# earth's mightiest heroes

**Summary**

*It was what Spock's mother called a ‘bedtime story’.*

"On Earth there has long been great violence. The people would wage war against one another as easily as any outside threat, but as long as there had been fighting, there were those who fought to protect and create peace".

*With a sigh in her voice and a smile on her lips, she would recite to him a tale rarely told.*

"*It was a time of mighty heroes.*"

**Notes**

Work in progress; will probably be 100k plus stupidly long when finished. Take note, the first half of this fic moves slowly, but then things will get crazy!
Updates currently around every two weeks (I teach full time). Beta'd from chapter 10 by the wonderful Kay. Any canonical weirdness in either universe is the result of my own machinations... future pairings and whatnot to come with the updates. No spoilers in the tags. :)

"Can you do it?"

"I am unsure this is the wisest course of action, Director."

"I didn't ask if you thought it was wise," Fury barked. "Can it be done? Can you cut us off, make sure Earth is inaccessible, nothing in or out?"

Thor didn't hesitate, but waited for a grim moment before answering. "Yes."

"Then do it."

"Director--"

"God damn it, Thor," Fury growled, wiping blood out of his good eye. "Can't you see what's happening, here? The whole fucking planet is tearing itself apart. This is going to get worse before it gets better, if we don't turn this rock into a pile of ash first. I thought we could stop this, but Selvig's equipment was stolen less than five hours ago. We're losing," Fury broke off, his unflappable composure crumbling just a bit before he looked Thor in the eye and continued. "I don't know who we're fighting anymore. SHIELD is gone, the Avengers are lost. Asgard might not see Earth as much of a threat, but you've seen the shit that's out there right now. If we can't stop it, we have to contain it."

"Is there nothing more to be done?" Thor asked solemnly.

"If there is, we don't have time to find it. Cut us off, Thor."

The Asgardian sighed, the sound filled with deep sadness. "It will be done."

An explosion rocked the building, the lights blinking out for a moment before being replaced by the dusky glow of emergency lighting.

Fury swore, coughing as dust rose from cracks in the floor. "Better make it quick."

Earth nearly burned, humanity bringing itself to the very brink before finding the strength to quell its own hubris, but the damage had been done. Technology, monuments, information and hundreds of millions of lives fell to violence and anarchy before drastic measures ensured that doomsday was postponed indefinitely.

There was no one to avenge the wrongs that had been done by their own hand, no one to stand up and pull them from the ashes but the survivors… and they were going to survive. They had no choice.
In the years between the end of the third World War when SHIELD and similar agencies were ruthlessly dissolved, all records were destroyed to purge the dregs of their perceived scourge. Out of Africa, a land so long burdened with despotism and genocide, peace was reclaimed. Humanity was poised to forget its brushes with aliens and superheroes and look forward to rebuilding.

Few remained hidden. The mutants all but died out.

There was a barely remembered ideal, a specimen of bioengineering before its time… it was the spark of a new goal. Some remembered Steve Rogers, but Earth and its fresh wounds forgot about the near misses that came before the devastation.

Serum was replaced with cold engineering; the ideals of valiant men and women, with empirical science in the hopes of making something better and oh—they were better. As they suffocated under the debris of a new war, the scientists and engineers, the people of Earth, knew that the augments were better at war and violence than any of them could ever hope to be.

Ash and dust and slaughter swept away what remained of the interminable years before. A single violent battle that saved a single city (now razed and irradiated) became a bedtime story, a comfort to the children of a race so damaged by its own hand.

As Hercules and Theseus, the heroes faded into myth and obscurity (who was left to tell the stories from which only scraps remained?).

A phoenix reborn, humanity crawled out of its would-be tomb and embraced a new future. Like prodigal sons returned to their fathers, Earth wept for the devastation and mourned its failures, but survived.

They would always survive.

Warp changed everything. To a new generation with the stars in their reach, the pettiness of planetary war seemed further away than a recent past. The Vulcans came, and met with a race so humanoid and yet so unfathomable, a demi-god in gleaming armor seemed further away than the century that had passed.

It was a new age for Planet Earth. An age of the Milky Way and beyond.

Echoes of a great cataclysm pierced through dimensions unknown and unsought. Peering behind a veil long shut, passionless eyes looked on as something beautiful began to grow, and hope bloomed again in the heart of he for whom they watched.

Jim woke to the sound of his comm chirping from across the room. Rolling onto his back with a groan, he rubbed the crusties from his eyes before sitting up gingerly.

_Fucking Romulan ale._

Stumbling shirtless out of his bed, he silently thought that whoever was comming him deserved whatever shit-show they got. Their last mission had been a clusterfuck in ways Jim hadn’t known a cluster could even get fucked; he was still on leave and could be as unbecoming an officer as he
"Kirk here," he rasped, slapping his palm to the receiver as the image blinked into focus.

"Good god, Jim. Put some goddamn clothes on!"

"Bones," Jim groaned, flopping down into the chair and lowering his head to the desk in front of the console. "Why the hell are you comming me this early? Shouldn't you be sleeping off a hangover with the rest of us?"

Without looking, Jim could feel Bones' eye roll as much as he could hear the scoff coming through the comm.

"Yeah, well, no rest for the goddamn senior officers of the Enterprise, it seems. Open your messages, I'll wait."

Sending Bones all of the misery and hatred he could in one glare, he sidelined his CMO's face as he pulled up his messages. He read for a moment in silence before groaning out loud, the sound long and forlorn.

"You've got to be kidding me. Fucking fuck," he swore.

"You're telling me," Bones sighed. "Looks like leave is over, at least for us."

"I hope you know that I'm directing all of my misplaced rage toward you," Jim said as sincerely as he could manage with a headache brimming in his temples. "All of it."

"Give yourself a hypo and suck it up, you big baby," Bones sounded way too smug for someone who was losing his remaining leave time with his daughter for what would surely become the third biggest clusterfuck to date. "Grow a pair and face the music like a man."

"I hate you," he deadpanned.

"Save it for the brass. I'll see you at 1800, Captain," the doctor said before shutting down the comm.

Staring at the message that replaced Bones' face, Jim read it through one last time before slumping back in the chair and releasing all of his frustration in a long, drawn out word

"Fuck."

"We found the coordinates in an encrypted drive with one of Khan's crew when we scanned the cryotubes," said Dr. Djembe, the scientist in charge of the evaluation and containment of their relics from the twenty-first century. "Some of the data was corrupted, but… I honestly can't even believe that they’re all intact. Functional!"

Kirk fought the urge to press the heels of his palms into his eyeballs. His brain felt heavy with the weight of the information that this Starfleet doctor had just laid on him and Bones. The whole fucking situation sounded like a rewrite of a very recent, very tragic story in which he had approximately zero interest repeating.
"Why? Khan's crew seemed just fine," Kirk asked, peering into the frosted glass but not seeing clearly to the face he knew was only centimeters below.

Djembe and Bones gave him both identically incredulous looks.

"What?" He asked defensively.

"Khan's crew was floating around space in a sealed environment, Jim. These poor bastards were buried in some god forsaken bunker in a tundra. On Earth. In the twenty-first century," he emphasized.

Scraping together what he knew of pre-warp history, the timeline clicked into place.

"Huh, wow," Kirk said, eyeing the ancient cryotube in front of him with newfound interest.

The twenty-first century had been a dark and violent time in Earth's history, worse than any of the records of the conflicts leading up to the third world war and the ancient battles of times relegated to the oldest surviving Earth documents. The fallout from WWIII and the Eugenics Wars had given rise to the field of archaeotechnological cryptology, for those trying to investigate the gaps of information that had resulted from some kind of massive information purge. That these dinky little pods had survived any of that devastation just buried in the ground seemed almost impossible.

"And not as a first and final resting place, it would seem," the doctor motioned to a holoscreen with myriad charts and numbers before Kirk could contribute further intelligent commentary. "There is residue on these pods that indicates they're from before the Eugenics Wars; well before. There's a power source in these that we can't identify." She sounded excited, like Scotty with a warp core excited, which Kirk frankly didn't get, but he was starting to understand the gravity of the situation.

"So you're saying that these guys are even older than Khan and his crew?" He looked from Djembe to Bones for confirmation.

Bones nodded. "Looks that way. These aren't even the same cryotubes, but they're similar enough that they might have been the basis on which whoever engineered Khan's cryotubes designed theirs."

"Which is why you're here," Dr. Djembe added, still buzzing with energy as she looked at Bones.

Kirk stared at them as he sussed out where this conversation was headed. "I'm missing something." He held up a hand, possibly to forestall whatever idiocy was brewing here. "You've stumbled across five cryotubes even more ancient than the ones that crazy motherfucker was found in, and Starfleet thought—what? Why don't we just crack one open and see who's inside?" His voice had risen several decibels.

Seeming to notice how inappropriate her excitement was in the present company, Djembe cowed a little. "Captain Kirk, I could never presume to understand what you or your crew went through with Khan and Marcus, but I've run every scan I can think of on these cryotubes, and none of them show any resemblance to the biology of the augments. In fact, with the exception of a few oddities, only one of them is anything more than plain old human," she added.

"More how?" Bones asked warily.

The doctor shrugged. "We can't be totally positive with a body in cryostasis, but his bone and tissue show evidence of density consistent with augmentation, but bearing entirely different markers than Khan and his crew."

Kirk looked down at the cryotube in front of him. "And this one?"
"Normal," Djembe answered. "Male, around forty years of age. He's one of the odd ones, though. He seems to have some sort of prosthesis in his chest, but I can't be sure of its function. Hell, whatever it is is three hundred years old. People did strange things to preserve and prolong life, back then. It might be some sort of pacemaker, who knows? The technology would probably be beyond me even if I were holding it in my hand."

The sound of a door swooshing open cut off their conversation as they all turned to see Admiral Archer walk into the room.

"Kirk, McCoy. Glad you could make it." The Admiral offered them a salute, which Kirk and Bones returned with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

"Admiral," Jim greeted, regarding Archer warily.

"Well, I'll get right down to it," Archer started, looming over the cryotube. "I need the Enterprise to transport Dr. Djembe and these cryotubes to a secure facility on that Class L planet you surveyed a few months back."

"We've set up there already?" Jim asked, surprised. "That's awfully close to the Neutral Zone for a Starfleet base."

Archer didn't bat an eyelash. "Not a base, temporary facility."


"Precisely."

A wry smile tugged at Jim's face. "Not taking any chances this time, then."

"And I assume the rest of the Admiralty knows about this?" Bones raised an eyebrow.

"Yes, Doctor McCoy. It isn't public, but this isn't a top secret mission. We want the Enterprise on this to manage and oversee the operation, contribute to the research and advise on action once we know who is in these tubes and why they're in there. For all we know, they could be refugees who found a way to survive World War III."

Bones snorted, and Jim surreptitiously elbowed him in the side, receiving a glare for his trouble. "Doesn't sound like a bad idea at all," Bones muttered.

"What Doctor McCoy is trying to say," Jim elbowed him again. "Is yes, sir. We'll make it happen."

"Good," Archer nodded at them before addressed Dr. Djembe. "Is your team ready for transport?"


Already mourning the loss of his leave, Jim silently winced at the thought of recalling the rest of his crew. They were gonna be pissed. "How soon should we be gone, Admiral?" Jim asked. Spock had probably already started getting everyone back with ruthless efficiency, if he'd been notified.

"You'll receive full mission details within the hour, but I want you out as soon as your crew is recalled and the Enterprise is ready."

Sympathizing with Bones heavy sigh as the doctor gathered his things, Jim nodded curtly. "I'll check in with the command crew, make sure they've got the notice."
"I'm sorry about your leave, Kirk, but you know how it is."

A sigh of his own desperately wanted to escape his lips. "Yeah, I do."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! Comments and kudos and whatnot are, as ever, appreciated. This is not an easy story to write... dynamics are always changing, and it is difficult to merge these two universes in a way that is plausible for what's in store.
"I don't like this."

Jim sighed, punching in a code on his PADD to open up the medical transport on the Enterprise. "I know you don't."

Watching the five cryotubes disappear through the transporter, Jim observed McCoy's stance tighten even more.

"Do you, Jim?"

Waiting until the transporter room of the Enterprise appeared in his field of vision, Jim stepped off the pad and headed for the holding area. "Yeah, Bones. I think I do."

A hand on his arm stopped him in the corridor.

"Jim, stop. Just listen to me. The last time some frozen fuckhead from the past made its way onto our radar, we lost you. You can't just expect me or anyone else on this crew who were there last time to go through the motions like there isn't a—a threat!" Bones hissed, gripping Jim's shoulders just this side of too tight to make a point without coming off like he really, really cared.

Meeting the stormy hazel eyes, Jim put on his best smile of reassurance. "We've got this, Bones. They aren't augments, you verified that much. The cryotubes are under the proverbial lock and key, we'll have security posted on them at all times. We're just the transport, and this time around we know what we're carrying." He paused for a second. "More or less."

Bones looked dubious. "It's never that easy."

Jim slapped Bones on the shoulder in farewell. "Of course it's not. I'd be out of a job if there weren't some sort of shit storm to go along with this. What do you think? Disease? Danger? Darkness?" Jim joked.

Bones punched him, harder than anything friendly. "Good god, man. Just comm me when one of them goes rogue or starts dying. If they aren't augments, a couple hundred years in a cryotube is bound to come with some damage," he muttered, scuttling off in the direction of sickbay.

"Attaboy," Jim smiled, turning back to the bridge with a nod to the security personnel bringing the tubes to isolation.

For a few mind numbing seconds, Natasha drifted in a haze before snapping to alertness. Not moving a muscle that wasn't needed to control her eyes in their sockets, she quickly assessed her
Watching light wisps of condensation dissipate beneath her nose, it was likely that the cryotube had finished its ejection protocol only seconds before she'd regained full consciousness. The barest twitch of her fingers and toes meant that there hadn't been any of the dozens of potential malfunctions, and against all of Stark's predictions, her limbs were intact and she was alive.

Well, intact was probably a generous exaggeration.

As if years hadn't passed, everything hurt exactly as bad as it had when Stark had put her in the tube. Her left ankle screamed in pain; it wasn't broken, just a bad sprain, but it was swollen and uncomfortable inside her boot. Sweat beaded on her brow and she felt the warm trickle of blood from a cut above her eye, and the sensation of blood oozing from the other places on her body clawed at her senses. Her chest and stomach were bruised to hell from throwing herself through glass and numerous falls into crumbling debris, the tight swollen feeling of her belly a good indication she was probably bleeding internally.

Shit. She didn't have much time.

Turning her gaze upward, she looked out through the small porthole from which the last of the frost was clearing. The lighting outside the tube wasn't especially bright, but it was definitely not the same as the bunker in which they'd been interred. For how long, she didn't know.

Risking a small, painful movement of her head, she glanced over at the small screen where time and environmental statistics should have been showing. A small but detrimental fissure was assurance enough that it was not functioning. Stark had guessed that any longer than fifty years exposure to the temperatures would damage any of the tech directly accessible inside the tube too much for it to be useful.

Great, so she had no idea where or, more importantly, when, she was—they were. Assuming that no one had compromised the ejection codes, at the very least two or more of them were together and in a secure environment. Ejection also meant the presence of people, but that could be good or very bad.

Well then, time for reconnaissance.

Wiggling enough to feel the solid weight of the knives and other weapons in her suit, she bit back a groan and slowly shifted her bruised fingers to open the panel beneath her right hand. Punching in the override code, she held her breath and waited as the final ejection protocol engaged.

With barely a scrape, the wall of the tube on her left retracted into itself, leaving a gap just wide enough for her body to slip through when she was ready.

Listening intently for any sound of movement or life in the immediate vicinity, she counted out the seconds.

A gentle hum was the white-noise background for few other sounds. She could discern footsteps, but they were faint and quickly faded. An enclosed space, probably a holding room or storage area. If whoever had the cryotubes in their possession was smart, there was video surveillance on them. The tube might be in a position to give her cover when she emerged, but she wasn't counting on anything.

She had to move fast. Breathing deeply once, she willed the adrenaline to pump through her veins, exhaled—forcing her pain into submission—and sprang into action.
She landed in plank position and quickly drew herself into a crouch, ignoring the protest of her damaged ankle and muted scream of internal damage. The urge to draw her knives was deep and persistent, but she left her weapons where they were. If she was being watched, it was a bad idea to present herself as an immediate aggressive threat.

A quick assessment catalogued the presence of four other cryotubes and nobody in the immediate vicinity thereof. There weren't any visible surveillance devices on the ceiling or elsewhere, but they were probably there. She'd have to move quickly.

No windows, no air vents. A semi-transparent panel on the other side of the tube looked like a doorway was likely the only option for an exit.

Sidling up to the panel, she peered through the probably-not-glass and quickly ducked back against the wall.

Two men outside the door in identical dress. Uniforms, probably military. A locked door for sure. There was no way she was getting out unnoticed, but if they came in...

Reaching inside a pocket, she withdrew a small throwing knife and flicked it at the nearest cryotube where the blunt end ricocheted off the metal with a loud ping!

She waited the scant seconds it took for the door to slide open and the two men to enter with their weapons drawn before ducking between them and disarming them both with chops aimed at the wrist. The weapons clattered to the floor shortly before they did. She spared a moment to relieve one of the immobilized guards of a device that looked like it was used to monitor communication before ducking her head out into the corridor. If there was some kind of motion sensor in that room, they’d be the first to be contacted and she wanted to know if someone else was coming.

Eight similar doorways lined the walls on either side, none of which were guarded. Another red uniformed person—probably female, judging by the cut of the outfit—disappeared around the bend of the corridor, leaving it empty. She couldn't be sure, it was conceivable that her color vision was compromised by her surely brewing concussion, but it was entirely possible that the person's skin had been blue.

Filing that information away, she mentally regrouped, flexing her muscles to get the blood flowing better. Acutely aware of the pain in her abdomen, she pressed a hand to the swollen flesh of her left side, swallowing thickly as she willed herself to move. The communicator in her pocket was silent, but she couldn't be sure of how much time she had before someone tried to check in with the guards or if whoever was monitoring surveillance sounded an alarm, but she had a mission to complete before they caught her, so she got to work.

Allowing herself one painfully deep breath in and out, she strode into the corridor and started on the primary elimination objective: find out who had them and if they intended to harm them or anyone else. Looking around the curved corridor as she traveled and noticing the strange lighting and continued absence of windows, she figured it wasn't going to be as easy this time around.

Not one to mumble to herself, she stopped by what seemed to be a computer console in the wall and navigate an interface that was—decades, at least, probably longer judging by the strange syntax and additional characters—beyond any she'd used. But it was familiar. Not strictly aliens, then, if the blue skin hadn’t been a figment of her imagination.

Going blindly to work on the console, she grit her teeth as pain pulsed behind her eyes.

This better be worth it.
"I knew this would happen!" Bones groused through the comm as Jim made his way down to the holding area.

"In the future, perhaps you could put that clairvoyance to use, doc. Maybe the next time I'm about to imbibe liquid anaphylactic shock on an away mission? Might save you some trouble," Jim responded, more than a little annoyed that the ship wide emergency had occurred in the middle of his off shift, and therefore his sleep.

"Shove it, Jim. The security officers are coming around, already, so you'd better get down here quick if you want to hear what they have to say before I take them to Sickbay."

"Already here, buddy," Jim said, flipping his communicator closed as he jogged up to the holding room. He spared a second to eye the two officers groaning into wakefulness under Bones watchful eye. Waving to Spock and Lt. Giotto where they were assessing the room and the empty cryotube, he walked over to join the assessment of the situation.

"What've we got, Commander? Lieutenant?"

"Parts of the cryotube's metal casing appear to have retracted inside itself, leaving enough room for the occupant to slide free," Spock rose from his crouch near the opening. "Without more detailed inspection I cannot conclude the circumstances of the opening, but the security feed's absence of any outside interference suggest internal computer protocols. Whatever they may have been, our investigation has triggered a failsafe. The power source shut down shortly after I began scanning the tube. I have alerted Dr. Wallace to the situation; she and Dr. McCoy may be of use in determining the engineering more than I when the immediate threat has been resolved."

"Also, I found this," Giotto gingerly handed him a small metal object. "Careful, it's sharp. Looks like a dart, maybe a throwing knife. Security feed suggests she used it to lure the guards in here," he nodded to the two now conscious officers where they sat on the floor, Bones' tricorder whirring in their faces.

"Gentlemen, care to tell me what happened here?" Jim asked, striding back over to where Bones was crouched with his hypos near the two security officers.

Lieutenant Markley, a tall but not too beefy guy from a Starbase near Andoria, answered first. "We heard a noise in here, so we went inside to investigate," he rubbed his wrist tenderly as he continued. "I was just reaching for my communicator when some chick jumped us. Knocked my phaser right out of my hand and bam, next thing I know I've got a tricorder in my face," he grimaced in the direction of Ensign B'avi, who was still being scanned.

"Is that all your blood, then?" Jim asked, indicating the drips and smears on the floor.

"I don't think so. B'avi?" Markley asked, looking over at the half-Betazoid where he was semi-sprawled, Bones muttering next to him at the readings.

"No. Conked on the head pretty good, but doc here says I'm okay."

"It's hers," Giotto said. "I can't be sure how badly, but she's injured. Here, you can see it on the feed." The Lieutenant passed Jim his PADD, and he waved Spock over to come watch with him.

Clear as day—bless these holofeeds—Jim could see the woman in question skulk around the room before neatly incapacitating two security officers, but not without leaving a thin trail of blood behind her. Against his better judgment, Jim felt a flicker of sympathy in the pit of his stomach, but it was quickly replaced by concern for the well-being of his crew.
"Shit," he muttered. "Bones, get an analysis on that blood. I want to know if she's exposed us to anything nasty, and Spock?" He turned to his first officer, a grim look on his face. "Find her. If she's capable of taking out two security officers while she's that banged up, I don't really want to wait and see what else she can do."

"Affirmative, Captain. Lieutenant Giotto is already working with communications and engineering to track and monitor the intruder."

"Good. Bones? Anything?" He said, moving over to where the doctor was crouched with a tricorder above the blood on the floor.

"Dammit, man, I'm a doctor, not a mass spectrometer. Give the god damn—ah," he said as the tricorder beeped at him. "I don't have enough blood here to really work with, but I'm not seeing anything airborne or contagious. Best to keep people away from whatever gifts she leaves behind, anyway." Bones shuddered. "The kind of crap people were carrying around three-hundred years ago... Jim, you don't want to know."

Clapping his friend on the shoulder, Jim gave him a grin. "Yeah, but I bet you'll end up telling me anyway if we get enough bourbon in you."

Leaving Bones and Giotto behind, he motioned for Spock to follow him out of the room and down the corridor where more blood was smeared, but ultimately tapered off. "Well, I guess it won't be as easy as following a blood trail."

"It would seem not. I am confident we will find her soon, Captain. Even someone with training cannot evade capture in a secure environment for long."

Jim sighed as he considered the computer panel where the blood trail terminated. "Famous last words, Commander."

Chapter End Notes

I can't promise updates will always come so close together, but here's another chapter!
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

If the Black Widow is going to be caught, it's going to be on her own terms.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Well, guys, I think this proves that two hundred years of human evolution and the combined wits and technology of multiple alien civilizations do not superior beings make," Jim said wryly. "Does anyone want to fill me in on how the fuck this woman has managed to subdue no fewer than eleven of my trained crew and is still managing to evade surveillance?" Jim asked his assembled command crew.

"She's using the Jefferies tubes, sir," Scotty said with a wince, probably for the thought of someone crawling around inside the ship, imaging the awful things she could be doing to her.

"And she ditched Lt. Markley's communicator; she must have figured out that we could track her movements using it," Uhura said, fingers moving swiftly over a PADD in front of her. "We can monitor life signs, but there are still crew members in the Jefferies tubes right now, so we couldn't isolate hers from any of the other human signatures."

Fingers tightening around the PADD that held all of the same information everyone else's did, Jim suppressed the urge to throw it at the wall. "Spock, send orders to department heads to notify their subordinates via communicator to clear the Jefferies tubes, but do it quietly—text only. I don't want them to make a scene out of it. Make something up so this woman, whoever she is, won't know they're being evacuated."

Without waiting to hear Spock's acknowledgement, he spoke over the Vulcan who was standing several feet away and speaking into his communicator while simultaneously manning a computer console, presumably doing something genius and helpful.

"Do we have any idea what she's been after? We have to assume that she's realized she's on a moving transport and probably not getting off the ship," he looked to Giotto and Chekov.

"She has accessed several computer terminals, but has not actually done anything with them," Chekov shrugged. "If she is as old as you say, she must be very good with computers to have gotten as far as she did with no knowledge of our systems."

"That's... actually not very encouraging, Lieutenant," Jim grit out, looking at Giotto. "What about security?"

Giotto looked harried, to say the least. "Whoever she is, she's stealthy. The officers she's subdued didn't even get a good look at her face before she had them out flat," he stopped, his lips thinned with suppressed rage, perhaps hysterical laughter. "Same as the security feeds before she went into the tubes. Female, petite, red-hair, black suit. Noticeably injured. She's been using non-lethal force, though. Defensive."
Scowling at the PADD in front of him, Jim tossed it on to the table in disgust. "She's probably trying to access the computers to see where she is, hell, \textit{when} she is. If I'd been frozen in a cryotube for who knows how long, those would be the first things I'd look for." He stopped for a second, allowing his synapses to fire a bit before going on. "It's clinical. Covert military. She's assessing the threat without giving us a reason to kill her on sight." He sat back in the chair. "You know, if it weren't my ship on which she was causing a ruckus, I'd be impressed."

"You sound pretty impressed, anyway," Giotto grumbled, his own hands occupied with a PADD.

"She knocked a phaser out of Hendorff's hand with a throwing knife," Sulu said, almost reverently. Rolling his eyes, Jim reluctantly drew the PADD back, not bothering to see who was coming in as the door to the ready room whooshed open. Scanning the brief report from medical, Jim frowned at the absence of a surly country doctor lamenting their situation. "Speaking of causing a ruckus, where the hell is my CMO?"

"I'm right here, Jim," came Bones' irritated voice from the door.

All eyes turned to the open door where Bones' broad shoulders almost filled the frame, and Jim had to say the scowl was really turned up to eleven.

"I brought a plus one. Hope you don't mind," he drawled.

Jim—and everyone else in the room—jumped to their feet as Bones stiffly walked forward two steps, revealing their quarry with a phaser pressed to the back of his neck. Anyone with a weapon reached for it when they saw her.

"Don't," came the firm voice of a woman who sounded like she wasn’t fucking around.

Well, shit.

Jim immediately put his hands up, raising both his eyebrows as he made eye contact with Bones as if to say, \textit{seriously}? The scowl he received in response was enough to communicate \textit{a fuck you} and guarantee several I-told-you-sos were in his near future.

"Stand down, guys," he said, straightening up slowly as the three others at the table with weapons also drew their hands way from them. A glance at Spock confirmed that he was surreptitiously sending a message on his PADD before his hand came into full view of their guest.

The woman didn't step out from behind Bones or make any kind of movement at all, but Jim could see her eyes flicking back and forth around the room, lingering a bit longer on Spock than the others.

Ah, well. Maybe the 'we come in peace' thing would work out for him. Worth a shot.

"I'm—"

"Captain Kirk, U.S.S. Enterprise," she finished for him. "And if you don't want me to shoot Leonard here in the head, you'll answer my questions."

The telltale white-noise of speech filtered through his UT sounded in his ear, and he furrowed his brow momentarily in concentration. He’d understood her just fine before so… \textit{Ah}. Right. It would make sense that she was probably speaking a dialect of Pre-Warp English, and the UT was interpreting it as Modern Earth English.
Now that he considered it, she'd have to have had a working knowledge of the language, anyway, if she'd been able to gather any kind of information on the ship. The crew spoke Federation Standard for the most part and most information on the computers was written the same way. Starfleet issue UTs were programmed to filter anything else.

In the same vein, UT filtered or not, he didn't miss the sound of words coming through teeth grinding together, a tool he'd used himself to mask the waver of pain in his voice.

Bones, ever the good hostage, had rolled his eyes skyward at her words, but Jim saw his jaw clench. Even locked to stun, a close range phaser blast might kill him.

As if reading his thoughts, the woman cocked the phaser against Bones' neck, forcing his head to a new angle. "I'd bet that even set to stun this weapon could do some serious damage."

Jim didn't take his eyes off of the tableau in front of him, but waved Spock to his side with one of his raised hands. He couldn't see the Vulcan, but felt the shift in the air that meant he was standing at his shoulder.

"Well, that was rude. We haven't even finished introductions." God, he could feel Bones glaring at him. "This is my first officer, Commander—"

"Spock," she cut in again, the sound still strained. "Now that we all know each other, let's get on with it."

Feeling a bit annoyed at the second interruption, Jim resisted the urge to wrinkle his nose. Instead, he met the green eyes that found his around Bones' shoulder evenly.

"Well, I wouldn't say that. If we're going to have a conversation, what do I call you?" Jim asked, trying to wordlessly communicate with Spock that, no, he isn't crazy and, yes, he's trying to reason with the woman who was poised to shoot his friend in the head at any moment if he twitched the wrong way. Probably. He hoped not.

He briefly looked over to Uhura, who, with a cocked head and slight nod confirmed that she too had picked up on the language situation.

Bones grunted as the phaser was pressed more firmly into his neck, forcing his chin up at an awkward angle.

"This is not a conversation," she said, seemingly ignoring the rest of what he'd said, possibly because she hadn't understood it. "Why do you have the cryotubes?"

Shifting slightly to his right, he turned his head to look at Spock. When the Vulcan merely raised an eyebrow, Jim rolled his eyes and jerked his head in a motion that was meant to convey, whatever, keep it simple.

Bless him, Spock must have gotten the message, or something similar, so he stepped in. "The cryotubes were discovered underground in the northern hemisphere of United Earth. The Enterprise has been tasked with transporting them and their occupants to a secure location off-Earth to determine the best way to revive those inside and evaluate their condition."

Apparently she didn't need time to process the information, regardless of how much she'd even gathered, because she flew right in with the next question. "Who are you? What is Starfleet?"

Fighting the urge to grin, Jim spoke up before Spock could open his mouth. "A humanitarian, peacekeeping armada. We explore space and protect the United Federation of Planets from threats
both foreign and domestic."

This time, she paused, narrowing her eyes at him, looking him up and down as if assessing him for the first time. Or maybe she was trying to muddle through what he'd said. Whatever.

"Humanitarian," she echoed, deadpan.

A wave from Uhura caught his attention, and she jerked her head in the woman's direction in a clear bid to take over the conversation. Well, then. Full-of-surprises Uhura had impressed him again; he hadn't known she could speak Pre-Warp English. They'd have been fine just switching to MEE, the two weren't that different, but he shrugged at her, brushing his fingers in her direction in a gesture of go for it. She'd probably be better at this than him, anyway.

"We're just trying to make sure you aren't a threat, biologically or otherwise, to any Federation Citizens," Uhura sounded sincere, not cajoling. Which was a good thing if this woman's bullshit detector was as good as it seemed even without the full knowledge of Standard at her disposal. "I'm sure you can understand that."

The woman's eyes narrowed at Uhura, and if her expression didn't change, he detected a hint of surprise in the way she shifted the phaser on Bones' neck and turned them both to better see her where she stood to his right was any indication. "Can I, now?"

"It's obvious that you don't want to really hurt anyone on this ship," Uhura continued, impromptu hostage negotiator that she was. "You're just trying to get your bearings. I'm assuming you've figured out you're a long way from home," she sounded genuinely sympathetic.

"I don't have a home," came the even response. "But 2260 is pretty far from what it might have been," her face looked pained for a second before returning to the calculating-blankness of before. He couldn't tell if it was because she was actually in pain or something else.

"Then it must be pretty disorienting, waking up on a starship like this. Aliens and strange technology," Uhura waved her hand in Spock's direction, who cocked a slanted eyebrow in response.

Eyeing Giotto and his red shirt for a moment, she looked back at Uhura. "I think I managed," she said. Jim had to suppress a grin at her snark... and the vaguely furious look on Giotto's face.

He had to admit, for a tricentennial frozen woman, she was kind of a badass.

Even as she exchanged a few more words with Uhura, Jim was feeling a bit more confident of his hunch that this woman wasn't much of an immediate threat to them—injuries notwithstanding.

Well, she was, but not in the "I'm going to commit interplanetary genocide" way. He might not have the psychology background that Bones did, but he could put this situation together well enough. Whoever she was, and whoever else was in those other four cryotubes, she was trying to protect them. Why else would hers have been the only tube that opened?

While that brought back some unpleasant memories of what a certain other frozen man had once said to him, he had to remember that she was not the same person, and not only because she wasn't an augment. Obviously she was smart, and manipulative if the way she was stringing Uhura along with her orphaned nostalgia was any indication, but she wasn't going to kill any of them.

Probably. Spock could give him the actual statistics later.

He watched the calculating look on her face as her eyes roved around the room once more. Green
eyes met blue as they settled on him and spoke directly to him as the Captain. "How do I know that I can trust you?"

Seemingly fed up with the whole ordeal, Bones threw his hands up in the air, heedless of the phaser pressed to his neck (he heard a choked sound coming from somewhere in Chekov's direction). "For fuck's sake, woman! There's a swarm of security personnel right behind you that hasn't come in here and stunned your ass back to the 21st century, and a Vulcan that hasn't used his voodoo to scramble your brains when you've got a phaser budged up against the one responsible for saving his green-blooded ass on too many occasions to count. I'd say those are some damn good reasons to believe we're not pulling your leg," he groused, folding his arms and scowling like he was paid to do it.

Which, well, he really kind of was.

There was a tense moment when Jim was sure she might shoot him just a little bit for his outburst, but to his surprise, she withdrew the phaser from Bones' neck.

"Good enough," she responded, putting her hands up as Bones whirled around and snatched the phaser away from her, tossing it over the table to Sulu before beating a hasty retreat to Jim's side.

A flurry of activity rose up near the door when Spock signaled the security team with his communicator, but before they could even get in the room, he heard a pained grunt as the woman dropped to one knee with a stifled moan. The officers crowded inside to subdue the woman, but he looked on in consternation as she gave a hard cough, blood spattering her lips and the floor.

"Jesus Christ, get out of the damn way!" Bones yelled, dropping to his knees next to the woman who moments ago had a phaser pressed to his head.

"Bones!" Jim cried indignantly, already moving towards him.

"Dammit, Jim—all of you!—get the hell back!"

Before Jim could even get a clear look or Bones could whip out his tricorder, the woman had collapsed entirely unconscious on the floor of the ready room.

While the rest of them looked on in confusion, unsure of what to even do, Bones was on his communicator and barking orders to Sickbay about a gurney and prepping for surgery.

Snapping out of his stupor, Jim shouldered past the antsy security officers and grabbed Bones' arm.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"My fucking job, numbskull! Good god, how the hell was she even walking around?" Bones said incredulously, his tricorder whirring and beeping in distress as he assessed the limp woman on the floor. "Get out of the way, you idiots!" He barked as the medical staff arrived at the now overcrowded ready room. Spock must have alerted them when he'd sent for security, earlier, for them to have arrived so quickly.

"Bones," Jim started uselessly.

"Send some officers with me if you want, Jim, but I'm not about to let someone die on my watch," he snapped, already barking out orders to the nurses on his way out.

"Spock, go with him," Jim said in a strained voice as he watched the medical team rush away with their burden.

"Yes, Captain. I will update you as needed."
Jim watched Spock follow the team, and waved a weary hand at the security officers now looking at each other in confusion. "Dismissed, gentleman. Back to your posts, or whatever you were doing." Jim sat down in a now vacant chair and slumped backward.

Well, fuck. That hadn't really gone how he'd thought it would. "Intruder has been apprehended. Cancel red alert," he said into his communicator, rubbing a hand across his forehead as he eyed the officers still in the room.

"Sulu, Chekov, dismissed. You can go back to whatever it was you were doing before the red alert," he nodded at their chorused, if bemused, Aye, Captain's and turned to his chief engineer.

"Mr. Scott, I want every inch of the Jefferies tubes she was in combed for evidence of tampering or damage of any kind. Make sure your hands and faces are protected, and get someone from medical to go with you to clean up whatever she bled on while she was down there," Jim grimaced. "Even if she accidentally knocked a wire loose, I want it found and fixed. I'll talk to Dr. Wallace and have her queue you in on the data from the security feeds; I want to know what she was up to before she got the drop on us. I'm sure Dr. Wallace will have the full dataset at your disposal in no time."

"Aye, sir," Scotty said, looking positively scandalized at the prospect that anything had been hurt anywhere inside the ship.

"Captain—" Giotto interrupted, staring at the phaser in his hands like it was a millennium problem. "This phaser has no charge. It was—she wouldn't have been able to stun an ant with this," he looked up while turning it over to Jim for examination.

Brow furrowed, he turned the weapon over in his hands. Giotto was right, the weapon didn't have any charge. "Huh, well, I guess it's good to know that Doctor McCoy's head was never in any real danger."

Giotto pursed his lips. "She still put it to his head, sir. She's dangerous."

Jim sighed, handing the weapon back. "I can see that, Lieutenant. Put that in an evidence case pending an investigation. Make sure it doesn't get mixed up," he said, leaning back in the chair, mind working over the new information.

"Yes, sir," Giotto saluted and exited, leaving him and Uhura in the room.

He stood slowly, walking over to her where she waited patiently. "Lieutenant," he squinted at her suspiciously. "Pre-warp English is a little obscure, even for you. I had no idea you were such a historical languages buff," he nudged her. "Can you throw something together so those of us Standard speakers can communicate with our guest without needing an implant? Somehow, I think she might find that objectionable."

She nodded, giving him a grudgingly impressed look, presumably for his ability to use his ears at all when most took the UT for granted. "Good call, picking up on that. Pre-warp E isn't programmed into most basic translation interfaces, but I can modify an existing program with a new matrix in less than an hour."

Jim grinned. "This is why I love you best," he said, opening his arms as if waiting for an embrace.

Uhura rolled her eyes, but she couldn't hide a smile. "I'll be at my station, sir."

"Dismissed, Lieutenant."
Chapter End Notes

It's difficult to simultaneously try and sit on what I've written and write the second half of this fic. I'm pleased with my own progress, but don't shun me if updates come more slowly in the future!

Feel free to leave me a note or something! Carry on.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Conversations in Sickbay.

Chapter Notes

Little nod to Supernatural in this chapter... blink and you'll miss it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Strapped to a bed, in the medical bay of a spaceship, two centuries removed from any familiar technology and with her only backup frozen in a holding area somewhere beneath her feet.

All in all, not the worst situation Natasha had been in.

The drugs in her system made her brain fuzzy and her body lethargic, two things that put her nerves on edge. Good. Adrenaline would keep her focus sharper for the impending confrontation with the Captain, so she waited patiently on the bed while whoever these people were were finished chasing their tails.

Which, really, she had been doing that much of the time she spent limping and climbing around inside the ship. The thing was labyrinthine.

The vessel's computers hadn't been locked, and after a bit of blind typing she'd thought to try voice commands. As it turned out, whatever language was in regular use on the ship was pretty similar to English; fragments of some other languages, possibly. Not too foreign for her to understand these people when they spoke, not so familiar that she didn't miss a handful of things here and there. All in all, it hadn't been exceptionally difficult to pull up names and photos of the senior crew of the Enterprise. The computer had had some difficulty recognizing the commands, but got close enough for her to find what she needed.

As for what she'd needed, well... what she'd needed was a little leverage. The Ship's Doctor had been both the easiest to locate and, more importantly, her best chance for survival when she inevitably ran out of steam. He just made it easier on her by being the last one out in the open when the senior crew had gathered, and the closest to that section of the ship in which she'd been doubling back.

Leonard McCoy been rather annoyed with all of it, as well, not the crying and quivering she was used to when not dealing with combat trained persons, even with military background. It made her wonder what was out here that inured him to being held at gunpoint.

Phaser point. Whatever.

While confusing, his grouching had been a bit endearing. He was like a scrappy little dog, all scruffy and nipping at her ankles.
Which, in addition to the tentative conclusion that these people—at least those in command on this ship—were not likely to outright kill, torture or experiment on her in the immediate future, was one of the reasons not related to the black spots in her vision that she’d surrendered at his outburst. It took balls to yell at the person holding a gun to your head. That and a bit of a death wish, but it had been a long time since she’d met someone who didn't have one of those. It looked like two and a half centuries didn't change that very much. She was making the uncomfortable leap that this might apply to the others.

Others, indeed. *Aliens.*

She’d seen no fewer than fourteen people on this ship that were readily recognizable as not-human, a couple of which hadn’t even been *humanoid.*

So, she waited, strapped down to a bed and nearly entirely at the mercy of the people on this ship. This *spaceship.* She supposed it was lucky that it wasn't some sort of flying space-whale or giant sledgehammer shaped behemoth like the last ones that had visited Earth.

She couldn't begin to speculate on how much had changed since they'd all gone under, but if the whole space ship and consorting with aliens thing were any indication, Earth had neither blown itself up or been blown up by someone else. Maybe they would have somewhere to go back to if they made it off this ship as free people.

No, not if. *When.* These people might not seem like a threat right now, but she’d worked for SHIELD. She’d knew how military bodies operated, and those under the auspices of a political organization like whatever this United Federation of Planets might be were prone to doubling back on their deals and taking what they wanted. No. She couldn't outright trust these people with her safety or that of her team, especially not Stark, Rogers and Banner. She and Clint were just human, but the other three would look like tasty morsels to any scientific mind, military or otherwise.

No way was she going to let any of that happen. Maybe she hadn't had a loyalty streak before all this shit had gone down, but these people had risked their lives to save her and trusted her to save theirs in return. They were all she had left in the world—the *universe*—so like hell was she going to let something like Starfleet get in her way.

No, she was going to do what she did best: infiltrate, build rapport, gain their trust, get information and use it to her advantage. To *their* advantage. She had intrigue and curiosity on her side. These people would want information that only she and the others could verify, and in return they’d probably be anxious to show her all of their shiny little toys. Scientists were all the same, and she’d been exposed to the best and brightest. They wanted to learn things and in turn wanted to show off just how smart they were.

What she didn't have on her side was time, but she could do this. She *had* to do this. For them.

Mulling over how much information she would give them and whether or not she would make them work for it, Natasha watched the nurses bustle around the infirmary—Sickbay—giving her a wide berth. Doctor Leonard McCoy had his back to her and was quietly arguing with the First Officer—a Commander, the Vulcan named Spock—near the door as they waited for the Captain to arrive.

They didn't wait long.

Holding up a hand to stave off both Spock and Bones' respective queries and rants, Jim walked over to stand by them and observe where the woman lay with arms and legs strapped to the biobed, four security officers flanking her on all sides.
“Will you get those redshirts out of my sick bay, Jim? She’s strapped within an inch of her life, and those restraints are designed to hold up against even a Vulcan’s strength,” Bones snapped at him.

Spock turned to him, giving Jim the Vulcan equivalent of a long suffering look. “As I was explaining to the doctor, it is inadvisable to be without security detail when dealing with a person proven to be dangerous and unpredictable. Strength is not the only means of escaping restraints,” Spock said, much less visibly ruffled than Bones.

“Noted, Commander,” Jim suppressed a smile. “Would it make you feel better if I knocked it down to one security officer and kept the others posted outside?” Jim asked his CMO.

“Would it help?” Bones sputtered. “This is a medical bay, not the god damn brig! I’ve got other patients in here, and having a bunch of security officers that aren’t cluttering up my biobeds is gonna make anybody who needs medical attention antsy. I want them out,” Bones said, folding his arms.

“I don’t think it’s the security personnel making them antsy,” Jim said wryly, not really sure if he was referring to the woman or Bones.

“You know what? Fine, but chuckles over there isn’t going to be hovering over my patient like a goddamn watchdog,” Bones huffed.

“Chuckles, Bones? Really?” Jim laughed in spite of himself. “I thought shitty nicknames were my job—and she’s your patient? Have you two been bonding while I was away?”

Jim motioned to the security officers, sending all of them outside rather than keeping one here. He’d have Lieutenant Astrid come back in when they were finished, this way at least whatever they discussed would stay out of the gossip rags for a few more hours.

“No, you idiot. I’m not gonna forget that she held a phaser to my head not five hours ago, but a patient is a patient, and this one just had major surgery so don’t think I won’t send you both packing if your little interrogation interferes with her recovery. If she’s gonna be a prisoner, she’s going to be a healthy prisoner,” the doctor looked both Spock and Jim in the eye.

“I understand your concern, doctor,” Jim’s expression hardened a little. “But the safety of this ship and crew come first. I’m willing to hear her out and get both sides of this mess, but we still have a mission and I need to make sure that everyone who gets on this ship also gets off of it in one piece, you included,” he finished, trying to sound reasonable and authoritative and probably failing. Bones never did fall for his Captain’s face.

“That’s fair, Captain,” Bones mocked lightly, it always was with them when they pulled rank or title. “But I’m serious. She shows signs of fatigue or regression and I’ll kick you both out. I had to repair and regenerate her spleen and she’s working on a concussion, so take it easy.”

“If you are finished, doctor, Captain,” Spock broke in. “We must attend to the matter at hand. If what the doctor says is true, then we have a limited window of lucidity in which to speak with the patient.”

The patient. Right. They still didn’t even know what to call this woman. “Okay, Spock. Let’s get to it.”

The woman met his gaze calmly as he eyed her from across the room as the trio approached. Without Bones to obstruct the view, he could really appreciate the whole red-head cat-suit thing she’d had going on, but even strapped to a bed he didn’t dare pull any kind of a side-eye or make a flirtatious remark. Something about her screamed at his very, very dormant self-preservation instincts to pretty-
"Captain," she said, calmly, like she wasn’t restrained on a biobed and at their mercy. She wasn’t even slurring her words like he usually did with a concussion or brimming with post-op drugs. Damn.

"Who are you?" He asked, keeping his speech to MEE for the moment while Spock was setting up the translation matrix to filter their speech. He’d have been fine going on like that, but Spock probably wouldn’t want to language hop with him.

Her eyes seemed distant for a moment before she answered, even though they never blinked as she met his stare. "Nobody. Not anymore."

“I’d settle for a name,” Jim asked, receiving a nod from Spock as he straightened next to the device he’d set up.

Blinking slowly, the first sign he’d seen from her that there were any of Bones’ hypos in her system at all, she seemed to consider for a long moment before speaking again.

“Natasha Romanoff.”

“Alright then, Natasha,” Jim repeated the name. Russian, then, he mused, filing that bit away for further consideration later. “We didn’t exactly have a lot of time to talk before, what with the punching and the phasers, but I’m assuming you came quietly for a reason.”

“Quietly, my ass,” Bones muttered as he surveyed the biobeds readings and fiddled with a few of the controls.

Ignoring him, Jim continued. “So given that you’re here and not dead inside a Jefferies tube, you found what you were looking for.”

Letting the silence ask the question, Jim waited for Natasha’s response. “I did,” she said one slow blink later.

“Enlighten me,” he said, folding his arms.

Two more blinks, she must really be thinking about this one. “I needed to make sure it was safe.”

“Safe from what?” Bones cut in, making Jim grind his teeth in annoyance, but he let the question stand.

“You,” she answered, this time without hesitation, shifting her body the slightest bit against the straps, a tick in her jaw the only outward sign of pain.

“By which criteria did you determine your safety, Ms. Romanoff?” Spock asked.

“My own,” she answered, meeting the Vulcan’s unblinking stare with one of her own. Now there was a staring contest that might be Spock’s match.

Spock cocked his head at her. Jim saw the calculating look on his face, but even then wasn’t quite prepared for the coming monologue.

“In the seventy-one minutes you spent outside of the cryotube, you were both hunted and confronted with multiple alien species, advanced technology, and weaponry that are beyond your understanding. Our security officers attempted to attack and subdue you, and you are now being restrained in a
medical bay on a starship bound for a destination that you do not know. Given these circumstances,
it is illogical to assume your safety when, despite Doctor McCoy’s claims, we have given you little
reason to do so,” Spock finished, and Jim very nearly gaped at him.

“Not helping, Spock!” He said in a strangled voice.

Rather than shrink in fear or anything else, to Jim’s astonishment, Romanoff laughed. It was soft and
raspy and there wasn’t a smile to accompany the sound, but it was a laugh nonetheless.

“I like him,” she said, looking at Jim with eerie green eyes. Before Jim could respond, she looked
back to Spock, who had raised an eyebrow at her comment in the interim. “Commander Spock,
right?” She asked, and the Vulcan nodded once. “Okay, Spock,” she cleared her throat. “I’ll tell you
why I think that my friends and I are safe for now. I was visibly injured, and even holding Doctor
McCoy here at gunpoint, you could have easily subdued me at his expense, so you value the lives of
your crew enough to negotiate when you could have ordered those officers to come into the room at
any moment with that little tablet of yours.”

At Spock’s somewhat surprised blink, she did smile. A tiny, quirk of her lips that was there and
gone.

“Despite being the one who attacked first, in any sense of the word, I didn't wake up in a cell or not
wake up at all. I woke up here, with my wounds healed, and do you know the first thing the Doctor
asked me when I woke up?” She turned her head to look at Bones, who jumped a little at the
attention. “He asked me how I was feeling, and if I was in any pain.”

“Well the second thing I said was that you’re a god damn idiot,” Bones flushed. “I’m a doctor, not an
inquisitor.”

“That does sound more like something you would say,” Jim bit back a smile.

“Do I have reservations about being here? Of course I do. Aliens, spaceships,” she flexed a hand to indicate her surroundings. “I've been asleep for two and a half centuries. Everyone I know except for the four people in those cryotubes is dead. They were probably dead before I was even in there for a decade,” Natasha’s eyes dropped away from Spock’s,
looking far away again for a second before shifting up to Jim’s. “I attacked your people and you
haven’t killed me yet. That’s safe enough for me.”

A frown tugged at Jim’s lips. This woman had a seriously interesting definition of “safe” if them not
killing her—quantified by yet—was how she judged the situation. She’d evaded capture on his ship,
and if she hadn’t been in need of medical attention, might have continued to elude them for longer.
The only people he could think of even in this century who could pull that off were probably him
and Spock, and they were working with a detailed knowledge of the ships systems and layouts. She
was smart and obviously manipulative, and he had very little reason to trust her.

And yet...

“Spock, Doctor, if I could have a moment alone with Ms. Romanoff?” He asked, eyeing her
shrewdly.

“Captain,” Spock said, the word as long suffering as any Vulcan could make it sound. “I do not
understand your impulse to privately converse with those who have clear reason to manipulate you
for their own ends.”

Rolling his eyes to the ceiling, Jim sighed. “Give me a little credit here, Spock.”
“I have expressed my objection.”


Bones looked like he was ready to voice some objections of his own. “You’ve got two minutes. I’ll be monitoring the readings on my PADD, don’t agitate my patient,” he growled, before stalking off.

A little surprised, Jim raised his eyebrows at Spock, who merely lifted a brow of his own and went to join Bones.

“Something on your mind?” Romanoff asked.

“I have no idea what I’m supposed to do with you,” he said candidly.

Another blink.

Sighing in frustration, Jim warred with himself for a few silent moments. By all rights, the second she was recovered she should be in the brig under lock, key and lots and lots of security feeds. A long atrophied self-preservation instinct cried fitfully somewhere in his brain that this woman was dangerous. Even the objective, logical part of his brain—not atrophied, as much as Spock might like to think otherwise—presented its case for sticking her in a cell until she wasn’t his problem anymore.

But that little tingle in his gut that had led him to a shuttle in Riverside, gotten him into the Captain’s chair, gotten Spock into the Captain’s chair… something about this woman, the cryotubes, the location—the “oddities”—didn’t add up. Self-preservation and logic said no, stop looking. She’s just like Khan. She’s dangerous. Look at what she did to your crew. She’s not your problem.

His gut? Well, his gut was pushing that pile of information toward him and smirking. There’s something here.

Fuck it all, he was curious.

“I have a very competent crew, Ms. Romanoff. Exceedingly intelligent and all very good at their jobs, and you managed to lead most of them on a merry dance through their own ship. You got past me, which is not an easy thing to do. Now, don’t get me wrong,” he held up a hand to ward off a retort she wasn’t making. “We would have found you, just maybe not before you bled out…” He trailed off, letting a smile curve his lips. He leaned forward and cocked an eyebrow like he was telling a secret.

“But holding a harmless weapon to a man’s head? Now, that’s just cheating.”

This time her lips twitched. It was as good as a grin, in his book.

“You didn’t know it was harmless at the time,” she admitted.

“Looks can be deceiving,” Jim agreed.

“Do you think I’m playing you, Captain?” She asked, her whole body in a state of relaxation, like she wasn’t having a high stakes conversation with the head of the ship on which she was—for all intents and purposes—being held prisoner. Could be the drugs, though.

“Eh,” Jim shrugged. “Maybe, maybe not. But you don’t know me very well, now do you? I’m a pretty smart man, Ms. Romanoff. Good at reading people, too—though not good as you are, I’m sure.” Jim hummed.
“You’re not,” she informed him bluntly.

Jim huffed a laugh, drawing a confused glare from Bones where he stood across Sickbay. “Are you going to tell me how you got so banged up?”

Romanoff breathed once, a deep in and out. “Would you believe me if I did?”

“Try me.”

She searched his face for a moment. A lingering blink, one eye opening slower than the other cutting across the action—she was getting tired. “Saving the world,” she said, the words finally coming out with just the tiniest slur.

That drew another huff of laughter from him. “Yeah, I did that once. It tends to leave a mark,” he said softly, watching another slow blink as she drew her brow downward in an approximation of a frown. “Bones fixed me up, too. He’s a nice guy like that.”

“Who’s a nice guy?” Bones said, drawing up to the biobed and shooting Jim a scowl when he saw her nodding off.

“Clearly not you,” Jim muttered as he was unceremoniously shoved away from doctor and patient.

“Alright, you’re done here. Ms. Romanoff, time to get some rest.” Jim watched her blink slowly again before Bones turned on him, arms folded. “Don’t you have a ship to run?”

“Okay, okay, I get it. Jeez, doc,” Jim put his hands up, wondering what was making him so edgy.

He made to leave, but just as he knocked his knuckles against metal of the bed, Romanoff’s hand twitched sideways, catching his wrist tightly even with very little room to maneuver. Bright, focused green eyes bored into his own when he looked up, all traces of fatigue gone.

Well played.

“Why are you trusting me?” she asked, voice smooth and calm with just the hint of a rasp.

Jim blinked, frankly still surprised at the strong grip around his wrist, and held up a hand to forestall Bones or Spock doing anything.

“Compared to the clusterfucks I’ve had to deal with on this ship,” some very recently, “You’re pretty small potatoes,” Jim quirked a wry smile. “Trusting you wouldn't even be the stupidest thing I've done this year.”

Seeming satisfied with the answer—or maybe just actually tired and really good and hiding it—she released him and closed her eyes, not blinking again.

Man, he could just imagine how many people had been fooled by this woman in whatever life she’d led to get her here.

Chapter End Notes

Happy US Premiere of Captain America: The Winter Soldier! I haven't seen it yet, but I will. Still making progress on this, however slow. I've recently begun a new job and,
suffice to say, it involves shaping young minds and leaves little energy for writing during the week.

Have a fantastic weekend, readers.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

McCoy gives a well deserved 'I told you so'. Natasha has scars. Jim makes things awkward.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Jim watched the security officer posted by Romanoff’s bed with a hint of chagrin. He’d completely hate the hovering if it were him, and if it were him trapped on a ship two hundred years in the future with the only people he knew frozen under similar guard, he probably wouldn’t be sleeping. He was only slightly sure that Romanoff wasn’t. Then again, Bones’ cocktails usually did their thing pretty effectively, especially with osteoregenerators fitted to various parts of one’s body. Red alerts and major crises had passed while he was conked out in Sickbay, blissfully unaware of his fractures being repaired.

Spock, per usual, voiced his logical concerns and cited protocols and wouldn’t budge on putting her in the brig when she was recovered. According to Bones, that would be by the end of Alpha shift tomorrow and a full two days before they’d arrive at their destination.

He and Spock got the abridged version of Romanoff’s injuries, surgery and overall physical condition, which was, in a word, thrashed. Whatever had gone down had happened pretty much immediately prior to the cryogenesis, but apparently she’d been sporting cuts, burns and a variety of contusions that had been accumulating for days. The beginnings of infection had set into some of the more serious injuries, but they hadn’t stood a chance against Bones and his staff. Cracked and bruised ribs, bleeding spleen, sprains, torn muscles… the list went on.

Having taken over for the logical part of his brain—which sounded like Spock anyway, so whatever —his first officer had taken these things into consideration and promptly reiterated that her romp through the ship demonstrated an obvious security risk. Unwilling to concede the point just yet, Jim promised to revisit it at the next available juncture and shooed him out of Bones’ office so he could accept his scolding without an audience.

Watching Spock depart, Jim braced himself before turning to face Bones where he stood on the other side of his desk, seething.

Saved the best for last, naturally.

"Let me guess, you hate to say I told you so?"

"No, Jim. I’ll gladly fucking say I told you so," he barked. "Three hundred year old frozen people and this ship is asking for trouble, and trouble found us in the form of a phaser at the back of my head!"

Jim moved over to him and patted Bones on the shoulder, letting his hand rest there. "We had your back, Bones. You know that."
Rolling his eyes so hard that Jim thought they might fly out of their sockets and hit him in the face, Bones huffed and refolded his arms. "Course you did. But it's not like she couldn't have gotten a shot off and paralyzed me for life before she keeled over or you managed to take her down." He frowned, as if the full weight of the situation were finally dawning on him after his hours of doctoring.

This time, Jim gave his shoulder a firm squeeze. "Yeah, Bones. I know. Leave it to your brand of southern charm to defuse the situation." He decided against letting the doctor know that she hadn’t planned on blowing his head off, just yet. A measure of healthy caution was probably better than not, in this case.

Bones snorted, but didn’t shrug Jim off. "Charm, my ass. Common sense, if you ask me. Didn’t need the psychology degree to see she was puttin’ on a merry show for all of us, and it’s bad form to shoot someone when you’ll need medical attention from them. My guess is she was looking for some confirmation that we weren’t slavers, evil scientists or hostile aliens," Bones sniffed.

"Well, two out of three ain't bad," Jim winked, and Bones rolled his eyes again, but seemed to relax. "Hey, you okay?" Jim asked. After all, he had had a phaser to his head for a pretty good while, and the woman who’d been holding the gun was lying in his Sickbay.

One deep inhale and exhale later, Bones nodded, patting Jim's hand where it lay on his shoulder before pulling away. "Yeah, I'm good." He scrunched up his nose, shooting Jim another look. "Unbelievable, Jim. She was about ready to give up the ghost even when she got the drop on me. Lucky she picked a doctor as a hostage."

"Yeah, lucky," Jim murmured, mulling over that last bit he’d said. "I think she likes you," he winked.

Bones made a disgusted noise, sitting heavily in his chair.

“I’ll leave you to it, then,” Jim said, resisting a parting pat to Bones’ shoulder. He might not get the hand back. The doctor grunted in response, already pulling up holo-charts as Jim left for the bridge.

Inside the turbolift, he pondered the bits and pieces of information from his conversations with Romanoff and Bones that swam around his head, trying to fit them in to place.

Lucky she picked a doctor as a hostage.

“Captain on the bridge!”

Nodding to Lieutenant Madegwa and the rest of the officers on Beta shift, Jim hunkered down in the Captain’s chair and pulled out his PADD, resigning himself to a few hours of serious research before shift change and what would no doubt be another very interesting vid-comm with an Admiral.

Osteoregenerators were Natasha’s favorite part of the twenty-third century, she decided, taking her first few—heavily monitored—steps around the Sickbay. Tender but somehow no longer fractured ribs were much better than tight bandages and semi-excruciating pain.

“Don’t be surprised if you’ve got some weakness in that ankle, or anywhere else for that matter. Regenerated tissue is brand new and needs to be exercised,” Doctor McCoy’s voice was a steady
stream of chatter in her ear as she concentrated on the sensations her healed body was telegraphing to her brain. It wasn’t annoying, precisely, but she also wouldn’t have minded if he shut up.

Then again, her lack of verbal responses was probably only encouraging his monologue.

“Any pain?” He asked.

“Some tenderness in the upper-left quadrant. I can’t put much weight on my left foot and I still have a headache,” she answered dutifully, turning around to limp back the five feet she’d traveled from the biobed.

The doctor snorted, clearly either amused or smug. Probably both, if her people-reading skills hadn’t atrophied while she was on ice.

“Once the drugs flush your system it will be easier to get your ankle working again. It’ll be sore while the new tissue assimilates to the density of the muscle around it.” He had her lie back down on the biobed, but didn’t strap her in. The security officer that had been posted on her looked ready to say something, but Doctor McCoy preemptively grunted at the stocky man.

“I need her limbs free to check neurological functions; the straps go back on when I say they do,” he eyed the young man briefly. “Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” the officer mumbled, though seemed to be chagrined at having addressed a Doctor as a superior before retreating to his post near the door. It didn’t really give the Doctor much protection from her—she could have killed him any number of times with very little recourse for him or the officer in the room—but she figured McCoy probably knew that. She was starting to get that the people in charge on this ship were smart. Either it was a twenty-third century trait or they’d been taken on by a pretty elite bunch of space sailors. Then again, SHIELD hadn’t let scientists into the Academy without at least one PhD to their name, anyway.

“Damn straight,” McCoy mumbled under his breath as he stretched out a map of flickering lights and colors, pulling it out of the two-dimensional reading it had been and allowing a tri-D hologram to occupy the space in front of him as he turned back to her.

“If I pulled rank on these idiots half as often as I should, maybe they’d be less likely to question medical orders,” he groused, the device in his hand whirring near her chin as he spoke.

“Then why don’t you?” She asked, mesmerized by the flickering, glowing projection hovering next to her bed.

The doctor huffed out a laugh. “Because I may be the fourth ranking officer on this ship, but I’m a doctor, not a drill sergeant. If they’re not smart enough to follow a doctor’s orders, I don’t much feel like pulling out the ‘Lieutenant Commander’ to get the job done,” he sniffed. “Much more fun to watch them squirm, that way,” he finished, drawing the instrument slowly down the other side of her face before it beeped in completion.

She hadn’t noticed she was still staring at the projection until he spoke again.

“That’s your brain, in case you were wondering.”

Natasha didn’t startle—she never startled—but an unpleasant prickling gathered on her skin before she shook it off.

“Do what you need to do,” she answered, maintaining the agreeable, even voice that she had during
most of her interactions. This strange man seemed to take it for granted that she had held a phaser to
his head and not pulled the trigger, which was odd, to say the least. Then again, smart people.
Obviously there was more to the Doctor than met the eye.

“I’ll give you something for the headache once I’ve ruled out…”

Natasha went through the motions of a few neurological tests of her motor function, speech and
recall; some standard tests for head injuries as well as a few she hadn’t been through before. All the
time the Doctor’s light Georgia drawl went on, narrating his actions and his findings and never
keeping her in the dark.

This man was the primary reason she’d surrendered, the ongoing reason that she figured they might
get out of this alive.

He was a good doctor. Despite the backhanded comments and occasional insult to either her own
intelligence or the intelligence of sentient beings in general, he was clear, concise and upfront about
both her injuries and her recovery. He was intense, and either a very good actor—as good as her—or
unflinchingly sincere in his actions and reactions with her and the other patients with whom she’d
observed him.

This wasn’t the kind of doctor that mercenaries paid and got to fix up torture victims enough to go
another round of interrogation. This wasn’t the kind of doctor that SHIELD hired for research, the
ones who would experiment on you as soon as fix your injuries. She could see it in the concentrated
focus he had on the readings as they flit across the screens, feel it in the gentle prod of his fingers
along her healing injuries, hear it in the gruff sincerity with which he asked his questions. Nobody
could be this surly about people getting hurt and not actually care about them.

Watching him record some data and shut down the flickering projection of her brain, she figured his
job wasn’t an easy one.

As good a place to start building rapport as any. They had history, after all.

“Your job must be difficult,” she said, seemingly apropos of nothing.

“Pardon?” He said, pausing as he loaded a hypospray with a combination of vials from a drawer in
the bed.

“Your job must be difficult,” she repeated, not offering any clarification just yet.

Eyeing her suspiciously, he worked on the hypospray probably longer than necessary as he
answered. “Keeps me on my toes.”

“You care,” she ventured, watching him work.

McCoy grimaced again, something he did with startling frequency.

“Yeah, well. Someone has to,” he grumbled, discarding the vials he’d loaded into the instrument.

Natasha let a smile curl on her lips. “Sorry about the phaser,” she said with a calculated touch of a
mumble. It wasn’t as if she wasn’t actually a bit tired anyway.

The doctor paused, the hypospray clutched tightly in one hand. He didn’t say anything for a while
after she spoke, just going through the motions, narrating the drugs, dosage and their effects before
pressing it to her neck.
It was a sharp, surprising sting, but he rubbed a soothing hand over the injection site briefly before pulling back. She kept her eyes on the ceiling above her or closed for brief periods of time as he bustled about her bed, clearly wasting time.

"'Figure a woman like you has a good idea when she’s in deep shit,” he said eventually, voice gruff and direct as he surveyed the readings on the monitor next to her bed. “I can’t say I enjoy being used as leverage against my friends and commanding officers, but you were never going to shoot me.”

Natasha suddenly found herself on the receiving end of a pretty intense glare from an equally intense set of hazel eyes. “That being said,” he continued, “I do my job and I do it very well. I’m not a damn fool and I’m willing to give you enough credit to believe that you won’t continue to treat me like one. You’re in my Sickbay? You’re a patient, but don’t think for a second that means that I trust you as far as I can throw you. I don’t have the best track record when it comes to assholes in cryotubes, so don’t push your luck.”

Blinking briefly, Natasha figured that may be the closest she was going to get to being threatened by this man. But that last comment, well, it held a bit of personal relevance for her.

“You’ve dealt with people in cryotubes before us?” She inquired.

Doctor McCoy’s stance stiffened minutely before he continued his mostly useless bustling and fiddling. “Why do you think we’re the ones who got stuck with this assignment?” He answered, though he seemed to regret having done so by the way his face scrunched up to resemble a pug’s.

Natasha didn’t reply. The cryogenesis programs had been among the first to go when SHIELD went down… but they’d never been exactly fond of getting rid of things, had they? But if these people had found other cryotubes, had spoken with other people that were even close to the Avengers, they’d have let on. There would have been something that she would have seen or heard to give her an inkling that he’d survived. It must have been something else. Cryotechnology wasn’t exactly the futuristic science that Stark had made it out to be, even if his tech had gotten them further without any sentient supervision or maintenance than anything else she’d seen for non-super humans.

The doctor drew her out of her thoughts once again.

“Well, at least you’re much less horrible than the last formerly frozen person we met on this ship,” he grumbled.

Yeah, Natasha thought, if you met anyone else from our hell hole of an apocalypse, we’re definitely the lesser of two evils.

“Thanks, I guess,” she responded, instead.

The doctor grunted, no longer making conversation. He paused for a moment, looking like he wanted to say something, but stalling.

“Look, Natasha, Ms. Romanoff, whatever,” he waved an arm, clutching his handheld device in one hand while he folded his arms across his chest tightly. “My next update is to tell the Captain and Commander Spock that you’re recovered sufficiently to be removed from medical supervision.” He seemed to hesitate, his eyes flickering back over her body beneath the nondescript patient scrubs she’d been wearing since her surgery. “You’re probably headed for the brig,” he said, honestly.

She suppressed the small twinge of apprehension she felt at the pronouncement. It wasn’t anything she hadn’t expected, but the doctor obviously had a mainline to all of her body’s reactions, and simply fixed her with a wry smirk. “Cells are individual and we’ve got no one else down there, so it
looks like you’ll have the place to yourself.”

Natasha nodded minutely, barely acknowledging he small sense of relief she felt at the three centuries separating her from the previous times she’d been imprisoned. She still had the scars to—

Wait. Scars.

Her eyes locked onto the Doctor’s frame once more, but he was already turned toward the monitor and reengaging the restraints. The look he sent her bordered on the sympathetic without actually making it all the way there.

There was no way he’d gotten that from—Natasha narrowed her gaze at him as he went about his work. Really? If he’d pulled that out of his ass just from whatever story her body told him, he was definite more intuitive than she’d figured.

Not for the first time, she thought that in another life this was the kind of man she might have tried to recruit for SHIELD, maybe as a field doctor and not a staff scientist. Hell, possibly even a handler. Fury would have balked, but Barton might have agreed with her. Coulson, too. He was a compassionate hardass, unapologetic in the face of what needed to be done, but smart enough to recognize both the physical and psychological pitfalls of his patients based on purely physical data.

But she wasn’t a SHIELD agent anymore, because SHIELD didn’t exist. It hadn’t existed for a long time, and what—who—was left of it was gone, just like everything—and everyone—else.

It was a sobering thought, just as much as the medication that was once more pumping into her through the biobed was not sobering.

“Ugh,” she grunted in annoyance. “Why the painkillers? I don’t need ‘em.” She grimaced when her speech slurred the tiniest bit on the words. God, if Barton could see her right now. As if she hadn’t seen him drugged to the gills at least a couple dozen times.

“Course you don’t,” McCoy responded, sounding a bit too pleased with himself. “Healing a spleen and nursing a concussion is bound to be just that comfortable,” he drawled. “I’ll see you in a few hours to make sure your brain hasn’t melted. Sweet dreams, Romanoff.”

Hopefully she was imagining flipping him the bird as she drifted off into unconsciousness.

"How does this always happen?" Jim groaned, flopping onto the couch Spock kept in his quarters, though Jim had the sneaking suspicion it was just for the benefit of the lazy humans (read: Jim) who invaded his space from time to time. God, he needed sleep.

"Captain, despite the circumstances, the parameters of our mission have not changed," Spock said, remaining on his feet near the computer terminal.

Jim sent him a skeptical look. "I don't think two days in the brig is really going to endear us to our visitor from the twenty-first century."

"As there is currently no possible way to return her to her time of origin, she is not a visitor but a permanent resident."
Jim pinched the bridge of his nose. "Not what I meant, Spock. But thanks, really, for reminding me. She and whoever else is in those tubes is going to be living with us for the foreseeable future, and, again. Two days in the brig? Not gonna help our image."

"Our image is irrelevant if these people prove to be a threat," he countered. "And as she has already proved adept at avoiding our surveillance and subduing our security officers, even gravely injured, it would be unwise to leave her with free reign of the ship."

"I'm not suggesting we give her free reign. Jeez, Spock. Give me a little credit," Jim sighed. "Just... secure quarters, or something. Now that we know what we're dealing with."

This time it was Spock's turn to look skeptical. "We have conversed with Natasha Romanoff on two separate occasions, neither of which yielded any more information about the other occupants of the cryotubes or indeed anything other than some vague information about herself. While it is possible to make deductions based on what we have seen, we most definitely do not 'know what we are dealing with'."

"Are you saying you want to interrogate her, like, for real?" Jim frowned. "It is the most logical option if we are to determine the circumstances that led to her interment and the actual nature of her disposition."

"I know it's logical," Jim grumped, "I just don't think it's a good idea. You know those deductions you were talking about? Well I can make a few myself, and it doesn't take Sherlock Holmes to see that Romanoff was—is—a trained operative. We could probably torture her and have as much luck getting honest answers as we would just straight up asking. She doesn't trust us. I wouldn't trust us, and given recent events, none of us have a lot of reasons to trust that Starfleet has her and the others' best interests in mind."

"While I agree with your assessment of the situation—"

"Aw, thanks, Spock," Jim interjected. "—it is nevertheless paramount that we have more information. Ascertaining such information is indeed within the parameters of our mission."

"She’s not going to spill any beans as long as we're in possession of the cryotubes. She said she had to make sure she—they—were safe from us. I can’t really guarantee that they are. Archer’s doctors aren’t part of my crew, and he’s not a bad guy or anything, but he knew Marcus. He was there the whole time that that fucker was running Sec-31."

"Admiral Archer’s responsibilities lie with the general operations of the Fleet and the Academy. He would have had no reason to investigate matters that were not under his purview."

"But that’s what I’m saying!" Jim gestured with his arm. "Everybody is paranoid right now. I mean, listen to this conversation we’re having—"

"I unfortunately have no choice but to do so," Spock said dryly.

"—even I'm paranoid. Paranoia makes people do shit, you know? Who’s to say that the lesson ‘Fleet and Archer took away from everything with Marcus wasn’t to not do what he did, but to do it better? The whole thing muddied the waters. I mean, we’re here and not crazy—" Jim caught the eyebrow Spock raised in his direction. "—not too crazy, but that doesn’t mean ‘Fleet won’t use these people whether they’re dangerous or not."
There was a long pause before Spock spoke again, and Jim tried not to read too much into the silence. It was probably just his lingering hyper-vigilance that made him interpret the thinky face as hesitation.

“Section 31 has been dismantled and those with knowledge of Alexander Marcus’ operations decommissioned or suitably apprehended and charged. You have been given no apparent reason to distrust our superior officers, nor the orders they give.” Spock countered reasonably.

“Yeah,” Jim sighed. “But it’s only been a year, Spock. A year.”

“One Terran calendar year and one hundred twenty days.”

“Whatever,” Jim waved him off. “Some of his mercs are still out there, aren’t they? What I’m trying to say is I still don’t know if I trust Starfleet with things like this.” Jim groaned into his hands, scrubbing his face. “God, this is such a pain in the ass. Why does it have to be so fucking complicated?”

“Perhaps it would become less complicated if we gathered more data on which to base our actions.”

“Okay, you’re right, I get it,” Jim held up his hands in surrender. “Be we are not putting the screws to her, and we’re not throwing her in the brig.”

“Captain, I must object again. This woman has proved herself dangerous and unpredictable. Confining and questioning her until we have reached our destination and can safely revive the others is the most logical course of action.”

Jim shook his head. “That’s a bullshit excuse, and totally not applicable to this situation. You’re dangerous, Spock. Hell, I’m dangerous!” Jim waved his arms toward his chest. “Tell me, if you’d woken up in a strange ship—injured—with next to no idea where you were or what happened, if you were safe or what the hell the people on the ship had in store for you, if me or Uhura were being held captive, what would you have done in her place?”

Spock opened his mouth to answer, but closed it again after a moment of thought.

“That’s what I thought,” Jim nodded. “We obviously can’t let her go running around the ship unsupervised. She’s smart and manipulative and has little reason to trust us right now. That’s a pretty hairy combination. But,” Jim began, trying to figure out how to voice the idea that had been banging around his head for the last few minutes. “If we’re going by the charter, she’s a citizen of United Earth and therefore the United Federation of Planets, and I think we should tell her that. It’s probably—scratch that—definitely not what ‘Fleet has in mind, but it should give her and whoever else is in those cryotubes some basic protections.”

“These protections will not matter should the Admiralty order us to remand them,” Spock cautioned.

“On what grounds?” Jim asked, already pulling up relevant documents on his PADD.

“Grounds we have yet to determine, Captain, and if we are not to interrogate Natasha Romanoff, I am open to suggestions as to how we intend to uncover information that may be of use in ensuring her safety as well as our own.”

Jim could tell Spock was annoyed with him, he always was when Jim resolutely ignored his advice and insisted on following a path that could only partially appease his need for decisive, logical action. But he was being decisive, and in his own convoluted way, what he intended to do was pretty logical.
“Well, we could stick her in secured quarters with a few PADDs on UFP history and some Starfleet propaganda. Two days would give her plenty of down time to read through it and come to the inevitable conclusion that we’re friendly and awesome,” Jim shrugged.

“I am sure I can compile the necessary volumes and secure a PADD for her use—”

“Or,” Jim emphasized, cutting Spock off, which the Vulcan hated and he should probably stop doing if he didn’t want to encourage insubordination by setting a bad example, but, come on. Sarcasm. “We could just show her.”

“Clarify,” Spock said, and in Jim’s brain he transformed it into a weary sigh filled with resignation and regret at having decided to continue serving on Jim’s ship.

“Come on, Spock. We’re on the USS Enterprise. The flagship! We’re an exploratory vessel and we’ve got the best, most diverse crew in the ‘Fleet. Her only experience of this ship and its function has been during a manhunt and recovery in Bones’ Sickbay; not exactly our best foot forward. What better way to show her what we’re all about that to give her the firsthand experience?” Jim cajoled, feeling a little excited.

Spock stayed silent for a minute, staring at Jim’s face and making him feel actually pretty uncomfortable. He shifted his position on the couch, prepared for the worst when Spock finally broke the silence.

“That is an acceptable proposition.”

“Wait, really?”

“Indeed. Your proposal is not unlike treating Ms. Romanoff in the same manner we would a diplomatic or first contact mission. As a person totally unfamiliar to the function and culture of both the United Federation of Planets and Starfleet, I agree that using the Enterprise as an example of the best we have to offer would be an adequate method of procuring her trust.” Spock stood with his arms clasped behind his back, ever the dutiful first officer.

“Huh,” came Jim’s intelligent response. “Look at us, agreeing with each other and being all compromising and stuff.”

“I do not believe your use of the adjective ‘compromising’ in that statement is entirely suitable to its implied meaning,” Spock said in what Jim assumed was a tone of dry Vulcan derision. In reality it sounded the same as everything else Spock said, but reading between the lines of Spock’s speech was a favorite pastime of Jim’s and what Spock didn’t know wouldn’t get Jim in trouble.

“Or was it?” Jim winked, bracing his hands on his knees and standing up into a full body stretch. In an ill-timed feat of resuming his normal modus operandi, he’d been going for jokingly alluring, but the loud pop of several of his joints pretty much ruined that.

He opened his eyes, feeling like the idiot Spock probably thought he was, but a witty rejoinder died on his lips. Spock’s eyes were locked somewhere in the vicinity of where his tunic had ridden up, exposing a hint of the happy trail beneath.

Before his brain could really process that, Spock seemed to notice the awkward silence and immediately relocated his eyes to a more typical location somewhere above Jim’s left shoulder.

“If you will excuse me, Captain, I have work to attend to before I retire,” Spock said as calm and unruffled as ever, standing to the side of the door as he opened it in a clear signal for please remove
“Yeah, sure,” Jim said, bewildered at the subtle shift in the tenor of their interaction. “Continue this conversation over breakfast before shift?” He asked, not moving toward the open door.

“That is acceptable,” Spock answered, not moving away from the door.

“Okay, then,” Jim finally uprooted his feet, tugging his tunic into a more appropriate position as he exited Spock’s quarters. “Good night Mr. Sp—”

The door swished closed in his face.

“—ock.” He finished, blowing out a breath and studying the closed door for a second.

Jim walked the few steps to his own quarters, absent mindedly fingering the hem of his tunic as he puttered aimlessly around the room. That had been kind of… off. Spock didn’t get distracted, and Jim had only ever seen him look that way when they’d both—well. We don’t talk about that, Jim thought wryly. Spock was the picture of professionalism even when Jim was being an idiot, but he had been staring for a second. Hadn’t he?

Okay, maybe reading between Spock’s lines would get him into trouble, because Jim had definitely imagined the greenish tint at the points of his ears.

Mashing those thoughts into submission, Jim sat down at his computer terminal and started in on a few historical databases. Drowning himself in information was usually a good way to distract himself from errant Spock pondering, especially when it came to Spock being weird. And he’d been weird… not just about the flashing, either.

Christ, he was overthinking things. Spock was probably right about the paranoia.

He smoothed his shirt over his stomach absently, lingering for a moment and thinking about Vulcan blushing.

Yeah, he’d most definitely imagined it.

Chapter End Notes

I've been poking and prodding at this chapter for a week, but I think it does what it needs to.

Also, feel free to drop by on tumblr at officiumdefunctorum if you'd like to drop me a line or just peruse my fandom and random related posts. Thank you for reading!
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

Sulu might have a death wish, Natasha is bored, and Bones wants her out of his Sickbay. But Jim can't seem to get Spock alone (who'd have thought there might be a good reason?).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Greeting one's floor first thing in the ship's morning wasn't really Jim's ideal waking up procedure.

*Chirp. Chirp.*

Then again, if he hadn't fallen asleep at his desk with his face mooshed into the console, he'd have been further away—and less upright—when the comm woke him with its horrible, cheerful sound.

"*Nyergh,*" Jim grunted, scrubbing the side of his face that was now sporting fabric patterns from his undershirt. "Kirk here," he answered, audio only.

"Captain, Spock here."

"Yeah, I'm getting that," Jim cleared his throat when it squeaked roughly.

"Captain, it is currently 0500 ship's time. You are most definitely not late."

Halfway to having his head inside of a sleeve, Jim halted in his struggle, straining to peer at the chrono through the fabric.

"For fuck's sake, then," Jim said, voice muffled by the shirt. "What is it? Did Romanoff kill Bones or the other way around? Because if it's 0500 and no one's dead I might spike your plomeek with Swiss Miss," Jim grumbled, pulling the shirt off and throwing it in the direction of the cycler.

"To my knowledge, all that were alive six hours ago are still living. I have called to cancel our pre-shift meeting. I must attend a sub-space conference call with Starfleet scientists that conflicts with that time."

Jim blinked for a second, his still sleep fuzzy brain sifting through the words. "Uh, okay. Anything I should know about?"

"I do not believe it is cause for concern. As head of the science department on the Enterprise, it is likely they wish to discuss our ongoing investigation of the opened cryotube."

Settling down at the console once more, Jim bit the bullet and activated video. Spock's face
materialized, and if he had any sort of reaction to Jim's rumpled not-bed-head, he didn't show it. Possibly because he was looking past Jim rather than at him, but the man was probably just being polite by not staring pointedly and giving him the eyebrow.

"And you're ready for that? I didn't think we had much in the way of new information."

"I have compiled the necessary reports. If they insist on asking questions for which I do not have answers, then it may be an expedited call."

Jim huffed a short laugh. "Seems like a waste of time, to me, but whatever. 'Fleet loves its bureaucracy."

"Indeed."

About to sign off and leave Spock to it, and maybe catch an hour of sleep in an actual bed, Jim hesitated a moment when a thought struck him.

"When did you compile those reports?" Jim asked, brow furrowed. "Our last check in with Drs. Wallace and Djembe was end of Alpha yesterday and they hadn't gotten anywhere."

"I consulted both they and Dr. McCoy last night after the conclusion of our conversation. Given the topic we intended to discuss before our shift, I thought it prudent to have all available data at our disposal."

There wasn't any hesitation in the way Spock said it, but something about it still struck Jim in an odd way. He pulled up his message queue on a PADD quickly to look for the reports Spock was talking about and... nope. Not there.

"Oh, um. Okay, yeah. That was a, uh," Jim glanced back up at Spock. "Good idea. Could you send those reports my way before your call? I doubt I'll get a look at them now, but it should enrich my breakfast just that much more," he went for a half-hearted grin, but barely got a nod in response.

"Of course, Captain."

"And ah," Jim rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly. "The thing about citizenship for the frozen people... I doubt they'll ask about anything like that, being science types, but, keep it on the down low, for now, yeah? I don't want to screw the pooch on that before we've even really talked about it. It's the best bargaining chip we have with Romanoff that isn't frozen in holding."

"I will endeavor to keep the matter out of the discourse, should such topics arise, though I agree it is unlikely."

"Thanks."

"If you will excuse me, Captain, I must prepare for the call."

"Yeah, see you on shift," Jim answered.

"Spock out."

The screen dimmed, and Jim got all the way to collapsing on his bed before he realized that he and Spock hadn't actually rescheduled their meeting.

Throwing an arm over his eyes, Jim sighed out his frustration and weird tingling in his brain, willing his body and brain to rest before the next hellish day really began.
"Dragging me up here to the mess when I've got patients that need seeing to, Jim, I swear," Bones grumbled, though he drank his coffee with a bit more than his usual gusto.

"Late night?" Jim asked around a mouthful of toast. Replicated bread, but really actually toasted. It was marginally better than the replicated fruit, but not by much.

Bones grunted in response. "Goddamn hobgoblin comes marching in demanding a detailed update on Romanoff middle of Gamma. Not like I wasn't awake or anything, but still. You know what Vulcans do to my sleep." Bones shot him a pointed look that conveyed each and every time he—and by association, Spock—had thwarted the doctor's hard won rest.

"Said something like that, earlier," Jim remarked, swallowing. "S'why I called you up here. Not that I don't relish the chance to see your sunny countenance this early on the ship, but it was supposed to be that hobgoblin sitting across from me."

Rather than being offended, Bones rolled his eyes. "Figures. He stood you up?"

"Nah," Jim waved the comment, along with a flutter in his belly, away with a dismissive gesture. "On some conference call with Starfleet science monkeys. Starfleet doesn't care what time it is on a ship if it's convenient for them. Lucky for them Spock doesn't need as much beauty rest as we do. I'd hate to see him cranky and fussy."

"Perish the thought," Bones drawled, finally digging into an omelette. "So, you putting Romanoff in the brig?"

Jim nearly choked on a mouthful of toast.

"What?" He sputtered.

Bones eyed him with a furrowed brow. "The report I gave Spock, would've sent it while you were on shift, but he was there last night and all. She's recovered enough that she doesn't need medical supervision, bit of therapy for the regenerated muscles and all that, but there's no reason to have her cluttering up my sickbay, anymore."

Jim took a swig of his own coffee and stared at it briefly before answering. "I, ah, haven't actually had a chance to read the report, yet," he admitted. "I just got it this morning when Spock cancelled."

"He didn't forward it last night?" Bones asked, seeming equally befuddled with the revelation as Jim had been.

Jim's shoulder rose and fell in a small shrug as an answer. "We were gonna meet this morning, anyway. You know how it is with me an reports, they sit in my queue until someone brings up what's in them."

"Not Spock's," Bones countered, sipping his coffee with a bit more temperance.

"He doesn't know that," Jim offered with another shrug.

Bones rolled his eyes. "Like hell he doesn't. If it weren't for his reports, we'd all be mince-meat in an asteroid belt by now."

Jim chuckled with slightly more humor than he felt. "Yeah, I guess. Still. I've got the reports, I'll read them on shift."

"Reports? Plural?" Bones asked.
"Yeah," Jim said, popping the last bite of toast into his mouth. "He bugged Carol and Dr. Djembe last night, too. 'Fleet monkeys probably want a full workup, it's a good thing he was so prepared for our chat this morning."

Bones hummed in response. "That's a Vulcan for you, I s'pose. Don't know how the 'Fleet runs without one on every ship."

The sarcasm in Bones' voice was so thick he could have poured it over waffles. Not that Bones let him eat waffles.

God, he missed carbs.

"So Romanoff is really on the up and up?" Jim asked, fantasizing about pastries and eyeing the chrono for the remaining minutes until shift change.

"Yep," Bones quipped. "Ancient body parts all in working order. Still no immunizations to speak of, which is batshit crazy if you ask me, but I can't exactly force them on her while she's strapped down, considering she's busted out of them a handful of times anyway." Bones snorted, then. "Thinks I don't know, probably. As if I wouldn't notice!"

Trying to quell the uneasiness that struck in him, that Romanoff could so easily shuck her bonds even under supervision, Jim went for light amusement. "She really got out of them? How'd the security officers take it?"

"Ha!" Bones scoffed. "Like they'd pick up on it. Never dealt with a slippery bastard in their lives. Real subtle, Romanoff. But she hasn't had to work with you and the rest of this floating tin can of crazy. I didn't mention that part to Spock, but it's high time she moved out of Sickbay, anyway, somewhere people can keep watch without putting my patients at risk."

Jim didn't mistake the serious edge to Bones' statement. "Yeah, I hear you. I'll have something worked out with Spock by the middle of Beta, I hope. We didn't exactly reschedule our meeting, but this is a priority."

"It better be," Bones scowled. "I'm a doctor, not a babysitter. Don't want those security meatheads in my Sickbay any more than Romanoff, but she's sneaky and not as annoying as you. Bad combination."

Jim laughed, then, a real one. "I'll bet," he said with a chuckle. "I'm sure you've got plenty of hypos that will make your job easier."

"Yeah, like I'd risk my arm putting one near her if she didn't say so first." Bones shook his head, taking a fortifying swig of coffee. "She's dangerous, and she ain't shy about letting us know it, or at least she isn't as sneaky as she thinks she is if she thought we wouldn't notice. She's trying to play some kind of mind game with us, and it's got everything to do with the other people in those tubes," Bones nodded in a vague direction to indicate the cryotubes housing Romanoff's friends.

Sighing, Jim looked at the chrono again. Time to go. "Yeah, I know. Just keep your eyes peeled and whatnot, yeah? I'm still pretty sure she won't kill you, but I'd hate to lose my best doctor."

Snorting, Bones waved Jim away, having seen his frequent glances at his timepiece. "Kid, as far as you go, I'm your only doctor. Now shoo. Go make sure we stay afloat long enough to get that woman out of my hair."

Resisting the urge to ruffle said hair out of its neat part, Jim stuck his tongue out at Bones instead. Not quite as effective, but equally immature. "You're a gem, McCoy."
"Don't you forget it!" Bones said to him as Jim rose from the table and made his way to the bridge.

Reports to read, people to ponder, other alliterative things... Alpha should be interesting, today.

Evidently, Spock's call had run long, because his first stop when he entered the bridge twenty minutes into shift was Jim's chair.

"Captain, I apologize for my tardiness. The call lasted longer than I calculated it would."

Jim waved a hand at him in dismissal, giving Spock his full attention in favor of the PADD containing the reports.

"No problem, Commander. I was aware of the circumstances."

"Indeed, Captain," Spock said, eyes fixed on the console over Jim's shoulder. "You have received the reports?"

"Yeah," Jim said, searching Spock's face for a moment before glancing back down at the PADD. "I'll have them finished well before Alpha is over. You want to rain check that operational meeting for a late lunch?"

Gaze not wavering from the console, Spock answered. "In the absence of any issues requiring my attention, that is acceptable."

Thrown a little by the uncharacteristically conditional response, Jim could only nod. "Okay, then. To your station, Mr. Spock."

Nodding once sharply, with a barely there glance at Jim's face, Spock retreated to his station and relieved the Lieutenant Jim had had covering until Spock arrived.

Turning back to the PADD in his hands, Jim ignored the continued tingling in his brain and resumed reading Spock's reports from the night before.

An hour later, Jim tried to quell his annoyance at the contents of Carol's report. It was thorough, given how late and last minute it had been requested, but that could probably be attributed to how the thing was rife with the fancy-speak for 'we've got nothing' on their analysis of the cryotubes.

Also possibly also Carol's lingering and ongoing insomnia. Jim could relate.

As for the cryotubes, other than the specifics on the actual material out of which the damn things were made, whatever tech was inside of them was inaccessible. Jim's inner computer nerd itched in aggravation to know what the hell sort of program it had been running—and was still running, in the other tubes—to get Romanoff out on her little reconnaissance quest, but it looked like until the rest of her little posse was liberated, it would remain, like them, a mystery.

In the report from Dr. Djembe, Spock mentioned—and it bore significance given the simple fact that it even made it into the report—that the Starfleet doctor was dissatisfied with the access she had to the lone revived patient. As far as Jim was concerned, she could suck it, because Bones was doing his job just shy of awesomely and he still wasn't convinced he could trust Djembe and her team as far as he could throw them out of an airlock.

On the other hand, he could sympathize. Her lone purpose was to study the tubes and the people inside of them, and Jim had all but locked her out of the proceedings. But there were lives and livelihoods at stake, and that wasn't something he was going to put out of his own hands or those of
the people he trusted until he had good reason to do so. They'd be at their destination soon enough, and then they'd have to deal with it, but by then (he hoped) there would be some protections in place that limited the scope anyone had from doing anything to compromise the safety of their frozen refugees, and thereby everyone else.

Setting aside the PADD with the reports, Jim pulled out his personal PADD to do a bit more research and put some more meat on the proposal he had for Spock when they had their rain check after shift.

But he sent a short text comm to Bones, anyway. For posterity.

djembe is pissed you won't let her see romanoff, he sent.

**Bones:** she can be pissed all she wants shes not gettign anywhere near my patient

not your patient for much longer, bonsey

**Bones:** liek youd give her free access even if she were headed for the brig

Jim was typing his reply when Bones sent another text.

**Bones:** youre not actually sending her to brig right?

Deleting the half formed message, Jim stared at the screen for a second.

not the plan but i still have to talk to spock about it

**Bones:** well fucking talk to him because i need to get her out of here she is going to start a fight Lt. Afzal caught her getting out of the restraints

**Bones:** shes in isolation now for their sake

Chuckling to himself, Jim imagined how that confrontation had gone before responding.

i'm sure it was hilarious. i'll talk to him. if i don't i'll have secure quarters on standby.

**Bones:** ok. go back to captaining because i might have to kill someone

please don't, Jim sent in response.

Several minutes passed without a response, making Jim a bit nervous.

bones swriously don't kill anyone its a lot of paperwork.

bones?

Abandoning the conversation, Jim went back to his plan drafting, until half an hour later when a message pinged in his official queue notifying him of an Ensign from engineering removed from duty until further notice, accompanied by a short list of injuries and signed off by Lieutenant-Commander McCoy, Chief Medical Officer and a custom message that said: *diagnosis of terminal stupidity, suggest review of competency before returning to duty roster.*

Jim's bark of laughter drew looks from the bridge crew, but he didn't even acknowledge it as he forwarded the message to Scotty. His CEO would get a kick out of it. Judging by the response he received almost immediately, his hunch was correct.
CEO Scotty: Lass is brilliant, but I don't think the ship likes her. She's on rotation for comms maintenance when she returns, not to worry.

Sparing a glance at Spock, who was still entrenched in his station, Jim hunkered down to get some work done. He could only hope no actual crises arose in the meantime. Feeling the occasional stare from his XO, there was enough on his mind already.

Beta found Jim taking lunch with Sulu. Which meant he wasn't having lunch with Spock, because he'd had shit to do. Again.

Midway through stabbing a hunk of replicated penne, Jim tried not to be startled when Sulu spoke up.

"Something going on, man?" His helmsman said, pausing in his inhalation of one of three plates of some high protein something or other that looked like it might have originated in the Pacific Islands.

Jim sighed, setting his fork down and staring into his abused pasta.

"No," he said, less than convincingly. "This is just the second time today I was supposed to be eating with someone else."

Barely pausing to shrug, Sulu spoke around a mouthful of food. "Trouble in Purgatory?" He asked.

"Purgatory?" Jim echoed with a frown, pushing his food around with a fork.

"Yeah," Sulu paused to swallow. "You and Spock. Not exactly paradise, but significantly less hostile than the first couple times we were out, so," he shrugged again. "Purgatory. What's up?"

Choosing to ignore the annoyingly apt metaphor—he really hoped that the rest of his crew in general didn't think of their Captain and First Officer's relationship with the moniker of 'purgatory'—Jim offered a shrug of his own.

"Spock and I have some shit to work out with the, uh, new addition. He had a conference call this morning and now there's a science crisis he has to deal with. I'm not worried but there's... stuff, we need to work out."

Jim felt stupid repeating himself, but Sulu, unperturbed by the vagueness with which Jim offered his explanation, polished off one plate before beginning on another.

"That shit with the Gaspar plant? Hardly a crisis," he said. "The thing is barely flesh eating, the spores aren't going to cause a ship wide pandemic or anything."

Jim nearly choked on the single mouthful he'd taken in the last ten minutes. "Spores can be dangerous," he said, catching his breath. "Very dangerous." He emphasized, shooting Sulu a meaningful look, daring him to say something.

"Eh," Sulu said around a mouthful of food. "Trust me, not a huge deal. Keep the replicator meals vegetarian for a few hours and we're gold. I'd say Spock is already on it, considering I couldn't get pork dumplings. Not exactly supervised work, we're talking about. He's probably done already if you want to comm him."

Fingering the communicator in his pocket, Jim was tempted, but given that Spock had put off their lunch he figured he might as well wait out the duration before trying to get ahold of his XO again.
"Nah," Jim answered, starting in on his thoroughly mutilated penne again. "I'll get him for dinner. Third time's the charm, right?"

"Sure," Sulu answered. "Hey, you seen Pavel, lately? He's usually around, about now, but I didn't see him before Alpha, either."

"He's on shift right now," Jim said. "Trying to keep the command crew rotated until we make our destination. I want at least a few of the usual suspects on the bridge if anything happens. It's not that I don't trust the auxiliary crew, but until I see them all in action myself, I don't want us all in the same place unless we need to be, you know?"

"Smart," Sulu nodded, swigging something green and possibly radioactive. "He's not the only one up there, is he? I know he was glad to give engineering back to Mr. Scott. Not that he's not good at the seniority stuff, young as he is, but I think he feels better with someone else to boss him around."

Jim laughed. "Nah, he's good. Uhura is up there, too. I've got them at the usual stations, but the command relief knows who to put in charge if something comes up. Good experience for everyone, I think."

Sulu nodded. "Yeah. So, any chance we'll get to see Romanoff in action? I know McCoy has her locked up tight, but the way she thrashed our security people, I'd pay to see what she can do with some real blades."

Snorting a bit of his pasta, Jim coughed his way into a response. "Little anxious to give someone who threatened Dr. McCoy's life some deadly weapons, aren't we?"

"He'd be dead if she wanted him to be, is the way I see it."

"I suppose," Jim hedged.

"Swords, Kirk. I volunteer. Gladly get my ass kicked for the sake of, you know, science, or whatever."

Shaking his head, Jim grinned at Sulu. "Science, Hikaru, really? That the best you can do?"

"I'm a botanist. I've never claimed to be anything more. She's hot, okay? I watched those security feeds. Puts our guys to shame, hell, she puts you to shame, and that's saying something."

"Alright, alright," Jim put up his hands, fork aloft. "No need to go insulting my masculinity. Also, might not be the best idea to go mentioning the boner you've got going for our resident... visitor."

"Psh," Sulu scoffed. "I'm not crazy. That'd be like picking a fight with Uhura. Only you're stupid enough to do that."

"Hey, that's insubordination, Lieutenant," Jim mock scowled.

Laughing, Sulu collected his plates and pinned Jim with a look. "That's why you keep flirting with her, right? Death wish? Let me know, though, about the swords thing. I'm serious. Keep me in fighting shape."

Garishly flexing his muscles, Sulu walked toward the recycler and out of the mess, leaving Jim to his snickering.

Unfortunately, the snickering gave way to the same itch he'd had in his brain all day, and Jim still couldn't quite put his finger on what it was. Something Sulu had said...
"Could you, for five minutes, not try to antagonize my staff?"

"Judging by the color of the shirt, she wasn't one of yours."

"Ha ha," McCoy deadpanned. "She's your security detail, and you're my patient until further notice, so that pretty much makes it my problem. Don't. Fuck. With the redshirts. They're idiotic at best, but they're my responsibility."

Resisting the umpteenth urge to roll her eyes, Natasha folded her arms instead.

"Glad to see you've escaped your restraints." McCoy folded his arms in turn, mirroring her posture. "Again."

"I was bored."

"Then ask me for a holoscreen and some reading material," McCoy unfolded his arms to gesticulate wildly. "You can't tell me that voice activated commands weren't a thing in the twenty-first century, because I know for a fact that they were."

"This," Natasha answered, nodding at the room, and therefore the ship, around her. "Is worlds behind some of what I've seen, so don't patronize me with voice activated commands. I want to know what is going to happen to me, and anything short of that means I'm bored and a continued pain in your ass."

McCoy unfolded his arms in an aborted motion of strangulation. She could relate. Honestly.

"Good lord," he hissed. "Don't blame me for being stuck with the toddler tech, kid. What exactly do you think I did all that work for, regrowing your spleen and muscles? Shits and giggles? No, I did it because I'm a goddamn doctor and I fix people. I do that so they can be less of a pain in my ass and not more. You, Ms. Romanoff, put a phaser to my head because it was convenient for you, and you are a huge goddamn pain in my ass right now. I 'make you better'," he supplemented the comment with air quotes and everything, "So the Captain and First Officer can deal with you. Until such a time as they do, you need to stop with the escape acts. It's making the other kids with the phasers antsy."

Natasha stared at him, making the moment as long and painful as she could.

"As grateful as I am not to have to deal with the irritation of cracked ribs, those kids with the phasers are pissing me off hanging around like they could actually do something if I decided I was sick of waiting for someone else to decide my fate. Which I am, if I hadn't made that clear."

McCoy fixed her with an unimpressed look. It reminded her of Fury.

"Nobody is deciding your fate. If anything is decided, it's that we're not going to kill you, so you can stop looking at me like that's on the table," McCoy scowled down at the floor before shooting her a sidelong look. "There are people who've done far worse than you who aren't dead because of it, so relax, would you? As much as I'd like to see you out of my hair and in the brig, I doubt Jim'd send you there. He's got a soft spot for people like you."

"People like me," Natasha echoed, cocking her head to the side.

"Idiots who have themselves in over their heads without a prayer of getting their shit together in time
to save their friends, and don't know how to trust other people to help them do it," McCoy said, steely seriousness in his voice where only moments ago it had been dripping with sarcasm and double-speak.

Natasha didn't respond. She just watched him watching her, the two of them with arms folded and waiting for some kind of sign that the other was going to give.

Unfortunately, she was at a disadvantage here. She didn't need to think five moves ahead to see where this was going.

"I get that you don't trust us. If it were any other ship you'd woken up on, pardon my treason, but I'd say you'd be better off trying to shoot your way out. But you're on the Enterprise, and her Captain is James Tiberius Kirk. Look him up when you get the chance, because you will. You don't know these people, but I do, and maybe you've seen some shit wherever you come from, but the two smartest people I know are in command of this ship, and they're going to make sure that both you and this crew and whoever else is still on ice get out of whatever shit storm this is alive and with some kind of future, you got that?"

Natasha wanted to believe him. She could almost taste the blind faith that was being spewed at her, and that made her nervous. It was the kind of faith she'd put in Coulson before he'd died, before everything with Fury and security clearance and global crises that had arisen before he'd even deigned to let them know he was still breathing just in time to go get himself killed again.

"I can't," she answered, almost reluctantly before she caught herself. "I'm not going to fuck with your security anymore, okay? But don't ask me to pretend like they're my friends. Your Captain isn't my friend, neither is his first officer. I'm a prisoner, and we're both smart enough to know that. Until I get something straight from the Vulcan or the guy in charge, I've got nothing for you. I'm sorry."

A long moment passed in which a variety of emotions passed over McCoy's face. The terminal point was somewhere between disappointment and resignation.

"I'm almost glad to hear you say that, Romanoff. You're not an idiot, I'll give you that. It's more than can be said of some of the geniuses on this crew. I'll break one of my own rules and promise you this: Captain Jim Kirk isn't going to throw you or any other frozen fuckhead to the wolves, you got that? I'll go out on a limb and guess that I'm still breathing just in time to go get himself killed again."

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The brief stare down that resulted from McCoy's rant could have started a fire, but Natasha eventually relented, not necessarily because she believed him, but because she wasn't so sure she had much of a choice. McCoy wasn't some manipulative cult orator, he spoke from the heart and said exactly what he was feeling. In any case, it was enough to get her to agree not to mess with the security lackeys.

God, what was she supposed to do now?

"Fine," she answered. "Your security is safe, but only as long as I get to stay in here without restraints. It's degrading and, as you've seen, completely ineffective. Cuffs are off unless your bosses say otherwise."

"My bosses," McCoy mouthed with a shake of his head. "Right. You don't be a jerk, they won't invade your space. Perfect."
"It alright for me to have the non-kiddie tech now?" She asked with an inquiring lift of her eyebrow.

"Ha!" McCoy scoffed. "That's funny. You're a riot. Try not to set off the medical alarms while I'm gone, you'll end up unconscious and I'll end up with a bunch of paperwork."

Natasha bit the inside of her lip in an effort not to scream or kick McCoy in the jaw. Neither would get her very far where she was right now. Staring at his back as he exited the room, the door sealing itself with a hiss of hydraulics—or whatever tech it was—she leaned over to watch him leave.

"Paperwork, right. Cry me a river, McCoy!" She called after him.

This time it was the doctor tossing a one fingered salute.

Natasha smiled. A little smirk, not quite a grin.

Okay, so she liked him. Almost.

"Captain Kirk to First Officer Spock," Jim spoke into his communicator. The Vulcan was nowhere to be found in the lab where he'd been putting out metaphorical flesh eating fires, which left either looking him up on a console or just comming him.

Jim had actually been tempted to use the grid to find him, it would have been fun to catch him off guard, but, there were some things he didn't like to do, and playing Big Brother with his crew was one of them.

"Spock here," his XO answered after a brief delay.

"Where did you run off to? Your lab rats said you had that mess under control like half an hour ago. I need that rain check on our chat. The Romanoff situation is...elevated."

There was another lapse of silence before Spock's answer.

"I am a bit indisposed at the moment, Captain."

Jim sighed. "Spock, this is time sensitive. We really need to hash this out."

Another pause, and when Spock replied Jim caught the sound of clicking and buzzing in the background

"I am aware of that. After attending to the current problem, I will be available for a meeting."

Staring at his comm for a second as he leaned on the bulkhead outside the labs, Jim brought the comm unit closer to his ear.

"Are you in Engineering?" He asked.

Spock's voice came over a bit more quickly this time. "I am in a Jefferies tube, Captain."

Brow furrowed in confusion, Jim marched to the nearest wall console and pulled up Spock's location. Fuck it, there were a lot of Jefferies tubes. Setting off in the direction of the one Spock was currently in—somewhere near communications, of all places—Jim spoke into his comm again.

"What the hell are you doing in a Jefferies tube?"

"Captain," came Spock's voice a few moments later. "The incident in the Arboretum necessitated
reprogramming of the central mainframe of the replicators so that the Gaspar plant’s spores do not populate in our crew's meals." Another pause. "I am conducting somewhat delicate work, especially given that I am partially suspended above a significant height and currently have the use of only one hand. Perhaps we could continue this conversation when I have finished."

"Jesus, Spock!" Jim called down into the tube he'd just opened, seeing Spock hanging half in an alcove with his feet braced on either side of the tube with one hand clinging to the ladder that trailed the wall. "Why didn't you say you were literally hanging out in a Jefferies?"

"I believe that I just did," Spock said to him from the short distance below, pocketing his comm and returning to his work on the circuitry.

"For fuck's sake," Jim muttered under his breath, rolling up his sleeves with the intent to climb down and give Spock a hand. Maybe it would speed things up, a bit.

"Hold up for a second. I'm coming down. I can't believe you went in here without a spotter or something."

"That is unnecessary, Captain," came Spock's immediate response, his hands stilling in their task. "Additional persons in this space will only compromise our safety, and I have almost finished."

Pausing with an arm and a leg into the tube, Jim frowned down at Spock. "Are you sure? The replicator code loves me, we'd have it done in no time."

"I am quite certain. Unless you should desire to contact me via communicator again, I will most assuredly finish my task here safely. Please remain where you are."

Withdrawing from the tube, Jim rolled his eyes. Stubborn Vulcans. "Sure, fine. But Bones will kill me if you go splat."

"As he would deprive the crew of the entirety of its command team in such an effort, I do not believe he would do so."

"He'd consider it a public service, probably," Jim answered, leaning against the jamb of the open panel and peering down at Spock some twenty feet below.

"Captain, if it troubles you to remain silent while I finish this task, perhaps you might find a replicator outside of those for general use to check the success of the programming. I will find you when I am done here."

Grinning slightly to himself, Jim rapped his knuckles against the side of tube. "I see how it is, Spock. Fine, I'll go. But comm me or something when you're finished up. I might wander."

"Affirmative, Captain."

Closing the panel to leave Spock in peace, Jim shook his head as he walked off to find a replicator. Hopefully Vulcans didn't consider sass an emotion, because his first officer certainly had that in spades.

Half an hour and several random replicated meals from various locations on C deck later, Jim was perusing the preliminary report from sciences on the Gaspar plant incident. It was somehow both hilarious and troublesome, considering nobody really noticed that the plant was fertile until an Ensign's sandwich meat had started to visibly decay when he'd returned from tending the arboretum.
It was an interesting method of ensuring propagation, to be sure. Killing off native insects and using the slimy remains of their bodies to leech their spores into the ground and surrounding vegetation was actually pretty badass, in a creepy, budget horror flick way. Sulu probably knew more about it.

How the plant had gone into the fertility cycle was another one of those mysteries, though, and one that was no doubt fascinating the science staff even as Jim read the report while he wandered the corridors. Technically, in the absence of insect stimulation, the plant would remain dormant. No sense in expending the energy to create and release spores if there was nothing crawly to melt, and all that.

Sighing a little to himself, Jim skimmed through more of the report as he wondered when Spock was going to comm him. Jim didn't want to bug Spock if he were still in the Jefferies tube, it really was preferable that Spock not plummet to great bodily injury because Jim was impatient.

Resisting the temptation to let his feet carry him back in that direction, Jim tried to concentrate on the report and not the lingering itch in his brain whenever he thought about Spock. It wasn't that Spock was acting weird, per se, just... something was bugging him. Little things, kind of.

But really, though, Spock acting weird in the grand scheme of their studiously ridiculous relationship was small potatoes. They couldn't all take Jim's ostrich philosophy and pretend like classified things never happened. Nothing to see here, business as usual, carry on.

Not that it was really working, but he could try, couldn't he? If he couldn't push personal feelings and past experiences by the wayside to run a ship with his friend and first officer, he may as well give up his command.

Still, Jim couldn't help but think that it had never been this difficult to get Spock alone for an important conversation, before.

Frowning down at the PADD in his hands, Jim was in the middle of wracking his brain when the turbolift doors opened, and it was thanks to both the PADD and said brain-wracking that he was not looking up as he walked inside it.

"Oof! Kuma nina—Kirk, watch where you're going!"

Jim blindly cursed as he fumbled with the PADD, only to grin outright when Uhura's exclamation betrayed who he'd run into.

"Aww, but if I looked where I was going, how would I ever get those lovely hands to touch me?" Jim winked, thoughts of Spock temporarily suspended.

Uhura radiated annoyance, her unimpressed eyebrow risen in a perfect imitation of Spock's that she had to have picked up while they were dating.

Sidling past him to actually exit the turbolift, Uhura dusted off whatever traces of Jim were left on her uniform. "I'm happy to punch you in the dick if you need female attention that badly."

Jim swore he felt his balls snuggle a little closer in fright.

"Such a cruel woman. We could do such beautiful things if you only gave me the chance. I've sworn off the farm animals in anticipation of our inevitable union," he said, waving a hand at himself as he struck an alluring pose in the doorway.

"Poetic," Uhura offered flatly. "Maybe you should try it on the next victim. I'd say that's a step up from your usual repertoire, but if it's just the farm animals that still puts you flirting with anything that
breathes. If you'll excuse me, Captain, I have some Ensigns to throw out of an airlock for gumming up my frequencies."

"Go easy on them."

"Not a chance," Uhura said, a terrifying smile on her lips.

"You complete me!" Jim shouted at her back, catching the one fingered salute she threw him as the lift doors closed.

Chuckling to himself, Jim went back to his PADD. The lift had barely started moving when a little tingle in his brain had been niggling away at him since last night exploded into conscious thought and struck him like an ahn-woon to the face.

Maybe you should try it on your next victim.

"Oh," Jim breathed, staring at the PADD but not actually seeing the words. "Oh, fuck me."

Where he’d been impatiently waiting to talk to Spock, before, now Jim felt weighted down by guilty dread at the prospect. If he were lucky, maybe he could get by with dragging him along to the mess for the conversation, something about seeing the replicator programming in action for himself. At least at that point, Jim wouldn’t have to worry about doing any number of monumentally stupid things.

Of course, that was when Jim focused on the corridor ahead of him and realized his feet had taken him to the mess, just in time, apparently, to see Spock walking toward him.

"Captain," Spock greeted, standing at parade rest. The full weight of Spock's dark gaze rested firmly on Jim, and not something over his shoulder, which was an improvement from their shift this morning.

Oh god, what did he even say?

"Spock." Jim cursed the squeak in his voice. "Wait, uh—Commander,” Smooth. Be professional. “Um, what?” Jim searched his scattered thoughts for an appropriate response to the greeting that Spock had given him sometime in the last minute. Right. "Hey, I was just... looking for you," Jim finished lamely.

He supposed it was better than ‘No, I wasn’t actually looking for you. I was shirking my very important duties so I could put off an awkward conversation we shouldn’t really be having.’

Jim really hoped he hadn't been standing there staring at Spock for the last two minutes or something. It kind of felt like it. Spock’s posture had tensed in the meantime, and god, he couldn’t possibly make things worse, could he?

"Are you in adequate health, Captain?” Spock asked, cocking his head at Jim’s obviously flustered appearance. “You appear feverish. Have you perhaps eaten something contaminated by the Gaspar spores?”

“No no,” Jim held up his hand. “I'm not... feverish, or whatever. I just wanted to, um.” Jim mentally kicked himself. Just spit it out! “Fuck it. This is probably going to come out wrong. I wanted to apologize for my behavior last night.”

Spock blinked at him. “Captain?”
Jim continued, trying not to look at Spock’s face and humiliate himself any more. “We both know that I don’t always have the best timing when it comes to inappropriate humor, but the thing with the,” Jim made a series of gestures in the general direction of everything below the waist that he hoped indicated the part where he’d put himself on display without actually articulating it. "That. The, um. Flirting. I shouldn’t have dropped that on you last night when we were… alone.”

Jim winced, putting a hand to the back of his head and looking up at Spock guiltily. “It was unprofessional and I completely understand why you kicked me out when you did,” he finished, mentally smacking himself and standing at attention to be more of the Captain and less of the idiot who’d flashed his happy trail at his first officer the night before.

Watching Spock’s face, Jim could only see him telegraphing Vulcan confusion. Which is to say that his eyebrows were furrowed just a touch more than they usually were when dealing with the illogical Captain Kirk. Which, of course, because Jim had not only blundered through their encounter last night, but he’d been waltzing around the ship for half the day without a clue that he’d done so.

“Captain, I must confess that I do not know of what you are speaking. I did not ‘kick you out’ of my quarters last night, at least not in whatever context it is you are describing,” he finished. “Are you certain that your health is sound? Perhaps we should converse in your quarters so that you might rest.”

“No!” Jim blurted, before he could think better of it. Jesus, Spock in his quarters was the last thing he needed, right now. Jim closed his eyes briefly and screwed up his face. "No. Spock," Jim put up both hands, waving them ineffectually. “I don’t need a siesta, or whatever. I’m fine, really, I just,” he huffed in frustration. “Dude, I made a stupid joke about ‘compromising’ when I was in your quarters and...” he gestured a hand somewhere at his middle, lowering his voice when an Ensign passed them to enter the mess. “May have unintentionally flashed some skin. I’m apologizing for being a jackass,” he said with an exasperated huff.

Spock no longer looked confused, but now he knew he’d imagined the green on Spock’s ears last night, because there was no way he’d have imagined it to look like what he was seeing right now. It was adorable and wow that was another inappropriate train of thought, seeing as how Spock still hadn’t said anything.

So, solution: word vomit.

“I made it awkward, and I’m sorry. And wow, I’m making it awkward again, aren’t I? Don’t answer that.” Jim pinched the bridge of his nose. "Shit, look. I didn’t mean to violate our code of silence or —” Jim cleared his throat, valiantly keeping a blush at bay. “Whatever. Really. You shouldn’t have had to kick me out and it won’t happen again. Perfect gentleman from here on out. So, I mean, I get the making yourself scarce thing, today, but you really don't have to worry about it. I'll behave, I swear.”

Spock stared at him for several long, excruciating moments, his posture still and inscrutable, decisions of Jim’s fate locked up in Vulcan impassivity.

“Apologies are unnecessary, Captain.” Spock looked over to the mess and then back to Jim. “If you are finished, it would perhaps still be prudent to converse in Captain's quarters. If not for your benefit, then for the sake of the information we have to discuss. There are things of import to which the general crew should not be privy.”

Mouth opened slightly where he’d thought to continue his ranting apologies and oaths and promises, Jim was still trying to compute having his whole crisis brushed off when his gut lurched a bit at the second part of Spock’s statement.
Forget Spock’s feelings—not feelings, whatever—on the whole thing, Jim was not ready to be alone in a room with him again. He wasn’t sure he trusted himself not to do something else monumentally stupid, now that he was aware he’d actually done it in the first place. Second place. Millionth place. Jesus christ, how many times had he actually done that to Spock, before?

Biting back another emphatic no before it could escape him again, Jim stumbled through an excuse. “That’s not necessary, Commander. You should see your programming for yourself, anyway, and I am capable of being discrete from time to time,” he tried to say with a friendly smile.

“Nevertheless, I insist.”

Shoving down a spike of panic, Jim shook his head. “We’ll be fine. Our conversations are never interesting enough to eavesdrop on, anyway, and the mess replicators have more options. You haven’t eaten yet. Come on,” Jim said, stepping toward the doors.

Spock looked like he wanted to say something, but ultimately unclasped his hands from behind his back and nodded once at him. “Very well. Shall we then continue our previous discussion, as suggested?”

“Yeah,” Jim breathed, feeling a little more relieved than confused. “You’re gonna love my ideas, Spock,” he grinned, holding up his PADD and feeling on slightly more even footing than five minutes ago.

Chapter End Notes

Kuma nina—motherfucker (Swahili)

At last! Here it is. The number of rewrites and revisions I went through for this chapter was... staggering. I'd be lying if I said there wasn't at least 7k of shit I wrote and subsequently banished. If there are typos I missed, sorry. If I read through it one more time I will punch myself in the face. I know it feels like nothing much is happening. Things will pick up soon (other Avengers incoming, I swear), and the next chapter will be up in the very near future. It was just this horrible little beastie I couldn't get right.

Still alive over at officiumdefunctorum.tumblr.com!
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

Liberation from Sickbay. Spock and Natasha make a deal; she finally spills the beans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“A tour. Right now.” Natasha repeated, like it would make more sense. Well, it did make sense, but the timing was... odd, for the occasion, to say the least.

“As the ship’s operations run continuously throughout three—sometimes four—shift rotations, the reduced activity of late Beta shift into early Gamma is not inopportune for such an undertaking. If you have no objections, we will begin immediately,” Spock finished, allowing her room to protest even as he lead her down the corridor away from Sickbay.

Natasha didn’t say anything, just followed him.

Well, when she was right, she was right.

Whatever it was the Vulcan and the Captain had worked out, at the least she was finally out of the Sickbay—gods be praised—but it seemed like what remained of Natasha’s day—evening?—would be spent as the baton in a ship-wide show and tell relay race.

It would be good reconnaissance, but hell, if this was what they’d had planned, they really could have gotten her out of there sooner.

Eyeing the stolid form of the Vulcan from her place a few paces behind him, she figured that yes, naturally, her first baton runner would be Spock. He was the Maria Hill of this ship’s operations: her best bet for a swift overview and general layout, probably before she was handed off to a subordinate because he had better things to be doing.

Honestly? She was having a difficult time reading him. It was impressive, to say the least. She couldn’t tell if the general stiffness in his posture or the curt bluntness with which he spoke were because he was Vulcan and that was just how Vulcans were—McCoy had said as much at some point, but again, she couldn’t be sure because drugs had been involved—or that he still didn’t trust her at all.

If he did, he’d be an idiot. To be fair, almost everyone was an idiot when it came to trust and being manipulation; though perhaps her own perspective wasn’t the best litmus test for how other people should handle interpersonal relationships.

If Barton were here, he would have laughed in her face at such a Coulson-like statement before agreeing with her wholeheartedly.

Sooner.

Not allowing herself to be distracted further, Natasha focused on the Vulcan as he pulled up a holographic schematic of the Enterprise.
“The ship is composed of two main parts,” he said, enlarging the projection and indicating areas with his hands. “The first is the main body of the ship—a so called ‘saucer’ due to the roundness of the design—which houses the command center, crew quarters, various laboratories, internal communications arrays, essential storage and cargo, recreational facilities and the medical bay, among other things. I will not take the time to list them all, as you will see them for yourself soon enough.”

Spock motioned and the projection with his fingers before scribbling on a PADD with a stylus, and Natasha watched as the image darkened to highlight the remaining portion of the ship.

“The second component is the battle section, comprised entirely of engineering and sub-departments related to defensive and offensive capabilities, maintaining ship functions and smooth operation. Therein is also the auxiliary battle bridge and medical bay. As you can see, it is extensive and much of it is off-limits to any personnel without highly-specific authorizations and training. Lieutenant-Commander Scott will attend to that portion of your tour, however, so I anticipate he will explain anything you wish to know within the parameters of discretion with regard to you as non-Starfleet.”

“And as a potential threatening presence?” Natasha added on, watching him for any sort of reaction.

Spock paused in the tapping on his stylus, letting the projection hover to the left of them as he lowered both of his hands to his side.

“Ms. Romanoff, I wish to make it clear to you that I am a scientist. As such, any judgments I make or conclusions that I draw are based on available evidence and logic. In the short time that you have been conscious on this ship, you have proved to be both physically capable of hurting and killing almost any of the crew. You are intelligent and manipulative, and from my experience these are things honed during a lifetime of practice.”

“To answer your question directly, I refuse to compromise the safety of this ship and its crew by providing you with information that could only be of use to someone intent on either running this ship or sabotaging it. I do not know you. I do not know the other people in those cryotubes, or why they are there. I do not know why you were the only one brought out of the cryostasis. These are questions that you can answer, but you have chosen not to do so. Captain Kirk suggested this tour as a means of illustrating our strength of character and the goodwill of Starfleet’s mission in order to gain your trust so that you might be willing to share these things with us. Until such a time as you intend to fill in the gaps of information that one such as myself might need to draw a conclusion that you are not a threat, as you have previously proven yourself more than capable of being, you are an unknown. I have not, nor will I, treat you with antagonism or aggression, or try to manipulate you as you have done so with me. Do not insult my integrity or my intelligence by attempting to do so further.”

Unknowingly, Natasha had mirrored Spock’s posture when he’d shifted, and found herself looking up into his stoic face over the scant feet that separated them. The man gave a hell of a monologue; as for the contents… bluntness? Unreserved honesty? She could work with that. She could definitely work with that.

It was so much different than what she’d experienced with McCoy. The doctor was devoted to his patients and to his friends. He was smart, but his decisions and mannerisms were wrapped up in empathy and bad experiences. Spock? Well, Spock was one-hundred percent resistant to bullshit. He was smart enough to see that Natasha could play them, but that that didn’t necessarily mean that she was.

Not all the time, at any rate.
From what she understood, there was some telepathy at work here, but it wasn’t anything like Xavier’s or she would either be in restraints or cuddled up on someone’s couch, waiting to spill her sob story about the end of the world. At this point, Natasha wouldn’t have been able to give him any of these answers he wanted. She couldn’t say with any assurance that she wasn’t a threat to these people, because she wasn’t convinced that they weren’t a threat to her. It was like she’d told McCoy; just as Spock was trying to protect his crew and their best interests, Natasha was grasping at whatever straws she could find that might mean the rest of her friends made it out of the cryotubes alive, and with something other than being on the wrong side of a microscope waiting for them.

As much as she might be able to trust some of these people, they served a higher organization—a military organization. Maybe they could make some of their own calls, but their careers and commissions ultimately depended on the people giving them their orders. It wasn’t like the people SHIELD hired; this wasn’t turning an assassination into asset recovery like Barton had done with her (and he’d still gotten in a lot of trouble for that stunt).

A grumpy doctor who cared about a patient that had put a gun to his head, a ridiculously young starship Captain with an attitude to match Tony Stark’s, and an honest Vulcan did not mean that they were safe in any sort of long term. Given that their health and transportation depended on these people… that was not something she was okay with leaving up in the air.

Obviously, Spock knew this.

Natasha took that moment to sigh externally, because it was the only thing that wasn’t shooting something out of frustration. She’d barely been out of the tube for a day, there were still too many unknowns.

“I appreciate your honesty, Mr. Spock,” she said, in place of *tell me how you really feel*.

“Vulcans cannot lie.”

Natasha didn’t smile. “What you said, about me being an unknown, I can’t promise that I’ll tell you everything you want to hear. That’s not really my call.”

Which was… somewhat less than the truth.

The team had pretty much put their respective fates in her hands, trusting her to make whatever calls she needed to keep all or most of them alive when the time came. But what Kirk and Spock were asking for fell into the category of things that might screw them. This wasn’t an eventuality that they’d prepared for, and she could only improvise so much before she would need to confer with them on cover stories or release of information.

“Nevertheless, it is appreciated. I’ll make you an offer, Mr. Spock,” she continued, mind whirling. “When this is over, I’ll sit down with you—only you—and we’ll talk. You don’t lie to me, and I won’t lie to you. I can’t promise that I’ll tell you everything you want to hear, or answer every question you ask me, but I won’t lie and I won’t obfuscate. I’d expect the same in return.”

Spock regarded her for a moment, his posture unchanging. The man’s face was incredibly unreadable—subtle shifts in the tension of his brow or the line of his lips the only indication of any inward contemplation. With more practice, she might learn to read these cues. As it was, she was stuck wondering.

“I must conduct such a conversation in the presence of Captain Kirk,” he said, eventually.
“No.” Natasha shook her head. It wasn’t that she couldn’t deal with Kirk or get around any lies or subjective statements, but with Spock there would be no bullshit. No fluff. “Just you, and that’s not a reflection of Kirk’s character, either. I’d know if he were lying to me or trying to hand-feed me platitudes, but I’d rather just talk and not have a mutual interrogation.”

If he didn’t know that any talk with Natasha was an interrogation, well, she couldn’t blame him.

Spock studied her a moment longer before giving a curt nod. “That is acceptable. I will, however, have to gain Captain Kirk’s approval before such a conversation can happen.”

“I trust you’ll make it work.”

Spock lifted his PADD, stylus and eyebrow simultaneously. “Indeed. Shall we continue?”

A smile did creep up to the corner of her mouth, then. There and gone almost before she noticed the impulse. “After you, Commander.”

As if the tension of the conversation had never happened, Spock continued on his succinct overview of the Enterprise, outlining the portions of the ship she would see, some she wouldn’t, and never mentioning the portions left out entirely. Obviously he was true to his word when he said that parts of this ship were off limits to almost everyone—possibly even him.

Following him out of the ‘small-purpose room’ as she’d described it in her head, her thoughts strayed to the inevitable revival of her friends in the tubes, wondering if she would even be able to do enough to help them survive the process, let alone what would come after.

Containing a sigh, she silently longed for the familiarity of the covert missions she’d been doing her whole life. This wasn’t that. It wasn’t even close. She had the reconnaissance skills that would get the information they needed to stand a chance, but she couldn’t do anything with it. Not yet.

She hadn’t been so alone since her final failed solo operation, the one where Clint had come to kill her, somehow coming out on the other side as a new SHIELD asset and his unwitting best friend.

_They’re coming. They’ll be here soon, just a little more work to do._

She had just under two days before waking them up became a reality anyway. Neither Kirk nor Spock nor anyone else had said as much, but opening those tubes was going to happen with or without her consent. And why shouldn’t it? If SHIELD had found them in other circumstances, they would have done the same thing, probably with a lot less delicacy.

Frankly, it’s what they’d done to Steve, but with the caveat that they’d known who he was and what they were dealing with at the time. That had obviously gone so well.

When those tubes moved, Natasha wasn’t letting them out of her sight for a second. She’d die first. For Starfleet, for the people on this ship… the Avengers were everything from a potential threat of disease and anarchy to a fascinating science project.

She could see where they were coming from, really, she could. She just didn’t care.

If it came to it, she’d kill whoever she had to make sure that she and her friends were free and unharmed on the other side of whatever was happening, here. She just couldn’t quite… figure out how.

Several hours and a handful of very odd encounters with various Enterprise crew members later,
Natasha was longing for some fucking peace and quiet and a chance to actually digest the enormous amount of information she’d just had to absorb.

“Are you satisfied by the tour of the Enterprise that you received, Ms. Romanoff?”

Looking around the quarters to which Spock had seen her—bed, shelving, terminal, door (bathroom)—she concluded that it was probably bigger and more accommodating than anything she’d had on the Helicarrier. Possibly at any of the SHIELD bases, altogether.

“Yes,” she answered simply. This Vulcan Spock obviously appreciated straightforward questions and answers. It was early in third shift rotation—Gamma—and she was tired; they’d agreed to talk at some point, but in the meantime, she had some questions of her own to pose.

“So, are going to ask me if I trust you, now?” She turned to him, keeping the weariness out of her voice and lifting an eyebrow in facsimile of his own expression.

“Do you?”

Natasha didn’t smile, but she wanted to. Fury and Coulson would have fallen over one another to get Spock on their roster for intelligence and interrogation.

“Tell me, Spock. Is this ship the best the Federation has to offer?” She gestured to the room, the bulkheads.

“The Enterprise is the flagship of the Federation. While no longer the newest or most technologically advanced, it is designed and equipped for battle, diplomacy, scientific research and deep space exploration. I cannot objectively state that the Enterprise is the best of the United Federation of Planets or Starfleet, but the ship and its crew are a more accurate representation than not.”

“And are you proud to be on this ship?” She asked, watching his face.

“It is not a question of pride. I have made the decision to be here because it is where I can be of the greatest service to its crew, its Captain and my people. To take pride in my service on this vessel is illogical; what is, is. There is no logic in being proud of sound decisions.”

Natasha regarded him, wondering for a moment how someone like James Tiberius Kirk could actually want this guy for his second in command. Then again, it was equally worth wondering why the hell someone like Spock would choose to serve on Jim Kirk’s ship.

“Then there isn’t anywhere you’d rather be,” she said, to see if it might either antagonize or otherwise make his answers more telling.

Every moment that passed in which Spock looked at her—angular, dark Vulcan eyes that seemed to see through every layer of defense she had—made her feel exposed.

“No.”

A few dozen other questions queued up in her brain, but she held them off. They would talk later, and if two centuries hadn’t allowed her spy skills to atrophy, then this guy was as real as she was going to get. In a rare turn of fate, she was more or less guaranteed honest answers—if shrouded in the Vulcan’s technicalities. If not the whole truth, she could count on Spock not to outright lie to her.

All the same, she’d woken up on the Enterprise, and it was the only thing she knew of the Federation other than what she’d gathered from the myriad anecdotes and observations during her tour of the ship. These people, this crew… they were exceptional. The people on this ship did not fit
any military mold she knew, and from what she could see of the commanding officers, their superiors had a limited ability to control them.

― “What if I say no?”

“I’ll persuade you.”

“And what if the…other guy says no?” —

It was a throw away memory. Something she hadn’t thought about since it happened, but suddenly came back to her, and she knew in that moment that she was on the other end of this for real.

Was this uncertainty, this destructive knowledge in the face of powerlessness, how Banner felt all the time? She could kill them, but where would she be? Where would that leave her team, the people she still cared about?

Dead, probably.

Right. This was the part where she negotiated exchange of information.

“Tell me, Spock,” she began. “If this is the best the Federation has to offer, what happens to the rest?”

The Vulcan’s brow furrowed the tiniest bit. “Clarify.”

“A long time ago, a man said that a nation’s greatness is measured by how it treats its weakest members,” Natasha quoted. “What is it like for everyone who isn’t on this ship?”

Another long moment of silence passed before Spock spoke again.

“Mahatma Gandhi, an interesting reference. If I understand your implication, you wish to know if the life aboard the Enterprise is a romanticized vision of life as a citizen of the United Federation of Planets at large. Is that correct?”

Natasha nodded, so did Spock.

“The answer in short, is yes. Starfleet and this ship in particular recruit those who offer unique talents and experiences that make them suited to the needs of an organization whose goals are to explore, research and maintain diplomatic relations between dozens of alien species. However, recruitment is contingent on a variety of factors in addition to the discretion of the recruitment officers. Captain Kirk is an example of such discretion, perhaps you may ask him sometime of his recruitment to Starfleet.” Spock paused, considering her with his usual intensity. “As a whole, Starfleet rarely rejects any applicant out of hand. Those not admitted to Starfleet Academy are usually offered alternative training and paths of employment.”

Spock’s stance altered, then, just a small readjustment of the grip of his hands where she couldn’t see them behind his back; his shoulder muscles bunched and relaxed with the motion.

“The Federation is not a Utopia, Ms. Romanoff. Earth itself spent many decades recovering from devastating warfare before Vulcan ever made first contact. The Federation is an alliance in which all members maintain autonomy within certain identifiable parameters, but Starfleet cannot hope to police and enforce every world we encounter and still abide by the Prime Directive. Ultimately I believe it is a peaceful, more vibrant future than what you must have experienced in your life before, but crime, corruption and terrorism exist in some capacity today just as they did hundreds of years ago. Certainly the advancements made since your time on Earth have made it possible to overcome
the worst of poverty, disease and famine, but these are things that transcend our ability to overcome completely.”

“Something tells me the Vulcans don’t have that problem,” Natasha answered on a hunch.

She was almost surprised when Spock immediately became more closed off, his face gradually loosening into smooth lines of impassivity that had only just been slightly lined with concentration.

“There are very few Vulcans left, but you are correct, Ms. Romanoff. The Vulcan way champions logic and control over one’s emotions. It is something that took millennia to achieve, and I cannot hold other species to the standard of my own precepts.”

She was getting the feeling that Spock probably wanted to leave. She didn’t know this story, but whatever it was must be a big deal if Spock was some kind of endangered species when they were the ones who made first contact with Earth.

Well. Sort of. The Asgardians had definitely gotten there first, but she wasn’t going to burst their bubble or anything.

“Okay,” she said, in place of anything else.

Spock nodded to her and turned to leave, she rolled her eyes at herself behind his back before calling out to him. “Wait.”

The Vulcan turned around smartly. “Yes?”

“This terminal… I don’t really,” she stopped short in frustration. “This translation matrix,” she tapped the small device clipped to her shoulder, “Works fine for conversation, but will the computer understand me? Am I allowed to access historical information? Publicly archived data? Does it even work?” Natasha gestured to the machine in question. “Do you maybe have a language module or something I could use to catch up?”

More silence reigned between them. Already she couldn’t really tell the difference between Spock thinking and Spock hesitating; it was a frustrating state of being.

It reminded her of Coulson.

“There are several respected programs that deal with the translation of Pre-Warp English to Federation Standard and interpretations into modern equivalents of the same dialect. They are designed for those with a previous knowledge of Standard, but do provide a variety of tables, matrices and phonic exercises that may assist you in reversing the process. I can transfer them to a PADD for your study, if that is acceptable.”

Trying not to grimace, Natasha nodded her acceptance. Learning languages had always been the most annoying part of her spy business. From what she could understand, learning Standard was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to life in the Federation. Sure, maybe she was the purveyor of an ancient Earth dialect, but her time with Lieutenant Uhura told her that there were at least four big Federation languages and two enemy languages she couldn’t even identify, let alone understand.

“I’ll figure it out,” she affirmed when Spock merely looked at her.

“I can also adjust the settings on the terminal to display in Modern Earth English, if you wish. It has changed little in the past centuries.”

“Not. It’s fine. Send a computer tutorial with the other documents, I’ll change it if I need to.”
Apparently satisfied with the response, Spock walked over to the computer terminal and removed a tablet looking thing from a slot beneath the desk.

“This is a secured PADD. You may attempt to break the encryption if you wish, but as I have personally programmed its security I will not consider any attempt to be malicious.”

Natasha stared, an eyebrow threatening to climb into her hairline.

Okay. Wow. If pride wasn’t a thing with Vulcans he was sure as shit confident that she couldn’t hack his code.

Spock handed her the PADD, activating the visual display and illustrating a few controls that would be useful for her studies. “You will find any programs and documents that I upload to this PADD in these locations.” His long fingers tapped on the dim display, indicating the spots in question. “I have included the personal addresses of approved crewmembers Montgomery Scott, Christine Chapel, Leonard McCoy, Nyota Uhura, Hikaru Sulu, myself and James Kirk for non-emergency contact should you have any questions you wish to direct to them.”

Looking at what reminded her of the address book in her old StarkPhone, she silently surveyed the names. At least the characters were largely familiar, nothing too outrageous. Perhaps that would be one of the questions she ultimately directed at Uhura or Spock… why the hell was Standard so similar to English?

“…thanks,” she said, instead. She had a day or so to get herself up to speed on the important stuff before the others would be woken up, so it was mission prep like anything else.

Before leaving, he spoke to her one more time. “It is relevant to note that Federation Standard is the language used by Starfleet for technological interfaces and diplomacy at large, but it is far from a general or interplanetary standardized language. It is notably different from MEE, Modern Earth English, as well as all of the various languages of Federation and Non-Federation planets. You will find that much has changed in the past two hundred forty-seven years, but not that much.”

Natasha blinked at him a couple times, wondering what the hell he wanted her to say.

“How about you just send me anything you think I should have? I can handle it, I assure you,” she said, matching his stoic look.

Nodding once more, the Vulcan finally turned and left, leaving Natasha alone in her closely monitored quarters.

Well, she wasn’t being monitored on the inside, but the variety of sensors and apparatuses she’d seen at work today assured her that the security officer posted outside of the room was probably the least problematic form of surveillance. Maybe they weren’t peeping on her in the shower, but she couldn’t do anything with the computer when she barely understood the coding or language, and at this juncture weapons were kind of a moot point.

Fatigue was nagging at her from the purely physical exertion of walking around the ship today—climbing in the case of engineering—but all of the information in her brain was volleying for her attention and the combination was giving her a headache.

Sitting down on the bed, Natasha allowed herself a moment to rest her forehead on open palms. Stress throbbed in her temples, but this was not the worst she’d dealt with, and she would be fine.

They would all be fine.
Lying back on the bunk, she resolved to catch a bit of sleep before working on the language problem. Spock would probably need some time to send her everything, anyway.

God. She hated recon.

A persistent beeping from the tablet—PADD—Spock had left her drew Natasha out of slumber. Blinking her eyes and reaching for it, she methodically pressed the buttons that she had been shown to pull up received transmissions.

Squinting into the dim light of the screen, she looked at the—growing?—list before her eyes. Wow. Spock had certainly provided her with quite the laundry list of study material, and apparently didn’t need to sleep, considering the hour.

Flicking across the documents, she realized that all the titles had been translated so she could read them. Among the documents and programs he’d sent were articles about the persistence of poverty on Earth, a few editorials on penal colonies, volumes on Pre-Warp English syntax and phonology, Federation Standard for Beginners, and basic grammar and speech in Andorian, Betazoid and Tellarian.

No Vulcan, which either meant it wasn’t something she could understand or he was being pissy. Probably the former, considering who she was talking about.

Scrolling through the documents yielded a plethora of historical documents and links to databases. In short, there was more than enough here to keep someone occupied for weeks.

With a sigh, Natasha sat up and rubbed the remaining sleep out of her eyes. She didn’t have weeks, she had a couple days.

Time to figure this shit out.

At some point, the door chime roused her from her ongoing linguistic nightmare. It was late—no, early—by the standards of ship’s time, and Natasha blinked owlishly at the indicator, trying to remember what she was supposed to say.

She settled on “Come in,” figuring that would be close enough for the ship’s computer to figure out. She thought of JARVIS with a bit of nostalgia, and briefly wondered if the data drives Tony had stored in his cryotube had survived.

The door slid open, and Captain Kirk stood a step back from the space. His eyes swept across the room, taking in where she sat on the bed, legs folded and a language hologram occupying the space in front of her.

“Wow, that looks like fun,” he said, dryly.

Natasha didn’t shrug, just looked at him. “It’s not supposed to be,” she squinted at him a bit, watching him for a reaction.

Kirk opened his mouth, but shut it again, staring at her in surprise. “You’re speaking standard,” he said, a smile tugging at one corner of his mouth.

“Not so difficult, considering the similarities to MEE. I suppose it shouldn’t be surprising that English would infect the galaxy along with the rest of the world. My money was always on Chinese.” She looked back to the program in front of her. He would say whatever he’d come here to
say, far be it for her to coax it out of him.

“Probably would have been right, except for the massive radiation poisoning after…” Kirk trailed off at her blank look. “Right, that’s—so,” he began after a bit, still not entering her quarters for whatever reason. To preserve the illusion of privacy? “We need to talk about what’s going to happen once we reach our destination, Spock and I thought it would be a good idea to do it over breakfast. Get an early start on…things,” his eyes roamed over the PADD, rumpled bed and glowing terminal. “Have you been at this all night?” Kirk frowned.

“He did, did he?” Natasha cocked an eyebrow, ignoring his last question as she resumed flicking through Andorian transliterations.

“Touché,” Kirk huffed a laugh. “It was my idea and Spock is humoring me, like usual.”

“He doesn’t seem the type to humor anyone.”

“He’d say the same, but you learn to read between the lines.”

Natasha hummed noncommittally. “So. Breakfast,” she said, actually looking up at him.

“I figured we’d go to one of the rec rooms. They’re usually a bit more low-key than the mess about now. Not even the Tellarites get up to kal-toh this early. Unless you’d rather stay here…?” Kirk left the question open.

Natasha suppressed a sigh, barely restraining herself from rolling her eyes. As if she really had a choice. It was cute, almost, how sincere Kirk was trying to be. Yeah, she could just stay here, but if they were going to discuss what was happening with the others when they got to this planet, she was going to be there. Like hell they were going to do anything to those cryotubes without her say so.

She could still kill them, after all. There was always that.

“No. The rec room is fine,” she said, shutting down the program and standing up. The nondescript black uniform they’d given her reminded her vaguely of the standard SHIELD getup, if a bit less form fitting. It did wonders for an illusion of modesty, but the extra fabric left something to be desired with precision of movement. At least it wasn’t those ridiculous short dresses some of the women on the ship favored.

“Oh, Mr. Spock will be meeting us there. Do you need a few minutes to—?” he waved his arm awkwardly and Natasha couldn’t resist raising an eyebrow at his discomfort.

“I’m ready,” she said, stepping into the boots she’d been given. These, at the least, were more than adequate. They fit snugly and the soles were obviously designed for a variety of terrain, gripping the sparse carpeting as well as the smooth paneling of the floor in the corridor—brushed tritanium, if she remembered from Montgomery Scott’s ramblings.

“Great,” Kirk nodded, stepping away from the door and shooing the security officer away. “I’ll take it from here, Ensign,” he said, and the man scurried away with a salute.

So maybe conversation over breakfast hadn’t been his best idea in the world. Considering the healthy supplement of awkward to their meal, he was spending more time playing with his food than eating it.

“So,” Jim cleared his throat, trying not to let Romanoff’s serene, penetrating gaze unnerve him. “What did you think of the Enterprise?”
“Which part of it?” Romanoff responded, raising a cup of water delicately to her lips.

Jim stared in fascination for a moment before shaking it off. “Um, all of it?”

“You have a very courteous crew, though I doubt my security escort has endeared me to any of them.”

Shrugging, Jim popped a piece of replicated, syrupy goodness into his mouth. Screw Bones and his diets, Jim was going to eat waffles if he wanted to. It’s not like he couldn’t program the replicator for whole grains, anyway. “Standard enough protocol, they’re probably just remembering that you very recently kicked their ass. In case you didn’t notice, there are more scientists on this ship than soldiers.” Jim munched on another bite, hoping the look he gave her was meaningful enough.

“The amount of space dedicated to your scientific facilities is impressive,” Natasha nodded, taking a bit of some vegetarian porridge thing she’d had Spock select for her. He’d only been a little offended that she hadn’t asked him for advice on alien food.

“As a ship designed primarily for exploration, the Enterprise is more scientific vessel than not. While adequately equipped with personnel for battle and military engagement, our needs are better served by utilizing scientific knowledge and equipment to avoid potentially hostile situations than our weapons and manpower to get out of them.” Jim didn’t miss the way Spock looked right at him when he said this.

“Hey,” Jim pointed at Spock with his loaded fork. “I give the science minions plenty of leeway to survey and collect data. The stellar cartographers love me,” he said before stuffing the replicated food into his mouth.

“I would not seek to criticize your decisions, merely to illustrate the strengths of the Enterprise and its crew in handling any of the more sensitive situations we have and may yet come across,” Spock said primly, chopsticks lifting in regular movements to his mouth filled with lettuce type things and seriously what was with him right now and getting distracted by people eating?

“So,” Jim pointedly turned his head back to Natasha. “See anything especially awesome? What was your favorite part?” He grinned somewhere between sweetly and roguishly.

“The recreation facilities are exceptional. I’ve never seen ones so varied and expansive, before,” she said, eyeing the room in which they sat. It was one of the smaller rooms, designed more for quiet entertainment with personal games or reading. He’d play poker with the security and medical staff in here on occasion. It had started as a joke, getting them acquainted with one another when they weren’t injured or unconscious, but it had sparked a really weird sort of… bonding rivalry.

Jim pretty much excused himself from those games now unless Bones was playing, but Bones usually only played with the command crew, because he could actually insult the rest of them without being in danger of potential harassment complaints. Or he was a secret elitist jerk. Spock begged off for obvious reasons—poker face, telepathy et cetera—but he’d play chess with Jim, instead.

Well, they used to. They hadn’t played chess since their last mission, and judging from the way Spock was looking at his food and not Jim, he was thinking something similar. The bastard.

“If you’re going to send people into space for five years at a time, you’ve gotta find ways to keep them entertained, give them something to do that isn’t working or training. Interdepartmental
Fizzball, Andorian calisthenics, ‘book clubs’.” Jim waved to the room around him. “Uhura started a choir not long ago. It’s not like we get shot at on a too regular basis, and until we’re actively in danger of blowing up, most of us act like we’re not going to. Some of the Admirals and the other Captains complain about it, saying I’m running a ship and not a community college, but,” Jim shrugged. “It works. I have an awesome crew, and they’re more awesome for not being miserable.”

“That must make it difficult when casualties happen,” Natasha said, not unkindly. She was always soft-spoken, but the careful way she talked didn’t exactly give him vibes of sincerity.

His hand tightened around his glass, and he took a sip to chase away the dryness that had gathered in his throat. “Part of the job,” he said, more stiffly than he liked.

Spock, in a feat of well-timed awesomeness, jumped in to save him. “Indeed. While our medical facilities and personnel are exceptional, the dangers of space and serving on a Starship mean that casualties are a fact of life. Even the esteemed Doctor McCoy cannot save everyone. The officers and crew of the Enterprise understand that they face death every minute of their lives. I was indeed skeptical of Captain Kirk’s desire to expand the recreational facilities upon the refit of the ship, but I have found these distractions and camaraderie have improved efficiency rather than hindered it.”

Natasha looked thoughtful as she took a drink, but Jim was only half paying attention to her. He tried not to think about it too much, but people under his command dying was still a sore spot. It hadn’t happened during the first stint of his command, but their encounter with Khan and Marcus had obviously broken that streak.

Jim wasn’t actually sure that it would ever not be sore, and couldn’t quite objectively weigh the pros and cons of having personal relationships with people he might send to their deaths at any time. The almost non-existent age gap didn’t help—he’d been at the Academy with a good number these people.

“Is that why you have a psychiatrist in residence?” Natasha asked, breaking him out of his thoughts.

Jim wanted to roll his eyes. Now there was something that hadn’t been his idea. That had been all Bones. Jim wanted a shrink on his ship about as much as a squad of Romulans—would in fact, rather have a shrink nowhere within ten parsecs of him at any given time.

“Doctor Dehner is there for people who want or need to talk to her. Most people don’t get on a starship if they don’t want to be here, but hey, shit happens. Who am I to judge how people deal with space-crazy?”

“Your use of pejorative terms suggests you do not understand gravity of Prolonged Void Exposure Syndrome.”

Jim stared at Spock for a second before sighing. “Whatever, I get it. It’s useful and there aren’t as many people who treat her like she’s going to get them discharged from the ‘Fleet as I thought there would be. I agreed to the trial program, didn’t I?”

“With copious protest and complaint, yes,” Spock responded, and Jim caught Natasha’s small smirk out of the corner of his eyes.

Jim suppressed the urge to stick his tongue out. The fact that he regularly had to suppress that urge around Spock probably wasn’t indicative of anything good, but hey, they were talking about how his traitorous best friend had made the Enterprise the guinea pig for the proposed shrink in residence for every ship out on a mission longer than six months. He could be forgiven his lapses in maturity.
“Why do I even hang out with you? Oh, right, because we have actual things to talk about. Relevant things,” he turned his head back to Romanoff, the remaining waffle on his plate now forgotten.

“Relevant to me, I take it?” She asked.

“Yep,” Jim nodded, putting on his serious face. “Quite relevant. I don’t know if you got around to reading the Federation Charter or not—I’m assuming Spock gave you the unabridged version—but there is the clause concerning naturalization that I think you’ll find pretty relevant.”

Jim retrieved his PADD from a small pack he’d brought with him and slid it across to her, several portions highlighted.

He and Spock waited while she read, then waited more when her eyes narrowed and she read through it again, hands clenched around the sides of the PADD.

“This—this is about citizenship,” she said, looking up, eyes flicking from Jim and then to Spock.

“Yep,” Jim nodded. “This isn’t a situation that’s been encountered before, not really, but any Federation lawyer worth their salt wouldn’t need much to make the case.” Jim shrugged, waving a hand at the PADD. “Hell, we have a couple on board. You’re a citizen of United Earth, technically with all of the rights that go with it.”

“Technically,” Romanoff echoed, her eyes dark and shrewd, looking at Spock and not him.

“Technically indeed,” Spock nodded. “Starfleet does not exist as a law unto itself, but tends to operate under the auspices of those who would sooner bend laws than follow them to the letter. Such includes the circumstances of criminals and the detainment of hostiles.”

“And as far as Starfleet is concerned, we don’t know yet how you and your… friends, fit into this. But what’s there is the best we’ve got, and it’s something that I have as precedent for keeping the science monkeys out of your shit without your consent.”

The look he received in response could be described as dubious at best.

“You can’t tell me that you’ll stonewall the entire mission you were assigned just to keep us out from under a microscope,” Romanoff said, pushing the PADD back toward him.

“Watch me.” Jim leaned forward, placing both hands on the table and meeting her gaze evenly.

“These are words on paper,” she said. “Or a screen. You said it yourselves that it isn’t enough to keep Starfleet or anyone else from doing what they want. You don’t even know who we are.”

“Yeah, but I’m the Captain, and whether this team of scientists like it or not, that means I’m in charge of the operation.”

“I agree with the Captain,” Spock broke in, probably unintentionally reinforcing his title of authority. “Until such a time as proven otherwise, you are citizens detained, not imprisoned, and theoretically retain all the rights thereof.”

“Frankly, that’s bullshit.” Romanoff regarded them with an icy gaze, whatever food was left on the table forgotten. “I’ve seen people detained indefinitely without charge or recourse for decades. It doesn’t make any difference to me, because citizen or not, I can’t stop you from doing anything. I could kill some of you, but I doubt that would help.”

Jim tried not to look too stunned at the pronouncement, blinking in response to a statement that had
been uttered just as sharp and matter of fact as anything else she’d said.

Surak bless Spock for jumping in at all the right times.

“You should remember that we are two hundred forty-seven years removed from what last you knew of Earth, Ms. Romanoff. I am well aware of the unlawful and atrocious acts perpetrated by government and other peoples on Earth in the name of suspicion and security. We know little of who you and your comrades are, but as long as we can be sure you are living, sentient beings, I will not allow ill treatment or indefinite containment without reason. Citizenship only compounds the avenues available to you and yours should you have need of its advantages.”

Spock paused a moment, then, considering her with that stupid, effective poker face of his.

Really, the command crew had only needed one game to figure out playing with Spock was a bad idea.

“The ease with which you suggest you may kill us belies your willingness to do so. I might suggest that such action is highly unnecessary to ensure the safety of yourself and those in the remaining cryotubes.”

“Those who sacrifice liberty for security deserve neither,” Romanoff rattled off the quote promptly. “Not that it’s something I’ve always lived by myself, but believe me when I say that we’ll go down fighting if it comes to that.”

“Nar-tor pulaya s’au k’ka’es – k’el’rular tun-bosh,” Spock responded, effectively distracting Jim from every point of the conversation with the deep, coarsely uttered words spoken in Vulcan.

Romanoff seemed, if not equally distracted, keenly aware of the Vulcan sitting across from her by the obviousness of his alien speech.

“Accept their reaching in the same way: with careful hands.’ Words spoken by the Vulcan philosopher Surak. I should think their meaning is clear, but I will clarify should you need it,” Spock finished, voice utterly transformed as he switched back to Standard from Vulcan.

A staring contest had seemed to commence between the two, and Jim flicked his eyes from Romanoff to Spock and back again while they sized each other up. He suppressed an immature urge to make a remark about breaking out a ruler.

Eventually Romanoff nodded, never taking her eyes off of Spock’s, even as several curly strands of red hair fell into her face. “I think maybe it’s time you and I had that talk, Mr. Spock.”

“Talk?” Jim repeated, sending Spock a look.

“Indeed,” Spock said, seemingly in response to both of them.

“Wait. What did I miss?” Jim asked, putting his palms up in a gesture of what the fuck?

There was a prolonged moment in which Romanoff turned her head slowly to look at Spock, eyebrow lifting in a way that conveyed something along the lines of seriously?

“Captain,” he turned his eyes to Jim, breaking the stare. “Prior to her tour of the Enterprise, Ms. Romanoff agreed to a conversation in which we might satisfy some of our mutual curiosities in an effort to assuage suspicion on either side.”

“Okaaaay,” Jim drew out the word, the suspicion that he was missing something prickling in his
brain. “Where should we start, then?”

Spock’s momentary hesitation and glance at Romanoff confirmed the suspicion. God damn it.

“I’ll only talk to Spock,” Romanoff said, now looking at him.

“Hey!” Jim said. “I’ve been almost nothing but courteous and upfront with you this whole time. I should be a part of whatever ‘talk’ it is you two set up behind my back.” He sent Spock a meaningful glare.

“It’s not a condition reflective upon your actions, Captain, just your nature,” Romanoff responded coolly. “Spock can’t lie to me, and while I’m sure any conversation with you would be extremely enlightening, we don’t really have the time for tangents and irrelevant inquiry.”

“So you’re saying what, exactly? That I’ll get in the way of my own best interests?” Jim bristled.

“Captain, I assure you that I am more than capable of handling this conversation in the most efficient and productive way possible. While I would indeed prefer for you to be present as both ranking officer and as added perspective, Ms. Romanoff was adamant that I alone am the one with whom she will speak.” Spock looked at Romanoff as he spoke this last part in an obvious request for confirmation.

“You can be offended if you want, but that’s my offer,” she said.

“Spock,” Jim said stiffly. “Outside.”

He didn’t even look behind him to make sure the Vulcan was following him. When the door closed behind him, he turned on Spock with what he hoped was an expression of stern authority and not indignation.

“Hell no,” was the first thing out of his mouth. Okay, maybe the indignation was winning.

“This may be our only opportunity to gain information from her before reaching the planet. Possibly at all, if her promises to defend her comrades are sincere.”

“Yeah, see? That’s not the problem I’m having here. The problem is that you shut me out of this little deal with her. You agreed to talk to her alone and didn’t even tell me about it!” Jim hissed, mindful of the public arena.

“I had not anticipated that Ms. Romanoff would choose this occasion to initiate our proposed conversation. We only briefly discussed it prior to her tour of the Enterprise. It was never my intention to ‘shut you out’, Jim.”

“Oh, don’t Jim me, Commander,” Jim snarled. He hadn’t quite figured out why he was so worked up about this, yet, but he was getting there. “This isn’t about us, this is about this ship, this mission. Maybe if you’d told me about your confab with Romanoff before we sat down to breakfast I could have anticipated it. That’s why this works,” Jim motioned between the two of them. “We fill each other’s gaps, but now she’s ready to spill the beans and we haven’t even discussed it.”

“We are discussing it now.”

Jim swiped a hand down his face, glaring at Spock in frustration. “Don’t even start that shit with me, Spock. You know what I meant.”

“You have my apology for not sooner bringing the topic to your attention, but I am entirely capable
of gathering information, Captain.”

“And I agree with you, big surprise. Of all the people who aren’t me that I’d want talking to the woman and getting honest answers out of her, it would be you, but that doesn’t change that you didn’t tell me. You can’t have this conversation now when we haven’t even discussed a strategy,” Jim hissed, trying not to raise his voice.

“You speak of strategy when it was you yourself who protested the idea of an interrogation,” Spock responded, a line of tension in his shoulders.

“It doesn’t have to be an interrogation to have a fucking plan.”

“Then you do not trust me to have a plan that will effectively answer our questions.”

“No, no, that’s not—” Jim growled, his irritation mounting by the second. “You don’t send me the reports before you cancelled our meeting yesterday, and now this. It’s making it awfully fucking hard to trust you when you’re twitchy about working with me.”

The tension in Spock’s frame mounted. “You are allowing unrelated events to cloud your understanding of the matter at hand.”

“Unrelated—” Jim broke off in disbelief, and there it was. The seed of his anger. “Me being pissed off about you keeping things from me has got nothing to do with that. Or, you know what? Maybe it does. But that’s not on me, Spock, that’s on you. I’m trying, here. You’re not impervious to being manipulated just because you’re Vulcan. And also, uh, I’m the fucking Captain of the ship, and in charge of this mission. I need you to be my First Officer and work with me on this.”

“You have repeatedly ignored my advice with regard to Ms. Romanoff since she woke, and now that I have begun operating in tandem with your handling of the situation, you protest.”

“At least I had the professional courtesy to ignore you to your face!” Jim snapped. When Spock didn’t respond, he took a deep breath, trying to quell the irritation. “You know what? We’re having two different conversations right now. Let’s deal with one of them.”

Spock stayed silent for several moments. “How do you wish to proceed?”

“Why doesn’t she want me in there?” Jim asked.

“She claims that your presence will result in a mutual interrogation. I believe she thinks you will not give her straightforward answers.”

“Well, she obviously hasn’t been hanging out with many Vulcans,” Jim grumbled.

“Whether she believes me or not, I cannot lie to her. I agreed not to obfuscate with technicalities in exchange for her own honesty. As you are well aware, I am more than capable of detecting lies in their own right.”

“Yeah,” Jim breathed, rubbing his temples. “Okay, I’m going to choose not to be offended by this. I’ll sit out the conversation, but I’m going to listen in. Is she going to complain about that?”

“You could always just ask me.”

Jim and Spock both turned to see Romanoff leaning in the doorway, arms folded and eyebrows raised in their direction. Apparently they’d both been too absorbed in their squabble to notice a door opening right next to them.
“Look, Captain. It’s not my intention to besmirch your integrity. Let’s call this more my fault than yours.” She shifted from her relaxed position. “You’re smart enough to have figured out that I’m trained in covert military operations. I read people and judge their intentions as easily as I breathe, but that doesn’t mean I want to be doing that right now. It’s going to get in the way for everyone. If I talk to Spock, it’s not going to be as much of an obstacle. I don’t care if you’re listening, but it’s not going to work if you’re the one asking the questions. I’m happy to talk with you another time when there’s less at stake.”

Jim suppressed the urge to fold his arms and pout, but a bit of his wounded pride was somewhat assuaged. With regard to Romanoff, at least, if not with Spock. Whatever. He’d deal with his XO later.

“That’s… fine,” he said. “Thank you for clearing that up. I’ll record and monitor the conversation from my quarters.”

Romanoff nodded, then looked to Spock expectantly. In turn, Spock looked back at Jim with an eyebrow raised.

Lips pressed into a thin line, Jim stared back for a few long seconds. “Commander,” he said stiffly, and then proceeded to walk the fuck away before he punched him in the face or something.

“I take it Captain Kirk was unhappy about the arrangement,” Natasha said when they were seated again, this time across from one another.

“He was displeased that I did not inform him of our earlier conversation. I made an error when I concluded he would not take umbrage with my initiative. He should have been informed prior to our meeting.”

Natasha hummed noncommittally as she settled back into her chair.

“He’ll get over it.”

“He is currently listening to our conversation.”

“You’ll get over it, then,” Natasha amended. The blank look she received was response enough. “Okay, let’s start this, then.”

“Computer, confirm visual and audio recording,” Spock said.

“*Recording confirmed,*” came the monotonous computerized voice, as if from the walls. It was not the first time she thought of JARVIS and how much the AI was simultaneously more and less unnerving than this computer.

“So, I’ll go first,” Natasha said, leaning back in her chair. “What do you want to get out of this conversation?”

Spock did not hesitate before he answered. “I wish to know what you are willing to share of your identity and those of the others in the cryotubes, and why you were interred.”

“Interred. That’s a pretty morbid word for it,” Natasha started. “Okay. I’ll tell you what I can about who I am, but I won’t say anything about my friends. That’s up to them when they’re out of the tubes.”

“Noted,” Spock said. “And the circumstances that led to your cryostasis?”
Thinking for a moment, Natasha breathed in and out slowly. “A fair question, but the details aren’t my call. I can fill in some gaps but it probably won’t be everything you want to know.”

“Share what you will. I shall ask for clarification if it is necessary.”

Nodding, she looked at him, waiting for his terms.

“What would you ask of me?”

“I think I’ll save that for after you hear what I’m willing to say,” she answered. She wanted to know what they could realistically expect now that they were more or less in the possession of Starfleet and the people on this ship, but those expectations hung on how Kirk and Spock reacted to her information.

“That is understandable. You have my questions, start where you will.”

Sighing a little, Natasha tried to bury her instincts that told her not to tell him anything. She wasn’t going to get very far in this whole disaster if she didn’t give a little ground, and her own identity wasn’t as important as those of the other Avengers. Sure, they could probably connect a few of the dots with a bit of research, but from her own digging it seemed like the war they’d left behind had done a lot of damage. There wasn’t a whole lot left that wasn’t speculation or conjecture on the part of whatever people had picked up the pieces after the dust settled.

“I was a spy. I’ve been a spy my entire life; there was an organization that took me in when I was a child and trained me to be a weapon, and I’m very good at what I do. I was still pretty young when things got… bad. I couldn’t stay with them anymore, so I went out on my own. I used the skills I had to survive, and I made a lot of enemies.”

Spock interrupted, then, as she’d figured he would. “Of what skills are you speaking?”

“Assassination, mostly. Espionage, theft and infiltration were also popular requests.”

If Spock were startled by her admission, he didn’t show it. But she knew this was a gauntlet that she’d just thrown down.

“You are a hired killer, then,” he said, voice a bit colder than she’d heard it before.

“I was a hired killer,” she emphasized. “It was all I knew; I was essentially a brainwashed kid who’d grown up with knives for toys. I was maybe seventeen when I left the Red Room and went out on my own. Leaving meant I could choose my targets instead of shooting where I was aimed. Don’t get me wrong, I killed a lot of people, but they were as criminal as I was. Rival drug lords and traffickers. It shouldn’t surprise you that bad people make enemies with other bad people. I made just as many enemies turning down political and law enforcement assassinations as I did killing the people they were after.”

When Spock sat there in silence again, Natasha met his gaze evenly. “Should we just stop here?”

“Does your story end there?” Spock shot back.

Quirking her lips, Natasha relaxed just the tiniest bit. “No, no it doesn’t.”

They talked for probably an hour. Natasha told him what she could about SHIELD and ending up on their radar, someone being sent to kill her and ultimately recruiting her. It wasn’t a shiny story of rehabilitation, and she hadn’t meant it to sound like one. Yes, she was a reformed assassin. No, she didn’t stop killing people. Yes, SHIELD was a covert organization and no, she didn’t always do
what they asked her to.

Spock wanted to know if she worked for them because she wanted to redeem herself, and it was hard not to laugh in his face.

“Redemption is a joke. People like me don’t get redemption. It’s a fairy tale. The people I killed are dead, the people I hurt had their scars until the day they died. I wasn’t looking for redemption when I joined SHIELD, I was looking for a second chance, and they were offering me one. The other option was joining the rest of the people who left the Red Room in a young, bloody death. I don’t deal in sentiment, I deal in debts. SHIELD was offering me a way out so I took their contract.”

“Reformation, then.”

“Sure, if you want to call it that,” she offered with a minute shrug.

“This reformation is relevant to your cryostasis in some way, is it not?”

Quirking her lips just a little, she eyed him across the table. “Perceptive, Mr. Spock. This is the part where I can’t give you the details, because it involves the people in those tubes.” She shifted in her seat and looked at the middle ground of the table between them. “Earth was a shitty place, the last I saw of it. I don’t know if I’ll believe that it’s changed that much, to be honest with you. Every day more and more things would pop up that seemed hell bent on destroying everything, and it was more than SHIELD or any government alone could handle. Experimentation, advanced technology, genetic mutation, aliens. Long story short, I ended up on a team. A team of ‘extraordinary individuals’, is what our director called it. We responded when others couldn’t.”

“It is your team in the cryotubes,” Spock interpolated, eyebrows drawn together.

Natasha nodded. “Yes. A team of freaks and fuck-ups, but we did what we could,” Natasha sighed then, looking past Spock. “It wasn’t enough.”

“What happened that caused you to be placed in indefinite cryostasis?” Spock asked, drawing Natasha back into the conversation.

“War happened. But this time it was… different. Worse. That history of the Federation you gave me, it said something about the Eugenics Wars that came after World War III, yes?”

“Affirmative. The Earth conflict that matches the timeline you have given is what is retroactively referred to as the third World War, yes. The Eugenics Wars came after.”

Natasha shook her head. “The way I see it, they’re one and the same, at least in name. There were other teams, not just ours, and people, civilians, with extraordinary abilities. Mutants. We were all dangerous in our own right, but it reached a breaking point when the US Government and finally the UN was calling for registration. It was the bottom of a downhill slope that we’d been riding for a long time. It wasn’t hard to see that registration meant marginalization, and there were plenty of people who were vocal about wanting everyone who wasn’t strictly human dead or in prison. So, war happened. It was a world war, yes, but it was people fighting people fighting anyone who got in their way.”

Memories of tense meetings and internal screaming matches among the remnants of SHIELD and the Avengers themselves ran through her brain. For months the team had fractured; Stark and Rogers especially were at odds with each other, but when Banner came out of hiding for the first time in over a year because there was nowhere left for him to run, they got over themselves.

“When things really got bad, they started calling it Civil War. Seemed like as good a name as any.
SHIELD did what it could for a while, but they were a target from both sides. Some went after it because they had used mutants and superhumans, some went after it because they were on the side of registration. In the end, it didn’t matter. SHIELD was… permanently dismantled. Every day there was a coup or a government toppling, and when the nukes started flying, we went to ground. I guess the reasoning was that there wasn’t anything left we could do. We were walking targets. We could go down fighting or we could wait it out and try to pick up the pieces.”

“Fascinating,” Spock said. “Many who research in the field of the early twenty-first century have hypothesized such theories given the anecdotal evidence left behind from the information purge during that time. Much of it is conjecture, but your story gives credence their theories.”

“History is written by the victors,” Natasha said gravely. “We lost. It doesn’t surprise me that they tried to get rid of anything we might have left behind.”

“No matter how thorough the attempt, it is impossible to completely erase what happened. It would seem that the ideals of the Eugenics Wars had their roots in the war you experienced.”

“Probably, I couldn’t tell you for sure. I just know that as soon as the extremists had their hands on a way to track down the mutants, we were screwed. Even carriers of the gene were being hunted, in the end.”

“Mutants,” Spock echoed the word. “There is considerable mention of them in radical texts that predate the Eugenics wars and in what data has been recovered by archaeotechnologists, but to my knowledge there are no humans with such extreme genetic anomalies on Earth today.”

Something like sadness, maybe guilt, curled in Natasha’s belly. “So they really did get all of them, huh?” She sighed. They really hadn’t done enough. Rogers was going to be crushed.

“Perhaps,” Spock replied. “Some humans demonstrate remarkable psionic abilities for what is considered a psi-null species.”

“Psi-null?”

“A species that has little or no inherent telepathic capability. Vulcans, for example, possess touch telepathy. Some demonstrate stronger abilities that transcend touch, manifesting in a way not dissimilar to natives of Betazed. Humans, like Andorians, Klingons and the Ferengi are among species without such abilities, but are unique in that some humans possess a higher rating, usually manifesting in the form of empathic ability. It is difficult to gauge, however, as those aware of their abilities often choose to hide them.”

“That’s not surprising. If anybody could have survived the Civil War, it would have been the telepaths. I’d bet my life that any of the mutants who survived long enough to have kids would have told them to keep it hidden. Generational paranoia.”

“With good reason, it would seem,” Spock said, eyes turned inward as he thought. “It would appear that Earth’s history is more tragic than we know.”

“We’re very good at war. I’m not surprised that Earth is Starfleet’s base of operations.”

Spock very slightly cocked his head at her. “On the contrary. As a planet whose recent history has wrought such devastation that much of it is still in the infancy of its recovery, humanity has been at the forefront of circumventing interplanetary conflicts. While those even among our own ranks indulge in warmongering, the overwhelming majority prefer peace to battle.”

Not for the first time, Natasha wondered what happened to Thor. Where he was, if he’d stayed even
after the Avengers had fled when he was looking for Jane Foster. None of them had held much hope that she’d survived the first wave of nuclear attacks, but he couldn’t be stopped.

“I guess you haven’t met any Asgardians, then,” she sighed.

“Asgardians?” Spock echoed, the faintest hint of interest in his tone.

Shaking her head, Natasha held up a hand. “Never mind. Thinking out loud.”

When Spock didn’t press further, she met his gaze and held it. “So. Unless you have more questions, that’s all I have to say until my team is awake. You should be pleased, it’s more than I was going to give you.”

“With the knowledge of your background, I suppose I should be grateful for the concession.”

Natasha didn’t mistake the edge of dryness in his words. Knowing her background, indeed.

“Well, now that you know, what’s your play?” She asked, braced for bad news, but harboring a bit of hope that she wouldn’t have to kill Spock or anyone else before they could do something stupid.

“My play,” Spock repeated her words. “You wish to know what decisions will be made regarding you and your team in light of your account.”

“More or less,” she agreed.

“That is a question I alone cannot answer. Would you allow the Captain to return at this juncture?”

Well, the hard part was over. Obviously Spock wasn’t going to be making any more insubordinate decisions on her behalf. “Sure, why not?”

“Finally,” came a voice from the doorway as it slid open.

Natasha and Spock both turned their heads to look at Kirk where he stood with his arms folded.

“Captain,” Spock greeted, a stiff echo of Kirk’s own departing remark from before.

“I’ve been waiting for the last ten minutes for you guys to wrap it up,” he said, removing a small device from his ear and pocketing it. “Hell of a story, Romanoff.”

“I’m glad you think so,” she deadpanned. If she were honest with herself, she hadn’t wanted him in the room because he reminded her so much of Stark. Having him there while she was slogging through one of the worst experiences of her life would not have ended with all of his limbs intact.

“Yeah, well. It shouldn’t surprise you that I really don’t know what to think. I’m not exactly thrilled to have an assassin wandering around my ship.”

“Limited movement with constant security escort can hardly be called ‘wandering’, Captain.”

“An escort she apparently could have killed at any time,” Kirk shot back, staring at her.

“If they’d given me a reason to kill them, yes,” Natasha said, meeting his stare unflinchingly.

“Then I guess that’s where we’re at now, huh?” Kirk pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed heavily.

This was a tipping point. She hadn’t lost Spock at the beginning of the conversation when she’d
dropped the “assassin”, bomb, but that didn’t mean the Captain of the ship wasn’t going to turn everything on its head. She didn’t know him, yet, but he’d already demonstrated a degree of spontaneity, a level of headstrong gut-instinct that rivalled Stark’s. It meant he could fuck everything up, if she didn’t play her cards right.

And at this point, it looked like showing her hand might be the right play.

“There’s a question you didn’t ask,” she said, finally, not pointing the remark at Spock in particular.

“Oh?” Kirk answered, looking harried (to say the least), “And what is that?”

“You didn’t ask why me,” she said. “Why the ejection protocols necessitated that I be the first revived.”

Spock looked interested. “Our study of your cryotube has yet to yield significant computer data.”

Before Spock could elaborate, Kirk jumped in. “You’re a spy, this is what you do,” he waved his hand in an effort to encompass all that had happened since she’d woken up on the ship. “You said as much, infiltration and espionage is your trade. If your team wanted to know what was going on, why not you?”

Natasha shook her head. “That’s part of it, yes. What makes you think any of the others couldn’t have done it better?”

She watched as he opened his mouth, and then closed it again. “Okay, point. Why you, then?”

“Because I’m only human.”

“Our scans showed that most of you are only human.”

She looked to the side, containing a smirk. “And are your scans always correct?”

“No,” Spock said, his face as serious and intense as it had been throughout their conversation. Kirk’s glare was visible from the corner of her eye, but she ignored it for the time being. He was probably just still chafing from their earlier tiff.

“How much can you really gather from a body in cryostasis without waking them up? It’s like scanning a dead person,” Natasha looked at Kirk, then. “A mutant looks just as human as anyone else when their blood and brain activity cease.”

“So they’re mutants?” Kirk asked.

Natasha shook her head. “I didn’t say that. What I said is that I’m only human. All of me is only human. You catch me, you look at my blood, my brain, anything else you might want to see, and that’s what you’ll find.”

Spock was watching her, possibly looking for traces of deception or other kinds of subterfuge. She couldn’t say for sure that he wouldn’t find any; her skills weren’t even second nature, that’s who she was. Even her name might be a fiction. For her, there were only smaller lies and less significant manipulations.

Apparently, she passed, because it was Spock who broke the brief silence.

“Then the question stands. Why is it you and not one of the others who was revived?”

Thinking for a moment, she hoped that anything she said wouldn’t bite them in the ass.
“If you’re planning to experiment on me—us, them—you’d get as much from me as you would any of you. Maybe some interesting historical data, I guess, something more fun for your doctor than any of the hundred or so scientists you have on this ship, but nothing about me that isn’t in my brain and my training could be used as a weapon. You can’t hurt me, or use me to hurt anyone else.”

Kirk looked like he wanted to say something about that, but Spock jumped in again. It was a very Clint thing to do—made her feel something like nostalgia. Must be a side effect of the twenty-third century, or something.

“If what you imply is the truth, and experimentation or study were our plan regardless of the permissions of you and your team, you would have little recourse should we decide to revive them and proceed without your permission.”

Time to show her hand, then. If it got all of them killed, at least it was their Plan B and not a disastrous failure of Plan A. Not bothering to hide the slow smile that crept across her face, she looked right at Kirk.

“Spock,” she said, in a tone that surely would have offended him if he were the type to be offended. “We went to ground during a Civil War where both sides were trying to use extraordinary people to their advantage by any means necessary. Do you really think we wouldn’t have thought of that? What happened when you tried to figure out my cryotube?” She asked, already knowing the answer.

“It shut down,” Kirk answered. “The power source failed and whatever computational systems were running fried.”

“And have any of your scans of the other tubes revealed any computer data? Anything related to the internal operations at all?” Stark was going to be so very proud of himself when he woke up—if she got to that point.

After a moment’s hesitation, or something that wasn’t hesitation, Spock replied with a terse “No.”

“Exactly,” she responded, any trace of smugness gone. It was too serious for games from here on out.

“Any attempt to revive them by any other means than the ones that only I know will kill all of them.”

A stunned silence followed her pronouncement, but she didn’t let it stand.

“I was the first line of defense because I’m useful, yes. But also because I’m unremarkable. When we did this there were probably a handful of regular people who are just as good as—maybe better than me—at what I do. I’m trained, I’m dangerous, I’m a pretty pound of flesh with a lot of information that you’ll never get out of me if I don’t want you to have it, but I’m not them. My team trusted that if I couldn’t get them out, no one could, and if I couldn’t do that, then we were as screwed as we’d been before. If you take me or kill me, they’re still safe.”

Her eyes and face were hard, and she didn’t bother leaning forward to make her point. “Dead safe.”

A pair of blinking faces were her only company for a handful of seconds.

“A kill switch?” Kirk finally said, his face somewhere between incredulous and horrified. “That was your Plan B?”

“We didn’t exactly have a lot of time to come up with contingencies,” she snapped. “Survival was our goal, but being dead at least meant we were weren’t screwing anyone else over.”
“But you had five cryotubes lying around for the occasion?” Kirk said, folding his arms.

Suspicious. Good. His earlier trust hadn’t really thrown off the vibes she’d been looking for. If he was showing his suspicion now, that meant she could get a better read on him. She, of all people, did not have qualms about taking advantage of someone’s emotional state for her own purposes.

There had been fourteen cryotubes, actually. She didn’t think about who could have gone in the other nine (even if some of them had been prototypes), because it didn’t matter. While they were on the way to a separate, but well hidden, storage compartment, the remaining pods had gone up in flames. A good decoy, if not a successful attempt at continuing to keep Stark tech out of the wrong hands—Stark had never given up that crusade. The wreckage had apparently either been useless or so complete that it hadn’t mattered.

Maybe. They had no way of really knowing, did they?

In answer to Kirk’s question, Natasha gave a short shake of her head. “Not my story to tell. The point is, that if you try to screw us, you’ll have four cold corpses and one warm one.”

Taking an empty chair at the small table where she’d sat with Spock, Kirk sprawled, rubbing his temples. “Well, I guess that’s where we’re at, huh?”

“It would seem so, Captain,” Spock agreed.

“I’m starting to rethink my answer to your question of whether or not you were trying to play me,” Kirk said, frankly.

“If I were playing you, Captain, you wouldn’t know it,” Natasha responded. “I’m giving you the courtesy of telling you how it is. That I’m telling you any of this at all means I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

“The doubt of what, precisely?” Spock asked.

“The doubt that you’ll hold us against our will and try to experiment or weaponize us, just like the enemies we left behind.”

“The Federation does not—”

“Don’t tell me what your fucking Federation does and does not allow, Mr. Spock,” Natasha said, the scathing tone in her voice anything but faked. “I know what soldiers like you think about the people they’re working for. It’s bullshit, it’s always been bullshit. I’ve done the dirty work for the same people who send do-gooders like you out to get shot at. There is always someone who can go over your head, and if they’re good at what they do you’ll never even know about it. You think that Starfleet won’t use you to get to us and then send you off on the next mission?”

While Spock’s expression shifted only slightly, perhaps at her thinly veiled insult, Kirk’s morphed into something difficult to describe. Anger was easy to see, but it was more than that. The set of his jaw, the way he clenched his fists... he was remembering something.

So that’s what she’d been seeing. It was the missing link in this impulsivity, the gap in his willingness to deviate from whatever orders he’d been given.

Kirk was different. Not different like Spock, but... someone who’d been screwed. Betrayed. There was a story here, she was sure of it, but she didn’t have time for that. What she had time for was using the little leverage she had to get some kind of guarantee that if she woke up her team, they wouldn’t be left to the devices of a futuristic science team and the interests they served.
“Ms. Romanoff—”

“Wait, Spock,” Kirk said, lifting a hand off the table while still looking at her.

Spock obediently held his peace. Natasha watched Kirk as he obviously deliberated whatever he was about to say.

“You’re an assassin. You say you’re reformed, that that wasn’t your life before you were frozen, and I don’t know if I can believe that. But you haven’t seriously hurt anyone on my ship since you crawled out of that cryotube, and that’s maybe more than I can say if I’d been in the same position.” Kirk paused, his blue eyes raising from his own hands to look into her own. “What you went through, what your team went through, it sounds like hell. I’m the Captain of a Starfleet ship, the flagship of the Federation, and I believe in our mission, but… you’re right. I don’t know that the people giving me my orders are telling me the whole story, but right now? We’re the only ones who have the full story. I’m making the calls, and maybe you don’t have any reason to trust me, but I’m not about to hand anybody over to anyone. So the question is, Romanoff, what do you want from me?”

Natasha looked at him, tried to reconcile what she’d seen, what she’d read, and what she felt about this young Starship Captain. Of all the people that could have ended up with the Avengers, it was him, and that might be the best thing that could have happened to them, but she just couldn’t be sure.

Not that she’d ever dealt in sureties, but it wasn’t only her own life on the line, this time. It wasn’t a mission where information or something expendable might be lost, it was all she had left. It was Clint, Stark, Banner and Rogers.

But there was something here. She could salvage this, she could try and get something out of it, give them a chance. Maybe she was only human, but she wasn’t about to condemn her friends to death. They might have picked her for all of those reasons and more, but she wouldn’t let that be the last defining act of the Black Widow. To let them die, to let them rot.

After all, there was more than one game afoot, here. Showing her hand didn’t mean she was giving up everything.

“It’s not what I want from you,” she said to Kirk, meeting his gaze just as steadily as he was hers. In a short movement, she turned her head to Spock.

“It’s what I want from him.”

Chapter End Notes

Consider this monstrous chapter as a preliminary bid for forgiveness of the next update. That chapter is outlined and in progress, but I’ve been struck with a death cold in addition to working as music faculty at a summer camp next week, so I do apologize in advance for an unknown timeframe for the next update. Also, I really just wanted to smooch the rest of this slow-moving business into one chapter instead of prolonging your suffering. :)

Feel free to stop by officiumdefunctorum.tumblr.com where I occasionally post about writing; my ask is always open, and comments here are appreciated as well.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

The Enterprise reaches its destination, Jim finds out why Spock has been weird, and Natasha crosses a line.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“This has got to be the most ridiculous thing I have ever heard. And Jim, coming from me, being someone who knows you, that is saying something. What in the great god damn was Spock thinking?”

“You know, Bones, I couldn’t tell you, because I’m not really sure Spock feels the need to clue me into that shit anymore,” Jim said tightly, not looking at the doctor where they stood shoulder to shoulder in the medical bay’s short term physical therapy facility.

“You have to work the hip more, Romanoff! The muscles in your ankle are a goddamn bracing point, not the powerhouse. Jesus, woman, I thought you knew what you were doing!” The doctor shouted at Romanoff, where she was going through a variety of exercises designed to strengthen and rebuild the muscles that had been damaged in whatever disaster had led her to them.

But Romanoff wasn’t really his problem right now. Spock was. Because Spock wasn’t talking to him. Not in the snotty, ignoring someone until they come to apologize to you sense, but dropping the ball on shit that was important to their mission at hand. He was starting to feel like a fucking crewman on his own ship and that was so many levels of not okay he didn’t know where to start.

“Trouble in Purgatory?” Bones leaned back in, giving him a knowing look.

“Oh, don’t even start that with me,” Jim groused, shoving Bones’ shoulder. “And seriously? You too? Spock fucking struck a deal with her; two deals, actually, and didn’t consult me on either one. All this shit with the cryotubes, and I think he’s got some bug up his ass about me not being able to handle it objectively, but he won’t just come out and say it.”

Bones turned away from Romanoff’s work to give him a confused look. “That doesn’t sound like Spock at all. If there’s anything you can count on, it’s a Vulcan being very upfront about their criticism. If he thinks you’re going to fuck this up, he would have told you.”

Jim huffed in frustration. “That’s exactly what I thought! But he’s been weird since… the last mission. I haven’t put too much pressure on him to talk, but now it’s like we’ve lost the ability to communicate. I try to hang out with him like before and it’s weird, and now I’m giving him space and he’s running with it. I’m trying, Bones, but he’s just not giving me anything to work with.”

“Shit.” Bones sighed, glancing over at Romanoff as she started up on some free weights. “Have you two been talking at all about this?”

“Well, yeah,” Jim said, a little put off by the guarded look on Bones’ face. “I was the one who came up with the whole tour thing, and we’ve met a few times to discuss the ‘Fleet scientists and
everything, but he just… pulled the interrogation thing, and now this,” Jim sighed, turning away from Bones and swiping a hand through his hair.

“What is ‘this’? What the hell are you talking about?” Bones hissed, probably aware of the keen presence of the spy doing her therapy not too far away.

Jim ducked forward and spoke quietly to Bones. “I brought up the issue of citizenship. Romanoff and the people in those tubes were born on Earth, so that technically gives them de facto citizenship, right? I offered it up as a gesture of good faith, and Spock was cool with it, but it obviously wasn’t enough for her. After the story she gave us about how they got into those tubes… she upped the ante,” Jim sighed, trying to regulate his internal freak out mechanisms. “Spock basically put himself on the table as a bargaining chip.”

Bones jerked back in surprise. “You don’t mean—”

“His commission. His life, Bones. He promised, with the whole Vulcan honesty and integrity shit and all, that he would honor any deal we make with them and personally assure their safety through this and when we got back to Earth,” Jim unloaded, trying to keep his voice down and contain his anxiety.

“But that’s—why would he even do that? We’re not going to experiment on them, for fuck’s sake! You’d never let that happen!”

“Of course I wouldn’t!” Jim agreed, quelling the urge to pace as he glanced at Romanoff where she continued to do her exercises. “That’s the whole fucking point. I wouldn’t stand for that shit. But Starfleet? The team they sent with us? Archer says we’re in charge, but I don’t know if that’s the whole story, you know? Spock has just… been weird about it, kind of, fuck, I don’t know. It’s making me antsy, and putting himself on the chopping block for these people when he didn’t fucking need to frankly scares the hell out of me. I don’t know what to do,” Jim finished, turning away from Bones to watch Romanoff from across the room.

“And this isn’t about what happened last time we were out?” Bones asked warily.

“I don’t know!” Jim hissed, reignining himself in. “I don’t think it is, but it’s not like we’ve had any time to really… get our groove back, you know? We were supposed to meet up while we were on leave, but that pretty much tanked with this whole thing. Sometimes he’s fine, and then he pulls this shit and I’m just,” Jim huffed out a breath. “Freaking out a little bit.”

“Fuck, Romanoff is almost done with this round, pull yourself together for a hot second and we’ll talk in a few, okay?” Bones said, giving him a serious look before walking over to Romanoff where she stood from her stretches, sweating and breathing heavily.

Jim stood there, arms folded, mind a whirling singularity of total crap. He knew that Spock was capable of going behind his back—the whole lying thing pretty much applied to straight questions, apparently, and even then nobody was better at a Vulcan than technically not lying—but as far as Jim knew Spock hadn’t made a habit of it. Spock had enough sass for ten Vulcans, but Jim honestly didn’t want to believe that Spock was capable of being bitchy enough to undermine him like this without a good reason.

What the fuck was a good enough reason to consort with a potential prisoner and then offer himself up to keep them safe? Yeah. Jim had no fucking idea.

The semi-audible interaction between Romanoff and Bones as they conversed across the room was a mild distraction; Bones waving his arms, pointing to various limbs and miming the exercises while
Romanoff looked somewhere between stabbing him and needing a nap. That, he understood.

Apparently, “a few” did actually mean more than a few, because after some kind of comment that Romanoff directed at Bones, the doctor threw up his hands—“Jesus, woman!” the only clearly discernible part of his exclamation—turning back to Jim briefly and holding up his hand to give him the five minute signal.

Bones left, and now it was just him and Romanoff in the therapy room. Jesus, the irony of that phrase in any context was so entirely not lost on him that it was actually pretty sad. Not as sad, however, that he felt the urge to quail a little bit when Romanoff began striding purposefully over to him.

At least he didn’t quail; he had that much.

“Let me offer you some advice, Captain,” Romanoff said.

“Excuse me?” Jim blinked, not quite expecting that out of all the potential things she could have said.

“Everybody lies,” she said. The faint sheen of sweat on her skin was quickly dissipating in the cool, recycled air of the ship, something about which he could only explain his manly physique for being unable to replicate in any kind of similar circumstance.

“Um,” Jim said, intelligently.

“Maybe you think your Vulcan can’t—or won’t—lie, but it’s not his honesty I care about. It’s his loyalty. Honesty is overrated, but loyalty is something that is hard to find. Loyalty doesn’t always mean honesty, and I think you need to remember that.”

“Still not sure where you’re going with this,” Jim said, shifting his arms so they lay at his sides instead of folded defensively.

“Lies are easy to see, but figuring out why somebody is lying, well,” Natasha smirked a little. “That was always where my talents lay. So as I said, let me give you some advice. You can run your mouth off to your doctor friend or lose sleep pacing in your quarters over what you’ve got going on with your first officer, or you can go directly to the source. I’m not going to be in your way for the next day and a half, and I think you should use that to get your head in the game, because I fully intend to take advantage of that promise that Spock made—that you both made,” she emphasized.

“If you knew anything about me, Romanoff, you wouldn’t have needed a promise,” Jim said, stonefaced.

He received a shrug in response. “But I don’t know you, do I? I’ll give you this: whatever inevitable horrible thing ends up happening? I don’t think it will be your fault.”

Jim tried to suppress a grimace and failed. “Yeah, well, don’t be so sure. I have a habit of screwing things up as much as I fix them, in the end.” Jim huffed a little, then, thinking of whatever Spock might be doing right now.

Romanoff’s face didn’t change, but she did look at him for a long moment, long enough to make him fidget if he weren’t already vibrating with nervous tension.

“That’s why you have a team. I didn’t always have one. I guess… you probably didn’t either, but there’s only so much you can accomplish on your own.” Romanoff looked away from him, staring down at the floor for a moment, body still. “Sometimes all it takes is the right partner. Someone to believe in you, even if you can’t believe that they do.”
The second that Jim tried to meet her eyes, she was already turning away, back to whatever it was Bones had told her to be doing—or not to be doing, more likely.

_Shit._

Well, it looked like he and his... partner, were going to have a talk.

Jim hadn’t even made it to the turbolift before Spock found him.

“Captain, I must speak with you.”

“Jesus!” Jim jumped, hand hovering over the access panel. “Can you please _not_ do that?”

“Apologies,” Spock said, though Jim detected a word thrown away when he heard it. It gave him pause, a pause long enough for Spock to reach past him and open the turbolift himself.

“Okay,” Jim drew out the vowel, stepping into the lift with Spock. “Well, good timing, I guess. I was just going to find you.”

“We must speak. It is an urgent matter.”

Jim’s eyes narrowed as the lift hummed to life, taking them to corridor that house officer’s quarters. “That sounds ominous.”

“It would be prudent to wait until we have reached a more private place, Captain.”

Jim’s gut clenched at that, and a knot of apprehension formed in the pit of his stomach. That sounded really... not like the conversation he was intending on having.

“Whoa, Spock, really. We had an agreement, and I’ll be the first to admit it’s been weird, but—”

“Privacy, Jim,” Spock retorted, the lift slowing as they reached their destination. Jim tried to meet his eyes but Spock looked resolutely forward and now Jim was just back to the freaking out he’d been doing before.

At least he hadn’t devolved any further than that. Yet.

“Um,” he said, following Spock’s long strides out of the lift and toward his quarters. Jim’s stomach did a little flip again as he spied the door and desperately wanted to backtrack. “Look, Spock, this really isn’t something we need to discuss, I mean, I know we never really talked about it, but—”

Spock’s fingers danced over the access panel to his room, and he didn’t wait for Jim before stepping inside, obviously expecting him to follow. Jim swallowed his heart where it had made residence in his throat, and tried to imagine the ways he could get out of this conversation and still have a first officer on the other side of it.

Standing outside the threshold, Jim looked warily into Spock’s sparsely lit quarters with something like dread. Some kind of conversation he wouldn’t like was about to happen, and he wasn’t so sure he was ready to have it anymore, Romanoff’s advice be damned.

“Jim,” Spock’s voice came from within, and Jim swallowed his cowardice and stepped inside.
The doors barely shut behind him before Spock was turning directly to him and speaking.

"I believe there is more to this mission than that which was told to you, or to me," Spock said, almost as soon as the doors had closed.

Jim stood there for a moment, relief vying with confusion for most prominent in his brain before the words fully registered.

"Wait, what do you mean 'or to you,'" he said, eyes narrowed. "Don't you mean 'us'?"

Spock’s conspicuous hesitation pretty much confirmed what he'd been thinking, and Jim cursed, turning his back and gripping his hands in his hair briefly before whirling around, accusations on his tongue.

"God damn it. I knew it! I knew there was something going on. What the hell, Spock?" Jim searched the Vulcan's face, looking for a trace of guilt or regret or something.

"I had only suspicions that Admiral Archer gave us different information. I could not determine the cause immediately and so I acted with subterfuge, for which I apologize."

"Oh, you're sorry," Jim spat. "That's fucking great, Spock. Really. Is that what all of—" Jim waved his hand at Spock, trying to encompass his behavior over the past two days. “—this has been about? Because you sure as shit could have immediately determined the cause by asking me."

Spock didn’t respond right away, which was just as well, because Jim wasn’t sure he had the patience left to let him talk, now that they were actually talking.

“Jesus,” Jim hissed. “So what you’re saying is that you’ve been going behind my back, even after what I said before about not trusting Starfleet? You didn't even think to mention it?"

Something like contrition flickered across Spock's brow, but the fury that curled in Jim's gut was only matched by a stinging sense of betrayal. Jim opened his mouth to let some more of his emotions spew, but Spock finally spoke up.

"I had reason to believe the implications of what I was told were related to Alexander Marcus and the remnants of his fugitive mercenaries. I did not bring my suspicions to you because I could not be sure if doing so would compromise your safety."

"My safety?" Jim asked, incredulous. "My safe—what about the ship? What about the crew? Who the fuck cares about my safety if there is something going on that might affect all of us? Which, if it does have something to do with that bastard, it probably does!"

"Which is precisely why I waited until I had gathered enough information before bringing it to your attention. Were my suspicions without merit, any action taken may have compromised both the Enterprise and its cargo were it directed at the wrong person. Your own suspicions, while rooted in paranoia, may have truth to them." Spock said. "There is an informant on the ship."

Words of accusation died on Jim's tongue, his jaw snapping closed with an audible click. "Say what?" He asked.

"I detected several anomalies in records when evaluating the ship's computers after Ms. Romanoff's cryotube opened. Records of subspace transmissions and audio-visual recordings are missing from the data. Expertly doctored, but what little I was able to reconstruct indicates that they were not made through official channels and should not have been able to exist in the first place."
"Are you saying that Romanoff is spying on us?" Jim gaped.

"Negative," Spock said, moving his hands to clasp them behind his back, walking a few steps in a show of pacing Jim rarely saw. "Some data was removed before the cryotube was opened, and the level of expertise required to route my own skills exceeds anything of which she could be capable." Spock paused, obviously thinking before he spoke. "While she has not been straightforward in her dealings with us, I do not believe she has yet acted maliciously."

"So we've got an admitted spy who's not spying on us, and there's a mole on my fucking ship," Jim ground out. "That still doesn't explain why you didn't tell me in the first place. What the hell did you think I would do?"

"It is of no consequence what actions you may have taken, only what actions you will now take."

Jim felt like his head might explode with frustration.

"It is not of no consequence, Spock!" Jim just barely restrained himself from screaming in Spock's face. "Did you think I would do something stupid? Do you honestly think that I would make that mistake again after the last time?" Jim hated himself a little bit for how his voice cracked. "Jesus, Spock. I thought we were past that. I thought you trusted me. What happened to my good judgment, huh?"

"It is not—" Spock began. "Do not manipulate my actions for the sake of your own emotional paradigm. My trust in your ability to lead is absolute. Where it lacks is in those to whom you report."

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to quell the urge to punch Spock in his perfect Vulcan nose. "Okay, look. I'm going to need you to walk me through this, because as of now I really don't know what the hell you're talking about, and I'm pretty fucking unconvinced that you couldn't have told me about this from the get go."

"That was my intention in bringing you here, Jim."

"Well the road paved to hell and all that, Spock," Jim spat. Even if he felt like vindicating Spock, this was way beyond the level of trust they'd had, even before shit had gotten weird between them.

"Had we time to allow you to ruminate on the perceived slights of my actions, I would allow you to take it. But we do not, and I must insist that you set aside your personal feelings on this matter and allow me to share what information I have on a situation that will affect us all, Captain."

God. He could just... punch Spock right in the face right now and not even feel a little bit bad about it. Hell, even the potentially broken fingers might be worth it.

Instead, he took a deep breath, closing his eyes and trying to remember all the reasons why Spock was his second in command and not his friend, even if that chafed like a wet t-shirt in a San Francisco marathon.

"Fine," Jim breathed. "You want to play this that way? Then fine. Lay it out for me, Spock." Jim spread his arms wide. "What have you got?"

"No more than I have already explained. What Admiral Archer said to me was to be vigilant, that even as the scientific team we have taken on to study the cryotubes and their inhabitants were vetted, that our journey and destination may be more than he anticipated. I do not believe that Jonathan Archer himself is to blame for whatever difficulties we have and may yet encounter, but that his warnings indicate there are those yet within Starfleet who retain connections to mercenary fugitives."
Jim let that knock around in his head for a bit. So Spock didn't think Archer was against them... okay, that was something. But he still hadn't said anything about it until now. His explanation thus far had smelled a lot like some grade-A Vulcan bullshit.

"Okay, so 'Fleet is still compromised. That isn't anything I haven't already thought about. That's why I coded that secure channel, for things like this. Why the cloak and dagger?"

"Because, secure or not, Admiral Archer himself may be subject to the same surveillance as the Enterprise. I had long ensured that my own quarters, as well as yours and some other locations, were secure, but I cannot speak for the Admiral's."

"But we've been reporting to him—and the others—this whole time. If those transmissions are compromised, aren't we screwed?" Jim huffed, folding his arms.

"Such information as has been transmitted to the Admiral is not all that has transpired. While I have made some contact in your stead, I have shared nothing that you would not have, and have installed a surveillance bracket in our communications systems to detect secondary audio-visual access,"

Spock said.

Opening his mouth for a moment, Jim closed it again, scrutinizing Spock. "So everything with the cryotubes, with Romanoff and the citizenship..."

"With the exception of ourselves and those with whom we have both shared such information, none are privy to what was spoken between ourselves and Ms. Romanoff, or the extent of the cryotubes' engineering failures."

"And maybe whoever is sending those transmissions," Jim added.

"Perhaps. With skills such as those evident in the scrubbed data, it might be possible to acquire such information. However, the compromised systems are those of standard Starfleet make, not my own. Should there have been any attempt on my secured PADDs or the systems we have been using, I would be aware of it and could easily trace its source."

Feeling stupid for not having assumed that sooner—that Spock would not only never let that information get out, but that the act of holding it would be a trap for whoever wanted it—Jim sighed to himself before what Spock had said before began to make sense.

"The replicators," Jim muttered before snapping his head up, pointing his finger at Spock. "The Jefferies tube! That's why you didn't want me going down there!" He crowed. "Oh my god, you're the reason for the comm back-up. Uhura is going to murder you!"

Spock gave him a blank look. "The reduced speed of communications transfer was a temporary side-effect of the installation, and not one about which the Lieutenant should yet be informed."

"Right," Jim deadpanned. More secrets. Goody. "Whatever. That's all... slightly more encouraging. But Spock, still," Jim pinched the bridge of his nose in frustration. "I don't understand why you kept this from me when we could have worked together on it. I know it's only been a few days, but I've been freaking out about this. I thought that you—that we—" Jim couldn't quite finish that sentence and broke off with an ineffectual gesture.

Despite the tension visible in his frame, Spock looked at him without hesitation. "Without knowing the identity of the informant on the ship and very little information from Admiral Archer on which to act other than the knowledge that you yourself remained unawares, I could not estimate the damage they may do should their intent be malicious. With your frustrations visibly directed at me for
whatever reason such a person might intimate—"Jim didn't pretend not to know what reasons to which Spock was referring, and suppressed a wry grimace."—they would not suspect an investigation. Assuring that you were yet unaware of the intrusion also ensured that your actions would be genuine. We are now close enough to our destination that such a deception is unnecessary as we must be on our guard to determine the source and intention of the informant."

The idea that Spock had been lying—*witholding information*—so that Jim could keep up appearances to protect himself almost made him as angry as the act itself. Things between them had been confusing and frustrating enough without the added strain of this crap, and Jim was not, *not* letting it go that easily.

"Leave it to a Vulcan to think that the only way to sell something is to actually believe it's true," Jim snapped. "Frankly, Spock, I don't care if you think you were doing the right thing, doing what you had to, to—*protect* me, or whatever it is you thought you were doing. You've been playing me since we went out this time, and when I was so worried that it might be Romanoff who was trying to pull the wool over my eyes. But no," Jim laughed at the absurdity of it. "Of course, she's the one who's been honest, actually laying it all out there. I can't—I just can't even believe that a self-proclaimed spy is the one who has been upfront about everything and my own Vulcan first officer has been lying to me."

When Spock looked like he might say something, Jim held up a hand. "And don't even try to tell me you weren't lying. Maybe actually being dishonest is beyond your abilities, but the skulking and the omissions are just as bad. Worse, coming from you. You know what this tells me? That you don't trust me. You didn't tell me because you didn't think I could handle it, that I'd do something to screw it up."

"That is not—"

"Oh, the hell it isn't, Spock!" Jim spat with a shake of his head. "And maybe you're right, maybe it would have been too much of a distraction, or I would have said something or been too aggressive or whatever, but you didn't even give me that chance." The wind in Jim's sails died down, and he scrubbed a hand over his face, realizing he felt more hurt than angry, at this point. "You still lied to me," Jim finished, voice breathy with accusation.

Spock's silence said more than even his carefully chosen words could have, but he said them, anyway.

"I know," the Vulcan responded, voice just as even, but softer than it had been. "And I am sorry."

"This—we have to deal with this. We have to deal with *all* of this," he made a gesture that encompassed the whole of the informant and Starfleet and Romanoff and the planet toward which they were headed. "But I can't do this right now. It's too much crap on top of more crap, and I'm just—" Jim broke off, trying to find the words. "I need time that we don't have. Too much is riding on us being able to work together, and I can do that. I'm still the Captain and I still need my First Officer. The *Enterprise* needs us, and so do Romanoff and her friends. But we're not okay, Spock. We're really fucking far from okay."

Jim's flinty tone must have had some effect on Spock, because even as his posture didn't change, Spock's demeanor seemed to shrink.

"I... understand," Spock said, after a moment.

Sighing out the worst of his anger, Jim just felt tired. "Seems pointless to ask you this, but I need to know that we can still do this. That we can be professional and handle all of this like the epic team
everyone thinks we are.” Bitterness edged into his tone on that last part, but Jim couldn’t really be fucking to hide it.

”I will, as I always have, set aside any personal feelings or emotions and act in the manner most efficient to our purpose,” Spock said without hesitation, but the statement only soured Jim’s stomach further.

Lips curling into a bitter smirk, Jim looked at Spock for a second before shaking his head and turning for the door. ”Yes, I’m sure that won’t be a problem for you, Commander.”

The next day passed quickly, more quickly than Jim would have liked with all the shit that was going on. He didn’t personally sit down with Romanoff again, though Spock, Bones and a few others had his go-ahead to meet with her on whatever needed to happen. Djembe had at last been granted some time to speak with her and do a bit of inspection on the cryotube, but he didn’t need the report sitting in his inbox to tell him that Romanoff had been tight-lipped and that the doctor had gotten no more from the hunk of ancient, inert tech than Carol or anyone else had.

Romanoff spent a disturbing amount of time with Bones, between the physiotherapy and talking about the other people in the tubes. The agreement between she, Jim and Spock still standing, she was going to open them up, but his inkling that her non-extraordinary friends might be as fucked as she was when she got out of the tube was unfortunately correct.

When he’d stopped in for his conference with Bones, he’d found the man harried and wild-eyed speaking with Nurse Chapel about auxiliary facilities and preparations for minor surgeries. Romanoff had told Spock a specific order in which the tubes should be opened—for whatever reasons they were; she wasn’t sharing them and Jim had given up trying to get her to tell them anything she wasn’t straight up offering—and apparently numbers two and three were going to require some medical attention not dissimilar to what she’d needed, maybe more.

It was an unpleasant reminder that Jim really knew nothing about what had really happened to them before they’d gone on ice. Yeah, her story had filled in a few of the wider gaps, but the specifics escaped him. Spock had met with her a few times and sent him summaries, but she hadn’t let on any more than what she’d already said. Typical.

In any case, as they approached the planet and cracking open the tubes became an imminent reality, Jim was vacillating between excitement, apprehension, and the oh so familiar feeling of freaking out. The crap with the informant on the ship hadn’t really gone anywhere since he and Spock had hashed it out in the Vulcan’s quarters, leaving them both with empty vigilance and Jim with some stupid insomnia.

Downing the last of his coffee on the way to the bridge, Jim hoped to hell that the next twelve hours would somehow go according to plan and not blow up in his face. Seriously, if all hell could break loose the least it could do was wait until he had enough sleep and brain power to deal with it on fair terms.

Yeah. Like that was going to happen.

“Captain on ze bridge!” Chekov announced as Jim strode out of the turbolift. He lifted his empty cup in acknowledgement before tossing it toward the recycler and taking his seat.
“ETA, Lieutenant?” He asked Sulu, rubbing his temple with one hand.

“Thirty minutes, sir. We’ve received confirmation from the base and are all set to establish orbit and beam down the welcome wagon when we arrive.”

Smiling at his pilot’s candor, Jim nodded to himself. “Great. Keep scans of the area live through our arrival, we’re too close to the Neutral Zone to let our guard down. Uhura, be sure communications is monitoring all frequencies for signs of anything out of the ordinary. It’s been quiet, but that could change.”

His officers “aye, sirs” were like music to his ears, soothing the dull throb in his head. He knew Spock was behind him, neither waiting nor not waiting for any prompt from him to communicate, but if he didn’t say something then people might start talking more than they had. With a contained sigh, he swiveled in his chair to face the Science Officer’s station.

“Any updates from fleet or Archer on the situation?” He asked, candid but aware of the thin code they’d established. Translation: are we fucked, yet?

“Negative, Captain. Our orders stand; transmission to Starfleet once we have established orbit and contacted the base team.”

“Right,” Jim breathed. “Let’s hurry up and wait, then,” he announced to the bridge, and settled in to do just that.

The Enterprise arrived at 'Class L Planet Without A Formal Designation' to limited fanfare, Uhura and Chekov entrenched in their continued scans of the space, the former occasionally speaking to her subordinates through the comm about transmission intercepts and flagging or dismissing them appropriately.

God, Uhura with subordinates. That shouldn't have been as appropriate and sexy as it was. The woman was destined to push people around—Jim sometimes wondered if he'd ever get around to pestering her about command shadowing or auditing the few training courses he and Spock had cooked up for the crew. She'd probably end up teaching them before long, though, so maybe he should just let her be and the inevitable would come to pass. Likely in the form of a Vulcan lead mutiny.

Handing Spock the conn with the good grace of a Captain who wasn't fighting with his second in command, Jim exited the bridge and headed down to the transporter room to convene the away team.

Well, it wasn't so much an away team this time around as those who had been chosen for permanent envoys to the planet for the mission at hand, but, habits of thought and all that.

It shouldn't have been at all surprising that when he got there, Bones and Romanoff were equal parts arguing with one another and berating or directing hapless security officers as necessary.

"For the third time, Romanoff, you can't beam down with the cryotubes. The life-signs might get garbled; you don't send bodies in stasis with conscious people through a particle beam because you might end up in stasis yourself! By which I mean you'll end up in a coma or dead."

Jim tried not to be too conspicuous in lounging against the wall as he watched the scene play out.
"Might and will are two different things, doctor. I'm not leaving them unattended either here or on the planet."

"Woman!" Bones barked, but at Romanoff's glare seemed to cow just a bit—which was far too impressive for Jim to actually articulate, had he had a mind to do so. "You're not beaming down with them. Scotty, back me up on this."

"Umm, I'd rather not get in the middle of this, if it's all the same to you, Doctor," Scotty muttered, a flustered blush staining his cheeks as he manipulated the transporter controls. When his Chief Engineer was met with two pairs of glaring eyes and his hands fumbled on the screens in front of him, Jim took pity and made himself known.

"Okay, guys. Break it up. Be nice to Lieutenant-Commander Scott, he keeps us from dying more often than not," Jim said, hands raised as he approached the two dueling personalities. The security officers and science Ensigns looked more relieved than they should have at his arrival.

"Jim, this crazy woman won't leave the tubes alone for a minute, despite the fact that she hasn't even seen them since she waltzed out of that room three days ago," Bones grumped, arms folded and glaring at Romanoff with every ounce of aggression he could muster.

"This is different. They're not under watch anymore, they're being moved with the intention to revive them and I'm not going to let them out of my sight," Natasha responded coolly; matter of fact and not at all like she was bearing the weight of Bones' full animosity, which would make most people quail.

Ah, this woman was a treasure.

"There has to be some kind of compromise here," Jim said, before Bones could sputter out anything else. "Scotty might be playing the diplomat, but Bones is right. It's a bad idea to mix bodies in stasis in a transporter with those that aren't. He's a master manipulator of all things related to particle physics, but even this would require the kind of practice and experimentation that we don't allow."

"Then we're at an impasse," Natasha concluded, face serene. "I'm not going down without them."

Sighing, and rubbing the bridge of his nose, he looked from Bones' flushed face to Scotty conspicuously ignoring the tension and wondered how the hell he was playing babysitter while Spock was up on the bridge monitoring for signs of an informant that they might never catch. Well, such was his life.

"We could beam you down ahead of them," Jim suggested.

"I already proposed that," Bones grumped immediately. "Romanoff here doesn't trust that she won't be stunned within an inch of her life and the tubes summarily whisked away from her paranoid spy fingers." Bones wiggled his own fingers in her direction.

Not deigning to respond with anything other than a small shrug, Jim tried not to roll his eyes at her. Of course that's what she would think. Because it wasn't like Jim and Spock had placed their lives and careers on the figurative line so she would have a little bit of faith in them.

Then again, he understood paranoid, so, glass houses and all that.

"And after all we've been through," Jim mock sighed. "Okay, guys. Let's just cut this off at the head because obviously there is another option and I'm surprised no one thought to mention it earlier. Looks like we're going for a shuttle ride."

Bones visibly paled, and Scotty then saw fit to actually enter the conversation.
"Cap'n, I dinnae think that's the best idea," the engineer hedged. "The weather in the upper atmosphere is nae very welcoming. I suppose the shuttle would make it through in one piece, but it would'na be a smooth ride."

Annoyance mounted in Jim's gut. God, this was just the best day and getting better by the second.

"Of course it wouldn't," Jim sighed. "But I'm not exactly seeing our options. I'm not moving the tubes without Romanoff's consent, and we're not sending them together, even if she is being stubborn about it. They aren't our property," he said, sending Romanoff a pointed glance.

They probably were technically Starfleet property by rights of discovery, but that didn't fall so much under the line of possession so much as jurisdiction at this point. The Federation had some pretty thorough laws as it applied to possession and its applicability to living beings, held in stasis or not. It was an ongoing matter of moral debate among the brass whether or not keeping Khan and his crew frozen in some warehouse facility was even legal so much as a necessity.

"We're talking seconds," Bones burst out, hands wringing in obvious anxiety. "Sending down Romanoff and the tubes right after her, hell, we could even send you down with her. Nobody is going to get stunned if you're standing right there," Bones waved his hand expectantly.

When Romanoff held her peace again, Jim tried not to be offended. He really did. In spite of that, an annoyed grimace formed on his face before he could hold it in. "Not sure I'd let that convince me if I were in her shoes, Bones. I'll fly the shuttle; we'll be fine. You wanna get these things moved to the bay?" He motioned to the tubes, not missing the strangled sound Bones made at his pronouncement.

"Jim—" Bones started, whirling on him.

"That's an order, Doctor," Jim sighed, fixing Bones with an exhausted gaze he hoped conveyed all of his desire for them to just get this over with so Spock could handle the lingering shitstorm in Jim's absence.

Stuffing his words, Bones nodded reluctantly. The doctor motioned to the security officers and resumed his controlled tirade by belittling their ability to handle anti-grav transport with any awareness of their burden.

Jim didn't acknowledge Romanoff when she walked up to him, not bothering to meet eyes that he knew were just assessing his condition, maybe for fitness to pilot a shuttle as much as his overall demeanor.

"So you talked to him," she said eventually, relocating her eyes to Bones and the security officers in favor of scrutinizing Jim's appearance. A quick glance in her direction confirmed she was as cool as ever.

Deflect, deflect! His brain urged him.

"That obvious?" He asked, instead.

Romanoff hummed in response as she watched the cryotubes lifted one by one onto transport, faint twitches in her hands belying her calm façade. "Not really. You just look like crap, mostly. Anyone else would chalk it up to being tired, but I've had nothing better to do than watch you and your first officer interact since I woke up. You're pissed at him."

Jim grunted, lifting his hand to dig the heel of his palm into his eyeball, the colors bursting in his vision doing nothing to alleviate the headache he could feel brimming in the base of his skull. "It's not a big deal," he grumbled.
"Now there's a lie," Romanoff folded her arms in a facsimile of relaxed posture. "Your panties wouldn't be in such a scrunch if it weren't at least kind of a big deal. You would have at least slept."

Turning irritated eyes on the mouthy spy next to him, Jim huffed in frustration. "I've got more than Spock to keep me up nights, thank you," Jim grumbled.

Eyebrows lifting in an almost comic display of interest, Romanoff lifted her head to meet his annoyed gaze. "Well, there's a double-entendre I didn't intend to make."

Fighting down an irrational blush, Jim quashed the urge to shove her aside and instead started toward the now moving transports to follow Bones, making for the shuttle that the doctor presumably had waiting for them.

"Here's a suggestion," Jim said, aware of Romanoff keeping pace with him on his left. "Next time you want to give someone advice: don't. And I'm not having sex with Spock," he added out of some ridiculously misplaced sense of honor. His or Spock's, he couldn't be sure.

"I didn't say you were," Natasha responded placidly. "I acknowledged an opportunity to mock you that I didn't take. For what it's worth, I don't think you're fucking your first officer."

Jim didn't sputter. Like a man who is secure in his secrets and also his masculinity, he did not even misstep or blush or anything of the sort. Of all his actions today, he could be proud of gracefully and genially avoiding any sort of outward reaction to Romanoff's statement at all.

"I just didn't say that you two hadn't fucked before."

Well, any outward reaction to the first statement.

"Okay, that's the last time you get to talk about me and Spock like that, ever," Jim bit out, stopping short, Romanoff halting along with him. "I think I've been pretty gracious with you right up until now, and you do not get to throw that in my face by talking about shit like you have any idea what's going on. I've got a thousand and one things to worry about, I'm pissed off, exhausted, and apparently about to pilot a shuttle through an atmospheric storm so you can babysit your frozen friends, so back. The fuck. Off."

Expression unchanged from its previous serene gaze, Romanoff just studied his glaring, manic expression for a moment before nodding once. "You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't do that on purpose."

Jim folded his arms and kept glaring.

"Okay," Romanoff acquiesced. "Maybe I did, but it's not what you think. I read people and situations. It's what I do. It's not even a reflex, it just is. I usually keep cards like that a little closer to the chest, until the information is useful; normally I wouldn't dream of joking about something like that with someone I barely know. You just—"

When Romanoff didn't finish that sentence, Jim rankled at the possible ways it could have ended.

"I just what, Romanoff?" He ground out.

Her eyes flickered to the rapidly disappearing forms of the security officers and cryotubes down the hall before she looked back at him, something different in her expression than the eerie calm she'd displayed before.

"You just remind me of someone," she said, and began walking briskly toward the gaggle of redshirts—and one blue—leaving Jim to stare after her.
The immediate heat of his somewhat rage-y reaction to her comment about he and Spock dissipated a little bit as he followed at a more sedate pace. Right. He was just going to... stuff Romanoff's little shot in the dark into the tiny little box in his brain along with Spock's most recent, frustrating behavior and deal with it later. Or maybe not at all.

Especially if they didn't survive the impending shuttle ride.

“Is he always like that?” Romanoff asked Jim, indicating Bones where he was frantically shedding his safety harness and colorfully cursing Jim and his ancestors.

“Pretty much,” Jim answered, double checking the docking protocol before releasing his own harness. “The aviophobia is a work in progress. Just be glad he didn’t throw up on you.”

“Thrilled,” Romanoff muttered, already out of her harness and heading for the cryotubes secured in cargo.

“Kirk to Enterprise. Shuttle has landed, not altogether worse for wear.”

“Acknowledged, Captain,” said Spock over the comm. “Doctor Djembe and her team are prepared for your arrival, along with the Base Commander.”

“Great. Keep the frequencies open to monitor the situation,” Jim responded, knowing Spock would understand what he meant. They didn’t know who they could trust on this base, and things were going to be tetchy from here on out, especially once Romanoff’s compatriots were out of their tubes.

“Kirk to landing party,” Jim said into his comm. “We’re ready for meet and transport over here.”

“Yeah, we gotcha,” Sulu said. “Nice piloting, by the way. That updraft was wicked, I thought you were goners for a second there.”

“So did I,” Bones grumbled as he shouldered past Jim to where Romanoff stood like a gargoyle at the cargo hatch.

“Oh ye of little faith,” Jim said into the comm. “Do me a favor and make sure the security from the Enterprise is on the transport duty, will you?”

“Way ahead of you, Kirk.”

There was a banging on the outside of the cargo hatch, and Sulu’s voice crackled over the comm again.

“Open up! Your chariot awaits.”

Flipping the comm closed, Jim walked up to the hatch and stood shoulder to shoulder between Romanoff and Bones.

“You ready?” He asked.

“You wouldn’t feel like lending me one of those phasers, would you?” Romanoff responded.

Shaking his head, Jim held back a smile. “Yeah, not gonna happen. Let’s get this show on the road.
You’ve got your plans all worked out, right Bones?"

“Yeah,” Bones responded gruffly, still looking green around the gills from the shuttle ride. “I read Djembe in on who we’re opening and what’s gonna happen when we do. It might be kind of a long process, depending on the shape these people are in when we get them out.”

Sulu banged on the door again. None of them moved.

“You don’t have to trust me, Romanoff. Just give me a chance.” Jim lifted his hand as if to put it on her shoulder, but thought better of it and aborted the movement. He breathed deeply once. “They’ll be okay.”

Rather than answering, Romanoff lifted her hand to the hatch release and pulled it.

Chapter End Notes

I know I said the other Avengers would be here, but my "next chapter" ended up being huge, so I'm splitting it. At least plotty things happened, right? Right?!

Next one should be up very soon! No more death cold, and my summer camp of crazy is over. Whew.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Jim gets an unpleasant reminder of what augments can do, but Natasha isn't alone anymore.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Oh, Jim was going to be in such deep, unabiding shit for this. He could just tell. Really, honestly, it was so wonderful that he’d pledged his commission to protect Romanoff’s buddies—he was still ragingly pissed at Spock for making him do that—when the Base Commander’s next transmission to Starfleet would probably render it moot.

“You’re kidding me with this, right? The whole point of this operation is to get the story about those tubes and those people, and you’re telling me that our access is eighteen different kinds of restricted?” Base Commander Treska’s voice boomed in the small space of his office in the center of Operations.

Keeping his Captain’s face firmly in place, Jim didn’t bother nodding. “I understand that you are in charge of this base and the team of scientists brought here on the Enterprise, but this operation is mine, and I will conduct it in the manner I believe most likely to yield the results that everyone wants.”

“And you believe that hamstringing those scientists is going to get you that?” Treska all but sneered in his face, clearly incensed at having his rank shoved in his face.

“I’m not hamstringing anyone,” Jim started in an attempt to placate him. “In fact, I’m relying on you and your people to make sure everything runs smoothly and safely. Doctor Djembe and the other scientists will get the access they need when the people in those tubes are awake, whole, and capable of consenting to it.”

The vein throbbing in Treska’s temple was visible even under his dark skin. “And if alive and whole they try to take us down, what’s your plan, then?”

Well, it wasn’t as if that thought hadn’t crossed Jim’s mind a few times, but… all things considered, Romanoff wasn’t stupid, and had extracted one hell of an oath from Spock to make sure things worked out for them. She wouldn’t risk screwing herself over by attempting something so monumentally stupid.

“I understand your desire to treat them as potentially hostile. It’s a possibility, yes, but a small one. We’ve got the advantage of already having spoken to one of the people from the cryotubes. Knowing what we do from what she’s told us, these people are extraordinary, yes, but I highly doubt they’d compromise their own safety by threatening ours. If you run this the way that I said, there won’t be any problems.”

“An advantage, right,” Treska echoed, with a sigh. “Look, Kirk, we’re set up here for research and holding. I don’t know what you’re thinking is going to happen with these people, but I’m here to
facilitate that research and protect the people doing it, not rehab some freaks from the dark ages.”

Anger bubbled in Jim’s chest, but he kept his face blank and stony, a trick he’d picked up from Spock.

“Those freaks are people, and what I’m thinking is that I’m not about to sanction indefinite holding or experimentation on anyone without their informed consent. You might have forgotten what happened the last time someone in Starfleet tried that, but I sure as shit haven’t.”

Treska looked reasonably cowed at the potent reminder of what a select few in Starfleet knew of what actually happened during the disastrous pursuit of John Harrison and subsequent fallout from Admiral Marcus’ covert activities. Treska had been part of the clean-up crew during the aftermath, and his knowledge of the events in question were a big part of why he’d been put in charge of this base.

“Captain, I mean no disrespect, but I’m just trying to get through this mission and keep my crew here in one piece. We’re limited in our options to call for help if something goes sideways, out here.”

Letting his earlier anger cool off a bit, Jim finally offered up a smirk. “We’ve got the Enterprise, Commander, and she’s only a quick comm to a Vulcan away if you need an emergency beam out.”

Some of the tension leaving his bulky frame, Treska returned the smirk. “I’ll hold you to that. Speaking of beam outs, are you serious about transporting some of those people back to your ship for medical care? The facilities we have here are fully equipped. Djembe wasn’t sure what she’d have to deal with, so she had Archer set up for everything from a paper-cut to epidemic containment.”

“Doctor McCoy is perfectly capable of working in an unfamiliar environment, and I don’t doubt the medical wing is well stocked. He might even need it, but he’s got equipment of his own on board. I try not to argue too much with my CMO if I can avoid it.”

“Yeah, I hear that,” Treska commented, one hand coming up to rub at his shoulder like he was remembering similar experiences.

“Doctor McCoy to Captain Kirk,” Bones’ voice crackled through his comm, as if summoned by the very mention of him.

Fighting the urge to flip Treska a one-fingered salute at the man’s knowing look, Jim flipped open his comm to answer.

“Kirk here.”

“I need you over here. We’re about ready to... get started.”

Apprehension knotting in his gut, Jim briefly locked eyes with Treska before responding. “Copy that. I’ll be there shortly.”

“McCoy out.”

Flipping his comm closed, Jim looked back at Treska for a brief staring contest. “Is there anything else, Commander?”

Shaking his head, Treska pulled his posture up out of the somewhat relaxed position it had assumed. “Let’s just get the ball rolling. The sooner this gets done, the sooner we can all get off this rock and away from the Neutral Zone.”
Treska snapped a salute, and Jim returned it. “I’ll keep you updated.”

With that, Jim turned and left the room, following a cramped corridor that joined the Ops center to the rest of the small biodome that housed the burner facility.

Looked like, for better or worse, he was about to meet the rest of Romanoff’s team.

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Guards. Transparent walls. People in blue and red milling around on the outside looking in. Doctor McCoy hovering at a console on the other end of the room. Everyone with a weapon except her.

And Natasha, standing beside four cryotubes that held her team, her allies, the only people left of what used to be her life. Her friends.

Natasha had never been so scared in her life.

Was she doing the right thing? She didn’t want to be alone in this anymore, but waking them up, letting them out to whatever was going to happen... would it be what they wanted? Would it be better for someone like Stark, to see that the world he knew had crumbled, no trace of his fame or renown left?

Or Steve. God, Steve. Steve Rogers, who had become her partner for a time, who had shown her again what it could mean to take the risk of trusting someone when everything else was falling apart— he’d lost everything for a second time. The irony of being frozen again was far from lost on her.

And Steve... he would be the first. She needed him to take this weight off of her shoulders. To help her deal with this, to just—be there.

"It's time," McCoy's voice came from her right, a few paces behind. She glanced up to see the tell-tale gold shirt that set Captain Kirk apart from the others behind the clear wall of the temporary medical facility.

Anger coiled in her gut. She didn’t want this to be a spectacle, Steve and the others coming out of the tubes, gasping and confused. Violent, maybe.

"Get rid of them," she said, coldly, her eyes locked on Kirk's blue ones through the glass— transparent aluminum. Whatever.

"Romanoff," McCoy started, with a long suffering sigh. "We've been through this. I need medical and security on standby—"

"Then have them on standby," she hissed, whirling on him. "This isn't the miracle of birth. You've already got surveillance running and recording everything, so put them in a waiting room or something. I don't care, but they're not watching this."

"Bones," Kirk's voice came through the comm unit on the other side of the wall. "It's fine. We'll be just outside. I'll keep my personal comm frequency open for anything you need."

Noises of protest sounded in the room before the communication terminated, and Natasha could see the visible signs of annoyance and indignity in the others, but Kirk locked eyes with her again for a moment and gave her a short nod.
Breathing in and out once, Natasha didn't take her eyes off of him even as he turned to leave.

"Kirk can stay."

Just as he was about to step through the door at the rear of the retreating party, Kirk turned, a look of mild surprise on his face. It only lingered a moment before it broke out into a grin, and Natasha had to stop herself from rolling her eyes.

"Well, then," McCoy grumbled, fiddling nervously with a veritable army of hyposprays and medical implements on a long table before pulling a cover down over them. "Now that we've got that over with. Are we good to go, Your Spyness?"

Stepping over to the largest of the tubes, Natasha peered into the frosted glass that obscured the face beneath it, running her hand over the charcoal gray of the metal casing. Steeling herself, she nodded.

"Yes. You remember what I said about him, right? It might look bad, or go... badly, just—stay over there. Don't call anyone in unless I tell you to. He's banged up, but I promise he'll be okay. Just keep it in your pants."

"Yeah, yeah," McCoy answered, retreating to a small partition, watching, but tensed and ready for action if it was needed.

She hoped it wouldn't be.

Closing her eyes, Natasha asked herself again if this was the right thing to do. It had never been something she'd much concerned herself with, before, but obviously things were different now. Pressing her fingers down in the places only she and Stark knew, a small, almost invisible panel opened in the casing, revealing a nondescript pad of numbers and symbols. She brushed the buttons with her fingers, lingering, but not pressing.

— "My first loyalty is to the protection of my Captain and crew, but I swear upon the once red sands of the destroyed Vulcan and upon my katra, that I will do all within my power to ensure the health, safety and liberty of you and your comrades."

"Bones was right. I'm insane. Certifiably batshit." Sighing, Kirk looked like a man who'd just lost a very important bet. "My word might not be as valuable as a Vulcan's, but I'm with him. All or nothing, right? You go down, he goes down, I go down, we all go down, et cetera. I won't let you rot. You've got whatever help I can give you if it doesn't involve killing, maiming or cruelty to animals." —

The silence of the room was stifling, even with the low hum of environmental controls and the almost undetectable thrum of the cryotube beneath her fingers.

It was Kirk's voice that broke it.

"I keep my promises."

Natasha began to enter the eject codes.

Cold. Darkness. Limbs numb from disuse and the freezing, suffocating water.
Moments passed, and the numbness faded to sharp pain. Frigid air crept into wheezing lungs and *oh, oh god, I can't breathe.*

He remembered crashing, drowning, icy water filling his lungs and his vision and—*no, they got me out. I was alive. I wasn't in the ice.*

But why was it so cold? Why was it so dark?

There was a…crash. He'd crashed.

Pain racked his body as he tried to gasp in a breath, but he was drowning again, his lungs wouldn't take in the frigid air and the sound of his desperate wheezing filled the close space around him. The air was freezing. His lungs were freezing.

*I'm trapped.*

The plane—darkness and metal and ice—*oh god,* had it all been a dream?

The cold seemed to retreat from his limbs, but everywhere the cold left him was replaced with white-hot pain, like pins and needles burning in his skin. He breathed in short, wheezing pants, a gurgling whine escaping his throat as he tried to move in the confines of his tomb.

Dark. It was so dark. If he could move then why couldn’t he see?

The sensation of blood oozing down his face brought his awareness to another hive of pain. His eyes... he could feel now that they were crusted with blood. Struggling to open them, to find some bit of light to escape this cold, suffocating space, he realized with another wheeze of pain that his right eye was swollen shut.

He tried to move his arm to brush away the crust that kept his other eye sealed, but as he did, agony exploded in his forearm and shot straight up into his chest.

In the darkness, Steve cried out. God, he needed to get out of this, this—*coffin.*

Over the sound of his wheezing, the pained noise coming from his throat, there was a hum, a whirring, and Steve desperately forced his good eye open. Eyelashes were pulled out at the root, stuck in the congealed mess on his face, but he saw it then.

Light, a tiny circle of clear light just above him.

At the sight of an escape, desperation and adrenaline numbed the pain in his body once more, and with a harsh, wrenching cry, Steve brought up his other arm and struck the metal above him.

Again and again, he pummeled the metal, heedless of the screaming protest of his damaged limbs or the increasing difficulty he found in taking air into his lungs. The glass had broken, its shards falling into his face and open mouth. Spitting glass and blood, Steve gurgled and wheezed with the effort of breaking through to the light outside.

There was a sudden give in the metal, but not where he’d been concentrating his blows. A long line of light appeared along his left side, and Steve rotated his body, reaching his hands into the tiny gap and pulling.

With a scream of rending metal, the casing separated, sparks and jagged shards cutting into his palms. It wasn't wide enough for him to get through, but he didn't care. Light flooded his vision, blinding him, but he pulled and pulled at the casing, wedging his foot in with his hands until he could
force his body through the space he'd created.

Falling to his hands and knees, Steve cried out again in pain when he put weight on what was clearly a broken arm. Body listing to the right as he removed the bracing point, he gasped and gasped for breath that wouldn’t fill his wheezing lungs.

Blood was rushing in his ears, a relentless roar and pounding with the frantic beat of his heart. Steve coughed out a moan of pain, blinking his eye rapidly to try and get his bearings. There was no water, his limbs still shook and his teeth chattered with cold, but it wasn’t—he wasn’t—

"Steve? C’mon Rogers, I need you here with me."

Shaking his head and pushing off the ground with his good arm, Steve desperately tried to make his blurry, light-blind eye work. He pawed at the crust on his eyelid once more, only to pull his hand back with the hiss when the motion stung his palm and smeared more liquid onto his face.

That voice, who...?

"Yeah, I'll bet that hurts. Боже мой. Rogers will you fucking look at me?"

Turning his head in the direction that the voice was coming from, Steve gasped in another wheezing breath—god, why did it feel like he was drowning—and sought the person attached to it.

Red. Red that wasn’t his blood, it was red hair...

Peggy?

No. Russian. He knew that voice.

"Natasha?" Steve wheezed out, a rough, hacking cough doubling him over and spreading wetness over his lips.

"Oh thank fuck," he heard Natasha whisper before her arms were suddenly around him, tugging him into a partially supine position. He cried out again when she jostled his right arm.

"Yeah, your fucking arm is broken, дебил. That coming back to you, now?" Natasha asked him, a manic lilt to her voice that he couldn’t place as she fussed with the shredded remains of his uniform top. Cuts stung across his shoulders and back—probably from his recent escape effort.

The more he blinked, the easier it became to see, the serum already going to work on his one usable eye. Steve bit back a groan before he shuddered out another cough, a hefty amount of blood leaving his mouth in a spray.

Natasha didn’t even pause to wipe the blood from her face.

"S-Sorry," Steve wheezed through chattering teeth.

"Shut up." Natasha bit out, her fingers poking and prodding at his chest through damp fabric before moving on to his arms and what—

"Ohhhh, oh lord, oh h-h-hell that hurts," Steve groaned when her hand seemed to clamp like a vice on his left forearm.

"Why does it hurt?" Natasha's hand didn't move, and Steve resisted the impulse to throw her off of him.
"B-because it's—" Steve broke off, turning his head to cough and sputter around a mouthful of blood. "Broken!"

Another hand gripped his chin, bringing his bruised face back forward to look into Natasha's bright, manic green eyes.

"How did you break it?" She asked.

"Wh-what?" Steve asked, blinking his eye rapidly, his somewhat mangled left hand clenching and unclenching with full body shivers.

Natasha squeezed his arm again, and a rough scream crawled up from Steve's throat. He thought he heard the sound of another voice, but he couldn't be sure over the sound of his own moaning.

"Answer the question, Captain Rogers," Natasha said coldly, heedless of his pain. "How did you break your arm?"

Steve beat the floor with his right fist, his hips lifting slightly off the ground as his back spasmed around another shudder. Blood trickled from his mouth and roared in his ears. His lungs seized and spots appeared in his vision.

"I—I d-don't—"

A third time Natasha squeezed his arm, and Steve barely registered his own body's next movements.

In less than a second, Natasha was on her back beneath him. His right arm hung cradled to his chest, his bloodied left hand he gripping her throat.

Steve's breath came in wet, ragged pants, and someone else was definitely in the room saying something, but his full attention was on the woman at the end of his arm. She held her chin up in an effort to get more air, but her eyes remained locked on his even as he blinked rapidly.

She held his wrist with two hands, dwarfed by the width of his own, and squirmed. He felt her throat expand as she struggled to get a breath in and forced out a single word.

"How?"

*How did you break your arm?*

His arm—his broken arm. Steve shuddered.

*Cold, he was so cold, freezing cold.*

Steve coughed.

*Blood in his lungs, his uniform damp and shredded on his chest.*

Steve blinked.

*One eye swollen shut.*

Steve pressed his right arm to his chest, shuddered, wheezed a painful breath in and out—

"We're going down!"

"Cap, what the hell are you doing, get back in your fucking straps!"
"Banner isn't secured; he's gonna get tossed into the cock-pit if I don't—"

"Brace for impact!"

"—I've almost got—"

"Steve!" —

Chest heaving with effort, Steve stared down into Natasha's face and released her throat, pulling his own hand back and slowly slumping back on his heels, staring blankly at the floor.

"The quinjet. W-we... crashed," Steve wheezed, a weak shudder wracking his frame. "I wasn't strapped in."

Something in Natasha seemed to relax, and she nodded her head, not moving from where she lay on the floor with the bloody imprint of Steve's hand on her throat.

With the haze of his panic gone, his confusion snuffed out by Natasha's heavy handed tactics, the weight of what happened hit him like a ton of bricks.

He'd willingly let himself be frozen... again, and now he was here with Natasha somewhere, sometime later. He'd torn his way out of that metal ice-coffin with no idea what was happening, was now lucid and in a significant amount of pain and having a hard time breathing.

Right. Because he'd been shot. In the chest.

Hacking and coughing on what would have been a forlorn sigh, Steve scrubbed his bloodied lips with his exposed forearm.

"W-well, that was—" Cough. Wheeze. "Un-p-pleasant."

If Stark had had more time, if she'd woken Stark up first, if she'd thought just a little bit ahead, if she'd been more scientist than spy... Natasha might have predicted that this would happen.

As it stood, she was just trying to make sure she actually had a the situation in hand such that her increasingly frantic audience didn't feel the need to intervene, promises be damned.

To be fair, she must have been channeling her inner Barton, because, well: this looked bad.

The ejection sequence hadn't finished, but Rogers had woken up anyway. His body, still partially frozen—the air inside the tube all but unbreathable—was alive enough for Steve's brain to power through and then he fucking ripped the damn tube open while it was still warming up.

Thank fuck for Stark's compromise protocols, shutting the whole thing down once the integrity of the tube was damaged beyond sustainability, or the reactor might have made a nice big crater out of their current location.

Because that was just what she needed on top of everything.

Watching Steve literally tear out of the cryotube had been... disconcerting, to say the least. It wasn’t like she would have been able to stop him, but she'd done what she could to try and override the
process and get the hatch open. No sooner had she done that than Steve had pulled some dead rising zombie act and pried open the metal, cutting his hands all to shit in the process.

Through the whole thing, it was readily apparent that Steve had no idea what was happening. The temperature, the tube, everything was fucking with his head and he wasn't lucid. She'd done what she had to do to get his head back in the game, but now that it was, she had his very real injuries to deal with, and the very real fact that she had a whole ton of shit to unload on him so they could make some kind of decision before she got Barton out of his tube and into surgery.

Because he was going to need surgery.

Natasha's heart sped up a little. She ignored it.

"Fuck it. McCoy, I need you. Get over here."

"About damn time!" The doctor hissed, striding purposefully over with a tricorder and medkit in hand. "Was about to call bullshit on your non-intervention clause. What the hell was that?"

Ignoring him, Natasha sat up and touched Steve's face before McCoy could get in it with all his tactless bluster.

"Hey, Rogers. I know you're the picture of health and beauty on a good day, but you're gonna need some help in the meantime. This is Doctor Leonard McCoy. He's a... friendly. See what we can do about that bullet rattling around in your chest, huh?"

"Bullet?" Came McCoy's incredulous sputter. Natasha tried not to roll her eyes.

"I did tell you he'd been shot in the chest, didn't I?"

"Must've been a sniper," Steve wheezed, eyeing McCoy with an unfocused look. His chest had closed up, but between the panic and his enthusiastic escape from the tube, the man had lost a lot of blood. A good bit of it was on her shirt, so she should know.

"Jesus fucking wept," McCoy muttered under his breath, his tricorder whirring as he waved it over Steve's chest, head, and chest again. "Bullets." He moved on to Steve's arm before tucking the instrument away and pulling out a few other tools.

"Steve, is it?" McCoy shot Natasha a look, which she met evenly. So what if she hadn't even identified her teammates to the Enterprise crew? No need to show a hand before it became necessary, after all. "We need to get you over onto one of these beds so I can prep you for surgery. There's some shrapnel inside your lung; it looks like the tissue around has healed, but the... bullet is still there, and every time you breathe or cough its tearing into your lung, so it needs to come out."

Steve looked kind of wide eyed at the pronouncement, but then a look of realization dawned on his face and something relaxed in his expression. He offered a shivery, wry grin in Natasha's direction before propping himself up on his good elbow and extending a bloody hand in McCoy's direction.

"Hello, Doctor," Steve wheezed, coughing up blood onto his shoulder as he turned his head. "If N-Natasha says you're friendly I'll take her w-word for it." Steve paused to draw another crackling breath, making Natasha's insides clench up. "But surgery w-won't be necessary."

McCoy ignored the proffered hand—not out of rudeness, but probably because it was mangled and bloody, even if it was healing beneath all the disgusting flaps of skin and fat poking through the tissue—and drew back a little.
"Bullshit. You've got a bullet in your lung! How the hell do you propose it comes out before it shreds more of your bronchial tubes, hmm?" McCoy lifted an eyebrow in a fantastic demonstration of his lack of bedside—in this case, floor side—manner.

Steve cast Natasha an apologetic look before turning his rapidly blinking gaze back to the doctor. "This isn't—" Steve took a slow, even breath in and out, surprisingly without coughing or otherwise sounding like he was dying of consumption "—the first time I've healed around a bullet, doctor."

Before Natasha or McCoy could say anything more, Steve scooted himself in a somewhat more upright position and began a series of awful, hacking, gagging coughs; his chest and body contorted in various ways while Steve wheezed and spit copious amounts of blood. When McCoy made a motion and a protest toward him, Steve held up a hand and continued his... whatever it was he was doing. After about forty seconds of nauseating noise, Steve made a twitchy motion with his head before he gagged on a final cough.

And promptly spit a bullet onto the floor.

Chest and body heaving with the effort of breathing through what must be a pretty good amount of blood in one lung, Steve lifted his eyes, one of them slowly returning to normal, to McCoy and Natasha, offering them a bloody grin.

"See?" He wheezed, coughing a wet mouthful of blood into his tattered sleeve. "No surgery. Just had to—" Steve coughed up another mouthful of blood and...things. “—c-cough the bastard up."

McCoy seemed rooted to the spot, staring at the bullet where it lay in a small puddle of blood and sputum on the white floor, jaw slack in consternation.

"That's—you—" McCoy recovered enough from his horror to look directly at Steve. "You just... coughed it up?" He asked, voice rising and cracking on the last syllable.

"Yeah," Steve said, slumping down before pulling himself to his feet with Natasha's help, looking immensely relieved as his breathing evened out. Natasha braced him on his left side without him asking her—she knew by the weight on her shoulder that he needed it, even if only temporarily. It wasn't like she didn't already have a bunch of his blood on her, anyway.

"Like I said," Steve continued. "Not the first time."

"Oh, well, bully for you," McCoy drawled, seemingly pulled out of his fascinated, horrified daze. "Seeing as you just spit the damned thing out, your lungs gonna be okay, or should I just go burn my medical degree now and pretend that didn't happen?"

Natasha tried not to smirk. Steve was kind of heavy, and he was leaning on her more than she figured he'd be as they made their way across the scant steps to an empty biobed.

"I'll be okay—oof—" Steve grunted, pulling his right arm to his chest as he sat down on the biobed. Almost immediately the readings he put out set off alarms wailing and shrieking, and McCoy had to dive around the other side to silence them. She didn't miss the significant looks he regularly cast to Kirk from his well-concealed vantage point in the observation area.

"My arm, it'll—" Steve started, but cut himself off at a look from Natasha that she knew he wouldn't really be able to interpret, but plainly said ‘not the time'.

"Um. Do you have a sling?"
Objectively, Jim really couldn't describe what he'd just seen as anything other than a shit-show.

He'd promised—like a fucking idiot—he'd promised not to call security in unless Romanoff specifically requested assistance. Jim had started to think the whole *my word is my bond* thing was overrated right around the time this guy had torn open the cryotube with his bare hands and started bleeding all over the floor.

The bleeding and screaming and general incoherence had really just been the most obvious of clues that the situation was maybe heading in the general direction of fucked. Romanoff had apparently given Bones some song and dance about the dude in the freezer looking worse than he actually was, but from what he could see, yeah. Definitely not the case.

...and then he'd spit out a bullet. Just—coughed the fucker up and *ptooie*. Right onto the floor.

It was straight out of a crappy twentieth century action movie, except for the part where this guy had actually, literally *coughed up a bullet* that had presumably made its way into his lung via the express route through his god damn chest.

Even while he was staring along in disgusted horror at the act itself of coughing up a bullet and the general mess of his body, it took Jim a moment to identify the skin-pricking, stomach tightening feeling that had taken root in his body.

Fear. Doubt.

This guy, the one Romanoff had wanted out first before any of the other people, was the one Djembe had identified as demonstrating characteristics of augmentation. Height and size. Muscle mass, bone and tissue density, skeletal integrity.

Romanoff had wanted an augment with her before any of the others.

She'd asked him and Spock why they thought any of the others couldn't have done her job better.

—"*Because I am better.*"

"*At what?*"
Jim swallowed.

Trying to convince himself there wasn't anything to worry about was frankly an exercise in futility—Jim had been worrying for a solid four days—so he watched the proceedings like a hawk. Bones was visibly shaken by the ordeal, which was saying something, but then it hit him the significant looks Bones kept casting at Jim were because they were thinking the same thing.

Augments were dangerous.

It was wrong. It was biased and it wasn't even fair, but he knew that at the least he and Bones—possibly even Spock—couldn't be fucked to care. Jim was in the business of keeping his crew alive and unharmed, though he'd taken up side-contract of colluding with his First Officer to make sure Romanoff and her posse were safe from the big bad... potentially hundreds of unscrupulous people who'd try to take advantage of them on Earth alone.

God. How did he even get himself into situations like this? Oh. Right. There was some sort of sordid scheme afoot that was going on under their noses, and the Enterprise was probably some sort of convenient means to an end.

For the second time that day, Jim was struck by the irony of risking his commission and command for these people when the reasons for fucking right off from Starfleet were beginning to pile up. Really, was the good that he could do as a Captain of the flagship really enough to outweigh the bullshit that was happening higher up the chain of command?

Yes, his brain told him stubbornly.

Shaking his head at himself, Jim stuffed his personal pity-party into the back of his brain when the man was ushered onto a biobed, still dripping blood from where he'd mangled himself breaking out
of the cryotube.

Because that had happened. *Fuck.*

"Bones?" Jim asked, palm pressed to the comm unit outside the room.

The dark look Romanoff shot him over her shoulder spoke volumes, but he met it with a look of his own and waited for Bones to acknowledge him.

"Gimme a minute, Jim," Bones waved a hand in his direction as he waved his tricorder around. Romanoff's friend—Steve, his name was Steve Rogers—looked wary, but ultimately not terribly phased by the procedure. The look on his face as Bones mumbled and barked at Romanoff a handful of times was one of long-suffering, like he'd been through this kind of ringer before.

Sighing, Jim took his palm off the comm and folded his arms, waiting.

Bones, to his credit, went about the whole thing with a kind of intense, straight-faced efficiency that lacked his usual bluster and grouch. The way he worked with Steve, telegraphing his movements and calmly explaining what he was doing was almost... gentle. The man still radiated apprehension, but his eyes were alight with watchful awareness, regularly looking to Romanoff and being offered small nods, shakes or monosyllabic answers in response to unasked questions.

Finally, Bones straightened and said something to Steve that Jim couldn't quite hear, then turned to walk over to his arsenal of medical equipment.

Jim caught his eye as Bones walked over, and the doctor gave him a steady look, surreptitiously looking down at the tricorder in his hands and then up at Jim with a raised eyebrow. Jim lifted both of his own brows in return—he hadn't mastered the single brow lift that Spock and Bones used on him—leaning back on his heels and giving Bones the 'look of expectant waiting'.

Bones rolled his eyes and grabbed a bracing sling from a sleek looking cabinet.

Realizing that he was still going to be mostly excluded from the proceedings, Jim frowned down at his personal comm and resisted the urge to contact Spock and ask about the situation on the ship. When he looked back, Jim was almost startled to see a pair of grey-blue eyes watching him intently.

Romanoff was saying something to Rogers, but catching where his eyes were looking, followed his gaze to where Jim stood on the other side of the clear observation panel. She barely even looked at Jim before she was turned right back to Steve and murmuring into his ear. Again, Jim couldn't hear it, but everything that was being said in the room was being recorded and monitored. If Jim wanted, he could access the recording or even amplify the sound right now and hear everything they were talking about, but he wouldn't. Not yet, at least. Romanoff was aware of the surveillance, and he was as confident that she wasn't going to let anything she didn't want anyone else to hear slip as he was that Spock's blood was green.

Rogers' eyes never wavered from him as she spoke. He didn't even blink, despite the way his chest still visibly shook with wheezing breaths, mouth hanging open and bloodied as he breathed through what must be a lung rapidly repairing itself.

Bones returned with the brace, and the staring contest was broken.

"I can't put this brace on over all... that," Bones said, indicating the torn, bloody fabric of Rogers' clothing. The remains of a star emblem in the middle of his chest a dingy, brownish red against what must have once been a deep blue and white uniform.
Looking down at himself, Rogers wheezed in a breath, letting it out in a rattling cough instead of what was probably meant to be a sigh.

"Yeah," he said. "Let me just—" Rogers made a move to stand up, and Bones nearly flailed.

"Whoa there," he said, palms out to halt the motion. "Fast healer or not you have a nasty break, one you made a hell of a lot worse by busting out of that cryotube. Your ulna is in pieces, you move it around too much and you might nick your radial artery—frankly I'm surprised you didn't manage it already."

Ah, there was a bit of the Bones Jim knew.

"I'm gonna have to cut it off and close up those gashes so you stop bleeding all over the place before putting the brace on."

There followed a moment of silence in which both Romanoff and Rogers stared at Bones. Romanoff slowly turned her gaze to Rogers, lifting a delicate eyebrow.

"Fanta—" Rogers paused to cough, more blood speckling the hand he brought up to cover it. "—stic," he finished, letting his head drop down onto the unyielding surface of the biobed and leaving him to Bones' tender mercies.

Shooting Jim a look, Bones brandished a set of laser shears and conspicuously leaned over to the wall to touch the panel that brought up the privacy screen.

It was difficult, Natasha was finding, to bring Steve up to speed on how long he'd been frozen this time around, let alone the situation in general, with McCoy constantly in the way. If this had been any other situation, they'd have been perfectly fine on their own while Steve allowed the serum to do its work and repair his body over the course of hours. The doctor, however, had no such intentions of letting things run its course, specifically where open wounds were concerned.

"It's a damned biohazard," McCoy grumbled, seemingly out of the genteel behavior he'd previously displayed. "No vaccines! You people may as well be walking pitri dishes. Like hell I'm letting you bleed all over the place, now hold still," he'd said, applying a regenerator to Steve's damaged hand, though it was visibly less mangled than it had been ten minutes ago.

"I don't get s—"

"Steve."

"Well, I'd really rather not—"

"Still!" McCoy barked, sending Steve into confused, shirtless silence as he watched his hands being repaired.

"That's new," he mused, lightly flexing his healed fingers when McCoy was finished. Natasha didn't miss the apprehensive note in his voice, but in another display of competence and grace under pressure, didn't ask any more questions. They'd shared enough looks and short, murmured words since he'd snapped out of his panic that he knew to wait for her debrief.
It had never stopped feeling odd—wrong, in a very disconcerting way—how Steve trusted her. Trusted her enough to allow a strange man in a strange place use strange medical equipment on him.

Perhaps it was a testament to some degree of sensitivity that McCoy didn't elaborate beyond a grunt of confirmation at Steve's observation, instead shooting Natasha look she didn't bother to return.

By the time McCoy had patched Steve up to his satisfaction, Romanoff thought the doctor might have found a new person to replace her—or possibly Kirk—as his least favorite patient.

Steve was sitting up on the biobed, still shirtless but much less bloody than he'd been before, enduring a final adjustment of the sleek looking brace that held his arm immobile against his chest.

"Really, Doctor McCoy, this—"

"Tell me 'it's not necessary' one more time, Rogers. I dare you," McCoy said without looking up from his work.

Steve frowned, but held his peace, choosing instead to attempt another silent conversation with Natasha. A lingering look at McCoy and then back to her with a skeptical tilt of his head almost made her smile.

*You're sure about him?*

There wasn't a good way to convey 'sure enough' through silent means, so Natasha just gave a single nod.

Finished, McCoy clutched his tricorder and stared at them both in turn before rolling his eyes.

"I'll just go clean up all that blood, then, shall I?" McCoy announced, fixing Natasha with a last lingering look before stalking out the side of the partition.

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Sitting back against the wall, Steve stared solemnly at the brace on his arm.

"I'm gonna go out on a limb and guess I've been asleep for a lot longer this time around."

"2260," Natasha responded.

Steve sucked in a breath, coughing sharply as it stung his still healing lungs. "Jesus," he uttered, a heavy weight settling in his gut. "That wasn't part of the plan."

"It was kind of a shitty plan," Natasha said, gentler than he'd ever heard her sound. It made Steve look up and observe her more closely.

"What happened? Where are the others?" Steve asked, flooded with concern and guilt that he hadn't asked after them until now. He hadn't been sure it was safe.

Folding her arms, Natasha fixed her gaze above Steve's shoulder.

"I can't really say much about what happened between when Stark put us on ice and now, but we were... found. These people brought us here to open up the tubes. The others, they're here, safe. Still in the tubes."
"Safe," Steve echoed, looking around at what he could see of the unfamiliar space, centuries more advanced but still looking like every lab he’d ever ended up in.

"For now," Natasha amended. "The doctor and I have an understanding."

"And what is that supposed to mean? What do they want from us?" Steve found himself snapping, leaning forward with a wheeze. "We made a hell of an effort to keep ourselves out of enemy hands just to end up right back where we started. We talked about this, we had a plan."

"A shitty one." Natasha's shoulders tensed, and she flicked her eyes down to look directly at him. "And I didn't exactly have anyone to bounce ideas off of while I was trying to adapt to life on a futuristic spaceship, do recon and keep you out of a lab."

"This looks a lot like a lab to—wait, we're on a spaceship?" Steve balked.

"We were on a spaceship, that's where I was ejected. We're at a temporary base on another planet right now."

Steve stared. "You're kidding."

Natasha stared back at him, not dignifying his pronouncement with an answer.

"Right," Steve breathed. "Even better. So we're what, prisoners?"

"Not as such. More like... refugees, according to them."

"And who is 'them', exactly?"

A small tick in Natasha's jaw belied her desire to say something more, but she inclined her head instead. "They're called Starfleet. It's the military branch of the United Federation of Planets, but it's based on Earth. A research team found us and sent a ship off planet to quarantine and investigate us in the event we posed some kind of threat."

Steve clenched his jaw, eyes narrowed at Natasha. He couldn't be so sure that they didn't pose a threat if there was something going on here that meant they'd have to fight their way out, other planet or no. There was always something.

"How much do they know, about us?"

"Highlights. They know we're a response team. I didn't tell them anything that wasn't necessary to ensure we were safe. No full names yet except yours and mine, but the cat's out of the bag on you being superhuman with the scans they took and the stunt you just pulled."

Swiping a hand through his stiff, somewhat blood bedraggled hair, Steve let out a slow breath. "Tell me about the people who brought us here. That doctor, you know him?"

Natasha nodded. "Leonard H. McCoy, MD. Chief Medical Officer of the ship that brought us here, the Enterprise."

That sounded oddly familiar.

"Like the Revolutionary warship?" Steve scrunched his brow.

Natasha's lips quirked briefly. "Apparently. I've met a few of the others on the crew, seen a good bit of the ship. Her Captain is James T. Kirk, the First Officer, Spock... who is an alien."
Steve stared at her for a long few seconds. "An... alien," he repeated slowly.

"A Vulcan. I did say United Federation of Planets, which implies more than one."

"Right," Steve said eventually. "Can we trust these people? Alien or not?"

The long pause that followed allowed the knot in Steve's gut to grow. When Natasha spoke, Steve was already mentally preparing strategies for escape and confrontation.

“I can't speak for the organization or the people on this base, but Kirk, Spock and McCoy,” Natasha paused, choosing her words. “I think they'll help us. I think they can help us.”

“How can you be sure?” Steve asked, thinking desperately about Tony and Bruce, what might happen to them if this all proved disastrous. The people who might be hurt if his own blood got into the wrong hands. He hadn't been awake for an hour yet and it already seemed like they’d gone from the frying pan into the fire. Except it was a fire with aliens and spaceships and it was not something they’d ever prepared for.

"The war—our war—it’s over, Steve. We lost, but it’s over. I really can't be as sure about them as I’d like, but our options are limited. Kirk and Spock, we made a deal. They're going to do what they can to make sure none of you end up under a microscope."

"And why would they do that? The goodness of their hearts?" Steve scoffed. Just because he was a good person didn't mean he was naïve.

"Yeah, probably. Starfleet is supposed to be a humanitarian, peacekeeping organization. But aside from that, I think it's personal. For the Captain, at least."

A personal vendetta. Wonderful.

"That's not reassuring."

"It's not supposed to be," Natasha snapped at him, suddenly. "You think I'm reassured by any of this? I've been grasping at fucking straws, spilling my guts about SHIELD and the Red Room trying to look out for all of us, things that I do not do. Things I've never had to do."

Steve was taken momentarily aback at the edge of her voice, the brightness of her eyes. This was not a Natasha Romanoff he'd ever seen before.

"You all trusted me to make the call when the time came, and I made it. I couldn't just cut you loose. I couldn't let them try to get you out of there and kill you, not when I know that we're not totally screwed," Natasha's hands visibly clenched in the black fabric of an unfamiliar uniform. "We can do this, I just—I needed—" Natasha looked down and away from Steve before bringing her eyes slowly back to his.

"I needed help."

Steve had never heard Natasha sound like this before, and suddenly felt like the biggest jerk for not having even asked how she was doing, if she was even okay. She'd been just as hurt as the rest of them before they'd gone under, maybe more than they'd known. She'd been out there alone with the full responsibility of the team on her shoulders for god knows how long before he'd been revived, and here he was giving her the third degree. Black Widow or not, it was a cold thing to do.

"Crap," Steve breathed after a prolonged silence, Natasha looking at him with too bright green eyes. What the hell kind of leader was he that he couldn't even reassure someone who had risked life and
"Crap," Steve said again. "God, Natasha. I'm sorry, I wasn't—I didn't think—oh hell, come here."

Without allowing himself to hesitate, Steve reached out with his free arm and pulled a stunned Natasha into an embrace. Part of him expected a knife to his ribs, but he figured the risk might be worth it if she didn't stab him.

For a long moment, Steve waited, chin pressed to the top of her head. Natasha was stiff and unmoving against him, her breath a scant tickle where her cheek rested against his chest. Finally, though, he felt a breath of air leave her and she almost slumped against him, her hands unclenching from their fists, curling instead around his braced forearm.

"It's alright," he murmured, moving his hand gently against her back, ignoring the slightly painful pressure of Natasha's grip on his injured arm. "You did good. It's fine. You're okay now. I'm so glad you're okay."

"I can't do this alone, anymore," Natasha whispered into his chest. "When did that happen?"

God, how could he have forgotten what it had felt like, waking up that first time? It had been devastating, the loneliness, the pressure of being someone he wasn’t sure he could be. He’d have given anything just to see a familiar face, to talk to someone he knew, a friend, anyone who wasn’t a SHIELD agent.

"You're not alone," Steve answered, ignoring her question in favor of a firm embrace. "We're still alive because of you. You kept us safe."

"You don't know that," she hissed, her grip tightening.

"We'll figure it out. I won't let anything happen to you or to any of us. I'm Captain America, remember?"

Natasha relaxed her grip a little, but didn't let go, which was miraculous in and of itself. Steve gave her another gentle squeeze and thought again how he didn't know how long she'd even been out of the cryotube.

"How long were you on your own, out there?"

"Three days."

Steve's eyes widened and he looked down at Natasha's red hair in wonder. Lord, she'd managed to wrap the three most senior officers of a spaceship around her finger in three days. "And you aren't running the ship already? You must be losing your touch." Steve coughed on the last word.

Natasha did pull away then, eyes conspicuously dry but seemingly grateful for the excuse to end the intimate moment.

"Yes, well, I had to learn the Federation Standard language, sift through two centuries of history and secure us de facto citizenship of United Earth. Not much room to incite a mutiny." Natasha's gaze looked him up and down again as Steve coughed again, his face twisting into a grimace. "And it looks like I'm not the only one slipping. Your lung should be healed by now."

"It's the cryogenesis," Steve answered with a slow sigh, pressing a palm to his aching chest. "I think something similar happened when they pulled me out of the ocean. I guess it's something to do with the serum recirculating in my blood after being dormant in my muscle and bone marrow." Steve
shivered a little at the reminder of not one, but two trips down an icy memory lane.

Natasha looked ready to say something, but stiffened when the partition around them began to fade.

The doctor who'd treated him—McCoy—stood with his arms folded on the other side of the retreating screen. "Hate to break this up, Romanoff, but we've got a schedule to keep. Your schedule, if you remember." McCoy's gaze slid to Steve, giving him a quick once over. "You all caught up?"

Steve tried a disarming smile, but he thought it probably came off as more of a grimace. "Mostly," he answered. "Leonard McCoy, Chief Medical Officer of the Enterprise, right? Steve Rogers," he said, sticking out his hand.

The doctor took it without hesitation, and though Steve might have squeezed a bit too tightly for it to have been completely polite, the doctor didn't flinch.

"Nice to meet you. Have some clothes," he said, pushing a small bundle of black clothing into his hands. "The guy creeping on you from the observation room is Captain Jim Kirk," McCoy stuck his thumb in the direction of the man Steve had observed watching him earlier, an indignant 'Hey!' accompanying the personal description. "I assume you'll be hanging around when we crack open the next tube?"

"Yes," Steve answered, eyeing the clothes in his hands before looking to Natasha. "Clint?"

"Clint," Natasha confirmed, and Steve breathed in his first deep breath without coughing.

"Alright. Let's do this."

Chapter End Notes

I told you it would be up soon! Experimenting with including gifs for flashbacks in the body of text. Let me know if it seems weird.

Feel free to follow me on tumblr, or leave a comment here.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Clint sets things back because he decided to get shot by bullets unknown—"Bullets!—Jim tries not to let past experiences get to him. He and Steve get a visit that makes things complicated, and Spock gets an insight into something that might have to do with the situation on the Enterprise.

Chapter Notes

Thanks and a warm welcome to my beta Kay for help with this chapter (and my Afrikaans)!

Translations in the end notes.

"I'M GOING TO SHOOT STARK IN HIS FUCKING EYEBALLS."

Well, so much for discretion.

Natasha watched, her veiled amusement turning into a growing concern as Clint hemmed, hawed and generally wriggled around in pain as the cryotube slowly opened at the top. It was a different model than the ones she and Steve had used, a hatch that lifted slightly up before moving down to cover the bottom half like the slide on a Glock 17.

"Nice to see you too, Clint," she intoned, leaning over the tube to grasp his shoulder, stilling movements that were sure to aggravate the broken rib he was sporting, not to mention the host of other injuries.

Sweat beaded visibly on Clint's brow, worrisome considering only minutes ago he'd been as frozen as a popsicle inside the tube.

"Fuck fuck fuck," Clint swore, hissing as Natasha pressed on the angry bruises beneath his uniform, a hideous magenta looking thing from his circus days she'd almost forgotten he'd been wearing during their final flight to the Canadian provinces.

"How's that leg?" She asked, trying to peer inside the tube even as she helped him to sit up. "Give me a hand," she motioned to Steve, indicating Clint's left side while she slid his arm around her own shoulders.

"FUCK," Clint swore again when he was lifted from the pod. "Du hässliches, verdammtes, Schlampepferd!"

"Not good, then," Natasha answered, eyes narrowing at the soaked through pressure bandage on his left thigh. They'd had to improvise, so it wasn't very good, but even then it was looking bad.
"Jdi po prdele," Clint hissed, a bark of pain escaping him when his legs came down out of the tube. "My leg sucks," he panted out between short breaths.

"Quit complaining. It's like you've never been shot before," Natasha needled, regardless of the very real concern she had for his pallor.

With Steve's one armed help, Clint was hustled over to another biobed, grunting and swearing in a multitude of languages along the way.

"McCoy," Natasha barked when Clint collapsed against the biobed, another muffled grunt of pain pushing its way out of his mouth. Steve lifted Clint the rest of the way onto the bed, and he let out a hissing breath.

"Move," the doctor said, neatly slotting himself in front of Steve on the other side, his tricorder whirring even as he dictated orders to the biobed mechanisms, pushing and tapping at the panel near Clint's head.

"The fuck are you?" Clint ground out, his eyes angry and bright with pain.

"He's with me," Natasha said, keeping her hands to herself but mindful of the ever growing puddle of blood beneath Clint's leg. "Don't bite him."

McCoy sent her a vaguely alarmed look, but ultimately didn't let his concern stop him from stabbing Clint in the neck with a hypospray.

"Ek sal jy kak te breek, jy ma fokker," Clint exclaimed, aiming a strike at McCoy's face that Natasha had to subdue. The doctor didn't so much as flinch, reloading his hypospray before bringing the tricorder down Clint's left arm, stopping at the wrist with narrowed eyes.

"Is he always like this?" McCoy asked, as Clint wriggled on the bed, setting various alarms blaring in the process.

"...more or less," Steve answered over Natasha's, "Yes."

"He hates medical, and he's bad at pain management, when he's not being tortured," Natasha amended, Clint's petulant " not getting past her.

" ," she responded placidly—if he was moving on to Korean, he was in a pretty bad way—finally allowing a hand to push his hair back from his sweaty forehead. Despite the sweat, his skin was hot under her fingers and she frowned down at him, the knot in her stomach tightening.

"I'm Doctor McCoy," said man butted in, ignoring Clint's feral expression and looking right into his murderous eyes. "Clint, I need you to try and squeeze my fingers," he said, placing the forefingers of his left hand into Clint's own.

The fingers gave a weak twitch, but otherwise Clint's hand remained still. With wide eyes and renewed panting, Clint glared up at McCoy with a shake of his head. "Can't. Wrist. S'broken," he said, his breath whistling out.

"Yeah, no shit," McCoy muttered, palpating Clint's hand and wrist.

"كسيكنسل!", Clint hissed, his hair damp with sweat and blood from a gash above his left ear.

Natasha noticed with a sick feeling that the fingernails of his left hand were beginning to turn blue
when, without warning, Clint arched his back off the biobed, an alarm beginning to screech over the sounds of his gasping.

"Hold his shoulders!" McCoy barked at Steve, ignoring the wrist he'd been examining in favor of clamping a gloved hand over the bullet wound on Clint's leg that had begun to bleed in earnest.

With Steve and Natasha covering a shoulder each, she could easily see that Clint was white as a sheet, his eyes rolling back in his head when he gave a jagged cough, blood bubbling up bright red and frothy from his mouth.

"Son of a bitch, he's seizing," McCoy said, ripping a drawer open and filling another hypospray. "Jim, I need help in here," McCoy said, keeping a hand pressed to Clint's thigh while he jammed the hypo directly into the muscle. The blood flow abated enough for him to swipe at the projection screen, another injection already loaded and pressed to Clint's neck while he flicked the screen to zero in on Clint's chest.

McCoy swore. "Activate emergency oxygen field, saturation seventy-five percent. Begin surgical protocols and disinfection," whirling back and forth from Clint's bed to the array of equipment and hyposprays laid out behind him, McCoy looked from Clint's thigh back to Natasha before asking. "He's got symptoms of anaphylaxis. Did you give him any medication before he was frozen?"

"No," Natasha said, before something struck her, and suddenly things seemed a lot more urgent. "Shit, Steve, the bullets."

Steve’s stricken look pretty much confirmed her fears.

"Specifics, Romanoff!" McCoy barked, waving his arm at Kirk in a 'hurry the fuck up' gesture, running a rapid blood scan with his other hand.

"He's been poisoned. The shot was through and through, but some of the people after us had their guns loaded to take down mutants. Immunosuppressants, some kind of radioactive chemical to target the DNA, I'm not sure. It's nasty."

"Jesus," McCoy hissed down at his tricorder before grabbing another hypospray from behind him. He called up to Kirk, who was intently speaking into his communicator. "Get me Chapel, now!"

"Chapel is on the Enterprise," Jim said, running into the room with two of the staff who'd been in observation previously, white coats billowing behind them and intent looks on their faces.

McCoy swore again, but motioned for the two new additions to come over to the bed. "Romanoff, Rogers, I need you out of the way."

"Like hell," Natasha growled, glaring mutinously at the nurses and hovering at Clint's side with no intention of moving. "I've been through this with him before, I can help."

"Clear his airway, prep for intubation," McCoy pointed to one of the new doctors, a tall, willowy looking Andorian, who nodded and grabbed the necessary tool, ignoring Natasha's antagonistic posture.

"Romanoff, I'm trying to save your friend's life, and I can't do that if I'm trying to coach you through a surgery. You're out of your depth, now move," McCoy barked, pointing to the side.

Natasha watched the screen with Clint's vital stats flashing an angry red and clenched her jaw tight. She felt Steve's hand on her shoulder and twitched away from it.
"Come on," he urged, holding his hands up. "Look at him, he needs doctors, not field medicine."

"Fine," she hissed. "But I'm staying."

"Fine!" McCoy snapped back, brandishing the same pair of laser shears he'd used on Steve and smoothly cutting away the remains of the pressure bandage and blood-soaked fabric of Clint's pants, revealing a mottled, purple mess of spidery veins and angry bruising.

McCoy and the two doctors had been working for less than a minute to stabilize Clint when a host of Clint's vitals began to plummet.

"He's going into shock," McCoy said, his hands coming out of the surgical field around Clint's body free of blood and gore, allowing him to rapidly adjust the biobed and enter commands into the console. After a moment he swiped a hand angrily across the screen before injecting another hypospray into Clint's neck. "Jim, we need a beam out. These beds don't have—I need—fuck it, just get us up to the medbay, now!"

Kirk didn't bother to ask questions, his communicator already opening a channel.

"McCoy to Enterprise Sickbay," the doctor said, his own medical comm responding without physical prompt. "Critical patient incoming; human male, anaphylactic shock from potentially mutagenic poison, arterial bleeding, perforated diaphragm and carpal dislocation. Alert Doctor M'Benga and prep surgical suite three."

McCoy continued to rattle off information even as he and the other doctors' hands flew about Clint's now supine body, putting out fires.

Her own heart thundered in her chest. She'd known it was bad, but she hadn't thought it would get this bad this quickly—they hadn't counted on AM-bullets. One second Clint had been swearing at McCoy in Urdu, and the next he was bleeding out.

"Transport is ready when you are, Bones," Kirk said, jogging into the room and stopping beside her.

"I'm coming with him," Natasha said.

McCoy didn't even argue, just snapped some device to the end of the tube down Clint's throat and threw a blanket over him. "His pressure is dropping, let's go!"

"Steve," Natasha said, whirling on him in the moments before the transporter took her up to the ship.

"I've got it," Steve said before she could even complete the thought.

"I'll stay with him," Kirk added.

"Nobody touches them," Natasha said at the same time McCoy said "Energize."

The last thing she saw was Steve's resolute nod before she disappeared in a whirl of light.

Awkward silence didn’t begin to cover it.

If Jim’s previous apprehension had been subdued in the face of the newest medical emergency, it had just made a grand re-entrance. Rogers would be stupid if he couldn’t tell.

Rogers didn’t look like a stupid man; massive biceps and wayward blonde hair notwithstanding.
Jim wanted to blurt out *what the hell was* that, but the staring contest dragged on for another half a minute before he remembered he was just supposed to suck it up and be a diplomat about the whole thing.

“Captain Jim Kirk,” Jim said, extending a hand. Rogers made a motion to extend his own, but, noticing the blood on it, withdrew it.

“Steve Rogers,” he said, holding his hand up with an apologetic shrug.

Eyeing the general disarray of Rogers’ appearance, Jim sighed out some of his lingering antagonism and took pity on the man.

“There’s a wash station over there if you want to get cleaned up,” Jim said, indicating the medical sonics across the room.

After another round of staring and a few suspicious looks at the door through which the doctors had come, Rogers relented.

“Yeah, maybe that—yeah,” Rogers finished, looking down at his hands again, staring at the drying blood.

Trying not to forget that this newest addition to the *Enterprise’s* traveling circus was straight out of the twenty-first century, Jim swallowed the sour taste in his mouth and made a motion for Rogers to follow him and headed for the wash station.

“Most medical facilities are equipped with sonic scrubbers as opposed to water. It’s more sanitary and saves on resources, especially on temporary bases like these were everything has to be shipped out.”

“So there’s no water on this planet?” Rogers asked, pausing for a moment in his steps as he seemed to realize what he’d just asked before following again with a shake of his head.

Huffing a laugh, Jim shook his head. “Some, but it’s not really in abundance. It’d be more trouble than it’s worth to try and mine a well, at least for this operation. Chances are the whole base will be scrapped when we’re done out here, and that’s not really something you want to leave behind for people to appropriate while you’re gone.”

Jim activated the sonic scrubber and demonstrated how it worked. Rogers tentatively stuck his hands into the vibration field, expression morphing into one of fascination as he did.

“That is… so weird,” he said, watching the particles of blood and grime were buffed off of his hands, the detritus whisked away into the filter.

“Yeah,” Jim agreed. Being from the heartland of the Midwest, he often missed the ability to wantonly waste water that came straight from a well on a farm. Bones always had a fit when Jim talked about dancing under a sprinkler of water that came from the ground, but the recycled water on ships and starbases just reminded him of toothpaste.

After Rogers finished cleaning his hands, he looked warily around the room, eyes coming to rest on the remaining two cryotubes where they lay beside Clint’s open one, and the one Rogers had destroyed coming out of it.

Watching him, Jim tried, he really, *really* tried not to let it get to him, but it was a losing battle. Jim checked the weight of the phaser on his hip and double checked his comm frequency for any activity while Rogers walked over to the other tubes, stopping between them and peering into each of the
glass portholes in turn.

If Khan had been physically intimidating in action more than stature, Rogers looked like what the Eugenicists had probably intended with their engineering. Half a head taller and a hell of a lot broader than Jim, he was the image of power and perfection, even mussed and with one arm held in a sling.

The man was nothing like Khan, but that didn’t exactly put Jim at ease. He’d met crazy people, and they had a way of seeming genuinely not crazy until you somehow ended up on their bad side, and Jim had a feeling he was starting out behind the eight ball on this one.

Every once in a while, Rogers would cast his gaze suspiciously around the room, or even at Jim, but when he was looking at the cryotubes, he mostly just seemed… lost.

Huffing a sigh and scrubbing a hand through his hair, Jim set his jaw and walked carefully over to where Rogers stood. Jim wasn’t not going to feel suspicious around him, but he could at least try not to be an outright dick and just sit here watching him with a phaser tucked menacingly in his belt.

Feeling incredibly awkward, Jim watched Rogers for a few moments longer, trying to think of what he should be doing or saying right now to defuse the situation. He was simultaneously brimming with questions and at a total loss for what to say. Some envoy of the twenty-third century he was.

“What happened to you?” He found himself asking, instead.

Frame tensing, Rogers gave Jim a shrewd, assessing look.

“Why do you want to know?”

Trying to quell the frustrating feeling that all of his conversations were going to go like this for the foreseeable future, Jim held his hands up and went for nonchalance.

“Curiosity?” He tried.

Rogers continued to stare him down.

“Seriously. I’m not… fishing for information, or anything,” Jim started. “Romanoff almost dropped dead on my ship after crawling around inside of it for over an hour, you coughed up an honest to god bullet, and your friend Clint sounds like he got hit by some kind of poison whammy. Can you blame me for wanting to know what the hell happened?”

Rogers stared at him a moment longer before looking away, his own shoulders slumping. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he said quietly.

Watching the way Rogers stared into the frosted porthole, Jim kind of figured that that was fair.

“So,” Jim said, after another minute of awkward silence. “Do you, uh, want to sit down, or something?”

Rogers looked in the direction of the few chairs that sat at the various consoles and stations around the perimeter of the room, then back at the cryotubes, obviously indecisive.

Sighing again, Jim rolled his eyes.

“Okay. Not to wear out the moniker of Captain Obvious, or anything, but I’m pretty sure if I tried something with your frozen buddies here you could kick my ass into next week, even with one arm.”
If there was one thing he’d learned from Alexander Marcus—other than the multitude of reasons to just stick a phaser in his mouth if he ever got any trumped up ideas about starting a war with the Klingons just to get it over with—it was that, when confronted with a superhuman from the past whose frozen friends in your possession, one should not hold them over the guy’s head as a means of manipulating him into doing things.

After enduring another minute of suspicious silence, Rogers finally relented, following Jim to a pair of chairs in a research alcove.

“See? Not so bad.”

Rogers didn’t answer him, just placed his forehead firmly into his palm and proceeded to…brood.

“He’s gonna be okay, you know,” Jim said, channeling all of his faith in Bones’ abilities into the statement.

When Rogers didn’t seem inclined to elaborate upon the light grunt he gave in response, Jim felt like throwing up his arms in true comic fashion.

Watching the augment with suspicious phaser pointing it was.

Jim would have been content to endure the awkward, suspicious silence until he got word from Bones or Spock, but Rogers pulled his hand down his face, pinching the bridge of his nose as he huffed out a sigh.

“It’s not that,” he started. “I mean, we could have fixed Clint up back in ’45. Not as well, but that’s not—I’m not worried about him.” Rogers pulled a face. “I mean, I am worried about him, but not that he’s going to die or anything—”

“Which he’s not,” Jim interpolated, trying to figure out where Rogers was going with this, and which ’45 he could possibly be talking about.

“It’s just,” he started before breaking off again, looking up and around him. “After everything that’s happened, that… happened, all I can think about is, ‘not again’,;” Rogers said, shamefaced and staring once more at his knees.

In the silence that followed that confusing statement, Jim tried to put his reportedly genius brain to work figuring out what the hell he meant. The little buzz in his brain went into overdrive when—oh.

“Oh,” Jim mumbled, and then: “Holy shit,” he said, his eyebrows shooting up. “Nineteen forty-five,” he said, looking at Rogers in consternation.

_Augment_, his brain reminded him.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve been frozen, is it?” Jim stated, trying to imagine the implications that had for this whole situation. Had they all been frozen before? Were they some kind of ancient mercenary team that was going to try and smite them all, extension of olive branch be damned?

While Jim was pondering the ridiculousness of those thoughts, Rogers, rather than another look like he’d just spilled some kind of important, highly classified beans, just sighed again, still studying the floor.

“I only lost seventy years that time, though,” he said, a wry tilt to his voice that hadn’t been there before.
Watching him sit there, a mass of hulking blonde, broody depression, Jim tried to imagine what must be going on in his head, and failed utterly.

“That… sucks,” he said, finally, somewhat surprised to find that he was genuinely sympathetic. Hell, he’d even managed to muster a bit of pity for the man who had killed the closest thing he had to a father, so maybe it wasn’t exactly a stretch.

“Yeah,” Rogers said, and they lapsed into silence once more.

Ninety minutes and three sessions of talking himself out of contacting the Enterprise (just to maybe have some sort of news to give Rogers about Clint, or to get an update from Spock) later, Rogers spoke again, nearly startling Jim into dropping his communicator.

“What did you do, that she trusted you to bring us here?” Rogers asked, and Jim finally noticed that the man staring at him, as he probably had been for several minutes.

Several answers to that loaded question popped up in his brain, most of them diplomatically avoiding the part where, yeah, she—Romanoff, who else?—hadn’t actually really had much choice in the matter, but the ‘instead of letting us die’ part was heavily implied. Jim figured that he hadn’t done too much of a bang up job with the honesty thing thus far. May as well go for broke.

“To tell you the truth, you guys were coming here whether she trusted us or not.”

Jim met the tense look Rogers sent him with no apology.

“It’s kind of a matter of security when centuries-old frozen people show up Starfleet’s radar, I was just the lucky Captain that got the job.” Jim grimaced a bit to himself, then. “As for what I did? I don’t know, really. I didn’t bullshit her, I guess, or rather, Spock and Bones didn’t bullshit her. I still don’t think she trusts me as far away as she could shoot me, so,” Jim shrugged.

“Bones?” Rogers asked.

“Doctor McCoy. It’s just a… stupid nickname I gave him. Or he gave himself. Whatever,” Jim waved a hand. “Bones is Bones, and yes, he is always that grouchy, but he’s a good doctor.”

“Still, Natasha, she doesn’t just give people the benefit of the doubt. She’d have let you kill us trying to get those tubes open if she didn’t have some kind of leverage. She’s a—” Rogers stopped himself. “—it’s what she does.”

“You can say it. She’s a spy. Assassin. Romanoff told us about herself, probably because she knew that we were smart enough to notice that she’s a manipulative, scarily violent woman. Only so many career paths she could have used to explain that away.”

Fixing him with a somewhat incredulous look, Jim couldn’t blame him. After all, Jim was the one who’d let a self-proclaimed killer for hire traipse around his ship.

“Right,” Rogers said, huffing out a short laugh. “So I guess what I’m asking is what she’s got on you that she believes you’re not going to try something funny.”

Trying not to let his expression sour, Jim stared at his communicator again.

“Oh, well, my First Officer and I just pledged to risk our lives and commissions to make sure you all stay alive and away from the business end of a science lab.”

The feeling of Rogers staring at him was starting to become annoyingly familiar.
“Why?” The man asked, a look of bemusement on his face.

Scrubbing his own hand over his face in a mimicry of Rogers’ earlier motion, Jim released a noisy breath. “Because it’s the right thing to do? Because I’ve got some kind of hero complex? Because I don’t feel like repeating the mistakes of other people? I don’t know, man. I guess I figured that she’d come that far to try and save her friends, I may as well do what I could to help her out.” Jim thought for a moment before continuing. “I also didn’t want my Spock to be the only one out of a job if something horrible happens. Good First Officers are hard to come by, these days.”

Seemingly unmoved by Jim’s awful attempt at deflection toward the end there, Rogers rotated his chair slightly so that he was facing Jim.

“Natasha said, for you, she said it was personal.”

Feeling that familiar weight settle into his chest, Jim swallowed and tipped his head back, not looking at Rogers.

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Okay,” Rogers answered, and Jim tipped his head forward to fix him with skeptical eyebrows.

Okay, Jim thought, and figured that between the two of them, Rogers was doing a better job of adapting to the situation.

Just when Jim thought the relentless urge to palm his phaser might be dissipating, the door to the medical wing swished open and Dr. Djembe thundered inside.

“Kirk!” She called. “I don’t know what kind of operation you think you’re running here, but I will not be shut out of the research on my own disc—oh,” Djembe stopped short in her tirade, noticing Rogers, who had stood up immediately upon the intrusion.

“Doctor,” Jim started. “I specifically ordered all base personnel to remain outside of the medical wing.”

“Yes, you did,” she said, tearing her eyes away from Rogers. She blinked briefly at Kirk before seemingly remembering to be outraged.

“Yes!” She repeated. “And I won’t stand for you—you—appropriating my research any longer. I stood by and took your disregard for my assignment while we were on your ship, but you aren’t in charge of this base, and I demand access to the subjects.”

“Doctor,” Jim said again, warning in his voice as he cast a look at Rogers. “I’d check your tone.”

“My tone,” Djembe sputtered. “What about yours? I’ve spent the last three days with barely scraps of information from your crew and almost no access while you cozied up to that woman, and now you’ve whisked one of them back to your ship so we can’t even observe the surgery! It’s insulting.”

Next to him, Jim could feel the tension radiating off of Rogers body, and didn’t miss the way his left hand tightened into a fist. Jesus, didn’t this woman recognize one of the subjects she was talking about? Who the hell else was going to be in here with him?

“Doctor, I’m not going to ask you again,” Jim said, trying to insinuate himself between Djembe and Rogers. “This wing is off limits until I say otherwise, and if you talk to Commander Treska you’ll find that we’re in agreement that I am the one in charge of this mission, which puts you under my command. Now get. Out.”
“Not until you tell me exactly when I’m allowed access to these pods and the people inside of them!” Djembe said, her skin flushed even darker with obvious annoyance.

“Excuse me, but who the hell are you?” Rogers took a step forward, his voice booming in the acoustics of the high ceilinged chamber.

Djembe jumped, as if she’d forgotten Rogers was there after she’d looked her fill of his manly physique.

“I’m the head of the research team that found these pods,” she began defensively, looking over at them before letting out a squeak of dismay. “My god, you’ve destroyed one of them!”

Completely ignoring both of their protests, Djembe rushed over to the shredded tube that had formerly contained the man she’d just spoken to. She looked almost comical as she knelt next to it, hands hovering just above the remains of the casing. She probably wouldn’t have gotten so close if it had looked anything like it had right after Rogers had come out of it, but Bones had been pretty thorough with his decontamination procedure. She’d be lucky to find one of Rogers’ hairs, and right about now Jim was thinking that that was a good thing.

“Doctor, you need to leave now, or I will have security to escort you to the brig,” said Jim, already on his way over to get her away from the cryotubes.

Calling in his security to have them drag her out was just adding more people to a mix that should have already included one fewer persons, but it was generally a bad idea for a Captain to subdue people under his command if they weren’t actively perpetrating acts of violence.

Yeah. He’d learned that one from Spock the hard way. Twice. On the same day.

A glance at Rogers’ open mouthed shock confirmed that the man was momentarily too stunned by Djembe’s somewhat insane behavior to realize he was clenching his right fist hard enough to crush the brace he was wearing, but Jim figured that was about to change very soon.

“Shit,” Jim thought, his heart rate picking up, remembering Romanoff’s last words to Rogers before they’d beamed up.

“Nobody touches them.”

“Kirk to security,” Jim said into his communicator, palming the phaser on his belt. “I need some officers in here to remove Doctor Djembe from the medical wing and escort her to her quarters immediately,” he said the last part loud enough that it couldn’t be mistaken for anything other than a hint.

“I can’t—oh, it’s just ruined,” Djembe wailed, resisting when Jim grabbed her shoulder to try and steer her toward the door and away from Rogers. “And an entirely different model than the one that woman was in, too. In pieces!” She hissed at Jim, not looking at him, wrenching out of his grip and abandoning Rogers’ tube for the one that had contained Clint.

“Doctor!” Jim barked, putting himself between Djembe and Clint’s empty cryotube. “You are not authorized to be here and you are disobeying a direct order from your commanding officer. Stand down.”

Djembe all but sneered in his face. “I am not some Ensign you can just order around, Captain. I have orders from Admiral Cartwright to investigate these pods and the people inside of them, and you, sir, are in my way,” she finished, attempting to shove Jim aside, and stepping around him when he wouldn’t move.
Jim glanced over his shoulder. Rogers wasn’t stunned into silence anymore, and was already closing the gap between himself and the tubes.

“Fuck,” Jim hissed. “Rogers, I’ve got this, don’t—”

“Well at least you managed to keep this one in one piece,” Djembe quipped, heedless of the pissed off augment bearing down on her. “I mean honestly, Captain, don’t you butchers have any respect for historical artifacts?” She’d barely reached inside of her coat, presumably to retrieve a tricorder or something when Rogers plucked it from her grasp, tossing it across the room.

“Do you?” Rogers hissed, coldly.

“I beg your pardon?” Djembe flounced.

“Let it go, Rogers. Security is on the way to clear her out,” Jim said cautiously, all too aware of how little room there was to try and get between him and Doctor Death Wish.

“Respect. Do you have any?” Rogers asked, ignoring Jim as he stepped forward, slowly forcing Djembe to back away from the pod.

Jim pulled out his phaser and pointed it at Rogers. Seriously, where the hell was his security?

“Steve,” Jim said, more firmly. “Back off. She’s not worth it,” he added, following their slow progress.

“Now just who do you think you are—” Djembe started, her voice beginning to sound fearful, but Rogers cut her off.

With a rough movement, he stopped, ripping the sling off of his arm with a single tug, letting the cracked polymer casing fall to the ground.

“I’m the person that came out of that pod, Doctor,” Rogers said coldly, but without menace, indicating the shredded cryotube Djembe had been crying over moments ago.

He’d stopped, but Djembe had continued to back up when he’d torn off the sling. If he was aware that Jim had a phaser pointed at his chest, he was pretty good at hiding it. When Doctor Djembe’s back hit the wall, she pressed her palms at it and looked wide-eyed at Rogers where he stood a good two meters away.

“I’m a person, not a subject,” Rogers said, his tone flinty but, again, somehow still not menacing. Jim didn’t lower his phaser, but suddenly felt a bit less like he might have to shoot him on the highest stun setting. How was he even doing that?

“And if you go near those pods again, it won’t be Captain Kirk’s security removing you.”

Ah. Jim readjusted his grip on the phaser. *Moment of weakness over.*

In a stunning display of perfect timing, two things happened at once.

Jim’s comm buzzed on his belt, and security hustled in through the door; two harried looking officers from the *Enterprise* who offered Jim apologies as soon as they were inside the room proper, but stopped short and pulled out their own phasers when they saw the display below them.

*Shit*, Jim thought again to himself, as his comm continued buzzing, it’s volume too low for him to hear, but he could tell it was Bones.
“Stand down, guys,” he said to the officers, who looked to him for confirmation before slowly lowering their phasers, but keeping them at hand. “Steve,” Jim said. “I need you to go back to the pods so our visitor can be escorted to the brig.”

A tense moment hung in the air, unbroken by the renewed, muted yelling coming from Jim’s comm. Finally, and with a last look at Doctor Djembe that spoke volumes about what would probably happen the next time he saw anyone in a white lab coat, Rogers backed away from Djembe and retreated to stand vigil over the two occupied cryotubes.

Jim lowered his phaser, slowly returning it to his belt. “Gentleman, she’s all yours.”

“Sorry, Captain,” one of the officers said, both of them hustling over to grab a blessedly silent Djembe. “Some of her compatriots were harassing Commander Treska and attempting to access the transporter back to the ship.”

“A couple actually made it,” Ensign Markley informed him, face grim as he gripped on one of Djembe’s arms.

“Send them all to the brig on the Enterprise. I’ll deal with them later,” Jim said coldly, silently cursing this idiotic woman for what was not only a serious faux pas with his resident augment, but what would probably be a premature leak of information to the admiralty that none of them would be happy about.

“Yes, sir,” the officers chorused, and just like that, it was Jim and Rogers in the suffocating silence of the room once more.

“Dammit, Jim! What the hell is going on down there?”

Well, almost silent.

“Sorry, Bones, there was a situation,” he answered his comm, finally, turning to meet Rogers’ eyes with comm in hand.

“I leave you alone for two hours and I’ve got rogue Doctors attempting to butt into my surgery! Romanoff already had one of them on the ground before Chapel even paged security!”

Jim winced. “They’re all going to the brig, Bones, you can tell her that.”

“Ha!” Bones scoffed through the comm. “You know, somehow I don’t think that’s going to make her feel any better. And Spock’s already on it, they’re cozied up down there as we speak.”

“And more on the way,” Jim added. “I take it since you’re on the comm yourself and not elbow deep in viscera that things went well.”

“Yeah,” Bones breathed over the comm. “Is Rogers around to hear the news?”

“I’m here,” Rogers himself said from over Jim’s shoulder. Reigning in the startled noise he might have made, Jim wondered how a dude so big could be so quiet when he moved.

Augment, his brain reminded him for the umpteenth time that hour.

“Clint’s gonna be fine,” Bones said first, and Jim heard the relieved breath leave Rogers. “Romanoff was right about whatever got into his leg, it was nasty, but we stopped the effects and got it filtered out before it could do any real damage. His leg’s gonna be bum for a couple days and we’re regenerating the fracture in the left wrist right now, but that should heal about the same. The seizure
caused the broken rib to perforate his diaphragm and puncture a lung; that was all the blood you saw when we were down there. It was a pretty major operation, so he’s gonna be out for a few hours yet.”

“Thank you,” Rogers said earnestly. “God, thank you.”

“It’s my damned job,” Bones grumbled, but Jim could imagine how flustered he must look. It wasn’t often he got that kind of praise doing operations on the Enterprise. Mostly he was too busy yelling at his patients.

“His wrist,” Rogers started, before Jim could say anything. “You said it will heal? No permanent damage?”

“Well, yeah,” Bones said. “It was a clean break, he’d just managed to get himself a carpal dislocation as well; cut off the blood flow to his hand, but it wasn’t long enough to sustain tissue damage. He’ll be good as new after a second round of regen.”

“Okay,” Rogers said, and “Thanks,” again.

“So how are we going to play this, Jim? Romanoff and I aren’t going anywhere until we can move Clint down to the facility, and that’s not happening until he’s conscious.”

“And how long until that happens?”

“Should be swearing at me by 1300.”

“Shit,” Jim said, rubbing his forehead. Three hours. “Okay. I need to talk to Spock, everything okay up there? Romanoff didn’t kill anyone?”

Rogers snorted.

“Not yet,” came Romanoff’s voice over the comm. “Steve, everything okay down there?”

“Nothing I can’t handle,” Rogers said, fixing Jim with a meaningful look.

There was the sound of slight scuffling over the comm while Jim tried to ignore the tension in his belly.

―my damn communicator! Jesus,‖ Bones said, his voice coming in louder. “Alright, I’m sure old pointy-ears will inform me of what’s happening, but keep in touch, you hear?”

“Aye, aye, Bones,” Jim said.

“McCoy out.”

Jim closed the communicator, eyeing it for a moment before looking over at Rogers with raised eyebrows.

“Want to meet an alien?” Jim asked.

Rogers looked confused. “The blue one wasn’t an alien?”

“Spock, Steve Rogers. Steve, Commander Spock,” Jim said, nudging his hand in both their directions.
“Um, hello,” Rogers said, holding out his hand. Spock, predictably, stared at it before lifting his own
hand to form the ta’al.

“Live long and prosper, Steve Rogers,” he said, lowering his hand. “I mean no offense. Vulcans
do not shake hands. It would be an inappropriate overture of familiarity to do so.”

“He means it would be like making out with you,” Jim clarified.

Rogers snatched his hand back, looking embarrassed.

“Oh, gosh, I’m sorry, I didn’t—”

“An apology is unnecessary. You were not aware, and now you are.”

Rogers stared for a moment before lifting his hand in a perfect imitation of Spock’s salute.

“I’ll try not to make that mistake with any other Vulcans,” Rogers said, heedless of Jim’s slightly
envious look. It had taken him days of practice to convince his fingers to make the Vulcan salute
without protest. Bones blamed his ligaments.

“I do not anticipate you shall encounter any other Vulcans while on this base or during your time on
the Enterprise. Nevertheless, your effort is appreciated,” Spock nodded to him, before turning to Jim
and thus ending the interaction. “I cannot linger here long. We must discuss our course of action with
Doctor Djembe and her team.”

Jim laced his fingers behind the back of his neck, willing the headache that had been clawing out
from his eyeballs since last night to subside.

“I’m stuck here until Bones and Romanoff come back to finish up with the other tubes, so I need you
to talk to them, but let them cool their heels in there for a while. Pull their comm logs and see who
they’ve been talking to. Djembe said it was Cartwright who put her team on this mission, not
Archer.” The meaningful look Jim sent him clearly said what he thought about how it might be
related to their situation.

Spock looked thoughtful. “It is possible that is something the Admiral was referring to when he
spoke with me before we departed.”

Jim glanced at Rogers and bit back a sharp retort. “Don’t call him. Not yet.”

“I had not planned on it,” Spock said.

“Look, when Doctor Djembe was in here, it got kind of hairy. She saw the fucked up cryotube
Rogers here busted out of, and he pretty much confirmed to her that he’s the augment she’d scanned
before, complete with threats and all.”

“She was out of line,” Rogers said, unapologetic. “I don’t want her anywhere near those pods or my
friends. I don’t trust her.”

“Join the club,” Jim grumped, rubbing his temples. “I had it under control, you shouldn’t have
intervened.”

“Yeah, so under control she was ready to climb inside Clint’s pod and try it out for herself,” Rogers
responded, stepping forward. “That woman doesn’t care about us, she cares about whatever journal
she might get published in for putting me and my friends under a microscope and stealing the
technology that kept us alive for two hundred years.”
“And that little stunt you pulled with the brace did what, exactly? Put her off your scent?” Jim snapped. “That’s going to come back to bite us, Rogers. She’s gonna do everything she can to go over my head, and as soon as someone on her team puts the word in an Admiral’s ear that we’ve got an augment running around out here, I’m going to lose my leverage. I know I promised to risk my commission to keep your asses out of the line of fire, but gunning for the scenario that’s going to end like that isn’t how I wanted this to play out.”

“Based on scans during cryostasis, Steve Rogers does not exhibit the known characteristics of the augments with which we are familiar, Captain,” Spock pointed out.

“And that’s going to matter to them… how?” Jim asked.

“What are you talking about?” Rogers interrupted.

Sighing in frustration, Jim glared at Spock for a second before answering. “Starfleet has had… experience with people in cryostasis. They were augments, humans genetically engineered to be faster, stronger, smarter,” better, Jim added mentally. “Made them megalomaniacal crazy people too, though.”

“But I’m not—” Rogers started, but cut himself off. “Obviously I’m different, but I’m not some psychopath. I’m just trying to protect my friends.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of what the last guy said,” Jim sighed, rubbing his face with one hand. God, he could really use one of Bones’ hypos right about now.

“Jim—” Spock began, but Jim cut him off with a dark look.

“Not now, Commander.”

“And what happened to him?” Rogers asked, finally sounding as concerned about the situation as he should be.

“Technically, it’s above my pay grade,” Jim scowled at the floor. “But considering I’m the guy whose crew he tried to murder, I know he’s back in the freezer until further notice. Too dangerous to put in prison and Starfleet doesn’t know what else to do with him.”

Rogers looked duly shocked at the pronouncement.

“That’s—we’re not—” He started, and then cast a wary glance over at the other two cryotubes. “Are you saying that because of me, because of what that Doctor saw, we could end up imprisoned, or worse?”

Still pressing his fingers to the bridge of his nose, and as irritated as he was, Jim was maybe a little bit grateful that Spock stepped in.

“Until such a time as you or any of your friends act to convince me otherwise, I do not believe you to be malicious or inherently dangerous as was the individual of whom Captain Kirk is speaking. As we have promised to Natasha Romanoff, we will do everything in our power to ensure your safety and your freedom.”

“But you have to work with us,” Jim emphasized. “I get that you guys were hot shit back in 2013, or whatever, but it’s 2260 and you have no idea what it’s like. Romanoff trusted us enough to wake you all up, didn’t she?”

Still looking at the cryotubes, Rogers nodded. “I can’t let anything happen to them. They saved me. I
need to give them this second chance.”

“Then give me a chance, will you?” Jim said, sighing out the worst of his frustration. “Just chill the fuck out while Spock and I try to get this sorted, okay? I’ll be here with you and your other frozen buddies, so if anyone comes in in the meantime, just leave it to me.”

“We shall require more information when our conversation with an Admiral—Archer or otherwise—becomes inevitable,” Spock said, looking from Jim to Rogers.

“Yeah, I know,” Jim sighed. “See if you can set up a secure channel to get through to Archer; I don’t want to have to use mine unless it’s an emergency. When I know something, you’ll know it.”

“Then I shall attend to the situation on the Enterprise,” Spock said. “If there is nothing else, Captain.”

“No,” Jim sighed, pain throbbing behind his eyeballs. “You know what we need to do. Just keep me updated, send me transcripts and whatever data you gather to my PADD. Keep to the secure frequencies, and make sure that one of Giotto’s guys is covering the team in the brig.”

“Understood,” Spock said. “I shall keep you informed. Enterprise, one to beam up,” Spock said into his communicator, and summarily disappeared into a swirl of light.

“That is never not going to be strange,” Rogers said, staring at where Spock had been standing.

“Just wait until you’re the one being transported,” Jim said. “I’ve been doing it my whole life and it still leaves me tingly.”

“Right,” Rogers sighed. “I’m sorry for my behavior with the doctor. I guess I’m pretty on edge about all this.”

“You don’t say,” Jim sighed, plunking himself down in the chair he’d vacated and covering his eyes with a hand. “I get it, though. I do, and I can’t say that I’d be handling it any differently if I were in your shoes.”

“But what happened with the doctor, can she really…?” Rogers trailed off.

“Even if she gets ahold of Admiral Cartwright, or anyone, and I’m ordered to allow them full access to you, they can’t do anything without your consent; not without the authority of the most senior officer on the premises to sanction the use of force—which I won’t give them. While you all were sleeping the frozen sleep on the way here, Spock and I drew up some citizenship documentation that gives you the same rights and protections as anyone born this century.” Jim breathed out slowly, moving his hand down his face to look at Rogers. “The problem is that Starfleet is capable of operating outside of certain Federation laws, and occasionally even I go the route of asking for forgiveness rather than permission. But to be perfectly honest, I’d like to see an Admiral try and get me to do something I don’t want to do when we’re this far out, and I’m pretty much charging Djembe and her team with insubordination and whatever else Spock can think up. If I get the go ahead from Admiral Archer I can probably get their privileges suspended pending a court martial.”

“That sounds more complex that it needs to be,” Rogers said.

“I’m colluding with refugees of unknown affiliation from a twenty-first century warzone. How exactly is that supposed to translate to simple?”

“Good point,” Rogers sighed, finally taking the seat opposite Jim.
The silence drew out between them once more, and Jim silently willed his headache to go away. Bones was really the only one who knew which of the various medications he could take for things like this, so Jim wasn’t about to rummage through the hoard of hyposprays stocked in the cabinets around him.

“My team,” Rogers started. “We help people—helped people. What you know about Natasha, the things I’m sure you’ve had to put up with from her, they aren’t going to endear her to anyone, and I get that, but we’re not like”—he stopped himself. “We aren’t going to hurt your crew. That’s not what we do.”

Jim took a moment to himself to marvel at the three ring circus of crap his life had become, and perhaps to evaluate his life choices, just a little bit.

“I believe that,” Jim said, eventually. Possibly against his better judgment. “Really, I do, but I have to be prepared for what other people believe. We all do, and to be honest, I pretty much know fuck all about you guys. Romanoff has told me enough to make these circumstances a bit easier to swallow, but if Spock and I are going to bat for you, we have to know what we’re dealing with.”

“I know,” Rogers sighed, imitating Jim’s posture by putting a hand of his own to his face. “But I think Natasha was right to be tight lipped about the details. It’s not that we’re trying to keep secrets, I mean she came out and told you she was an assassin, but the more that you know about us the more could be used against us. Curiosity is dangerous when it comes to people like us,” Rogers finished.

“People like you,” Jim echoed.

“People who’ve lived extraordinary lives, I guess. With me, yeah, the whole… augment thing, is a factor, but now it’s not just being special or superhuman. That made us a target two hundred years ago, it’s something we’ve all lived with and most of us made peace with that. But you, this—”

Rogers indicated the room and thereby the whole debacle in which they were currently immersed. “People are going to want to know about us, about what happened. Natasha said it was all just… erased. That everything we went through is this big blank spot. That’s horrible in and of itself, and something I’m trying not to feel guilty about, but now I can’t help but think this is history repeating itself. We can’t fix what we left behind when we went to ground, but it’s like we’re so close to being able to start over and instead ended up right back where we started.”

“So you’d rather, what, disappear?” Jim asked.

“I don’t know. Yeah, maybe,” Rogers slumped in his chair. “I can think of a couple of us who’d rather be anywhere than go back to being a lab rat. We were fugitives before, anyway.”

Civil war, Jim thought, remembering what Romanoff had said about the events that lead them here. “Not sure I’m gonna be able to swing that,” Jim responded, frowning.

“I know, that’s why I’m thinking about damage control and not perfect world options.”

The headache Jim had been trying valiantly to ignore throbbed viciously behind his eyes. Grunting a little bit, Jim leaned forward to press his fingers against them. “You know, not telling me anything isn’t going to make Starfleet’s questions go away. You don’t have to tell me about them,” Jim indicated the remaining tubes. “Just tell me about yourself. Considering you’re currently the one ‘Fleet’s probably gonna have a cow over, it would help to put their suspicions to rest.”

“And your suspicions?” Rogers said, shooting him a knowing look.

Crap. “Mine, too,” he admitted.
Rogers continued to look at the other cryotubes in the room, looking more worried than contemplative. “Alright,” he said. “But I’m only doing this once.”

“…shoot…eyeballs. Fucking serious.”

“You don’t have your bow, Clint,” Natasha said, maybe a bit more fondly than she intended.

“Don’ care. ‘ll find something,” Clint slurred, blinking owlishly at her. “Fuck, I’called you a bitch, didn’ I?”

“In Korean, it was actually kind of impressive. You got through five languages before you started dying.”

“Guh,” Clint groaned. “Is that why I feel like I took Cap’s shield to the chest?”

“No,” Natasha said, smoothing out the blanket next to Clint’s braced wrist with one hand. “You had a seizure that forced your broken rib into your lung. Nice going, on that, by the way. Did you forget to mention that you were shot by the AM-bullets when we were putting you in the freezer?”

Clint groaned again. “I didn’t know, ‘Tash. It fucking hurt and I was pretty sure I was dying of exsanguination, so cataloguing the symptoms wasn’t really an exact science. ‘The fuck was I s’posed to know those bastards were packing anti-mutant rounds?”

“Well you almost died from anaphylaxis,” Natasha informed him, pushing her finger into the tender area of his ribs.

“Ow,” Clint groaned. “Hoookay, I deserved that,” he flinched, pushing himself up. When he encountered the resistance of the brace, he brought it up to eye level and stared at it. “‘M I on the really good drugs? Because I swear to god I thought my wrist was broken.”

“Well you almost died from anaphylaxis,” Natasha informed him, pushing her finger into the tender area of his ribs.

“Ow,” Clint groaned. “Hoookay, I deserved that,” he flinched, pushing himself up. When he encountered the resistance of the brace, he brought it up to eye level and stared at it. “‘M I on the really good drugs? Because I swear to god I thought my wrist was broken.”

“Welcome to the twenty-third century, Clint,” Natasha said, holding her arm out to indicate Clint’s room and the variety of futuristic medical equipment.

“No shit,” Clint said, eyes wide. “Well, that was unexpected,” he offered, looking back down at his wrist. “So, what, did I grow a new bone or something? Or is it like a hand transplant? Oh, shit,” Clint said, holding his hand out away from him. “What if it’s an evil hand, like that episode of Angel?”

“Дурак,” Natasha muttered, slapping the back of his head. “It’s accelerated bone growth. Doctor McCoy regenerated the bone at the break site, so you’ll be good as new. Pretty much the same with the rest of you, hallelujah for medical advancements.”

“Well, there is that,” Clint rasped, coughing a little and grimacing, looking down and pulling open his medical gown to see his chest. “Hey! No surgical scars!” He said, a look of disappointment on his face.

“You have plenty of scars already.”

“My leg, too?” He asked, tossing the blanket aside to draw up the hospital gown, heedless of exposing himself to her or anyone else who might walk in.

Which included, of course, Doctor McCoy, who chose that time to arrive.

“Romanoff, is he—good god, man!” McCoy said, turning around abruptly as he strode through the
He’s awake,” Natasha responded to his interrupted question. “Clint, put that thing away. This is Doctor Leonard McCoy, he saved your ass and he doesn’t need to see any more of it.”

Clint looked up, but didn’t hasten to cover himself. “What the hell, man? A dude’s scars are sacred. No one’s gonna believe I was actually shot, now.”

Peering over his shoulder, McCoy gave him a scowl of disbelief, muttering “Bullets,” for the umpteenth time. “Seeing as I’m the one who patched up your damn artery, I think I believe it well enough.”

Clint just meaningfully tugged the gown to cover himself and glowered. “Whatever. So, future-doc, can I go now?”

“Go where?” McCoy asked, telegraphing confusion even as he pulled out a tricorder to check Clint’s healing wounds.

“Anywhere but here,” Clint answered, predictably. “Doesn’t matter what century it is, hospitals suck.”

“Well I guess it’s a good thing you’re not in a hospital,” McCoy muttered.

“Huh?” Clint gave him a look, before turning his head to Natasha. If it hadn’t been patently obvious before, his blown pupils gave away the extent of how stoned on painkillers Clint probably was.

“Spaceship,” Natasha answered.

Clint stared at her for a few long moments, eyes blinking slowly one after the other, before saying with deadly seriousness: “I think I need a nap.”

Natasha reined in a smile that wanted to break over her face. “Let’s get him back down there. Stoned or not, he’s fine. We’ve got to get Tony.”

“So I can shoot him,” Clint added.

“Of course, Купидон,” Natasha patted Clint’s chest, more firmly than anything affectionate—though she knew Clint could tell the gesture effectively should be taken as such—and offered him a small smile when he grunted in pain.

“He stays in the biobed when we get back,” McCoy warned as they wheeled a protesting Clint over to the medical transporter on a hover chair. “Mostly healed or not, he needs rest and another round of osteo on his wrist and torso.”

“‘Tash,” Clint whined, attempting to get out of the chair for the third time. “This is humiliating.”

“It amazes me that you’re completely fine with acting like a child, but are embarrassed about being pushed around on a hovercraft.”

“At least let me drive,” he sulked.

“Not on your life, kid,” McCoy muttered.

“Dude, I’m thirty-nine.”
McCoy’s face looked pained, but he didn’t say anything more as he stepped onto the transporter pad beside Clint and Natasha.

“Three to beam down to the medical facility on base,” McCoy sighed, casting Clint a look before gesturing to the nurse manning the transporter controls.

“Signal locked,” she said.

“Hey, what’s—”

“Energize.”

“…happening,” Clint finished when they materialized in the medical wing, Steve and Kirk already on their feet and walking towards them.

Kirk looked pale, dark circles more prominent under his eyes than they’d been before.

“Clint, god, you scared the crap out of me,” Steve said, clapping a bemused Clint on the shoulder.

“Did we just… teleport?” He asked, ignoring Steve as he looked around at the room. “Holy fuck, we did.”

McCoy was already moving him over to the now pristine biobed on which he’d been just hours before. “Atomic disassembly and transport, not teleportation,” he clarified.

“Cool,” Clint sent a shit-eating grin over his shoulder to Steve and Natasha where she stood next to him.

“He’s on meds, isn’t he?” Steve sighed, putting a hand to his forehead in recognition of the familiar behavior.

“Completely fucked up,” Natasha confirmed. “But he’s doing fine. McCoy said he needs another round with the osteoregenerators, and then he’ll be good as new, barring some lingering pain.” Natasha flexed the muscle in her own ankle, remembering the recovery process for herself. “He’ll need some PT, but not much.”

“That’s… good,” Steve breathed.

“Cap,” Clint crowed from across the room, pointing to the cryotubes. “Is that one yours? Looks like a fucking Great White came out of a sardine can.”

“Clint,” Natasha started, darting a look over to Kirk, who had followed McCoy and was saying something to him quietly.

“It’s okay,” Steve held up a hand. “Captain Kirk and I had a talk, he knows about me. The situation with the other Doctor and her team pretty much made it a necessity, I hope that’s okay.”

Natasha relaxed, but only a little bit. “You’re free to tell him what you want. It’s your call.”

Steve frowned at her. “It’s not just my call, Natasha. We’re in this together. I’m not making blanket decisions for anyone, especially not Tony or Bruce, who aren’t even here to have a say in what we tell them. Kirk had to know so we can deal with whatever those people send back to Starfleet. If you trusted Kirk and Spock enough to wake us up, then we should help him help us.”

“This is a bad idea,” Natasha said.
“We haven’t had good ideas in a long time, Natasha.”

“Freezing ourselves wasn’t a bad go of it,” she shrugged. “We’re still alive, aren’t we?”

“Fat lot of good it did,” Steve sighed. “It didn’t help anybody. You said so yourself, we lost.”

“It helped us,” Natasha emphasized, looking him straight in the eye. “Maybe we had the intention of going to ground and regrouping, but we’re here now. We can’t take that back. We have the chance to start over. Steve, do you understand what that means? Nobody knows who we are,” she said. “Nobody knows about Bruce. He could have a life.”

(Somehow I don’t think he’s going to be okay with that,” Steve said sadly, looking over to the conspicuously remaining cryotubes.

Natasha darted a look over at McCoy and Kirk, still occupied with Clint while she continued the hushed conversation.

“You think he’d be happier being locked up, again? Poked and prodded until there’s another incident, and they finally find something strong enough to put him down?” Natasha bristled.

“No, but Natasha… look at where we are. How do you expect we’re going to leave? He’d never get on the ship, he’d be putting hundreds of lives at risk.”

Pausing, Natasha realized she’d neglected to factor that in. Not that Banner would actually be putting lives at risk, that was always a factor, but that even with the control he’d demonstrated over the last few months, he wouldn’t trust himself enough to make the trip.

“He’d surrender himself, stay here indefinitely,” Natasha said, grim faced.

Steve’s expression matched hers for a moment before he looked thoughtful. “I’ve been thinking about it, actually. If Tony could—”

“Steve,” Natasha said, indicating Kirk coming over to them once more, looking decidedly less like a corpse than he had five minutes ago.

“Captain,” she said by way of greeting. “Steve tells me you two had quite the chat.”

Kirk pursed his lips momentarily, giving Steve a long, lingering look. “We did. He’s been caught up on a few things, as well. I can’t say I’m as efficient a guide to the twenty-third century as Commander Spock, but I think I did okay.”

“It’s more than I needed to absorb the first time around, but I guess the major, galaxy changing events were a bit more significant. Replicators, warp, Vulcans, UFP, Starfleet,” Steve listed off on one hand. “Covered the big ones.”

Natasha hummed in response. “And what of the interloping doctor in the brig? Spock came in to update us on the situation, said he’d spoken with an Admiral Archer who was looking into it. Should we be worried?”

“Probably,” Kirk sighed, rubbing at his temples like he’d been doing it a lot. “Archer is a solid guy, been in Starfleet a long time and he knows what he’s doing when it comes to the politics, but we’re working against some pretty strong sentiments inside the Admiralty as it applies to augments.” Kirk looked at Steve. “It helps that we’ve got Spock’s statement that you aren’t remotely like the guy we encountered last time, and that the so-called ‘victim’ of the whole shitstorm—yours truly—is vouching for you, but it might not be enough to keep them from escalating the investigation, even in
the face of citizenship. I might even get kicked off the assignment, and then we get to the part where I start cashing in favors and there are lawyers and—” Kirk stopped talking, putting up both hands to stop himself. “We’re working on it.”

Sighing, Steve sent her a pained look. “We need Tony.”

“I’m telling him you said that,” Natasha said.

“You were thinking the same thing.”

“Yes, but I didn’t say it. He does have the most experience handling these kinds of situations, and he’s a quicker study than any of us, Clint included.”

Barton had always been a darling for last-minute ops and certain covert missions because of his uncanny ability to slot right into the middle of something and make an equally clean getaway. They weren’t the same kinds of missions to which Natasha was better suited, but this was plainly a political—and probably media—situation. Nobody was better at it than Stark, and with a few hours with a PADD and someone to interrogate, he’d probably be a better bet than any lawyer Kirk could find to get them out of this.

“I know,” Steve sighed, and got that sad look on his face again. “I just wish we didn’t have to drop this on him right off the bat. He wasn’t doing well even before all this.”

“It’s not an ideal situation, but we’re all dealing.”

“It still sucks,” Steve said, standing with his hands on his hips.

“What’s so different about this guy?” Kirk asked.

Looking over at the tube that contained Tony Stark, Steve dropped his arms and went for the full body sigh. “We all lost something in the Civil War, but Tony… he had more to lose than the rest of us. This is going to be hard on him.”

“Steve,” Natasha said, gentler than she wanted to be. “Tony will talk if he wants to. We have to get him out of there first.”

“Yeah, okay,” Steve said, scrubbing his face one last time with his hand before looking over to Kirk, and then Clint and McCoy. “Are we ready for this?”

“Almost,” McCoy said, sounding harried. “Would you just—there,” he said, stepping back from a sullen looking Clint who had a bulky looking thing strapped to his ribs. “That’s staying on for at least the next twenty minutes, and with the drugs in your system you should barely feel it, but call me if you’re in any pain.”

Natasha caught something muttered in Haitian Creole that would have made McCoy’s ears turn red, and decided against mentioning it.

“Okay, god help me, but I’m ready for round three,” McCoy said, his tricorder in hand and portable medkit ready to treat burns. “We’re dealing with burns and blast damage on his arms, face and possibly his chest. Any other nasty surprises?”

Natasha and Steve exchanged a look. “I didn’t exactly tell him about the—” Natasha gestured at her chest, and Steve took her meaning immediately, groaning.

“Natasha,” he said. “That’s kind of a big thing to leave out.”
“I already know he’s got a prosthesis in his chest; that much was on the scan,” McCoy pointed out. “What’s the big deal?”

“Well, it’s—” Steve started, but then stopped.

“You see my dilemma,” Natasha pointed out.

“Unfortunately, yes,” he directed at her before turning back to McCoy. “He has an electromagnet in his chest that’s… keeping him alive,” Rogers said, in place of the longer explanation. “There’s some shrapnel near his heart from an old injury. The magnet keeps it from moving, and the device powers the magnet.”


“It’s a miniaturized non-nuclear reactor,” Steve said. “And it’s something Tony doesn’t like doctors—anyone—to mess around with, so just—don’t touch it.”

McCoy and Kirk both stared at them for a long minute.

“I’m not actually even shocked anymore,” McCoy sighed, fixing Kirk with a look that bordered on forlorn. “Jim, you owe me so much bourbon if we get out of this mess alive.”

“I owe myself that much bourbon,” Kirk answered him, sharing a long-suffering look before turning toward Natasha. “Let’s just get it over with. Honestly, if we all blow up right now it would solve a lot of problems.”

“I do not get paid enough for this,” McCoy muttered, but followed Natasha to the edge of Tony’s cryotube nonetheless.

*Here we go again.*

Chapter End Notes

Du hässliches, verdammtes, Schlampepferd! - You ugly fucking whore of a horse! (German)

Jdi p prdele - Fuck you (Czech)

Ek sal jy kak te breek, jy ma fokker - I will break your shit, you mother fucker (Afrikaans)

– Fucking bitch (Korean)

– Call me that again and see what happens (Korean)

کسی کنسکل - Son of a whore (Urdu)

■■■■■ - Bitch (Punjabi)

Дурак - Idiot

Купидон - Cupid
I pride myself on my translational prowess, but I make mistakes more often than not (especially with syntax). The Wiktionary, Google translate and eclectic blog posts can only get me so far! Input from native speakers and those with more expertise with the Korean, Czech, Urdu and Punjabi is always appreciated.

As always, thanks for sticking with me, and drop by my tumblr for flailing over the Horrible Bosses 2 trailer and unwanted insight into my headcanons and day to day insanity. Love everyone who's reading! You make me smile with my heart!

Hate me a little if you want, but things are going to get interesting soon...
There was at least one serious problem staring them in the face as soon as the cryotube had begun to open.

Unlike any of the others, Tony Stark’s tube was a complex arrangement of moving parts, slowly folding in on itself like the Iron Man armor. But as the reversal protocols finished and it began opening, Natasha had yet to hear a peep from Stark and straining over the sounds of moving parts wasn’t yielding any results.

“Something’s wrong,” Natasha said, trying to get an arm inside the tube without it being crushed by moving slats of metal. “Steve, can you hear anything?”

“Too much noise from the tube,” Steve said, hands hovering over the disassembling metal as he worked out where to put them.

“Shit,” Natasha said, with feeling, when the partition over his face finally slid back. Tony’s eyes were partially open, flickering back and forth as his mouth hung open, obviously wheezing for air.

The tube opened wide enough for them to get a glimpse at Tony’s chest, burns and all, and Natasha said “Shit” again.

Behind her, McCoy made a sound of alarmed disbelief.

“There’s a goddamn hole in his chest!”

“He doesn’t have the arc reactor in,” she said, eyes wide as she noticed the absence of its glow.

What the hell were you thinking, Stark?

Already in action, she tried to peer into the still obscured area of the tube. “McCoy, his heart—he’s going to go into cardiac arrest,” she said urgently, lightly slapping Tony’s face to try and get him awake.

“Tony, Tony you moron, wake up!” She barked in his face, ducking her head around McCoy’s arms as he stuck a tricorder in through their opening. He was seriously invading her space, but it wasn’t like they had a lot of room to maneuver.

Tony remained stubbornly semi-conscious, face twitching with the effort of breathing.

“Fuck,” she breathed, abandoning her attempt to wake him while she shoved her body over Tony’s,
heedless of aggravating the burns on his torso. Eyes searching in the growing area of visibility, she patted down the sides of the tube and Tony’s legs. If he’d taken the arc reactor out before he’d been frozen, he would have kept it on him or close to hand so he could put it back in. So someone could put it back in.

“Natasha,” Steve started, his voice echoing inside the still slowly opening tube.

“I’m looking,” she bit out, wedging more of her body against Tony’s as she got more room.

“You said it was a prosthesis! This is—my god it’s through his sternum,” McCoy babbled at her, and the hiss of a hypospray being applied reached her ears.

“And where the hell did you expect an electromagnet to go? Up his ass?” Natasha barked as she felt around Tony’s hands, radiating heat from the burns. Finally, she felt one of them clutching the hard, round metal of the reactor.

“Got it,” she said, sitting up as the last of the covering slid away, pulling up Tony’s entire arm to reveal his damaged fingers wrapped tight around the miniature arc reactor.

“Holy hell,” she heard McCoy say, evidently distracted from the cavern in his chest by the state of his arms while she went to work pulling the reactor from his death grip.

Tony moaned in pain as bits of his flesh came off on the reactor and her own hands, but if they didn’t get it back into his chest soon, it would be a whole lot worse than just burns that they’d have to deal with.

Tony’s eyes suddenly snapped wide open—probably something in the hypospray—and he bucked his hips upward, his grip on the reactor loosening completely.

“Hnnngh,” Tony wheezed, arms shaking in pain as he held them aloft, but he smacked at his chest with one trembling wrist, fixing an equally panicked Steve with a wide-eyed look. “Before my—heart stops—please,” he said between wheezing breaths.

In a fluid motion, Natasha pressed the arc reactor into Tony’s chest cavity and turned it until it clicked.

_This sucks_, Tony had time to think in the moments before sweet, glowing blue light filled his vision.

An arc reactor humming to life inside of him would never stop being an amazing and really fucking weird feeling, like sticking a vibrator into his sternum on the highest setting. But instead of an unnatural orgasm he got to, well, not die. It was a trade-off, really. That kind of object insertion was _so_ not one of his kinks.

"Hoohhh!" Tony wheezed out, coughing and swallowing several times, blinking owlishly and generally checking to see that he was still alive. “Whoa, holy shit, wow. There it is, whoo,” Tony breathed, burned hand pressed flush against the arc reactor, sputtering a little as he smacked his cracked lips with the familiar taste. "Never in my life have I been so grateful to taste coconut. Coconut sucks, but arc reactor tastes _good._"

"Tony," Steve said, his tone that endearing and yet incredibly annoying mix of gentle and chiding that made him feel like a reckless kid. But—

"You're alive!" Tony beamed, then thought better of the smile when his arms fucking _throbbed with excruciating pain_. Biting back a groan, he tipped his head to look around him and saw that
Romanoff and Barton—in some kind of wheelchair thing—were giving him equally unimpressed but slightly worried looks. "And the spies who wish they'd shagged me are also alive. Awesome. I love it when I'm right," he said, before the horrible twinging in his limbs became more than his light-hearted deflection could sustain and he groaned aloud.

"Hey, wow," Tony hissed, holding his arms out like maybe pretending their very existence didn't hurt like fuck. "There better not be anyone shooting at us right now. Seriously," he said, because he would be so fucking useless if there were. "Who's got the morphine around here? Because ow. These hands do some incredible things, but they're maybe two steps away from—hey!" Tony jumped, a sharp and unexpected sting interrupting his thrilling monologue. "What the fuck?"

"Painkiller," a gruff voice said, and he swiveled his head in the direction from which he'd been stabbed to come face to face with a side-part that would put the seventies to shame and a face that looked like scowl was its default setting,

"Romanoff," Tony bit out, eyes flickering over to her. "Who the hell is this? Don't—" he smacked away a hand that was too close to his everything, rewarding himself with more tornadic spirals of pain, but hands off the merchandise was kind of his priority "You know how I feel about—" his right hand chose that moment to send an extra burst of pain up is arm and he coughed out a groaning laugh.

"He's a doctor. It's alright; I'm watching him," she said, eyes focused on the side-part guy even as she spoke.

Unable to really acknowledge that Romanoff had managed to interpret his incoherent, pained expressions as his particular mistrust of physicians who weren’t Bruce (because of course he was a doctor, they’d all been dying. Good on Romanoff for hooking them up), Tony just turned his face back toward the ceiling and tried to think about whatever wasn’t his KFC grilled chicken bucket of appendages.

"Who's Scowly McSidepart?" Tony asked, instead, holding his arms aloft and wondering when the horrible burning sensation would begin to retreat. "Also—ow, fucking shit—" Tony hissed, clenching his jaw and rolling his eyes back while pain pulsed from his fingers right up to his elbows.

"Good God, man, what in the great god damn happened to your arms?" Grumpy asked him, a beepy wand making distressing noises as it roamed over said damaged limbs. Tony was doing his best not to look at them, but they were mostly in his field of vision and wow that really looks bad, so, fuck it. Grunting in pain, he brought the damaged flesh up to his face and stared at it for good measure.

"Repulsor overload," he said through clenched teeth, because fucking ow did not begin to cover it. "Had to make some things explode and they kind of exploded with it. Happens," Tony tried to shrug, but it probably got lost in the rest of his shuddering limbs. Wrinkling his nose, Tony brought his arms back to the general area of not touching anything. "Ugh. TV shows make you think it smells like bacon but this is rank. Burnt flesh is gross. JARVIS?" Tony asked, swiveling his head around at the cryotube in which he was sitting. At the silence, he let out a shaky sigh. "Ah well, figures. Sometimes being right sucks."

"Would you stuff it for a second?" Scowly asked, sounding even grumpier than before. In a coincidental moment of listening, Tony was silent long enough for the man to do whatever it was he'd needed to do. "Your lungs sound like shit," he said, eyeing the reactor glowing in Tony’s chest like it was the monster baby from Alien crawling out of it, but apparently was polite enough not to say anything because he asked instead: “Are you sure you weren't shot, too?"

"Um, nope. Pretty sure," Tony did have to think about it, though. There had been a lot of shooting.
He was so glad there wasn’t any more shooting. “This baby takes up a lot of room,” he appended, nodding his head toward the arc reactor. “Working with about eighty-one percent lung capacity. Better than the alternative, though.”

“Please stop talking, just until you stop smelling like a bad fry-up,” Romanoff said, peering at the beepy-wand device the dude had been waving over him.

“Where’s—” Banner, Tony was about to ask, but Natasha interrupted him. His fingers throbbed when he involuntarily twitched them.

“Still frozen,” she said, shooting him a look that plainly told him to shut his mouth or else. “We’ll talk about it when you smell better.”

“Now that’s just rude,” Tony groaned, eyes locked to the thingy that Scowly, apparently a medical professional, was using to inspect his fucked up limbs. “I don’t know what that thing is, but I think I want one.”

The man glared at him for a moment, but ultimately stood up and away from his cryotube and gestured to a blonde, blue-eyed dude wearing a hideous, not-quite-sparkly gold shirt.

“Let’s get him to a biobed for treatment,” he said, already moving around and fiddling with his wand thing. God. The side-part was killing him. “As much as that thing—” he looked at the reactor. “—is freaking me out, if you say your lungs are par for normal, then I believe you. But any explosion close enough to do this kind of damage might have hurt your bronchial tubes. Those meds should start to work in about another minute, but I’m going to put you in an oxygenated field and give you a topical anesthetic so I can work on the burns. You with me?”

Well, this guy was much more accommodating with his science babble than Tony ever was. He looked at Romanoff before staring at Frowny-Face for a moment longer. “Do you have a name or should I just keep calling you variations of Grumpy like I have been in my head this whole time?”

“McCoy,” the doctor said, meeting the stare Romanoff had been giving him with an expression that made him squint suspiciously. “Let’s get you out of there.”

Getting out of the pod was, well, somewhat easier than getting into it. For one, at least his somewhat crispy fingers were—at last—starting to hurt less and for two, he had Captain America lifting him from one place to another. Tony caught a look at Cap, Romanoff and Barton all looking pretty whole and hale and figured that this doctor character might not be so bad. Maybe his flesh had a pretty good chance of being returned to normal.

“So how far into the future are we?” He directed at Natasha. She had been the spy with the keys to the castle and all that. “Because unless you’ve just kept me in the freezer and are bringing me out for a special occasion, the last time I saw Cupid he was pretty much bleeding out, and I know for a fact that Cap took one to the chest.”

Scowly made a face and mumbled something that sounded like “Bullets.”

“I still say it was a lucky shot,” Barton interrupted. “A chest shot on Steve is like going for the broad side of a barn. Total fucking amateur move.”

“Is he stoned?” Tony asked, feeling a little bit on the way there himself. He’d never heard Barton speak with such annoyed animation—at least to him—barring the times he’d been completely fucked up on opiates when hospitalized or otherwise incapacitated.

Natasha smacked Barton on the head. “Yes,” she answered.
Tony snickered, or tried to snicker, but his abused lung capacity chose that moment to attempt to expel whatever explosion induced crap was hanging around.

Doctor What’s-his-face—really, could he be expected to remember names right now?—chose that moment to direct Steve to smoosh him onto an uncomfortable looking torture device bed type thing and press a few buttons that activated a shimmering field around it.

“Well that's interesting,” Tony rasped, extending a trembling hand to run his fingers along the edge of the bubble, then pushing them through it and pulling them back.

Pain was like a living thing in his body, radiating from his burnt fingers to the still tight, throbbing pain in his chest from being without the arc reactor. Seriously, whatever Grumpy had given him better start doing its job right fucking quick. He’d blocked out pain before, so Tony tried to fill his brain with anything that wasn’t the raw evidence of overloading his fucking gauntlets.

Oxygenated containment field, he’d said. Semi-permeable, obviously, possibly a plasmic field with an adjustable diameter. Tony ran some numbers and the physical limitations of the tech he’d seen as compared to what he knew theoretically could be done. If this was medical tech…

“So 2159,” Tony announced.

“What?” Doctor man asked, pulling out a pen-like device that he proceeded to use on Tony’s arm like a fucking crop duster, spraying it with… something aerosolized. Probably the anesthetic. He should really be asking more questions about his medical care, but Romanoff said she was watching him and hey, he was already in distraction mode and there were tech things.

“The year. Semi-permeable oxygenated field like this? Theoretically possible but unlikely to exist before 2159 considering research funding, availability of resources and limitations on experimentation and access to specific and extremely rare metals.”

Blue-eyed Blonde from before chose that moment to step into Tony’s field of vision.

“So 2260,” he answered, eyeballing Tony’s conspicuously fucked up limbs. Fair enough, really. They were pretty gross, but as the pain started to dull he was kind of on the way to chatty-Clint levels of painkiller bliss, so, objectively, kind of funny.

“A hundred and one years off. Ouch. Well, I guess I did forget to factor in the apocalypse. My bad,” Tony said, poking at the field again and watching it shimmer. Ah, there were the drugs.

“Dude, your arms are so gross,” Barton said, staring at them from his perch on what appeared to be a floating chair.

“Hover chair,” Grumpy Doc said, gingerly lifting Tony’s arm back inside the field as he stepped in between them, totally cutting off his view. “Lie back down, please, I really need to treat these burns. You might not feel them anymore but they’re pretty bad.”

“Pretty gross,” Tony heard Barton say, followed by a telltale sound of palm hitting cranium.

“Is he gonna be okay?” Steve asked, hovering around the outside of the field like if he got too close to it, he might compromise the whole thing and Tony would drop dead.

“He’ll be fine,” Blondie said. “We get burns like this on the Enterprise fairly often, usually the
engineers doing something stupidly genius that backfires.”

Barton, Romanoff and Steve all turned their eyes to him.

“What?” Tony said defensively, holding up his arms as Doctor Who started applying another layer of the aerosol shit.

“That actually makes perfect sense,” Romanoff said, cocking her head. “Most of Tony’s injuries result from him being a stupid genius, I think he might fit in just fine.”

“Please don’t say things like that,” Steve said, putting a palm to his face. “We really have enough to worry about without setting him loose inside the engines of a spaceship.”

“Starship,” Blondie corrected.

“Well I always did call myself a futuri—wait,” Tony backtracked, the words engines and spaceship catching up with him. “We’re on a spaceship?” He perked up again, only to be pushed back onto the bed.

“Starship,” Blondie emphasized. “And no, the Enterprise is in orbit. We’re off Earth.”

Letting that sink in for a second, Tony felt a knot tighten in his gut. “Oh my god. Did we actually manage to destroy the planet? Is this like, the real life version of Wall-E? Tell me we’re not all like Barton in the floating—”

“Tony,” Natasha cut in, fixing him with a flat look. “Earth is fine. Get yourself fixed up, then we’ll talk.”

With a scowl that scarily matched Fury’s on his best day, future doctor turned on the gaggle of people by his bed. “Okay, clear the hell out. When I’ve got his arms wrapped up and made sure his heart isn’t being shredded, I’ll put down the screen.”

Tony’s heart sped up. “Wait—”

“I’m staying.” Romanoff stepped closer to his bed instead of retreating, and ridiculously, Tony already felt more relaxed, which was an entirely new feeling where Natasha Romanoff was concerned.

“Of course you are,” the doctor mumbled, and activated some kind of opaque, semi-holographic privacy screen thing before any of the others could offer protest.

There was a tense moment where the three of them stared at one another. Or, where Tony stared at Grumpy, Grumpy stared at Romanoff, and Romanoff stared right back at him.

He’d barely opened his mouth when Romanoff’s stare turned directly to him.

“Shut up and let him fix you. I’ll explain everything after.”

It was a testament to his fear of this woman that the noise inside his own head dulled long enough for Doctor Sidepart to deal with the lesser wounds on his face and chest—conspicuously avoiding talking about the arc reactor except the ask if this hurt or if he thought there was any internal damage—and wrap him from elbow to fingertips in some weird bandages that would supposedly grow his skin back enough to be “regenerated properly”.

Or, it could be the drugs.
Flexing numbed, bandaged fingers and marveling at the fact that he pretty much couldn’t feel his own limbs, he figured it was probably two parts drugs and three parts scary ex-assassin.

“You know, SI has something like this floating around R&D,” he mused aloud. “Regenerative gel with surface nanobots to debride and repair damaged tissue. I suppose it makes sense from a field perspective to skip the nanobots and incorporate it into a bandage. Shit was three million an ounce, not exactly cost effective, but,” Tony shrugged. “Burn victims and all that. Pepper organized a gala with support from the NYFD—”

Tony choked on the words, startling himself with how abruptly his brain to mouth filter had suddenly started working to stop him talking. Staring at his bandaged hands, he felt the urge to clench them into fists, but only succeeded in getting the unwieldy things to shake even more.

He remembered that gala. It had been four months ago—two hundred forty-seven years and four months—Pepper had worn a blue dress that showed off her pale, freckled shoulders, dipping low in the back. He’d made it a thing to buy her dresses with no back. Tony had fixed her, had unlocked the Extremis program and fixed her and even though her dress had matched the little blue light he carried around, he’d promised her that when he’d fixed her he would fix himself.

Rhodey had been there too, accompanying the First Lady because her husband had been dealing with fucking crazy people who wanted Captain America on a list—

“Whoa there, you sure that thing is working right? Your heart rate is sky high.”

—it wasn’t supposed to be like this—

“Ah hell, he’s getting hypertensive. Romanoff—”

—they shouldn’t have been there—

“Back off, I’ll handle it.”

—he’d saved her. He’d fixed her, and there she was on the ground, smiling up at him reaching out and—

A hand on his face.

Tony blinked at the sensation, startled, but it was Romanoff who was in front of him when the world came back into focus.

“Breathe, Tony,” she said. “You’re with me. Steve and Clint are just on the other side of the screen.”

It took a long moment of staring into her intent green eyes before Tony actually took her advice and let his lungs gasp in a breath of air. Four months—

“Slower. Like me.”

He breathed again, keeping his eyes on hers and somehow not being freaked out about her deadly fingers being so close to his eyes. But, then again, he was already freaking out, wasn’t he?

“That’s good,” Romanoff said, letting her hand move down to the new skin on his shoulder. Her touch on the sensitive flesh made his breath hitch, but he kept going.

A couple minutes passed. He felt nauseas, but kept breathing.

“Okay,” Romanoff said eventually, hand moving down to his bandaged forearm and resting there.
“Doctor McCoy brought you some clothes. You want to put on a shirt? You’re glowing all over the place.”

A weak laugh bubbled up from his chest, and it sounded breathy and too high-pitched when it came out of his mouth, but he nodded anyway, determined not to let the tightness in his throat or the stinging at the back of his eyes manifest into anything.

*Four fucking months.*

Tony pressed his eyes closed and breathed again, deeply. The breath shuddered on its way out.

“Could you get him some water?” It wasn’t directed at him. “I’m not a doctor, but I do know he needs to stay hydrated.”

“Yeah. Water,” the doctor said, sounding weird.

Tony kept his eyes closed. He heard a rustle of fabric and then silence.

“Stark,” Romanoff said, and it was quiet. Too quiet for someone like her.

Opening his eyes, he was impressed not to feel anything other than his own scratchy stubble on his cheeks. Tony Stark, expert at not crying during panic attacks. He’d had a lot of practice, after all. *Fucking flashbacks.*

She held up a black shirt with short sleeves, and he reached a bandaged hand out to accept it, but only received a dubious look for his trouble.

“A shirt on his back and the edges of his panic attack fading away, Tony let out a *whoosh* of breath and slumped back on the biobed.

“What the fuck happened, Natasha?” He asked.

“We lost,” she said, still too quiet for the woman he knew. Honestly, Tony wasn’t sure that was the answer to the question he’d asked, but he’d never won any contests for specificity before, so it was an answer. A *shitty* answer.

“What does that mean, ‘we lost’?” Tony snarled. “Of course we fucking *lost.* We barely made it to the god damn bunker in one piece, let alone alive.” He glared at his bandaged hands again. “We got our asses handed to us.”

“No, Stark,” Romanoff interrupted. “We *lost.* We lost the war. It’s over. It was over two centuries ago when you put us in those pods.”

Tony shook his head.

“We were going to go back, we were going to *keep fighting*—”

“Right. And that’s why the protocols in my pod didn’t activate until three days ago.”

“That’s not—yours was the only one with external AI, it was supposed to evaluate the environment and proximity of the rest of our pods, not—”

“You’re a shit liar, Tony,” Romanoff interrupted, the edge of coldness he knew back in her voice. “You of all people knew that we were done. You knew it then, you know it now. There wasn’t...
anything we could do.”

Tony stared at his hands, impotent rage sitting like a hot poker in his gut.

“We couldn’t do anything but stay alive. You gave us that. We lost, but we survived,” and the weird, soft voice was back.

“Don’t—**talk** like that,” Tony said, holding up a bandaged hand, ignoring the way his eyes were stinging again. “I’m not a mark,” he added sullenly, glaring his best glare.

“No,” she agreed. “Just a bad liar. Especially if you’re trying to lie to yourself. You’re better than that.”

“I’ve been told by reputable sources that I’m excellent at denial and self-deception, thank you,” Tony quipped, but didn’t actually deny what she was accusing him of.

A few more seconds under Romanoff’s unimpressed stare and he let his shoulders slump.

“We were fucked,” Tony admitted, at length. “Completely and irredeemably fucked. We’d finally made it there, and you were all just waiting for my miracle, genius plan while they were trying to bring the fucking *mountain* down on us and I just—I couldn’t—”

“You couldn’t lose anyone else,” she finished for him.

He felt his throat close up and he looked away.

“I didn’t know what else to do. It wasn’t—I didn’t **intend** to just put us all in the freezer. But then they fucking found us and—”

“Tony.”

“—the quinjet was down and my armor was fucked, and Cap just looking like he was gonna go out there with a **bullet** in his chest just to take some of the fuckers with him—”

“Tony.”

“—Bruce was barely even **conscious**, but he just looked so fucking sad like we were all going to leave him behind—”

“**Anthony!**”

Jaw clicking shut, Tony halted his rant, momentarily stunned by Romanoff’s use of his given name.

“I get it,” she said, with emphasis after it became apparent that he wasn’t going to start talking again. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me.”

*Maybe I need to explain it to myself.*

Grumpy Doc—McCoy, he remembered now—came back through the partition, and the sound of Barton’s stoned guffaw filtered through, along with the indistinct tones of Steve’s long-suffering reprimand.

Maybe he was a little bit ashamed of himself for freezing these people because he’d taken away their chance to go down fighting, but Tony wasn’t sorry he’d done it.

“Probably shouldn’t tell Cap, though,” Tony sighed.
But, quickly being done with confessional and the hives it would bring, let it never be said that Tony couldn’t be a narcissist at even the most heartfelt of moments, because the words that came out of his mouth would forever disabuse anyone of such a notion.

“So, what do I look like in a history book?”

“He just needs a minute, let him be.”

“But—”

“Steve, I know this is old hat for you and everything—”

“That’s not fair. I didn’t say—”

Tony stared at the wall, lying prone on what he’d been told was a ’biobed’. Another time, he might have been enthralled by the readings it displayed above his head, craning and moving around until a nurse or someone told him to lie back down and stop messing with the outputs, but he didn’t give a shit. He ignored the voices of his friends on the other side of his paltry privacy screen and continued to not give a shit.

He was becoming very good at not giving a shit. Maybe he should add it to his fucking nonexistent resume.

The Merchant of Death.

Iron Man.

Genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist.

“Tony Stark.”

And then there had been silence. No recognition. No questions, no flustered, disbelieving exclamations. No monuments or biographies, no hint that he’d left his mark on anything.

Two hundred forty-seven years after he’d lost everything, everything, trying to save the world—after saving the world a handful of times before—and staring at tech he probably could have created back then given the desire to do so, it sounded like he wasn’t even a footnote.

Clutching the arc reactor in his chest like a lifeline—more of a lifeline that it already was—he stared at the blank white wall and didn't move.

A noise behind him drew his attention, and he tried not to tense up as that doctor came back through the screen.

"What do you want?" He asked sourly.

The doctor frowned at him, but it wasn’t a dangerous frown. He knew those. He'd seen them when he’d come back from Afghanistan refusing treatment.

"Just here to check your arms, make sure the tissue is healing the way it should be. I normally wouldn't bother but," the doctor waved his arm and trailed off as he approached Tony with that same tool in his hand. "May I?" He asked, eyebrow raised.

"Be my fucking guest," Tony grumped, sticking out his swathed arms, wrists facing up as the doctor set about running the instrument over his skin, eyes darting between it and the readouts above his
head. Against his will, he found himself drawn to soft whirring of the instrument he’d seen before—drugs must be wearing off—in his hand and before he knew it, the doctor was pulling it away.

Before he could stop himself, his hand followed the doctor’s, grabbing his wrist as he stared at the instrument in fascination. When the other man tensed beneath his grip, he abruptly let go, mumbling an apology before hunching back into his former pose.

Silence stretched between them while the doctor ignored his touchy-feely outburst. Standing beside his bed and fiddling with a holographic monitor, he spoke again. "It's called a tricorder. This one is medical grade, so it's programmed to detect vital signs of known species, biological components such as toxins and pathogens as well as certain inorganic prosthesis and substances," he finished.

"What the hell kind of processor is it running to compound that kind of data?" Tony blurted before he could reign himself in.

McCoy grinned a little bit as he shut down the projection in front of him. "It's not much compared to the ship’s computers, but this model maxes out around fifty exaFLOPS. I can fix one if it's not too busted up, but I can't tell you too much about the technology. I leave that up to Jim and the other coding wizards around here," he answered.

Tony couldn't stop the incredulous noise that escaped his mouth.

“That is so hot,” he found himself saying.

McCoy sent him a startled look.

“Not you,” Tony clarified. McCoy looked maybe a little bit offended. “That,” he pointed to the tricorder, his moping momentarily usurped by the tech. God, he wanted to be inside of it. Literally.

“Maybe later,” McCoy drawled at him, giving him a look like he was probably still stoned, and Tony realized he’d said that out loud.

“I’ll hold you to that,” Tony said, still eyeing the instrument. Jesus, and he’d said this one was only medical grade.

Tony pondered that, tapping numbed fingers against the arc reactor as he looked up at the ceiling.

Tony stopped tapping.

“Why haven’t you asked?” Tony directed at the doctor who was conspicuously not looking in his direction.

“Because those ain’t the kind of manners my Momma taught me,” McCoy grumbled in response, not pretending to misunderstand what Tony was referring to, but still not looking at him.

Manners. Tony almost laughed. This guy had a brain to mouth filter almost as fucked as Tony’s.

“Seriously? This thing isn’t exactly soundproof,” Tony indicated the partition. “I’ve heard you insulting everything from your blonde buddy’s masculinity to Clint’s ability to handle a spork. You don’t strike me as the strictly Southern Gentleman type. More of a…” Tony sucked on his teeth and waved his hand in the air. “Speak your mind, fuck what other people think because you’re usually right type.”

McCoy turned a scowl on him. Tony idly wondered what he’d look like with an eyepatch.
“I’m a doctor, not a shoulder to cry on. People get themselves hurt doing stupid shit, don’t take their recovery seriously, I tell them how it is. But I don’t stick my nose where it doesn’t belong, even if it is horrifying, ridiculous, outdated—”

A snort of incredulous laughter erupted from Tony’s throat before he could stop it. There was a slight lull in the white noise of conversation outside of his little recovery area, but after a second it started up.


McCoy had deliberately looked everywhere but at the slight glow of Tony’s reactor through his shirt, but with a valiant eye roll turned his scowl right back to Tony’s face.

“Well it’s—wait,” he stopped. “Your tech?” He said, now staring directly at the reactor, but Tony mysteriously didn’t feel the discomfort that usually accompanied a strange person so closely scrutinizing his chest piece. Huh.

“You built that?”

“Well, yeah,” Tony said, like it was the most obvious thing in the world. “You think I’d trust anyone else to stick a live reactor in my chest? Well, besides the guy who did it in the first place, but that was just the electromagnet and it was hooked up to a car battery—ugh—and I wasn’t really conscious, so—” Tony waved a dismissive hand. “Speaking of live reactors. This didn’t exist before I invented it. Sort of. Mostly.” Tony paused to breathe. “Probably for the best. If something is going to keep me alive, it sure as shit better be my design, because my shit always works.”

“You built the cryotubes,” the doctor said, now staring Tony right in the face, the scowl gone and replaced by a look of incredulity.

Now Tony was feeling uncomfortable. Maybe he’d overshared.

“Um. Maybe?” He ventured.

“Maybe my ass,” the doctor folded his arms. “You… you’re three hundred years old—”

“Two hundred ninety,” Tony interjected.

“—and you built those things? How in the—” McCoy was staring at him with something like disbelief, which, well, that was a bit better. Tony actually enjoyed those kinds of looks. So he might have preened a bit even if he was way oversharing. Hard habit to break.

“Our engineers haven’t been able to get shit from Romanoff’s cryotube. It’s a god damn fortress. You built that? By yourself?”

Okay, now the tone was edging into actual disbelief. Babble mode activated.

“Well I don’t see any other ridiculously handsome genius engineers popping out of cryotubes. And of course you can’t hack it. If I hadn’t built it, I wouldn’t be able to hack it. Excluding my legendary skills,” though they were apparently not even the stuff of history books, much less legend. “The reinforced—”

“Stark.”

Tony actually yelped.
“Um, hi?” Tony said, trying not to wince as he turned his head to see Romanoff glaring the glare with her arms folded.

“If you’re finished, we need to talk,” she looked from him to McCoy, who was apparently immune to The Glare.

“He’s staying in the bandages for at least another two hours; the numbing agent won’t last longer than that anyway. Then we can talk about regeneration. I’d say he’s looking well otherwise, but there is the matter of shrapnel—”

“Hey, we can discuss that later. Preferably never,” Tony held up a bandaged finger. “And whatever. I’ll brood more about the end of the world later, hopefully with alcohol. Wait—” Tony paused, alarmed. “You do still have alcohol, right? It’s not like some weird prohibitionary epoch we’ve landed in, right? Because I am not into moonshine.”

Romanoff didn’t even deign to sigh at him, just stared him down for another half minute before walking through the screen.

“Right. Yeah. I should probably follow her. You never know where that woman keeps her knives.”

“Oh, I think I do,” McCoy said, a pained look on his face.

Tony’s eyes widened.

“You don’t mean—”

“Stark!”

“Coming, snookums!” Tony sing-songed.

A spork sailed over the partition and hit him in the forehead.

Leonard hadn’t been on the other side of the partition for three seconds before he had a face full of ancient assassin woman.

“Is doctor-patient confidentiality still applicable in the twenty-third century?”

Leonard blinked, looked from Jim’s supremely annoyed expression and back to Romanoff before answering: “That depends.”

“My friends and I need to talk with as much privacy as we can have. I realize that Captain Kirk has extended us a lot of courtesy thus far, but he can’t be here for this. So I need you. So what does your confidentiality depend on?” She asked.

“It depends on whether or not whatever it is you discuss indicates imminent harm to either yourselves or others,” he answered, folding his arms suspiciously. “Which I assume isn’t the case or you wouldn’t be asking.”

Romanoff didn’t confirm or deny, “We just need to talk. It’s very important to us. If you think it’s something Captain Kirk absolutely needs to know, then that’s your call. But I’m asking you to be here as a witness so you and he both know we’re not scheming, and we know that nothing medically relevant is disclosed without due process. Can you do that?”

Jim’s annoyed look intensified, which meant that not only was he annoyed, but he was annoyed because he’d already agreed to whatever it was Romanoff was shoving in his face.
Throwing his hands up in the air, Leonard settled on rubbing his face with one hand and looking up to the ceiling. God, he would never be rid of strange frozen people and their stupid, stressful issues, would he?

“Jim, I assume you’re on board with this hare-brained request?” He asked with a sigh, knowing the answer.

Holding up a PADD, Jim conspicuously tapped on the screen and they all heard the tell-tale whirr and beep of audiovisual surveillance being suspended.

“I’ll just be in the observation room, not listening in,” Jim grumbled. “And Romanoff, do consider the fact that I’ve shown that you can trust me on several very significant occasions, a few of which have happened in the last six hours. This is getting real fucking old.”

After a brief staring match, Jim made a frustrated noise, gave Leonard a significant look and then proceeded to the observation exit.

Folding his arms, Leonard looked at each of the four people in turn. Clint was intently balancing a spork on his finger, but otherwise they had their attention on him.

“This is about the last guy in the tube, isn’t it?” Leonard sighed. “What is it you forgot to mention this time? Do I need to reattach his head? He’s infected with some sort of zombie virus?”

“He’s fine. Perfectly healthy, better than any of us, in fact,” Romanoff said.

“Great. Then let’s get him out of there so you can all have this private little chat,” Leonard grumbled, already heading for the pod.

Romanoff grabbed his arm at the bicep, halting him. “He’s the one we need to talk about, doctor,” she said.

“What’s there to talk about?” Tony said from his place beside Clint, sounding defensive. “We wake him up, we show these clowns we’re not terrorists and we hop the spaceship back to Earth, sort out the details later.”

“Tony, don’t start this now. This is serious,” said Rogers.

“Yes, well, I’m being serious,” Tony retorted, trying to fold his bandaged arms, but abandoning the attempt after some awkward fumbling. “We’re a team, right? Well, we wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Bruce, so I think we owe it to him not to let him rot in cryostasis.”

“That’s not what we were going to suggest,” Rogers started, but Tony scoffed.

“Isn’t it, though? What, you think I can’t tell what you’re all thinking? That he’s too dangerous to let out, that you don’t trust him enough to keep it together?” Tony sneered. “That’s fucking bullshit is what it is—”

“Wait, dangerous?” Leonard interrupted. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Tony, we were all out of sorts when we came out of the tubes. Our last memories were of a crash and running for our lives. You can’t tell me that isn’t going to be an issue with him,” Rogers said, holding out a placating hand and completely ignoring Leonard’s question.

“Because it’s not,” Tony said through clenched teeth. “He can control it. You all saw it, you know he can.”
“Control what?” Leonard asked, louder this time, but still ignored.

“These are different circumstances. He might not be the same kind of liability that he was before, but we can’t afford to test the limits of his control. Not here, not on a spaceship,” Romanoff said, like Leonard wasn’t standing right next to her trying to get their attention.

“Um, excuse me, but if you could tell me what the hell is going on—”

“Bullshit, bullshit and bullshit,” Tony accused over Leonard’s statement. “God, it’s always the same thing with you guys. After all the shit he’s done to help us, to save our asses, you still don’t fucking trust him,” Tony spat. “Some friends you are.”

“Of course I trust him!” Rogers said, sounding deeply offended. “This isn’t about that.”

“The hell it’s not!” Tony said, walking forward and into Rogers’ space.

“If you’d stop and think for a second about this, you’d see what we’re getting at,” Romanoff said, off to the side.

Leonard gave up trying to get their attention, rolling his eyes before glancing at Clint, who was idly flipping the spork in the air and catching it on his finger, a bored expression on his face. Christ, he hadn’t given the guy that strong of a dose.

“No, I see that pretty fucking clearly,” Tony continued, even as Leonard contemplated breaking out his tricorder to monitor Clint’s med levels. “You just want to abandon him, keep him locked up like everyone else in his shithole life,” Tony snapped, pointing at Romanoff.

“Tony, that’s enough,” Rogers said sternly.

“Well apparently it isn’t, since you’re all so fucking convinced that my best god damn friend is too dangerous to take out of cryostasis.” Tony poked Rogers in the chest with a bandaged finger.

“His vitals aren’t normal, Tony, even without an incident they’d never let him leave without a battery of tests,” Romanoff said.

“You said the elf-alien wouldn’t let them do that!” Tony retorted.

Abnormal vitals? Dangerous? Oh, hell. Leonard did not have a good feeling about this.

“Damn it, Tony, just listen—”

“Oh, believe me, I am—”

“Both of you need to reign it in so we can talk about this—”

Leonard had barely opened his mouth to finally shut them all the hell up when, with frightening accuracy, three identical sporks banked off of their heads.

The room went silent, the only sound that of the sporks clattering to the ground and bodies swiveling in unison to stare at Clint, none more surprised than Leonard.

“You think he’d thank us for waking him up?” Clint asked, his tone bored but sincere.

“I—”

“No, seriously,” Clint said before Tony could finish. “Say we go over there and defrost him right
now, everything is all good and we catch him up on where he is and how we’re planning on getting back to Earth. Do you think he’d thank you for unfreezing him, laying that responsibility on his shoulders? Asking him to take that risk?” He said, leaning back in his chair, hands empty of the sporks he’d apparently been hoarding.

When neither Tony nor anyone else responded, Clint shrugged, like it wasn’t a big deal.

“I don’t think this is about how much we trust him. God knows the big guy has snatched me from certain death enough times for me to owe him that. It’s about doc trusting himself, having to make the decision to stay or go or whatever. The way I see it, you wake him up and he doesn’t have that choice anymore. You wake him up and you’re abandoning him because he’d stay here, wouldn’t he? He’d never take the chance of getting on a spaceship even if there were the slightest risk of something going wrong.”

Leonard still had no idea what the hell these people were talking about, but he was starting to err on the side of caution and thinking that maybe four unfrozen people and one frozen person was the way to go on this.

“But that’s—” Tony started, and then stopped. “I wouldn’t abandon him,” Tony protested, looking mutinous.

“None of us would. If he decided he had to stay, we’d all stay,” Rogers said. “But what do you think that would do to him? Knowing that we’d give up going back to Earth because of him?”

“That’s not fair,” Tony said, sounding like he’d been worn down a bit.

“Nothing in doc’s life has been fair, Stark,” Clint said, still sounding bored. “I’m just calling it like I see it. I think we should wait until we’ve got a better plan before we put any more shit on him, give him the best options instead of making a decision we can’t take back.”

There was silence in the room for a long minute, Leonard eyeing the tense staring match that Tony seemed to be having with all three of the others in turn.

“This sucks,” he said, finally, and it was as good as a concession as he’d ever seen.

“I miss him too, man,” Clint said, finally sounding sympathetic.

“It’s just until we have a better plan, Tony. Really,” Rogers said, sincerity written on his face.

“And what if we never do, huh? What if there’s always something in the way?” Tony said, closing the gap between himself and the remaining active cryotube. “We just—keep him in here and forget about him?”

“Never,” Romanoff surprised him by speaking up. “We play it how Bruce would.”

Tony sighed. “And Bruce would keep himself frozen if he thought it would keep him from hurting anyone.”

Clint hovered his way over to Tony’s side, clapping him on the arm. “You know him best, dude. It’s the right call,” Clint shrugged. “For now.”

“I still don’t believe that,” Tony grumbled mutinously. “But I can see I’m outnumbered. Whatever. For now,” Tony echoed.

“Oh, okay, well, now that that’s all settled,” Leonard drawled sarcastically. “Someone wanna tell me
what the hell it was about?”

Four heads turned to look at him.

“Yes, as you can see, I am still, in fact, in the room.”

Rogers looked sheepish. “Bruce, our friend in the tube, he has a—”

“Mutation,” Romanoff finished.

“Right,” Rogers said, not missing a beat, though he cast a look at Romanoff. “A mutation.”

Leonard waited expectantly, eyebrow raised. “And?”

“And, in the past, he’s had difficulty controlling it. He’s sometimes… not himself,” Rogers twisted his face like there was a bad taste in his mouth.

Tony, from his place beside the cryotube, rolled his eyes. “Bruce has some issues with compartmentalizing his emotions. Stress isn’t great for him, sometimes not for people in his immediate area, gets a bit radioactive when agitated. Hasn’t had an incident he couldn’t handle in over a year, but,” Tony shrugged. “I’m outvoted, so I guess we keep him on ice until there’s a better option.”

Radioactive? Had he heard that right? Oh, sweet Jesus. No more frozen people, ever again.

“Oh, well, that’s really comforting, then,” Leonard drawled. “What in the hell do you expect to do with him back on Earth? Agitated?” He echoed incredulously. “He gets a little cranky and—what? People get fried? Yes, I can see how waiting until you’re back amongst billions of people instead of in space is the better option, here.”

All four of them gave him an identical look of hard determination.

“You don’t know him. You don’t know the lengths he’ll go to to keep people safe,” Rogers said, first. “We’re not going to abandon him just because he thinks he’s not worth saving.”

Leonard opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it.

“You know what? This is so not my division,” he said, holding up his hands. “You want your doctor patient confidentiality? Well, as long as he’s on ice, I won’t bring it up. The second you think about unfreezing him, my confidentiality is void because radiation is kind of a sore spot with me. And Jim. And Spock,” he emphasized. “We’ve got better facilities equipped to handle whatever radioactive nonsense this is back on Earth, anyway.”

“Facilities?” Tony bristled. “What in the hell do you mean by facilities—”

The sound of the observation door opening cut off the conversation.

“Guys,” Jim said, running into the room. “Sorry to interrupt, but this pow-wow is gonna have to wait. We’ve been called out.”

“Shit. What happened?” Leonard asked, already hurrying to grab his personal medkit.

“Attack on a Starbase,” Jim prefaced. “They sent out a distress signal and we’re the closest Federation vessel that can provide assistance,” Jim paused. “Uhura didn’t get a lot of information from the message, but it’s probably not Klingons.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, his tone echoing the sentiment.

“What does that mean for us? How can we help?” Rogers asked, all business.

“It means you’re coming with,” Jim said. “I’m not leaving you here, not when my crew is being recalled to the ship. You’re not going to help. You’ll have an escort, you’ll stay in designated areas and you will not interfere with anything,” Jim said.

“Well that’s boring,” Tony grumbled.

“There is nothing boring about this distress call,” Jim snapped. “And we need to move out. I’ll have the cryotubes beamed back to the medical cargo hold, and I meant what I said. Stay out of this. You might have been some kind of super-team three hundred years ago, but this is my territory.” Jim checked his buzzing comm. “And we need to go. Questions?”

“Keep us in the loop?” Rogers asked, obviously reluctantly to be benched, but conceding to Jim’s plan.

Jim nodded. “Bones, go with Romanoff to secure the tubes. The rest of you, with me.”

“Got it,” Leonard said. He knew when to follow orders, and he had a Sickbay to run. “Enterprise, two to beam up.”

Jim watched Romanoff and Bones disappear in a swirl of light, the three empty cryotubes and one occupied vanishing soon after. Stark looked delighted.

“Oh man, the future is awesome.”

The opportunity to burst Stark’s bubble didn’t even cross his mind. A mercenary attack on a Starbase so close didn’t sound like a coincidence, and there was too much going on to keep his eyes off the prize, right now.

“Captain, Commander Treska confirms the remaining crew have been recalled. The ship is ready for warp,” Spock said over his comm.

“Ready?” Jim asked the assembled group in front of him.

“Ready,” Rogers said, face as grim then as Jim’s.

“Enterprise, four to beam up.”

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to my beta Kay for vir help with this chapter!

And so it begins! The Avengers on the Enterprise. What could go wrong?
"Report," Jim said, before he'd even sat down in his chair.

Spock, already in his place at the Science Officer's station in anticipation of Jim's arrival, didn't turn his head as he rattled off information.

"Distress call received from Starbase 24 approximately fourteen minutes ago. The base is armed and defending, but the assailants were apparently cloaked upon arrival. Estimated two to four unidentified enemy ships attacking. Motive and target are unknown at this juncture."

"No communication from the base since the initial distress call," Uhura said, fingers flying over the console. "I've been trying to raise them but I can't hear anything. It's possible that their extraoribital communication satellites have been destroyed. We might not be able to make contact again until we're closer."

"Right," Jim said, mind racing as he took his seat and looked around the bridge. There were a lot of variables to consider, but the most important one was getting to the Starbase, and fast. "How far out are we?"

"If Mister Scott can push us to Warp 7, we can be zere in maybe one hundred and thirty minutes?" Chekov said, shooting Jim some calculations from his console.

"Shit," Jim mumbled. Starbases this close to the Neutral Zone were equipped with pretty heavy defenses, but two hours without real aerial support could mean clean-up instead of rescue. "Do better. Any route we can take to get there faster, I'm willing to try it. Scotty," he said, activating his connection to Engineering. "You ready to work some magic?"

"Always ready to break the laws of physics for you, Cap'n," Scotty responded.

"Good," Jim said with a grin. "Mister Chekov is going to find us the fastest route to Base 24, but I need you to get us to Warp 7."

"Ach, Cap'n, the ship's been idling for almost a day, now!" The engineer's voice was harried, but Jim knew he was already running around trying to comply. "Warp 5 is the best I can get you for now. Once the core's hot, we'll see, but—"

"Do it, Mister Scott," Jim said, and ended the comm to the sound of Scotty's swearing.

"Alright, Lieutenant, take us out."

"Ready for warp on your command, sir," Sulu said, as calm in the face of worst-case scenarios as he'd ever been.
"Punch it."

"This is boring."

"Tony," Steve sighed, leaning his forehead into his palm. "We've been over this. You can't—"

"Still boring," Tony interjected. "Approaching board meeting levels of boring. There was a reason I never attended them, you know. I'm a man of action."

"But we need—"

"Whatever. I get it," Tony held up a hand, nose pressed nearly flush against the outer casing of a replicator, and thus not looking at Steve. "You all need my brain and my bullshit skills to handle the military and political shitstorm that our arrival will wreak on the universe. Piece of cake," he waved the hand he'd put up. "Now this, on the other hand..." he pressed his free hand to the input pad and watched the machine whir to life, and a mug of steaming black coffee appeared in the slot below. "Oh, you sweet little thing, you," he breathed, reaching out to grab it.

"Stark," Romanoff began. "I realize your freakish brain doesn't need as much time or sleep to compound information as anyone else's, but the sooner you get started on this, the sooner you'll know what's going on. And then we can actually have a plan instead of relying solely on the goodwill of some maverick Captain and his alien wingman."

"Mmm, yes, this is a wonderful thing," Tony purred, his still bandaged hands wrapping around the mug of caffeine. "Wait," he stopped, looking up at Romanoff. "Did you just make a Top Gun reference?"

"Yes, she did," Steve sighed, shooting him an exasperated look. "Now if we could—"

"That is—hold up," Tony said, staring at Steve and then Romanoff. "Who watched Top Gun with you? No, don't tell me, you rented it and watched it by yourself," Tony said, gesturing with the mug and nearly spilling the beverage onto his snowy white dressings. "And here I thought movie nights were sacred."

"No," Steve said defensively. "I watched it with—" Steve stopped, taking in a quick breath before letting it out slowly. "I watched it with Sam," he finished, more subdued.

"Shit," Tony deflated, feeling like a dick for the first and definitely not last time this century. "Cap—"

"Don't, it's okay," Steve said, still quiet.

"Smooth, Stark," said Clint, his bum leg propped up on the table, playing around with a PADD Romanoff had given him.

"Stuff it, Cupid," Tony sniped, pointing with the mug. "I can always reprogram that chair to float you out an airlock."

"Right, because I'm sure nothing about coding has changed at all in two and a half centuries," he shot back, not looking up from the tablet.

"You just give me ten minutes and I'll—" Tony paused, mug stalled mid-gesture. "Oh, you sneaky
son of a bitch."

Clint grinned up at him briefly before going right back to the PADD.

"Which brings us back to the earlier topic of discussion," Romanoff said, slowly. "I've debriefed you on the broad aspects of what I know, and now you," she indicated Tony, who clutched his mug against his chest like she might steal it from him. "You have homework."

Tony let out a noisy breath, his lips fluttering. "Boring," he said again. "Seriously, Romanoff. I'm on a spaceship and you want me to hit the books? What kind of sadist are you?"

"The kind who wants us to live through this," she emphasized.

Tony stared mutinously.

Romanoff folded her arms and met the stare head on. Drat. He'd never been very good at staring contests. He was better at the ignoring people thing.

"The kind who wants to see Bruce out of his pod. Safe," she added.

Opening his mouth to say something, Tony stopped short, face twisted in an expression of distaste, maybe a little admiration.

"Low blow, spy-lady. Low blow," he said, eyeing the PADD Romanoff had procured for him before they'd been shoved into this suite and forgotten. He finally brought the mug to his lips and took a swig, then promptly sprayed the mouthful all over the wall.

"Ugh, Stark, gross," Barton muttered, scooting his floating chair away from the mess.

Tony held the mug at arm's length, swiping at his tongue with his free hand, staining the bandages.

"Gross is correct, Robin Hood," Tony said. "Blech, ugh, god. That's like—gas station awful," he choked, trying to get the taste out of his mouth. "Possibly worse."

"Tony," Steve started, his voice long suffering and yet somehow still impatient.

"Fine!" Tony relented. "Fine, I'll read up on the political shit, I'll power through the stupid charter of the United Federation of Aliens and Robots or whatever," he rolled his eyes. It wasn't like he'd been planning not to do it, he just maybe had... more interesting things on the brain.

"But I am seriously going to reprogram the shit out of this replicator thing. This coffee? Poisonous. Awful. Inhumane."

Romanoff rounded the table and pushed the PADD toward him. Tony eyed it warily, shooting glances between it and the demonic replicator that had given him such a heinous beverage.

"You all suck," he said, sticking the mug—coffee and all—into the recycler before sitting down. "I hope you all appreciate the effort I put into this when we're inevitably confronted with my need to be able to reprogram and/or reverse engineer spaceship tech and instead all I can do for you is explain how to adopt alien babies."

Holed up in the ready room, Jim finally sat down with Spock to hash out their conspiracy theories.
Well, sat down was probably a misnomer. Spock stood by the table, and Jim paced restlessly along the other side.

"We do not have enough information to implicate the informant—whoever they may be—in the attack on the Starbase, Spock said evenly.

"Right, because this attack just happened to occur while we were out here on the edge of the Neutral Zone with a recently defrosted ancient—" Jim flapped a hand, trying to think of a word to encompass their newest pain in the ass "—response team in our care. You said Djembe's people had calls logged from Cartwright, didn't you? What if this guy is piggy-backing on his frequency to feed them information? What if that's how they knew about all of it?" Jim spread his arms.

"We do not know that the informant is male," Spock started, and Jim shot him an annoyed look. "And if whomever it is has copied the Admiral's frequency, it would have to have been recently and with great skill. I have yet to detect an anomaly in the transmissions. Such implications notwithstanding, we do not yet know what Doctor Djembe and her associates actually knew prior to confronting you in the base, or Doctor McCoy on the Enterprise."

Jim sighed heavily, pinching the bridge of his nose. He hadn't slept in almost forty hours, and the exhaustion and headache he'd had Bones subdue with some meds and stims was starting to rear its head again.

"Then how—why—did she barge into the Medical Wing like that? I mean, sure, she's kind of deeply dedicated to this research and all that, but busting in was a seriously bad call on her part. It sounds like manipulation, to me," Jim hedged.

"Another possibility," Spock said after a moment. "But also statistically unlikely. I do not know to what end that would serve, given that we still do not know the identity or the purpose of this informant, nor specifically to whom they have been speaking."

"This is ridiculous," Jim said after a moment. "We don't know anything. I mean, the most we've been able to do is set up a trap, one that this guy," Jim emphasized out of spite, "may have managed to evade if he's hacked an Admiral's frequency. If he's hacked an Admiral's frequency," Jim said. "For all we know, Cartwright gave him the codes."

"Again, possible," Spock said evenly. "Statistically incalculable, and it remains an accusation you cannot make, given the information at our disposal. We cannot act without evidence, and in the midst of an impending conflict, I cannot say that our time is most wisely spent in this capacity."

Jim bristled with anger. "I can't just stand here and do nothing! We could be walking into a trap!" Jim yelled before taking a deep breath and continuing. "There's an enemy on my ship and I can't afford to just let that go and deal with it later, because it's a problem now. We have to flush this bastard out if we can't figure out what the hell he's up to."

Spock was silent for a long time after Jim's outburst.

"Then perhaps it is time we enlisted the aid of someone suited to the task of helping us."

Staring at Spock for a long moment, Jim didn't even pretend not to know what Spock was thinking. Who was the only person they knew for sure couldn't be a part of whatever was going on under their noses? Who had a skill set that was designed specifically for this kind of scenario? Who had already demonstrated a remarkable ability to adapt to the environment of a Starship under pressure and remain undetected?
Jim knew. Oh, he knew exactly what Spock was thinking, and the idea put a pit in his stomach. He looked at Spock with dubious resignation.

"That's a really, really shitty idea."

Tony was knee deep in boring—with maybe a side of coding theory and programming literature—when a chime sounded in their room.

"The hell?" He asked, looking around. "JARVIS?" He asked, before thinking better of it, then grimaced in annoyance.

"It's the door," Romanoff clarified, shooting him a look before standing up from her chair along with Steve. Both of them faced the door before she said "Enter."

When it swished open, a tall guy in a blue not-quite-sparkly shirt and a ridiculous bowl cut stepped into the room.

"Spock," Romanoff said by way of greeting, and then—oh, the ears. Pointed, perfectly elfin ears.

So this was the guy. Commander Spock. First Officer of the Spaceship Name-stolen-from-an-ancient-Revolutionary-warship-Enterprise. Tony stared. The Spock guy didn't even look at him.

Just as well. Unimpeded staring. He wasn't going to be able to call Barton Legolas anymore if this guy was hanging around.


"Your coffee sucks," Tony said, still staring, watchful of the guy's unmoving posture. And really, who the hell had posture like that? Oh, yeah. Probably an alien.

God. The future was awesome.

Suddenly, though, Tony's stream of consciousness outburst had him pierced by the dark, assessing gaze of an honest to god not-Thor not-Loki not-attacking-Chitauri alien, and it was kind of... really fucking weird.

"I have heard on several occasions that the replicated caffeinated beverage known as coffee is unsuitable to the tastes of those who indulge in it," Spock responded, and Jesus. This guy really was an alien. "Perhaps you might experiment with one of the varieties of tea. The replicator approximates the taste more closely and some contain compounds such as those often imbibed for their stimulant effect."


Staring at Tony for a moment longer, the bowl-cut-sporting alien finally relented and turned his creepy unblinking gaze back to Romanoff.

"If you are amenable, the Captain and I have a situation on which we desire your consultation."

When no more information was forthcoming other than the request, Romanoff finally shifted her stance, folding her arms slowly.
"Do you, now? What kind of situation would that be?" She asked.

"One that is both potentially relevant to you and your compatriots, and time sensitive. If you would accompany me to the Captain's ready room, it would be the most expedient method of evaluating your ability to assist."

A staring match ensued, and, casting a quick glance at Barton, apparently Tony wasn't the only one invested in seeing who the hell would win it.

"She's not going anywhere alone," Steve interrupted, causing Spock to break first. Yeah, Tony would have won that bet, but still. Outside interference. Rude.

"Steve Rogers," Spock said, in what Tony guessed was his customary way of including someone in a conversation. "It is only Ms. Romanoff whom the Captain and I require at this time."

"I don't care," Steve answered somewhat mulishly, now standing beside Romanoff, who had lifted a delicate eyebrow at him as if daring to question her ability to handle anything. "If it's something that affects us, I want to be there to. Maybe I can help, maybe I can't, but she's not going in alone."

Something in Romanoff's posture seemed to... soften, when she glanced at Steve. It was, well, it was a new look on her, and it was maybe sort of freaking Tony out. What the hell had gone on between those two before they'd defrosted him?

He was so making them spill the beans about that, just as soon as whatever crisis of the hour was over.

"Kodak moment," he mumbled to Barton, who flicked him in the arm for his trouble.

"Acceptable," Spock said after a stretch, sort of throwing Tony for a loop. Maybe he'd been expecting alien-guy to argue, but, that was, well. A deliberated decision. Not an argument.

"Really?" Steve asked, like he'd been expecting the same thing.

"Indeed. Ms. Romanoff?" Spock settled his gaze on hers once more.

"Give communicators to all of us with secure frequencies and I'll see what I can do to help with your problem," she said, and hell yes. God. Tony loved this woman in a very platonic and not getting his balls sliced off way. Communicator? Future-speak for cell-phone. Radio. Whatever.

Gold mine.

After another short round of staring—creepy deliberation, whatever—Tony followed Spock's steps as he walked over to the replicator in the room and Spock's fingers literally blurred over the input pad. Tony tried not to look too interested, but, well. Tech.

In short order, four identical little grayish devices appeared in the slot, and Spock retrieved them. But wasn't that a food replicator? Had he just—? Oh, he had. Alien guy had just straight up hacked the replicator and made it do something it probably wasn't supposed to do.

Now there was a brain worth picking.

One by one, Spock quickly and methodically entered some kind of commands or coding and placed each of them on the table. Tony couldn't be sure from his vantage point, and struggled not to fly out of the chair and stand on tip-toe over the dude's shoulder while he worked.
Apparently finished, Spock laid the communicators out on the table.

"Each of these communicators is programmed with the private frequencies of the others, as well as those of myself, Captain Kirk and the all-broadcast emergency frequencies available to all ship passengers and personnel. Please to not abuse the latter three, as we are currently in the midst of what may be a crisis situation requiring the full attention of the bridge crew and all subordinate crewmembers. A tutorial for proper operation is available on your secured PADDs, which I suggest reviewing before usage."

There might have been a puddle of drool beneath Tony's face, for all he knew. Whatever it was Romanoff and Steve were off to do, he hoped they'd be okay, but at the moment... god, tech. He wanted to get his hands on it, like, two centuries ago.

"That's it? Seriously?" Tony asked, swiping a communicator into his hands and flipping it open. Who cared if it looked like a bad Nokia from the early 2000s? He'd build a better one once he knew how it worked.

"Indeed," Spock answered, though for all Tony knew he was dancing a jig because his face was intent on the device in front of him.

With a sigh that Tony didn't acknowledge, Steve started to talk.

"You okay with this, Natasha?"

Tony saw Romanoff retrieve two of the communicators from the corner of his eye, then stare at it more intently as all of them buzzed to life at the same time.

A moment passed, and Tony waited while Barton snatched his, and even Spock pulled out his own communicator.

"knock knock," Spock read aloud, and Tony had to fight to keep a straight face. "From whom did this originate?"

Barton groaned aloud and whipped another Spork at Tony's head.

Seriously, where the hell did Cupid keep getting them?

"You know, Steve, I'm beginning to think it might have been a bad idea, actually," Romanoff answered Steve's earlier question.

"Please tell me you didn't send that to the entire crew," Steve said, voice strained.

"Dunno," Tony shrugged, unconcerned, fingers tapping anyway at the communicator's interface. "Might've been a 'reply all' situation."

In the aftermath of his, admittedly, lame joke, some sort of silent communication, perhaps a reprimand in his general direction, must have happened—who knows, it could have been out loud—while he was immersed in the comm, because he was just going to call it a comm. It's what they'd always said before, because when he looked up, Barton and he were alone in the room.

"Oh, good, the babysitters are gone," Tony perked up, pocketing the device.

Barton raised an eyebrow at him.

"Feel like getting into some trouble?" Tony asked, as innocent an expression on his face as he could
A moment passed in which he wasn't sure if Barton was going to rat him out, throw a spork at his eyeball or stare him into submission.

"What did you have in mind?"

Tony grinned.

Rubbing a hand across his brow, Steve wondered exactly how they'd manage to end up in such a complicated situation.

"How much time, exactly, did you say we had before we're going to be at this... Starbase?" He asked, slowly, because he was used to screwing up terminology. He hoped that they would forgive him for it. Mostly he didn't want to be corrected for the thousandth time.

Thankfully, no one did.

"About two hours, unless Chekov works some more navigational magic," the Captain answered. It was maybe a little bit odd to be around an actual Captain, not just in rank but in title, as in he was actually the Captain of a vessel and not a squad of super powered misfits.

"One hundred thirty-three minutes and fifty seconds," Spock corrected. Steve didn't miss the annoyed set of Captain Kirk's lips, or the roll of his eyes.

"Right, so, not much time," Steve said, cutting off whatever retort Kirk might have made.

"That's not really a great timeline for covert work, Captain," Natasha said. "Especially given that you know pretty much nothing, especially not who you can trust. There are over four-hundred people on this ship."

"Hey," Kirk said, "I know who I can trust. That just happens to be a smaller pool that the people that I don't exactly... know," he trailed off. Steve looked at him askance. "It's a big crew, okay? And I haven't gotten the chance to know everyone personally. Besides, I'm asking you to consult, not take action. We're trying to, I don't know, put ourselves in this guy's shoes, or whatever. If whoever is informing is good at what they do, I figure I wouldn't know anyway, right?"

Natasha and Steve met each other's eyes, a silent communication that didn't go unnoticed. Steve didn't pretend not to know which memories she was thinking of, which other situation had been similar to this on an organizational level.

"The first thing you need to understand, Captain. Spock," Natasha addressed both of them, "Is that no one is beyond reproach. Beyond the two of you and us, apparently," she added on. "You don't actually know who you can trust."

Kirk gave her a blank stare for a moment, probably processing that.

Steve waited for the backlash.

"Hey, no, there are definitely people beyond reproach," Kirk argued. "Bones, for one."

"I agree. Doctor McCoy has neither the skills nor the personality for such underhanded operation," Spock added, somewhat to Steve's surprise.
Natasha shrugged, like it wasn't a big deal.

"Okay, yeah, you can probably put McCoy in the trust column, but that still leaves a lot of openings," she paused, and Steve could see the gears turning. "The skill set you say is required for the evidence you've recovered," she directed at Spock. "Is that something that can be hidden or purged from a record?"

A moment passed in which Spock looked neither like he was thinking nor breathing, before answering. "Not precisely. It is possible for someone to attain such a level through personal study, but each Federation ship has its own nuances with regard to hard wiring and code modified over time. It is highly unlikely that an amateur, even one surpassing my own skill—also unlikely—would be able to accomplish the scrubbing and surveillance apparent in this person's activities over the past five days without leaving traces of investigation or diagnostics."

"And those couldn't be obscured by routine computer maintenance or other events requiring such diagnostics?" Natasha asked.

Spock opened his mouth briefly, then shut it again.

"Shit, Spock," Kirk said, after a moment, pinching the bridge of his nose. Steve had been thinking the man looked tired, but now he looked positively exhausted. "We did a eval and reinstallation of the communications programs before we went out."

Natasha narrowed her gaze.

"Who ordered it?"

"I did," Kirk emphasized. "But Uhura—my communications officer—she wanted everything running like new before we went out here to minimize interference and put her own frequency protocols in place so we'd have a clean line on anything coming through the neutral zone."

"Is she on your list of trusted people?" Natasha asked, frankly.

"She is," Spock answered, surprising them all. "Lieutenant Uhura would not do anything to jeopardize the safety of this crew or the ship."

"You can't know that for sure," Natasha said, before Steve could soften the blow.

"The hell we can't," Kirk hissed. "She's been with me since before day one. She's not the informant," he growled.

A moment of tension hung in the air, and Steve almost felt bad for speaking up, but he'd experienced this before.

"People can be made to do all sorts of things if the right buttons are being pressed," he said.

"Not my people," Kirk shot back, looking angry.

"He's right," Natasha said. "Leverage can be a powerful thing, especially if whoever is informing on what's going on doesn't actually know the extent of what their information is being used for. It's a pretty standard extortion technique. They might not even be a bad person, necessarily," Natasha shrugged minutely. "Just blackmailed."

A moment of tense silence hung in the room.
"Captain, they make a valid point," Spock said.

"I don't care if it's valid!" Kirk blurted. "I've had it up to here—" Kirk placed his hand flat at eye level, "—with trusting people and being screwed for it," he looked directly at Spock, and if Steve wasn't mistaken, there was a thing there. "I can't—" he started, then pinched the bridge of his nose, sinking down into a chair and taking a deep breath. "I can't run a ship without trusting my crew. I can't do that. It's hard enough trying to do..." he waved a hand in Spock's direction, squinting in his direction, "...this."

"Are you in adequate health?" Spock asked, but Steve was still a little stuck on the dynamic that had just been revealed to them. There was something going on here, something personal.

It was none of his business, but then again, he'd been asked to put his faith in these men, so it kind of was.

Opting to stay out of it for now, he just observed. Spock's question was a valid one; the Captain—Kirk—he didn't look good.

"Oh, yeah, I'm great, Spock. Thanks for asking," Kirk snarled back without looking at him. "I haven't slept in almost two days, I have a headache that won't quit, and someone on this ship is spying on us and there's a spy who's not spying on us that we're trying to get to spy on the spy who's actually spying!" He blurted, voice rising at the end, pulling his hands away from his face to place them flat on the table. "And it could be anyone! Do I look like I'm anywhere close to adequate health?"

"Given the information on your state of exhaustion and admitted cephalgia, your appearance is one of several factors that would indeed indicate evidence to the contrary," Spock answered. It would have sounded snarky, insulting and positively insensitive if not for the completely deadpan delivery and lack of anything but sincerity in his tone.

The murderous look on Kirk's face, however, implied that he'd taken offense anyway.

"Okay, let's just get back to the matter at hand," Steve interjected before a screaming match could derail them further. "You've told us what's going on, but what is it you want Natasha to do, exactly?"

"We require her insight, and she has provided us with some already," Spock answered, seemingly dropping the matter of his Captain's ailment for the moment. Kirk still had a sour look on his face, but he held his peace.

"I need information," Natasha said, heading straight for the point. "An ongoing supply of it. I'm good, but I'm only as good as the resources I have with a limited time span. This isn't going to happen by the time we get to this confrontation you're flying to, but," she said, pausing to look at Kirk, "I can help you figure out who you can trust outright, first, if you want."

Something like relief formed in Kirk's posture.

"That's not to say that ruling someone out means bringing them into the fold," she cautioned. "The more people who know about a mole without knowing who they are will scare them off. Probably stop them from doing anything that would flush them out. The first thing that would put me off is people behaving out of the ordinary without an obvious explanation."

Kirk's grimace and sidelong glare at Spock could not be missed even if Steve hadn't been paying attention.

"A spy running scared is pretty hard to find, especially an amateur," Natasha continued. "Amateurs
don't have training, usually don't have back-up plans, and if they're being extorted, they're probably not getting any support; they'll stop what they're doing completely. But if they're confident that no one is on to them, you can keep following breadcrumbs."

"This sucks," Kirk said after a moment, palming his forehead.

"So does being frozen for two centuries and waking up with a bullet in your lung," Steve said, more harshly than he'd intended.

Kirk looked momentarily taken aback by the comment.

Trying to find a way to backtrack, Steve didn't really have any way to actually improve the conversation, so he gave up.

"Look, Captain Kirk," he started. "Right now, you, Spock, and Doctor McCoy are the only people I trust outside of my team, and that's because Natasha has said that I can trust you. That means that your problems are my problems, because supposedly you're our ticket to freedom." Steve didn't articulate how dubious he actually felt about that idea. "So if you want our help—Natasha's help—you're going to have to do it her way. Take it from someone who knows," Steve said, not with a little hint of chagrin as he sent Natasha a significant look. "Natasha is the best at this espionage thing. Clint's not far behind. You do things her way and you'll find your mole."

The tension in the room was whipcord tight, like a noose around his neck, waiting for someone to release the trap door and hang him. Steve waited, posture confident and unmoving.

"Well," Kirk breathed, slumping in defeat. "That is why we asked you to come here, isn't it?" He asked, not directed at anyone in particular. "Okay. Fine. We'll do things your way. But we don't have a lot of time to get you started before shit out there hits the fan. I'm neglecting my duties as it is," he said, gesturing toward the small door and the bridge beyond. "So you tell me what kind of information dump I can give you to get started and we'll go from there once the Enterprise has kicked whoever's ass needs kicking."

Spock seemed ready to object, but Kirk held up a hand.

"My ship, Spock. You're the one who kept me out of this, and now it's my call what we do to fix it. You don't like it? Hand me your resignation," he said coldly, and some missing pieces started to slot into place.

Dissent in the ranks. Wonderful. How did they end up in this situation, again?

"Very well," Spock conceded, without alluding to which statement he was answering.

Kirk seemed stunned for a moment before Spock continued. "I will defer to your judgment on this. I will assist Ms. Romanoff and whomever she deems fit to include in the task of gathering information in the limited time available to us, if you will grant me leave from my duties until our arrival at Starbase twenty-four."

Steve watched Kirk blink for a moment, like he'd had some kind of tirade ready on his lips but it didn't have anywhere to go in the face of Spock's calm, logical assertions.

"Granted," Kirk said, at length, and Spock nodded, turning to he and Natasha.

"Mr. Rogers, Ms. Romanoff, if we may return to your suite, we can begin," he said.

"Um," Steve said, looking at Natasha, who just offered a shrug.
"Fine by me. But if your hands go anywhere near a computer, you can be sure Stark is going to be a
second shadow," she cautioned Spock, and Steve winced at the memory of Tony's hungry gaze
when the man had been programming the communicators. "You should probably be prepared for
that," Natasha paused. "Not that anyone is ever really prepared for Tony Stark around new
technology."

"I am experienced in the human tendency to invade one's personal space and intrude on the efficient
completion of tasks. I am confident that his presence will not perturb me."

Steve shared a brief look with Natasha in which both of them managed to raise the same sceptical
eyebrow.

"Commander, you should never underestimate Tony's capacity to perturb people," Steve said
gravely.

"Nor should you underestimate the extent of Vulcan patience," Spock replied placidly.

Oh, dear. How did that paradox go, again? What happens when an unstoppable force meets an
immovable object?

"This should be good," Natasha muttered.

Chapter End Notes

I do apologize for making you all wait another week. I had a brief, ill advised stint with
a job this summer that pretty much shredded my sleep schedule and desire to do
anything but watch Supernatural, but that's done now, so, yay? This chapter got long, so
it's been split. CH 13 will be up when I've made some edits and revisions--but soon!
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Jim is totally over the frozen people on his ship, Spock's Stark experience gets postponed because Clint and Tony have shitty plans, and Natasha will never admit to thinking the word 'shenanigans'.

Chapter Notes

Translations in the end notes.

"This better work," Clint mumbled to Stark, before uttering an exaggerated groan and clutching his hand to the thigh in which he'd been shot.

And hey, it actually did hurt, so there was something to build on, here.

"Is he okay?" The woman in the red shirt who'd been staking out their room asked, leading them to the Sickbay.

"Does he look like he's okay?" Stark snarled in the woman's face, and Clint was a little impressed with how convincing he was.

Clint moaned again for effect.

"Can we pick up the pace a little? I'd rather his leg not fall off or something," Stark said pointedly, and the woman indeed moved faster, perhaps to distance herself from Clint judging by the wary glance she shot him over her shoulder.

Ahead of them, their babysitter’s back turned, Clint rolled his eyes, shooting Stark a judgmental look.

Stark flicked Clint's ear, prompting Clint to elbow the man in the gut for his trouble. Hey, he may be stuck in a floating chair, but he was not going to take Stark's crap sitting down.

The hiss of breath that Stark let out from Clint elbowing him caused the security woman to glance back at them again, checking and re-checking the two of them and her surroundings. A grunt she may be, but at least she had a bit of training, even if she was putting too much stock in the unverified injuries of her charge. Clint maybe felt a little bit bad for being part of what would probably be an impending display of abject contrition to her superiors when she ‘lost’ one of them.

"Are you okay?" She asked, eyeing Stark's bandaged arms and the bulge beneath his shirt, turning them down a corridor.

"Fine," Stark snapped back, refraining from any more pinching. Smart man. "Just hurry the fuck up."

They entered through the doors of the Sickbay that Clint remembered—he'd probably have been able
to get them there on their own, even stoned he had a pretty good memory for places. Force of habit—and the security woman immediately started shouting for a doctor.

Just as McCoy appeared from an office not far from the entrance, Clint went for it.

He let out a very convincing yell of pain, pressing his palm down into his thigh for some inspiration, and fuck—that really did actually hurt. Kind of a lot.

_Aww, leg._

“Hey man, are you alright?” Stark asked, hearing the lower grunt that Clint uttered as he gentled the hand on his thigh.

“Shut the fuck up and go when you get the chance. I’ll provide your fucking distraction,” he mumbled, before moaning aloud again, _real_ pain powering the deception.

“What in the hell?” McCoy asked, jogging to a stop beside Clint’s chair, his tricorder already out.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know, he was looking peaky and then _wham,_” Stark gestured. “Yelling and pain and floating chairs to your _Sickbay,_” he pronounced the word sarcastically, and really, Clint was up to his ears with Stark’s shit, anyway. May as well utilize that to sell it.

“Stark, I will shoot you,” Clint said through clenched teeth, hissing his breath and calling on all of his many memories of being in actual severe pain. To make his vitals convincing enough for McCoy to keep him here, he’d pretty much have to induce a panic attack.

Maybe this had been kind of a shitty plan, he thought, when his heart started pounding in his ears.

“My leg,” Clint gasped, trying to direct McCoy’s focus, who was zeroing in on where Clint’s broken rib had been.

“Okay,” McCoy said, waving a Nurse over. “Stark, let go of his chair, I need him in a biobed.”

Blood was rushing in Clint’s ears as his self-inflicted panic attack started to settle in. Suddenly his chest _did_ seem to be more of the problem, a growing tightness making it hard to breathe.

“Stark…” Stark started, having relinquished control of his chair but now hovering as he was led to a biobed.

“N’avez-vous pas quelque part pour être?” Clint panted out, eyes roving frantically over the doctor and throng of medical staff beginning to crowd him in and hoping that the comment was subtle enough not to arouse suspicion if the translator picked it up, but on point enough that Stark would take the hint and get on with it. Apparently Stark spoke several languages, but French was the only one Clint could think of at the moment.


“You,” McCoy stuck his head up for a moment, and Clint was sure he saw Stark tense as he sidled away, but the doctor was looking at the security officer that had been with them. “Out. He’s under medical supervision, now. He doesn’t need a babysitter,” the doctor snarled.

“Doctor—”

“Lieutenant,” the doctor growled back, and the woman flinched at the tone. Clint guessed that
McCoy was ranked higher by the involuntary reaction. Natasha hadn’t said as much, but he didn’t need the Black Widow and the full force of a logistics team to figure shit out, fuck you very much.

“Out!” McCoy said, waving his free hand in a shooing motion, and, taking advantage of the moment, Clint began to writhe on the biobed, setting off a few alarms.

When he chanced a look toward the retreating form of the security officer, Tony was gone.

Good, now he could panic in peace.

“OW,” he said, when the doctor stuck him in the neck.

“Just some painkillers, Clint,” McCoy said. “Now let’s have a look at what those chemicals are still doing to you.”

The edges of his panic attack dulled, Clint had the wherewithal to experience chagrin when McCoy lasered away his clothing to get at his braced thigh.

“Aww, pants,” he mumbled.

Tony felt almost giddy as he made his getaway.

Well, perhaps getaway was pushing the point. He’d asked a nearby nurse if she could point him to the nearest facility, trying to put on his most nauseated face, and had received straightforward instructions for his trouble.

And as far as Ms. Babysitter knew, that was where Tony was. Clint had given him the low down on the medical holding where the tubes were being stored from what Natasha had told him during his stay. Covert work had never been Tony’s strongest… anything, really. He sucked at it. It had always been other people with the ideas and know-how to get him through anything inconspicuously. For most of his life he’d skated by with his wits and charm, and being noticed was his strong suit.

Then again, he’d had kind of a lot of practice keeping a low profile for the last half-year.

Not quite, his brain reminded him, and Tony suppressed the actual sick feeling he got by pulling up the command program on the PADD he’d toted with him from their little jail-suite.

If Tony were to say he hadn’t been multitasking while running over the whole citizenship and indefinite imprisonment/Starfleet charter shit, well, he’d be kind of telling the truth. That shit had been easy. Half an hour and he’d mowed through the important crap, run it through the translation program their esteemed elfin alien had provided for them and more or less figured out that they had de facto naturalized citizenship of United Earth—and wasn’t that still weird to think about—and that technically Starfleet couldn’t detain them, not if they didn’t do anything worth detainment.

Or if somebody came up with something worth detainment. Like, say… Steve’s ‘augmentation’, Tony’s arc reactor, Clint’s blood poisoning or Bruce’s gamma problem.

They might be screwed, but at least now he knew what they could do about it and, well, he’d been playing with code ever since.

Jail-breaking the PADD had been the easy part. It was so easy he figured the things were probably designed as a singular model with rudimentary programming in place to prevent temporary guests from having a go at all their classified data. Or at least things with which people without the proper authorization and training should not be tampering.
Probably would have taken someone else a couple days, but the beauty of the future was its simplicity, it seemed. The coding language that they were using was… elegant. Streamlined. He’d actually paused long enough to read through a scientific journal that detailed the involvement of Vulcan computing and its influence on Starfleet computers—computers across the Federation, now—and had to concede that it made sense that a non-human brain had had a hand in making this so easy on him.

But then again, that was the part where the Stark genius came into play. His brain was as far from human as people ever got, and he was proud of it. Need to hack into a locking mechanism secured by beautiful, elegant programming that will trigger ship-wide lockdowns when accessed without authorization? Take the Stark way out. Make it dirty.

Tony spared a thought of gratitude for how well protected Bruce—and his tech—was before ruthlessly cutting through the authorization system and slipping into the room in the seconds he had before someone would probably walk by.

Without giving himself a chance to hesitate over Bruce’s still silently running tube, Tony quickly approached his own tube and reached his hand inside the curved lip where his feet had been.

After fumbling for half a minute with the buttons and touch-pad, Tony swore and viciously withdrew his arm. He latched his teeth into the fabric and began tearing into the bandages of his right hand. His skin felt raw. New, like it had been submerged in hot water for far too long. He ignored the discomfort as he flexed his fingers and worked off the bandaging of his left as well. If he was going to do this, he may as well do it full tilt. Let it never be said that Tony did not go all the way when trying to accomplish something important.

Free of the hampering cloth, Tony put his sensitive fingers back to work and tapped away at the pad without looking. His tube was, for all intents and purposes other than his own, dead. The arc reactor within it had shut down and it would never work again. He’d made sure of that. It was irreversible. But the programming inside of it… well, that was still accessible. Dormant, but there.

The problem was he was dealing with two incompatible programming languages two centuries and an alien species—probably more than one—removed from anything he’d written. It had taken a minute of extemporaneous thought when he’d been perusing some archived data, but he figured that if he created an isolated portal for a data dump directly into the memory drive of the PADD he’d been given, he could create an impromptu flash-drive that was wholly disconnected from whatever mainframe Starfleet or anyone else might want to use, remove the drive and replace it with another before anyone figured out that he’d hoarded the information in the first place.

Patching an uplink with both hands, one in the tube and one on the PADD, Tony cast a glance at Bruce’s cryotube and hoped it would work. If he was going to stay safe and sane long enough to get his friend out of there, well. Tony could use everything he had, or would have, at his disposal.

Silent minutes passed while the data downloaded, and Tony waited impatiently, every second expecting that someone would burst into the room and haul him off, corrupting the data for good.

But with a miraculous glow of a completed uplink and successfully retrieved data, Tony stared at the PADD in his hands for a few long seconds and was actually, thoroughly impressed with his own genius.

So, that had worked.

Scrabbling at the casing of the PADD, Tony pried it open and retrieved the data drive. He didn’t even bother trying to encrypt it, any attempt at something like that would probably screw him as
much as help him. Genius or not, Tony hadn’t had nearly enough time to get to know these codes like he should, but, when an opportunity presents itself and all that.

With a careful movement of his hypersensitive hand, Tony removed the arc reactor and lifted it slightly away from his body beneath his shirt. As far as his limited ability to experiment had informed his knowledge, Tony had about a minute without the arc reactor directly attached before the charge was lost and he was in deep shit.

Sticking two fingers into the cavity of his chest, Tony stashed the slim data drive in a tiny pocket that served no other purpose than precisely that reason—to hide shit—and quickly reattached his life-preserving night-light.

Expelling a breath of relief at the weight of the reactor in his chest, even though nothing bad had actually happened, Tony straightened and looked at the door.

Well, now was the part where he hoped he’d get out and back to somewhere inconspicuous before people accused him of things and checked security footage.

Maybe he and Clint hadn’t thought quite so far ahead in their plan for that.

Tucking the now useless PADD under his arm, Tony cracked the door and peered out. Seeing and hearing nothing that would compromise the first part of his escape, he bolted out of the medical cargo and glanced behind him, pleased to see the door whoosh shut and the tiny light move from green to red as it reengaged the full extent of the security that the alien First Mate had probably designed himself.

Tony really, really needed to pick this guy’s brain.

He’d made it into a corridor outside of the medical wing when he felt a slight rumble beneath his feet. Stopping still, like maybe it had been his fault, Tony was almost relieved to see some red-shirted security people rushing in a different direction and paying him entirely no heed.

The ridiculous translator device they’d attached to all of their hips for the sake of communication patched him through to an irritated snippet of one scaly looking alien to a dark-skinned human beside her.

“Why is it always engineering?” The first one groused, not even looking in Tony’s direction where he stood in the cross-section of two corridors. “You guys all seem to be trying for an early death.”

“As if you should talk!” The man beside her said, their voices beginning to fade away. “At least we have the excuse of hostile aliens and not…”

“Drake, seriously—”

The remainder of the conversation faded away down the corridor, but Tony’s tech-lust had been activated, and not only that, he may have found the perfect excuse to prevent anyone from looking into where exactly he’d really been when he’d escaped medical supervision.

Engineering. Tony felt a grin spread over his face, and walked after the two officers with all the confidence and purpose he’d ever had going into something he had no right and authority to actually do. And if no one questioned him while he stared intently at a blank PADD that no-one could actually see while he made his way there, well… maybe some things had changed, but not that much.

Even while his sensitive fingers protested their premature exposure, Tony just grinned to himself as
the corridor opened up into a wide, narrow bridge and balcony over a massive, sprawling complex of completely foreign mechanical workings that must be keeping this *Starship* traveling safely at faster than light-speed.

A harried, thickly accented voice carried up to him where he’d paused in the middle of the bridge, the tenor beleaguered and frantic. Tony spotted a man in a floppy beanie and goggles bobbing around his neck jogging to and fro between two enormous looking...things—god, Tony couldn’t even identify them and it was *awesome*—and watched him for a minute.

A stupid, stupid plan formed in his mind.

Walking forward with the influx of personnel entering from the corridor behind him, Tony figured that, hell, it wasn’t like he’d had many good plans lately, anyway.

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*Shit,* was Natasha’s first thought when they entered the suite, but it was Steve who actually said it.

“Shit.”

Taking in the empty room and conspicuously missing Avengers, Natasha could only sigh in agreement.

“How long do you think they waited after we left?” Steve added, when neither she nor Spock said anything in response to his uttered curse.

“Knowing Stark, however long it took for him to notice we were gone. Commander,” she turned to face the Vulcan. “I believe we may have a problem.”

“If you are referring the whereabouts of Mr. Stark and Mr. Barton, I need only consult one of the ship’s computers to access their communicator signal.”

Somehow, Natasha didn’t think it would be that easy. The look she shared with Steve confirmed his equally dubious belief in the simplicity of such a solution, but figured it was worth a try. Maybe Tony *had* actually been looking at political documents and immigration law instead of playing with the coding of his PADD.

“Be my guest, then,” she said, indicating the darkened screen of the console across the room.

After maybe a minute and a half, Spock straightened from his slight bend over the console to turn back to them, brows raised in what might have been admiration if she hadn’t known better.

“It appears that the remote location protocols in their communicators are inactive,” he paused, cocking his head slightly at Natasha and Steve. “As are those in yours. I do not know how it was done, considering I programmed your communicators myself without error.”

“Pretty sure of yourself, there, Commander,” Steve said dryly.

“I need not be sure of myself when I know unequivocally that the communicators in question were programmed accurately and fully functional when we departed.”

“It was Stark,” Natasha said, trying to keep a surge of fond exasperation at bay. She did not need to be impressed with his shenanigans right now, and for that matter, ever let on that she had ever thought the word shenanigans with any seriousness inside her own head. “He’s probably had at least half an hour with both the comm and access to coding and software manuals. You should be grateful that turning off the locater is all he’s done.”
“Yet,” Steve mumbled. “We should… probably find them,” he sighed.

“While our time would be more usefully spent on the matter for which he had originally come here, I do agree that locating Mr. Stark and Mr. Barton is of a higher priority. Commander Spock to Lieutenant Astrid,” the Vulcan said into his communicator.

“Astrid here,” the Lieutenant’s voice came over the comm, and if she’d lost Stark and Barton, she sounded remarkably composed about it.

“What are the current whereabouts of Tony Stark and Clint Barton?” He asked.

“Mr. Barton is in Sickbay,” she answered first, and Natasha narrowed her eyes at the device in Spock’s hand, resisting an unprofessional urge to stop listening to the conversation and bolt for the Sickbay then and there. “He was having some kind of problem with his leg and, well, he’s here and I…” she broke off, and Natasha could hear the muted sound of McCoy’s annoyed shouting in the background. “He’s fine.”

Well, that sounded like a load of bullshit, but well-slung if she knew Clint’s ability to cause a distraction.

“And what of Mr. Stark?” Spock prompted.

“Oh, he’s just—” The Lieutenant broke off midsentence, and a meaningful silence extended over the comm link.

Steve’s frame tensed, prepared for the inevitable blow.

“…gone,” Astrid finished, her voice now definitely forlorn and filled with trepidation.

“Explain,” Spock said tersely.

“I—he went to the restroom while Mr. Barton was being examined and I—it appears that I failed to recognize he was attempting to… escape.”

Spock didn’t miss a beat as he signaled both she and Steve as he walked directly back out of the door through which they’d come in.

“Please remain in the Medical Bay. I will be there in two point six minutes with Ms. Romanoff and Mr. Rogers, at which point you will provide a full account of the events and I will determine the extent of disciplinary action necessary.”

“Yes, sir,” came Astrid’s voice, and though it had the edge of shame to it, wasn’t as despondent as some of the agents she’d known when facing down Maria Hill after similar fuck-ups. She’d met Astrid during her tenure as Natasha’s watch-dog both in the Sickbay and secured quarters, and while she was young, seemed to have her head screwed on right.

Besides, Stark had managed to evade both she and Coulson in the past when he had a mind to be somewhere or do something. This rookie hadn’t stood a chance against the combined efforts of a single-minded Tony Stark and bored Clint Barton, if that was what this was about.

Following Spock at his brisk pace to the turbo-lift that would take them to Sickbay and Barton’s inevitable admission of a half-baked plan, she figured that they’d find out soon enough.

There was something really, really wrong with Clint that he found the way McCoy berated him was
comforting, rather than annoying. It was so incredibly like the times that he’d ended up in medical with Fury or Coulson—Steve, one time—giving him shit for throwing himself off of a building or using a parked car to cushion his landing instead of calling for backup.

Apparently, though he’d initially faked the pain, the little stunt he’d pulled throwing him into a panic attack and flooding his system with adrenaline had actually triggered a secondary response from the poison he’d had in his system. It was something that nobody ever would have caught, before, and definitely not something that they would have caught until an inopportune moment when fight or flight would render him useless. And dead.

God, the people who’d engineered this shit had been real bastards. Smart fucking bastards, but bastards nonetheless.

So, Clint lay in the biobed and stared at the muted, bluish lighting above him, trying to be still because holy shit he was so high. But it wasn’t really a good kind of high. He’d had those. He knew them. This was sloppy drugged in medical—sorry, Sickbay—without someone he trusted there to watch his back.

–“You know, I seriously thought Stark was kidding about the whole ‘huge bag of weed’, thing.”

“The other guy likes it.”

Clint paused, coughing partly in surprise and partly because of the huge rip he’d just taken from Bruce’s nondescript water-pipe.

“There’s… there’s some kind of a joke about irony and the color green in here somewhere, but I’m way too fucking blitzed to figure out what it is.”

“Lightweight.”

“Hey man, not cool. I haven’t smoked since before hipsters were growing hydroponic weed in their closets.”

Bruce took a smooth, expert hit from the pipe, holding it in his lungs without any of the bravado he’d seen in the assholes who used to pass joints around in the circus. Clint watched the smoke gently billow out from his nostrils.

“That’s—surprising,” he said, on the tail end of his exhale.

“Why?” Clint asked, melting into couch, wondering if maybe there was something about him that screamed ‘recreational drug user’, but not taking offense.

“I don’t know,” Bruce shrugged, setting the pipe aside. “I just figured that, going after drug lords and all that, doing the spy thing, it would be an—” Bruce lifted a hand in a seesawing motion, searching for the word.

“Occupational hazard?” Clint supplied with a grin.

“Yeah.”

“Well, most of the time I shoot the drug lords from afar, and usually they sell cocaine or meth, not weed,” Clint said. “Plus, bad idea to get fucked up on an op. Gotta fake it, man. Only times I’ve been stoned in the past decade or so weren’t really my idea, you know?”

Bruce looked contrite. “Shit, I’m sorry.”
“Nah,” Clint waved a hand, the bud quieting the demons he knew lurked beneath the surface. Heh. There probably was something to getting stoned being therapeutic for the Hulk. “Don’t sweat it. This is… nice,” Clint finished.

“Yeah. Thanks for, uh, hanging out?” Bruce finished, awkwardly. How he still managed awkward with how high he must be one of his other superpowers. “It’s nice to have the company.”

“You mean Stark hasn’t been hounding you to get him stoned since day one?”

“Oh, he has,” Bruce chuckled. “But I can tell he’s the kind to get hyperactive. Not that I’d begrudge him, or anything, but,” he shrugged.

“That’s not why you do this.”

“Pretty much.”

“Well, hey, glad to be of service,” Clint said, tossing a lazy salute and ending up smacking himself in the face.

Bruce burst out laughing, before clapping a hand over his mouth, his eyes glassy and crinkled while his shoulders shook silently.

Clint managed half a glare before he too was giggling. When he caught his breath, he leaned back into the couch, staring at the ceiling and feeling the world gently sway around him, genuinely relaxed for the first time in… a long time.—

“Barton.”

Clint slowly turned his head to give Natasha glassy, wide-eyed look, blinking slowly at her. “‘Sup?”

“Besides you?” She asked, arms folded in a posture of amused disapproval.

“Oh, I’m waaaaay up,” Clint said, but grimaced instead of grinning. Maybe it wasn’t morphine, but whatever future drugs McCoy had pushed into him were certainly doing their job. His limbs weren’t numb exactly, but he wasn’t actually sure he was in charge of their movements.

He heard Natasha’s quiet sigh, but didn’t realize how close she was until he felt her hand on his head, pushing wayward strands of hair away from his forehead.

“You’re an idiot,” she said, and he felt a little better.

“Blame Stark,” he mumbled.

“Oh, I do. But this is definitely partially your fault for going along with it,” she paused. “McCoy tells me that there was a secondary reaction to the poison.”

Clint was silent for a moment. “Not part of the plan.”

“I figured as much,” she said.

Clint nodded, but when the world started to spin again, he closed his eyes and flopped a hand over his face with a pathetic noise.

“Hat’s sich gelohnt?” Natasha asked, and Clint wasn’t sure he wanted to smile or cry. Ever since the op in Liechtenstein, German had been their go-to language for tell me what’s wrong and don’t lie because I will hurt you if you don’t spill the beans. It was why it had been the first profanity out of
his mouth when he’d woken up earlier today.

God. This had all happened today.

“Höchstwahrscheinlich,” he answered. “Kommt darauf an, ob Stark was er tun gemusst gemacht hat, ohne sich verfangen lassen.”

“Es hat sich also doch gehöhnt,” she said, and Clint spied the quirk of her lips.

“Kein Scheiß?”

“Nur das, wovon du voll bist,” she said, poking him none-to-gently in the temple.

“Sie beide merken, dass sie nicht die einzige Leute, die Deutsch verstehen, ja?” Steve asked, and Clint realized he’d been standing just a few feet behind Natasha, observing the whole thing. He and Natasha both raised their eyebrows at him.

“Zweiten Weltkrieg? Deutschland? Kommt’s einem bekannt vor?” Steve said, his accent a little off, but altogether pretty, well. Dated, actually, at least for German. Then again, he had learned it in the 1940s.

“Right,” Clint said. “Sorry. Drugs.”

“I noticed,” Steve said, exasperation and worry etched in his features. “Where’s Tony?”

“Uh, not here?” Clint said, peeking around Natasha. “I mean, he probably went back to the room.”

“Would we be asking if he was in the room?” Natasha said, poking him again.

“Hey, I did my part of this whole thing,” he answered. “Where he went if not there is his bus—”

Clint was cut off when they felt the ship rumble around them, a tiny yellow light ticking on just outside of the screen separating him from the rest of the Sickbay.

“What the hell?” Clint said, just before the sounds of communicators chirping and Doctor McCoy yelling reached his ears.

Spock appeared from behind the screen, tucking communicator into his belt.

“Mr. Rogers, Ms. Romanoff. You must return to your room. There has been an incident with the warp drive and I must return to the bridge. I have already tasked a security team with locating Tony Stark.”

“Hey, what about me?” Clint sat up on his elbows, and then immediately regretted the motion when the room turned into a merry-go-round and he had to slowly lower himself down again.

“You’re not going anywhere, Barton,” McCoy—who apparently had ears like a fucking bat—said as he scooted past the partition, out of sight. “You’re drugged to the gills and who the hell knows what kind of tertiary reactions might pop up,” he grumbled aloud as he walked past again, shouting at a Nurse to get some biobeds ready for whatever fools in engineering had managed to injure themselves.

“Fuck that,” Clint said, the obvious change in atmosphere clearing a bit of the haze from his brain, enough to remind him that he did not want to be here alone.

“I’ll stay,” Steve said. “Natasha can go with the team to help find Tony,” Steve finished, a quick
glance at her confirming that he figured whatever Clint and Tony might have been up to was something they probably didn’t want him caught out with in the open.

“Negative. In a yellow alert, all non-crewmembers are to remain in assigned quarters per safety procedure.”

Steve and Natasha argued with Spock for a minute, McCoy occasionally barking or yelling some comment at them as he bustled past. Clint was taking stock of his limbs, his brain on drugs and trying to get a read on the situation in the Sickbay.

Also, he was remembering he didn’t have pants.

“Hey, Tash,” he said, cutting off the conversation as three heads swiveled toward him. “Think you can rustle me up some pants? If I’m gonna stay here, it may as well be without my junk flapping in the breeze if I gotta get up and take a piss.”

“Barton,” Natasha started. “We’re not leaving you here by yourself,” she emphasized, knowing how he felt about drugs and medical, but he waved her off.

“I’ll be fine,” Clint said, still working on blinking away the worst of the fuzziness in his head, but dutifully not slurring his words or anything else that was embarrassing. “Just get me something to cover my ass and you two can head back to the nest. I’ll catch you up later. Besides, I’m sure the team won’t have any trouble finding Stark and hauling him and his new toys back in one piece.”

Natasha narrowed her eyes at him, and he was hoping he couldn’t be any more clear about the message he’d just given her. With tight lips, Natasha nodded once. She briefly disappeared around the screen before coming back a minute later with a bundle of black fabric in her arms, tossing it at his head, obviously annoyed, but going along with it, she grabbed Steve by the arm to indicate they were leaving.

“Hey, what about—”

“He says he’s fine, he’s fine,” Natasha said. Spock actually remained where he stood for a moment before following after them.

Their voices disappeared, Steve sounding argumentative but not standing a chance in the face of Natasha’s determination. The whole cover my ass thing couldn’t have been clearer, so he hoped that she’d be able to make it happen.

Not even a minute after they’d left, when Clint had fumbled his way through getting pants on and secured the communicator that Natasha had retrieved for him in an inconspicuous location, Clint was propping himself against the bed and doing some stretches to get his blood flowing when sound flooded the Sickbay.

The pained moaning of at least three separate people permeated the already bustling atmosphere of the Sickbay, and now Clint had an idea of what McCoy had been talking about when he’d said that they treated burns like Stark’s on the Enterprise fairly often. He barely glanced around the edge of his privacy screen and saw some people in singed red shirts, a few looking (and smelling) worse for wear.

The tirade had already started by the time the crewmembers had gotten themselves settled into biobeds for treatment, a few more redshirted people trickling in with more minor injuries getting their fair share of McCoy’s ire at having to treat “terminal stupidity”.

Clint watched and waited, trying not to think about how hard he would need to try to walk straight
right now, let alone do anything else, but ten minutes later when Christine Chapel poked her head past Clint’s privacy screen to check on him, he was gone.

“Scotty, what the hell is going on with my ship,” Jim said, every ounce of patience he possessed stopping him from growling the question.

“Oh, so she’s your ship. Well maybe you can bring your bloody arse down here and make the nacells do what you want them to do!”

Jim stared at his armrest, slightly bewildered, and now more than a little concerned. Scotty didn’t snap like that without a reason.

“What’s wrong?” He asked, glancing over his shoulder in the hopes that Spock had mysteriously reappeared, but he was still gone.

“What’s wrong? What’s wrong?” Scotty blustered. “I try to break the bloody laws of physics so we can haul arse across the galaxy and my poor wee cooling system threw a fit!”

Oh. That was bad.

“Shit,” Jim sighed. “What’s the damage?” He asked, almost afraid to voice the question.

“Well one of the damn intercooler interfaces in the port nacelle overloaded, and the bloody warp coil shot a nice big blast back into the engine room. I shut down the core to save the other two interfaces, but it’s nay looking good.”

“Scotty, we have to get to this starbase. There has to be a way,” Jim said, feeling the eyes of the bridge crew on him.

“Aye, I’m sure there must be.” Jim could hear Scotty’s somewhat labored breathing on the other end, and no doubt he was running everywhere trying to, maybe literally, put out fires. “I just lost four of my engineers to Doctor McCoy’s tender mercies, so I’m shorthanded, but I may be able to bolster the other two cooling interfaces in the mean time to get us moving, but I’ll have to keep power down to at most Warp 3 to prevent another overload, because then we really will go boom.”

Jim was so very tempted to tell him to do better, and sooner, but Scotty knew the score on this as much as Jim did. It would be an insult and unfair to ask him to go above and beyond when he was already doing that, and now he had at least four of his crew in Sickbay because of the demands he’d made.

“Okay. Get us moving as fast as you think is safe, and I’ll see what Chekov and I can do up here to find a better route.”

“Aye, Captain. Scott out,” and the transmission terminated.

“Chekov, we need something.”

At the brief but meaningful look his navigator shared with Sulu, Jim knew something was up.

“Well—”

“Just spit it out, Lieutenant,” he said tersely.

“We are passing near to a binary star system,” Chekov babbled, pulling up maps on the view screen. “The circumbinary planets in ze system are small and uninhabitable because of ze unpredictable
orbit, but if we fly the ship close to ze smaller sun at warp and ride ze outswing of one of ze planet’s elliptical orbits, it could propel us in ze right direction.”

Jim’s mind whirled with the information, overlaying the scenario in his head while Chekov explained and pointed to the relevant areas of the map.

“How fast?” Jim asked, finally.

“Well, um,” Chekov stammered, but made a few calculations on his console that Jim knew he didn’t actually need to do; he was just stalling. “It would put us close to Warp 5 without any additional strain on ze engines.”

“And what’s the downside?”

“If our trajectory is off, even by a few meters, we could be warping in entirely ze wrong direction,” Chekov said.

“Or crash into the sun,” Sulu added.

“Sulu,” Jim started.

“I can do it,” his helmsman said, swiveling in his chair. “Chekov already pitched this to me, I know what we have to do, and I can do it. If we’re not getting there as fast as we can, we aren’t doing our job. I’m not gonna let some merc assholes bombard a starbase because I couldn’t handle a little binary star surfing,” he grinned.

Jim fought not to grin back. “Okay. Plot the course and prepare for the maneuver. Mr. Chekov, you patch through to Scotty and let him know what’s up. That kind of gravitational whiplash is going to put some strain on the ship before we’re shot into space, and I want him to have all the information.”

Of course, that’s when Spock arrived back on the bridge.

Spock nodded to him once before approaching his chair.

“Something wrong, Commander?” Jim asked with a bit of trepidation.

“Clint Barton is once again in the Sickbay due to secondary effects of the poison in his system. Tony Stark is missing.”

If Jim had been drinking coffee, like he wanted and probably needed to be, he would have done a spit-take.

“What do you mean missing?” Jim hissed.

“His whereabouts are unknown. I believe he has disabled the locater program in his communicator, and was last seen in Sickbay when he brought Clint Barton to receive medical care. I have assembled a small security team to locate him and bring him back to their quarters, where I have left Steve Rogers and Natasha Romanoff until the yellow-alert has passed. I merely wished to inform you of the situation.”

“Fucking great,” Jim muttered. “You know what? I don’t even care. We’re knocked down to Warp 3 because of an intercooler interface SNAFU, and Chekov is about to slingshot us toward the Starbase using the gravitational pull of a binary star, so, fuck it.”

“Captain—” Spock started, disapproval clear in the set of his shoulders and tilt of his head.
“I do believe I said ‘fuck it’, Commander,” Jim said, keeping a lid on the exhausted hostility that wanted to lash out somewhere, Spock just being a convenient target. Not the time or place.

A moment of tense silence passed between them, the muted sounds of Sulu and Chekov working some magic between the only vocal interactions on the bridge.

“I shall apprise you of the situation should I myself receive an update,” Spock said curtly, and walked to his station without dismissal.

Jim closed his eyes for a moment, tempted to call down to Sickbay to get an update from Bones on the engineers and conveniently ask him to send a Nurse up with a hypo for his headache, but he was probably busy patching people up, so, as he’d said before: fuck it.

Natasha waited about five minutes after Spock dropped them off at their suite to get rid of their security babysitter—not Astrid. Watching the man scuttle off down the corridor with some fake information as to Stark’s whereabouts, and the knowledge that he’d have to deliver it in person if he wanted to avoid Stark catching wind of it and ditching them again, Natasha observed until he rounded a corner before retreating back inside the room.

“Was that really necessary?” Steve sighed. “We’re not going to win any brownie points with the Captain if we keep antagonizing his crew.”

“They’ll never know the information was fake if we find Stark first, so yes. It was necessary.”

Watching Steve’s brow furrow for a moment, he opened his mouth and then closed it again. “You’re kidding,” he said.

“Nope,” she answered, lingering by the door.

“There’s an engineering crisis and you want us to go look for Tony? You barely know your way around this place! It could be dangerous! And what if someone catches us?”

She barely resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “You really think Kirk will be that surprised that we’re a pain in the ass? I know McCoy won’t be.”

“Yes, well, he did have the pleasure of your company while you recovered,” Steve emphasized the word. “How long did you wait before busting out of your restraints?”

Natasha shrugged, a little half-smile worming its way onto her face. “Longer than Clint did, I’ll wager.”

Steve didn’t have the chance to answer her, because she opened the door to a wide-eyed, somewhat unsteady looking Clint with a hand poised to request entry.

“You’re late,” she greeted, pulling him in and letting the door shut beside him.

Clint wobbled when she released him, grabbing the table for support as his injured leg tried to give out.

“I’m stoned. Give a guy a break,” he panted.

“Clint!” Steve sputtered. “What are you doing here? You should be—”

“Sitting in medical watching the ceiling spin while some security team gets their grabby hands on whatever Stark got out of his cryotube? Yeah, not so much,” Clint said, sinking down into a chair as
he waved a pointed finger in Steve’s direction.

“So that’s what you were up to,” Natasha hummed, interested.

“Yep,” Clint confirmed. “Said the thing was dead but he could save some data. Not sure what, or how he planned on getting it from the tube to a PADD without corrupting it, but I’m sure he figured something out in the five minutes we had between leaving and getting there.”

Steve had taken a chair for himself, resting his forehead on his palms and muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “for fuck’s sake”. When he lifted his head to glare at them, he was somewhere between disappointed and irritated, but didn’t actually lecture them.

“Leaving aside the fact that it was incredibly irresponsible to risk yourselves as well as whatever data was in there to retrieve it without backup, what was your plan if he got it?”

“Find somewhere close and inconspicuous to wander off to so when Astrid found him he’d have a valid excuse for being missing,” Clint said. “But seeing as he’s currently got a search party out for his ass, I’m guessing he went with conspicuous and far away.”

“That should not be surprising to you,” Natasha said. “Inconspicuous is not part of Stark’s expansive and varied vocabulary.”

“Oh, believe me, I’m not surprised. I would have said something to Astrid about it when we were in Sickbay, but, well, this poison being a bastard wasn’t part of the plan. Neither was McCoy sending me on soma holiday*.”

Steve squinted at Clint as if he wasn’t sure he’d actually heard what he’d just heard, but his silence spoke of letting the comment go.

“That was a stupid plan,” he said, finally.

“Puts it par for normal with our track record, then,” Clint said, attempting to lean back in his chair but nearly overbalancing. Natasha put a hand out to stop him from falling backward, flicking him in the ear for his trouble.

“Ow!”

“As charming as this conversation is, the security team has a fifteen minute head start on us. We need to find him first,” Natasha stated, looking at Steve. She also needed to get started on the little project that Spock had discussed with her, but a little first-hand reconnaissance and observation wouldn’t exactly hurt.

“And just how are we supposed to do that without being apprehended and sent right back here for our trouble?” Steve snapped.

Natasha looked down at Clint, who was absently drawing an invisible picture on the table with his finger, then back to Steve, cocking her head.

Steve stared at her for a second, both of his eyebrows lifting in dawning comprehension. He narrowed them as if to say seriously? And Natasha nodded once.

Finally sensing the eyes on him, Clint looked up, pupils blown wide.

“What?” he asked, leaning away from them. “Why are you looking at me like that?”
“How’s it looking, guys?” Jim asked, leaning over Chekov’s shoulder to observe his console.

“Course is plotted, and Mr. Scott has been informed of ze plan, so he wishes to state for ze record zat any damage to ze ship will not be his fault and zat you must fix it yourself,” Chekov answered.

Laughing a little in spite of himself, Jim clapped his navigator on the shoulder. “If it gets us to the Starbase, I’ll switch places with him on the way back.”

“God help us,” Sulu muttered.

“Hey, Scotty doesn’t do half bad at the conn,” Jim replied.

“Yeah, no, I was talking about you in engineering,” Sulu said, tossing him a shit eating grin.

“Insubordination, Lieutenant,” Jim said with mock seriousness, enjoying the bit of banter with his helmsman. God, he needed the break. It was a terrible, selfish thought that warping toward a Starbase under attack was an improvement for his mood, but, it was what it was.

At least until Spock and Bones called him at roughly the same time.

“Captain, it appears our situation has escalated.”

“McCoy to Kirk.”

Closing his eyes briefly in order to not yell at one or both of them, Jim briefly held up a hand to Spock and answered Bones’ call.

“Yeah, Bones,” he said, walking away from the navigator’s station and meandering towards Spock’s.

“Barton flew the damn coop,” Bones snarled over the comm. “The man must be high as a kite and still injured, so you’d best tell that security team they’re looking for two people.”

“Oh, for fuck’s—” Jim cut himself off, holding the communicator in his fist and resisting the urge to smack it repeatedly against his forehead. “How long?”

“Captain,” Spock said again, and Jim glared at him.

“In a minute, Commander,” he said, turning slightly away.

“Couldn’t be longer than ten, twelves minutes,” Bones answered.

“I know the current whereabouts of Mr. Barton,” Spock said, firmly interrupting.

Jim whipped back around to stare at him.

“What?” He asked. “How?”

“Because the science staff on T-Deck report that Mr. Barton is currently attempting to scale the trees in the Arboretum,” Spock said.

Words failed.

Jim stood there for a second, staring, trying to comprehend how his years of training and busting his ass as a Starfleet Captain had culminated in this point.
“Captain,” Chekov called. “We are approaching ze star system.”

He could not deal with this right now.

“Bones,” He said calmly into the communicator, cutting off the doctor’s rant. “I think Spock just found him. He’s gonna take over this clusterfuck while I deal with another one. Kirk out.”

Jim flipped his communicator closed, took a deep breath, and pointed at Spock with the device. “Deal with this,” he said.

“Yes, Captain,” Spock responded, and promptly exited the bridge.

“Mr. Chekov, please make a ship-wide announcement about our impending maneuver and the safety precautions they should be taking,” Jim said, returning to his chair.

“Aye, Captain,” Chekov answered, already preparing the message.

Not stupid enough for it to go over his head that Romanoff and her buddies were up to something, Jim opened his communicator again.

“Kirk to Romanoff,” he said.

“Romanoff, I know you can hear me,” he said again, agitated.

Still nothing.

“You want to be that way?” He asked, hating how childish it made him sound. “Fine. But if anything happens to my ship because of Stark or Barton, it’s coming out of your asses,” he hissed into the communicator.

The bridge personnel dutifully ignored him, which was just as well, because he may have been in a mood to throw things.

*Fucking frozen people.*

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

“N’avez-vous pas quelque part pour être?” (French) – Don’t you have somewhere to be?


Clint, Natasha and Steve’s conversation:

“Hat’s sich gelohnt?” - Was it worth it?

“Höchstwahrscheinlich. Kommt darauf an, ob Stark was er tun gemusst gemacht hat, ohne sich verfangen lassen.” - Most likely. It depends on whether or not Stark did what he needed to do without getting caught.

“Es hat sich also doch gelohnt.” - Then I guess it was worth it.
“Kein Scheiß?” - No shit?


“Sie merken, dass sie nicht die einzige Leute, die Deutsch vertehen, ja? Zweiten Weltkrieg? Deutschland? Kommt’s einem bekannt vor?” - You both realize you’re not the only people who understand German, right? Second World War? Germany? Ringing a bell?

*Soma Holiday

In Aldous Huxley’s dystopian novel *Brave New World*, soma is a drug used by most of the characters. It has hallucinogenic effects in addition to providing the user with feelings of euphoria and relaxation. An extended period of time under the drug’s influence for recreational or recuperative purposes was referred to as a “soma holiday”. *Brave New World* was published in 1932, and so it is conceivable that Steve Rogers might have read it before or during his tenure with the US Military and subsequent “death” in 1945.

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So, think of this as Chapter 12, part two. The greater part of what was originally all Chapter 12. Thanks to my beta Kay for ongoing help!

My [tumblr](https://www.tumblr.com) is still open for any and all comers. I've mostly just been *freaking the fuck out* over all of the SDCC Avengers 2 stuff.

Comments give me life and mostly just make me happy, so leave them if you wish. Have a beautiful day, readers!
It's time the Avengers learn a hard lesson about being on Jim Kirk's ship.

Something unintelligible had sounded over the ship-wide comm, and not too long after that, Clint found himself mostly thrown from the tree in which he’d been perched.

An odd thing to find on a spaceship, that. A tree. An oak tree. But hey, he’d fought gods before and seen interdimensional portals, so. Tree on a spaceship? Pfft.

What was more troubling was the lack of ow when he hit the deck. Clint gasped for breath for a second, the wind knocked out of him, but didn’t have that familiar ache of full body pain when he’d made a rough landing.

He stared at the artificial light of the ceiling in the arboretum, glowing and spinning, before he remembered oh right. I’m stoned as shit, and lifted himself into sitting position.

A gaggle of red and blue shirted people were skirting the edges of his position, and he almost rolled his eyes at himself except for the part where they looked as thrown by the lurching of the ship as he did.

Never one not to take advantage of an opportunity, Clint climbed unsteadily to his feet and took off.

Ah yes, he was quite good at being the distraction, wasn’t he.

“Sulu!” Jim griped, tightly gripping his armrests.

His helmsman cackled briefly before pausing to take a few deep breaths.

“I did say it would get kind of bumpy, didn’t I?” Sulu said, grinning over his shoulder.

Chekov looked pale.

Jim watch Sulu punch Chekov in the arm, busting him out of the brief stupor long enough for the kid to offer a shaky grin of his own. The two shared a fist bump and Jim rolled his eyes.

“Alright, guys,” he announced to the bridge. “Check in with your departments and make sure everything is still in one piece.”

A chorus of ayes rose up on the bridge, and Jim raised Scotty on the comm.

“Aye, Scott here, ye’ bloody madman,” Scotty snarled over the comm. “If ye’ were about to ask if ’tis all good down here, then it’s not. Knocked about the inertial dampeners something good but ’tis
nothing we cannae fix in a jiff. Might be a little shaky for the next thirty minutes until I’ve got them righted.”

Small price to pay, Jim though, if it got them to the Starbase in time to help.

“And the cooling interface? The other warp coils? Can you boost us enough to get there, now?”

“Aye, I think I can. The artificial boost to our speed means that any increase we get up to where we were before will be amplified. But I’ll have to get on it myself, seeing as a handful of my best are getting a white wedding up in McCoy’s chambers. I’ve sent for some off-duty reinforcements, though I hate to deprive my minions of their rest.”

Jim almost snorted. It never ceased to amuse him how the engineers continued to create euphemisms for the regular trips to the Sickbay they made.

“We’re all feeling it, Scotty. When we’re through with this hopefully you can catch a sandwich and nap, yourself.”

“Ach, dinnae tempt a man with promises ye’ no’ intend to keep, Kirk!” Scotty said, and ended the comm.

Seriously, there was nobody who hung up on him quite like Scotty.

Jim’s PADD pinged and he pulled it out, unsurprised to find an updates from the security search party and Spock.

There were stills from the feed in the arboretum, in which Barton was suspended from the middle branches of one of the stouter trees, grinning like an idiot and wearing nothing but a pair of Sickbay scrub pants.

Jim turned his PADD sideways, sitting back in the chair.

“Huh,” he mumbled, and flicked over to Spock’s message before his mind could wander.

The short text message that Spock had sent to him informed him that he’d forwarded some necessary data to Natasha Romanoff’s PADD, but also that upon visiting their suite to confirm her start on evaluating it, she and Steve Rogers were nowhere to be found.

Fingers tightening briefly about the edges of the PADD, Jim took a deep breath in and out through his nose before releasing the device entirely and holding up his hands above his lap.

Yeah. No. He was done. Spock could handle it. He had a god damn ship to run and a Starbase to save and maybe all four of them would manage to accidentally beam themselves out of an airlock and solve all of his problems.

Jim refocused on the view screen and the reports coming in from the various departments, stuffing the PADD back into the compartment beside his chair before he could be tempted to review the stills from the arboretum again.

Tony slinked through the labyrinthine depths of the engineering deck, occasionally pulling out his communicator to stare confusedly at the weird conversation he’d managed to start with his half-baked knock-knock joke. Apparently someone on the ship had actually been interested in hearing the punchline, and from there it was all an odd blind-date-esque exercise in tech jargon.
Whoever’s attention he’d managed to grab, they were a kindred spirit, so, not bad.

At least until he bodily ran into someone and nearly knocked himself out on a… pipe thing.

“Oi, an’ who the bloody hell are you?”

“Um,” Tony said, elbowing himself off the ground, his fingers finally adjusting to the stimulus of metal and electricity that seemed to permeate in this area of the ship.

“An’ out o’ uniform, too! Ach,” the man waved his own words to the side. “Stuff it,” the man said, hauling him off the floor with an arm. “We’re down two in the propulsion augmentation, so you’re with me. I’ll no deny reinforcements when they’re provided.”

“Whoa, wait—”

“Is that questioning a superior officer, I hear?” The man said, unrelentingly tugging Tony up and down several metal flights of stairs toward their destination.

“Ah, no?” Tony ventured, trying to crane his neck backward to the orange glowy thing they’d just passed.

“Good!” Beanie guy said, “Because it’s all hands on this bloody deck after the havoc that deranged Captain has managed to wreak on my poor baby!”

Tony seriously considered bolting when the guy stopped to run his fingers along the edge of a piece of enormous machinery, but, well, he’d kind of been there before, so he wasn’t complaining.

“All right,” the guy said, as they arrived at a massive complex rosebud of glowing equipment and humming glory. Tony couldn’t take his eyes off of it.

“Aye, she’s beautiful, isn’t she?” The man said, slapping him on the back.

Tony could only nod.

“So, what did you say your name was, again?” The guy asked, pulling him forward once more as he made to climb upward to the peak of the structure.

“Stark,” he said, looking behind him for a moment before grinning outright. He had no idea what he was doing, but this was going to be awesome.

“Tony Stark.”

Steve hunched his shoulders, trying to make himself smaller as he descended the ladder.

“Natasha, maybe you haven’t noticed, but I’m not exactly suited to—nguh—” Steve squeezed through the door at the bottom of the ladder, “—this kind of work.”

“Quit complaining, we’re almost there,” Natasha said, darting down the corridor and into another Jefferies Tube.

Steve didn’t quite groan aloud, but followed at a more sedate pace. It wasn’t like he was going to catch up with her, anyway.

“And you’re so sure—” Steve paused to allow himself to drop down past a few rungs. This tube was a little wider and he could actually do so. “—that Tony made his way to the engineering deck?”
“He’s an engineer. The ship dropped out of warp around the same time that he would have been leaving the Sickbay,” she called up to him, already at the bottom of the ladder. “Is it that much of a stretch to think he followed whatever people were headed that way? It’s where he wanted to go, anyway.”

Steve reached the bottom few rungs and dropped down next to her, as silently as he could. The Jefferies tubes had some remarkable acoustics, and it wouldn’t be conducive to their non-confrontational infiltration plan to announce their presence to all and sundry.

“No,” he admitted. “It’s not. But you said yourself that this place is huge,” Steve motioned to the door they had yet to open, the one that led to the bowels of the ship’s engines. “How are we supposed to find him?”

Natasha opened her communicator and tapped at it a few times before looking back up at him.

“Because he’s a genius engineer. You think he’d pass up the chance to butt heads with another one?”

Steve paused, his shoulders slumping. “No, unfortunately not.”

“Good, then he’ll be right in the thick of whatever just knocked us on our asses,” she said, referring to the lurch of the ship that had almost sent him tumbling down a ladder to crush her on the descent. She’d been quick enough to avoid it, but Steve—he rolled his shoulder once—hadn’t had such a nice landing.

“There is no way that this works out well,” he said lowly, as the door swished open to reveal reddish orange lighting and the ambient sounds of people shouting over the noise of engines.

Steve could only stare, open mouthed, at the expanse of what lay ahead of them.

“Stick close, and don’t hesitate when I jump over railings, okay?”

Knocked out of his fascinated stupor, Steve glared at her.

“You realize I don’t have the same training in acrobatics that you or our esteemed former circus colleague does, right?”

Natasha shrugged. “But you’re Captain America,” she responded, and slinked off into the dim light and noise.

Muttering under his breath, Steve followed.

“You’re Captain America,” he grumbled, watching her leap over the side of a walkway and following without question.

There were no two ways about it. Running from goons in ridiculous red and blue outfits, dancing around people trying to catch him, swatting them on the ass when they failed to do so, exploring a spaceship with all the grace of a drunk monkey, and not actually being shot for how much of a shit he was being?

This was the most fun Clint had had in years.

Riding high on whatever drugs McCoy had stuck into his neck, he couldn’t even be fucked to feel bad about it. Natasha asked for a distraction? Oh, she’d get one.
At least until he ran into Spock. Literally.

He’d rounded a corner too fast, his limbs too uncoordinated to recover or avoid the collision like he’d be able to do if he were sober and alert.

_Drat_, he thought, backing away from the ridiculously solid form of the Vulcan off of whom he’d just bounced.

“Mr. Barton,” Spock said, hands behind his back and eyeing him sternly.

Clint chanced a glance over his shoulder to see that the security and medical personnel dogging his flight were closing in.

“Commander,” Clint said with a dopey grin, slightly out of breath. He gasped, suddenly, and backed off a step, pointing behind Spock. “Oh my god, what the hell is that?”

Spock didn’t look.

Shrugging, but without giving the man a chance to say anything, or, more importantly, _do_ anything, Clint darted to the side, intending to make use of the wide corridor to circumvent Spock and slip into the Jefferies tube a few meters away.

Spock, unfortunately, was a fast bastard.

“_Oof_,” Clint vocalized, when Spock’s arm shot out to catch him in the middle of his movement and knock him down to the floor with brutal efficiency. Clint took a second to blink that he couldn’t afford, but kicked his legs out and locked Spock’s arm under his knee, using the man’s weight to leverage himself up and him down.

Or, it would have been down, if the man had actually moved. As it was, Clint did manage to lift himself up, but it was only to be met with Spock’s _other_ arm coming up to wrap around Clint’s shoulder blades, flip him over, and pin him face down on the floor.

Footsteps echoing closer in his head meant that the people after him were catching up, so Clint _really_ didn’t have time for this.

Fueled by annoyance, Clint pulled his free leg up underneath him and twisted his body, shooting his now newly unencumbered leg up and out in a single movement to catch Spock in the jaw with his heel.

Apparently his prep had been subtle enough this time to actually be unexpected, because Spock released the arm that had been pressing his torso.

Clint took the opportunity to kick himself onto his feet. Ignoring the sludgy brightness of the corridor, he dropped low to avoid Spock’s retaliatory motion to grab him at the hip and shot himself across the floor, ending up directly behind the Vulcan. He braced one foot on the wall, grabbed Spock’s ankle and levered himself into a handstand.

In any other circumstances, locking his legs around Spock’s neck would have ended up with it broken. In these, it was just a convenient boost.

Using the Vulcan’s height to his advantage, Clint pulled upward with all the core strength he could muster and propelled himself toward a hatch on the ceiling he _really hoped_ would open.

Amazingly, it did.
He fumbled for a half second with the latch, but he’d spied enough of the damn things—at least on this deck—on the wild goose chase he’d led the red-and-blue shirts through to hypothesize how they opened. Thankfully, his instincts for getting into small and usually unoccupied spaces were still good, and before Spock could retaliate from having Clint climb him like a tree, the former circus freak had levered himself up into the recesses of some kind of ventilation maintenance system.

It didn’t stop him from sticking his head down into the corridor, just as his pursuers rounded the same corner, and blowing a raspberry at all of them.

Clint’s ribs twinged from the take-down he’d gotten from the First Officer, who must be built like brick shithouse under his sparkly blue shirt, but he didn’t have time for a breather. The ways ahead and behind were open and dimly lit, and the USS Enterprise had just become his oyster.

The last thing any of the people he’d just thoroughly thwarted probably heard was the sound of Clint’s maniacal giggling.

“How the heck are we supposed to find him in here?” Steve hissed at Natasha as they darted along another metal bridge suspended over the vast array of machinery and people below.

“If he’s even here,” Steve added.

“He’s here,” Natasha said, leveling herself over the railing and dropping soundlessly down two levels below.

Steve followed, a bit less silently, but kept up as she darted between a couple massive tanks of what were probably water.

“This place is enormous, and there are people everywhere,” he whispered, following when she continued on, slinking between machines and avoiding people. “I don’t see how we’re gonna pick him out of the crowd.”

“Follow the biggest clusterfuck,” Natasha said, eyes darting around and upward. “That’s where he’ll be.”

“That’s comforting,” Steve mumbled, but kept up with her, which was an impressive feat. It was kind of nice to have a partner on an infiltration op—it was the only way she could really refer to it in her head—even if it did mean she couldn’t resort to her usual acrobatics.

“There,” Natasha pointed, a small throng of people gathered on the far end of the room around what appeared to be a long, conical machine. What she hadn’t mentioned is that she’d really been looking for Montgomery Scott, because if Tony had come here, there wasn’t really any way that the two wouldn’t end up attracted to one another’s genius gravity. Somehow, if he was bored enough, Tony always found the smartest person in the room.

She motioned upward to Steve, and he wordlessly offered her a boost up to a higher walkway, leaping up after her with his inhuman strength propelling him. They approached Scott’s position, but she didn’t see Tony yet. Hopefully her assumption hadn’t been wrong.

“I’m tellin’ ye, wiring the damn interface directly to the core’s power is not gonna work!” Scott grumbled, his voice muffled from where his head was stuck inside of the machine’s open hatch.

Natasha slunk closer until she was just on the other side of the machine, looking downward, wondering if they should continue the search when a familiar head poked out of the hatch.
“It’s where all the power is coming from anyway, right? The problem isn’t with the intercooler interface, it’s with the relays between it and the warp core. Here,” Tony said, ducking back inside the tube, Scott’s head and half of his body following.

The remainder of the conversation was lost in the muffled acoustics of the machine’s casing, but she leaned back up and shot Steve an expectant look.

“I can’t believe him,” Steve said, appearing half annoyed and half impressed. “I’m going to be so angry if he gets us all blown up.”

Natasha shrugged, looking around and spying an alcove just below the walkway where they could wait until Tony emerged from the machine and they could grab him or otherwise retrieve whatever he had on his person.

“That’s Lieutenant-Commander Montgomery Scott. He’s the Chief of Engineering, so I’m thinking he’ll stop Stark from doing anything too crazy.” She paused. “Then again, I hear that he’s a bit of the mad genius type, himself, so it might go either way.”

“What’s the plan?” Steve asked as they settled into their perch.

“Wait for him to come out, hopefully before we get blown up, and get whatever he has on him off of him before the security team nabs Barton and comes down here to find him.”

“Then we have no idea if we’ve even got that long,” Steve said.

“Oh, we’ve got that long,” Natasha said, lips quirking. “Clint is a very good distraction.”

There were hatches. Surprisingly, a lot of them.

Clint had no idea where he was going, so, in absence of schematics, he figured logic was his best friend. Not wanting to get lost in the spaceship and end up sliding down the garbage chute to the incinerator (if they had one), his best bet was to go in one direction—quickly, he was still being chased—and know where he’d be and how far he’d gone if he had to backtrack.

His ribs twinged as he continued his crawl. Fuck. He definitely wasn’t stoned anymore, and now that the fun part of the painkillers had worn off, the necessary part of them was waning, too.

Boredom and painful necessity dictated that he needed to not be in this ventilation system anymore, though he figured it was probably another maintenance access system and not actually for ventilation, but, they had to get breathable air somehow, didn’t they? He wasn’t above pretending he was crawling around in vents to make himself feel better about a way too fucking weird situation.

Clint paused for a minute above his chosen hatch, catching his breath and then breathing through the pain of his tender and abused ribs. And leg. And well, actually a lot of things. Spock didn’t pull his punches. Even if he did, Clint had already made a mental note to never ever get in a fight with him, something that applied triply when he was stoned and without a proper exit strategy.

Hearing nothing but the continuous hum of the machinery around him, perhaps just the ambient noise of a ship traveling too fast for him to be of any use describing its speed, Clint opened the hatch and dropped down.

Right in front of Spock.

“Oh, crap,” he sighed, hand pressed to his aching ribs. “Hey there, Commander.”
Exit strategy, Clint thought, and did a quick assessment of his surroundings. No way would he get away with climbing Spock again to get back into the vents, and the corridor had narrowed somewhat, so there was no way he was going past him. Clint didn’t need to glance over his shoulder to know that there was an assembly of red and blue blocking him from the other side.

“Mr. Barton,” Spock greeted him, or, maybe it was a reprimand? A question? He couldn’t tell.

“Maybe we could call this no hard feelings and—” Clint bolted in the direction opposite of Spock. He ducked an immobilizing maneuver from one person while striking out with his bum leg at the knees of another.

Standing up to attempt a sweet parkour move to get him on the other side of the Fuchsia Brigade, Clint barely had the time to tense his muscles when a hand fell on his shoulder.

And then he was unconscious. Again.

Tony yelped when a hand yanked him away from trailing Montgomery Scott and into a tight space between machines.

Or, he would have yelped, but a tell-tale hand was pressed firmly over his mouth.

When Scott disappeared up a flight of stairs, still babbling along and obviously not noticing Tony’s absence, the hand on his mouth let up and he turned around, indignant.

“What the hell?” He snapped, sotto voce. “Do you just get off on ruining other people’s good times, or what?”

“Stark,” Natasha said lowly. “You are creating a huge problem for us right now, so give me whatever it was you retrieved from your cryotube and then get the hell back to Scott.”

“I have it in a secure location,” Tony retorted, glaring mutinously at her outstretched hand for a moment when a distressed sounding whisper sounded above them.

“I think they probably caught Clint,” the voice said, and Stark squinted up to see—

“Steve!” Tony beamed. “How nice of you to join us.”

“Give her the data, Stark,” Steve snapped, dropping down to crouch above them atop one of the big metal basins between which Tony and Natasha were currently squished.

“What are you gonna do with it?” Stark asked, hand twitching toward his chest before he could abort the movement.

Natasha, obviously, saw it.

“Seriously?” She asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I said it was secure!” Tony snapped, folding his arms. “Why the hell do you want it?”

“So they don’t find it on you when the security team bearing down on us catches you?” She answered.

Tony opened his mouth to protest, but rolled his eyes. Whatever. “Fine,” he grumbled. Sticking a hand up his shirt, he carefully removed the reactor before reaching in with his free hand and removing the impromptu flash-drive.
Placing it in Natasha’s outstretched hand, he clicked the reactor back into place and glared.

“So?” He asked, spreading his arms as much as their close confines would allow. “Can I go now?”

“Yes. And you’ll accept whatever consequences Kirk has in store for you graciously,” Natasha answered, smoothly storing the drive somewhere that Tony would never ask about nor repeat to anyone in his life.

“That’s no fun,” he grumbled. “It’s not like I was—”

“Finish that thought at your own peril, Stark,” Natasha said, already levering herself up to where Steve was perched, Captainly disapproval etched on his chiseled features. “Steve and I intend to return to the room before anyone notices we were gone, so I don’t need to tell you that we were never here.”

“And if the ridiculously advanced surveillance of the ship says otherwise?” Tony asked, leaning against the basin.

“Let’s not give them a reason to review it,” she answered smoothly. “At least with you they’ll know that you were supervised.”

“Hey, I was plenty unsupervised and made out just fine, thank you,” Tony quipped.

“So the engineering malfunction coinciding with you breaking into the medical holding was just that? A coincidence?” Natasha asked, now crouched next to Steve, who looked impatient to be going.

“What? Of course it was, I was messing with security coding, not—” Tony flapped a hand, indicating their surroundings. “—this.”

“Because your twenty minutes with the coding software makes you such an expert at the intersectionality of a Starship’s computer systems.”

“Hey, I am so much better at—” Tony stopped short, brow furrowing in contemplation. “That might actually be a thing,” he mused, looking back up at Steve and Romanoff.

Who were gone. Typical.

“Oi! What in the blazes are you doing back here?”

Tony nearly yelped again when he was tugged out of the alcove by Scott’s partially gloved hands.

“Oh, just, uh—”

“Lieutenant-Commander Scott!” A voice sounded from behind him, and Tony craned his neck to see a throng of red shirted people coming toward them. “Please release Mr. Stark, he needs to come with us.”

“What?” Scott asked, looking quizzically between the security officers and a guilty looking Tony. “Mister Stark? Lad, what have you done?” Scott narrowed his eyes at him and Tony had the good grace to feel a little bad.

“Well it’s Doctor Stark if you want to get technical,” Tony grumbled. “So, maybe I, uh, withheld some information,” Tony hedged, and ‘lad’, seriously? This guy was probably younger than him.

“Mr. Stark, now, please,” one of the officers said. He looked tired. Probably from chasing Barton, if
what Steve said about him getting ‘caught’ was any indication.

Sighing, and with a longing look at the engineering bay around him, Tony removed himself from Scott’s grip and went over to the security officers.

“‘You’re not going to cuff me, are you?’ He asked.

“Please don’t give us a reason to,” one of the other officers said, a tall, blue person with antennae poking out from white hair. Much cooler than Commander Bowl-cut, for an alien.

“I demand an explanation!” Scott broke in, glaring at all assembled.

“We’ll talk later,” Tony said, summoning a grin, even as the security officers began herding him away and up the stairs. “You can tell me all about that warp propulsion thing we were gonna go tweak!” He called over his shoulder.

The disbelieving squawk Scott let out almost made Tony laugh out loud. Man, he liked that guy.

“Mr. Stark and Mr. Barton have been apprehended. All of our charges are now secured in their suite.”

Jim clenched his jaw tightly, eyes locked on the view screen and his own mental countdown to their arrival at the Starbase.

“Bring them to my ready room,” he snapped, clutching a PADD tightly in his hands. “Let me know when you get them there. Kirk out.”

“Jim, is this really the time?” Bones asked quietly from over his shoulder. He’d come bearing hypos and other things and Jim was, well, Jim was done. It was time to lay down the fucking law.

“No, but I’m not putting up with this anymore. I’m sick of having my good faith and my hospitality thrown in my face, because these people can’t afford to forget for one more second that they’re not in a warzone. They’re out of their depth if they think they can pull these stunts and I’ll just brush it off.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” Bones hissed at him. “You’re all worked up and we’re warping into an attack that’s no more than ten minutes out!”

“Exactly,” Jim said, voice flat as he surveyed the security footage on his PADD. “And they’re gonna see exactly who and what they’re dealing with.”

“Jim,” Bones said, warning in his voice. “I don’t think that’s a smart move.”

“Something has to make them take this seriously,” Jim answered. “Take me seriously. Maybe they think they are, but they’re not,” he answered. “And I’m not going to coddle them. I’ve got a fucking job to do and I don’t like people running around my ship—” he bit out, “—making a fool out of my officers for the sake of some ridiculous, mistrustful spy game.”

Bones sighed heavily. “I hear you, Jim. But we both know there’s more to it than that, for them. Most of them have been out of those cryotubes for less than a day, and you didn’t exactly give them an orientation,” Bones tried to reason. “They’re testing you, I get that, but do you really expect them to just turn off their PTSD? And you,” Bones laid a hand on his shoulder. “You’re exhausted. Can’t we just get through this confrontation and leave it ‘til later?”

“No,” Jim said, voice hard as he shrugged Bones’ hand off. “We can’t.”
Bones started to say something else, but his communicator chirped.

“The team is assembled in your ready room, Captain,” Spock said without asking for acknowledgement.

“I’ll be right down,” he said. “Make sure the ancillary bridge comm and view screen are ready.”

“Affirmative, Captain,” Spock said without questioning him. Well, at least there was that.

Standing up, he eyed the bridge once more before meeting Sulu’s expectant gaze. “Sulu, you have the conn. I’ll be back for the main event, make sure all departments are battle ready.”

“Aye, Captain,” Sulu nodded, standing smoothly and taking the chair as Jim headed for the turbolift, Bones dogging his steps.

“Just think about this for a second, Jim—”

“Are you gonna be with me in there, or not?” Jim cut him off, the doors whooshing shut as they began the short descent.

“Of course I am!” Bones grumped. “Somebody has to reign you in when you start biting their heads off.”

A small, anticipatory smirk formed on Jim’s face, and he shook his head.

“You have no idea, Bones.”

They’d all barely gotten settled in the Captain’s Ready Room when the man himself strode through the door. Steve rose immediately to his feet, and the rest of them—minus Barton, who was under strict orders to remain seated, and Spock, who was already standing—followed suit with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

The grin the man wore as he strode into the room was fixed, too wide and with far too little movement in the eyes to promise anything except danger. Natasha tensed minutely in anticipation.

“So!” Kirk said with obviously false cheer. “Who wants to go first?” He spread his hands wide, holding a PADD in one.

All of them remained silent. Natasha flicked her gaze at Steve, but he simply tightened his jaw and stared forward. The man could spot a rhetorical question when he heard it.

“Nobody?” Kirk asked, looking at each of them in turn. “That’s okay. I think I’ll start,” he said with a shrug before everything in his demeanor changed.

“What precisely the fuck did you all think you were doing?” He asked, voice low and menacing as he regarded all of them.

Silence reigned again, though this might have been more of a genuine question than the last. Natasha nevertheless held her peace. She’d done what she had to do to secure the data Stark had retrieved and to help minimize whatever damage he might do after the fact. She wasn’t going to apologize for that.

When Kirk didn’t get a response, he smiled another dangerous smile and stopped walking, folding his arms briefly before motioning to Doctor McCoy, who was standing by the door and watching the proceedings—watching Kirk—with a wary eye.
“Bones, can you show them what you showed me?” Kirk asked.

With what seemed to be a degree of reluctance, McCoy walked over, his gaze coming to rest on Stark as he removed a small bundle of stained white cloth from the medkit over his shoulder and placed it on the table.

Natasha looked at the bundle and didn’t need more than a moment to figure out what it was.

Stark’s bandages.

She slid her gaze to Stark and saw what could only be described as a vaguely sheepish look. He met the stare and scrunched his face in an approximation of a shrug.

Obviously he wasn’t taking this seriously. Something told Natasha that that was about to change.

“Mr. Stark,” Kirk started. “I think you know what these are, so I’m not gonna bother asking you. Bones, where did you find these?” Kirk asked, obviously knowing the answer.

McCoy sighed and rolled his eyes a little. At least he was a bit annoyed by Kirk’s spectacle. “In medical holding with the cryotubes.”

“Thanks,” Kirk said, now looking directly at Stark with what appeared to be murder in his eyes. “Stark, before I show you this, I’d like you to know that I’m exercising a whole fucking lot of restraint not to punch you in the face.”

Stark blinked, momentarily surprised, and then Natasha had to close her own eyes when she saw him gearing up to speak.

“Yeah, no, not buying it, dude,” Stark said. “You’ve gathered us all here for a little lecture, I can see that, but this self-righteous teacher shtick? Not really work—**hwoof.**”

Kirk stepped back, shaking out his hand.

“Whoops,” he said, not sounding sorry at all.

Steve and McCoy both stared in open mouthed shock at both Stark and Kirk, the former of which was clutching the table and a hand to his jaw, pulling the limb away to reveal a slightly split lip.

Clint had a hand over his mouth, eyes wide but obviously straining to keep his laughter contained.

“Captain, I must object,” Spock said, stepping around the table while McCoy quickly strode over to Stark, yanking something out of his medkit and muttering under his breath.

“Hey, wow, no,” Stark said, waving McCoy away as he worked his jaw a couple times. “Easy elf-ears, that’s not the first time I’ve been punched in the face.” Stark rubbed his cheek, red and already beginning to swell. “Might have even deserved it.”

Well. Natasha raised both eyebrows and met Steve’s incredulous gaze. What a time for Stark to grow some self-awareness.

Then again, she had told him to accept his punishment graciously.

“Mind telling me which thing I did the punch was for?” Stark asked, looking at Kirk, who still had murder on his face, even if it had been temporarily appeased by the act of violence.

Kirk hefted the PADD, swiping his fingers across it a few times before sliding it across the table to
Stark, who snatched it up and stared at it for a moment before recognition dawned on his face, followed quickly by a noticeable wince.

“Not as subtle as I thought, then,” he said, placing the PADD back down on the table. Natasha could see lines of coding in green letters and could hazard a guess as to what they were.

“Not fucking subtle at all, Stark,” Jim hissed. “Your little stunt getting into the medical holding didn’t just grant you access to that one room, you miserable fucking amateur,” Kirk growled, grabbing the PADD and scrolling through it to a highlighted portion. “Your half-baked hack deactivated random security sensors across the whole ship for the entire time you were in that room,” Kirk’s voice was rising, and Stark had actually started shrinking a little. “You know what one of the sensors you knocked out, was?” Kirk stalked forward a step, but Spock stuck an arm out to halt the movement. “The monitoring diagnostics for the cooling system in the starboard nacelle!” He barked, his face reddened with anger.

Natasha set her jaw. Yeah. She’d hoped she was wrong about that.

Stark looked taken aback, staring wide eyed at the coding with obvious incomprehension.

“But I don’t—” he started, swiping furiously over the screen and scanning the code. “It was an isolated hack, I tested it on the door to our room before I went down there. I don’t understand—”

“That’s right,” Kirk snapped. “You don’t fucking understand because it’s been two hundred forty-seven years since you last touched a god damn computer! You don’t know how this ship works,” Kirk turned around, running a hand through his hair, obviously trying to reign himself in and regain some composure. “You didn’t isolate the sensor hack on a vacant frequency, so it assimilated into all of the cloned frequencies you used to open that door, which you would have known if you’d spent more than twenty god damn minutes learning anything about the coding on a Constitution Class Starship or if you’d bothered to fucking ask someone for help when you needed to access your fucking cryotube to get whatever super-secret data you wanted out of it.”

Clint and Tony both managed to look a little bit contrite, though Stark still looked like he had half a mind to say something more. She saw Steve place a hand on Stark’s arm and shake his head once, and thankfully he remained silent.

Kirk took a moment to breathe, but looked at the clock—chronometer—in the room and set his jaw once more.

“It was a rookie god damn mistake, Stark. I can tell that you’re pretty fucking smart, but this ship is not your playground, and you’re lucky that Lieutenant-Commander Scott took a shine to you, because getting punched in the face will be the least of your problems when he finds out it’s your fault that the intercooler system took a shit,” he said, seeming calmer once more.

“Jim,” McCoy said, in a somewhat chiding voice, but Kirk shot him a look and the man backed off.

Watching the exchange, Natasha could see the exhaustion in him; acute, like the tirade he’d just gone on had taken more out of him than he’d intended. It made her wish she trusted more people on this ship; maybe this all could have been avoided.

“Kirk—” Natasha started, but the man held up a hand and shook his head. She shut up.

“Barton escaping from medical? I’d call that a rite of passage, and it’s not something I haven’t done a handful of times myself, but running around my ship like a drunk Gorn as part of some half-baked spy game with Rogers and Romanoff? Not fucking cool. Waste Commander Spock’s time like that
again and you’ll get more than a nerve pinch,” Jim said, glaring at Clint, who shrugged, and then visibly winced at the movement, bringing a hand up to rub at his right trapezius.

“I’m very suggestible when I’m stoned,” Clint said, and god. Natasha could kick him.

It was becoming very apparent that she was the only one who’d actually spent time with these people and on this ship and had any idea of the consequences their actions might have.

“Shut the fuck up,” Kirk snapped to Clint, turning to Natasha and Steve in the same breath.

“You,” Kirk pointed at Steve, “You seem like a smart guy, and someone who cares about his friends, so I’m frankly surprised you thought it was a good idea to have Barton bust out of Sickbay just so you could go chasing after Stark on your own.”

“Not his call,” Natasha said, interrupting.

“I didn’t know you had him break out,” Steve countered, “But I didn’t say no when you told him to buy us time.”

“I wasn’t exactly giving you—” Natasha started, but Kirk’s shout halted her speech.

“Stop!” He barked. “All of you, sit the fuck down,” he waved at the table, pressing a palm to his forehead and rubbing it.

“Jim,” McCoy started again, but Kirk waved him off.

“M fine, Bones.” He opened his eyes to glare at all of them, now seated along with Clint. “Frankly, I don’t actually care what your reasons were, the fucking motivations for sneaking around my ship like I’m the enemy. What I care about is all of you not fucking getting it that you are not in your own god damn sandbox anymore. This ship?" He motioned to the room and everything beyond. “Is my home. This crew is my family and I have a fucking job to do that, wouldn’t you know it, doesn’t exclusively revolve around you. I’ve done absolutely nothing but give you all the benefit of the fucking doubt and you throw it in my face with these fucking secrecy games and spy stunts,” Kirk shook his head incredulously.

Natasha watched Kirk take a breath, visibly swallowing down whatever anger had resurfaced as his volume had risen.

“I get that this sucks for you guys, and I can’t actually begin to understand how much, but you’re not in the twenty-first century anymore,” Kirk said, his voice hard and unyielding. “You’re in space, on the flagship of the United Federation of Planets. This is as real as it fucking gets, and I refuse to allow you to compromise my ship or my job beyond what I’ve promised to risk to help you. Spock,” Kirk said, straightening up.

“Yes, Captain?” Spock asked, still standing almost between Kirk and the rest of them at the table.

“Activate the ancillary screen and comms. Make sure the bridge feed is patched through,” he said to Spock, never taking his eyes off of them.

“We’re due at the Starbase that sent out a distress call in less than two minutes, so I’m going back to the bridge. You’re all going to stay here and watch me work,” he pointed to the screen that had come to life on the far wall. “Consider this your wake-up call.”

“Well that was dramatic,” Tony mumbled, holding the cold-pack the doctor had given him to his
“Shut up, Stark.”

It was Steve who’d said that, and Tony shrank just a little at the tone. None of them were looking at him, but he knew the signs of unspoken accusation when he saw them.

It made him feel defensive, despite not having a very defensible position.

“I was just trying to keep our data secure,” he groused, a little annoyed at how petulant he sounded.

“Your data,” Romanoff corrected.

“Well—yes, okay, it’s pretty much only relevant and useful to me, but it will be helpful to all of us when I get the chance to decrypt and re-code it,” he said.

“Quit while you’re ahead, man,” Clint sighed from where he was sprawl-slumped in a chair to his left. “Actually, just quit, because ‘ahead’ left you in the dust.”

Tony watched Clint shift his arm again with a pained grimace. “What the hell happened to you?”

“I was your search party’s distraction while Rogers and Nat went hunting for you so your precious data would go unmolested,” Clint glared at him, but it wasn’t as heavy or judgmental as the stony silence the two rays of sunshine to his left were keeping. “The ship’s pretty sweet. Lots of fun places to climb and crawl and shit, but that First Officer? Hoo,” Clint rolled his neck again with a wince. “Barely touched me and I was out cold.”

Tony snorted a laugh, but he could actually feel the glare being levelled at him from Steve’s direction, so he shut up.

Heaving a breath, Tony decided to bite this bullet before it made his life any more difficult.

“Look, I’m sorry I—”

The view screen blinked to life, sound accompanying it and filling the room, cutting off Tony’s poor attempt at contrition.

Just as well. He sucked at apologies. He’d always figured actions spoke louder than words, anyway.

“Shields up, Red Alert,” Kirk’s voice came over the comm they had in the room, as clear as if he were right there.

“Arrival at Starbase 24 in three, two, one,” an unfamiliar voice spoke and Tony actually leaned forward as the ship visibly dropped out of warp and the screen coalesced on—

“Jesus,” Steve breathed, and Tony couldn’t help but agree.

“Talk to me!” Kirk said tersely, and Tony gaped at the scene of carnage on the screen. There was a… floating fucking metal thing—a space station?—and a good chunk of it was on fire.

“How is that even possible?” Tony mumbled, not expecting an answer.

Almost instantly entranced by the display, Tony—and he was assuming everyone else—let the ongoing chatter wash over them as they looked on.

“I’m trying to hail them; so far no response. I’m getting some chatter from the attacking ships,
though,” a woman’s voice said.

“How many?” Kirk asked.

“Four unmarked Federation ships visible, Captain.” Spock. “Warp signatures from another two that are not present.”

“Uhura, try to hail the merc ships and we’ll negotiate a surrender. Chekov, keep an open scan. I don’t want any surprises if the missing ships are cloaked. Spock, how are the shields doing?”

“Currently functional, but likely at less than thirty-seven percent. I cannot say for sure.”

“Scan for life-signs in all compromised portions of the base and beam out anyone you find—friend or foe. Kirk to security.”

“Giotto here.”

“Get a security team to the transporter room and have them stand-by for possible incoming hostile. They go to the brig if they don’t need medical attention. Contact Sickbay for a med team, as well.”

“Aye, Captain. Giotto out.”

“Enemy ships not responding, sir.”

“Sulu, lock phasers on the two furthest from the station.”

“Locking, Captain.”

“Transporter technicians say they have a lock on life-signs from the base, Captain; suggesting shield integrity at twenty percent or less.”

“It makes me very nervous when you aren’t specific, Spock!”

“Phaser banks ready to fire.”

“Fire at will, Lieutenant.”

“Technicians request lowered shields to initiate transport.”

“Confirm request. Get those people out of there.”

“Spock to transporter room. You are cleared to beam out.”

“Confirm one ship destroyed. Remaining ships evading fire; two retreated behind the base.”

“Follow on impulse. Uhura, hail them again.”

“Giotto to bridge.”

“Kirk here—”

“Battleship uncloaked to starboard! Ze’re locking phasers!”

“Evasive maneuver 26F!”

Tony and everyone else grabbed onto the table when the entire ship rumbled around them.
“What the hell was that?” Tony gasped, looking around the room.

“What?”

“Minor hull damage. All systems functioning at one hundred percent.”

“I think the ship was hit,” Steve said, looking a little pale as he gripped the table.

“No shit!” Clint snapped, eyes not wavering from the screen.

“Spock, tell the techs to cease transport. Shields up. Chekov, scan that ship and get me the specs right fucking now. Sulu, ready photon torpedoes and lock the fuck on.”

“Transport cessation confirmed. Activating shields.”

“Captain, Giotto here.”

“Locked on the battleship!”

“Monitor their movement, target their shielding with prejudice. Giotto—talk to me.”

“Six station personnel recovered, no hostiles. Techs report their signatures were blocked from transport.”

“Casualties?”

“Two severely injured, the remaining doing well. Wait—I’ve got a Lieutenant here who says he can help.”

“I need information on the integrity of the base and the shielding, the mercs’ target and anything else that will help us save the base.”

“Got it. Giotto out.”

“Photon torpedo fired—fuck, they evaded. I think it clipped them on the port side.”

“Run scans—shit, evasive!”

The ship banked and rocked again, a more insistent rumble that actually jostled Tony’s footing where he stood in front of the screen.

“That can’t be good,” Tony said, arms out for balance like the ship might shake again.

“Shh,” Clint hissed at him.

“Holy—Captain, that was not a photon torpedo that just hit us. Shields down to sixty-three percent.”

“Get us moving, follow the ship. Madegwa, you’re on phasers. Keep eyes on those runabouts and fire at will. We’re no longer trying to negotiate.”

“Captain, I’ve intercepted their comm frequencies. They’re targeting the hangar.”

They all looked on as one of the attacking ships was struck by a laser-beam of red light, bursting into flame before quickly being snuffed out.

“Damn,” Tony supplied. “That was kind of fucked up.”
Steve’s shaky “Yeah” of agreement came from behind him.

“Confirm runabout destroyed!”

“Good fucking shot, Lieutenant. Spock, Uhura, bust through their frequencies and tell them the rest of them are getting blown to kingdom come if they don’t stand down.”

“Captain, base shields are critical. The remaining crew in the compromised facility will not survive without intervention.”

“Fuck—Madegwa, focus phaser fire on the battleship, keep them running. Spock, have transporter techs lock on to all available life-signs. Beam to any available receiving area and have security monitor. Shields down on my command.”

“Engaging suppressive fire.”

“Transporter techs ready.”

“If you get a lock, fire another torpedo. Shields down!”

“No response from the mercenaries, Captain. They’ve shut down ship to ship communication. I’m getting separate reports from the runabouts and the battleship, I think they’re—"  

“Oh fuck,” Clint said, suddenly and with great vehemence.

“EVASIVE!”

The ship lurched a bit beneath them, but not the way it had before.

“How the hell did you see that?” Tony snapped, incredulous, in Barton’s direction.

“Seriously, Stark?” Clint said, hands glued to the armrests of his chair. “Does my codename mean nothing to you?”

“Torpedo fired off port. We weren’t hit.”

“Fuck. Spock?”

“Confirmed sixteen aboard, all base personnel. Remaining life-signs in the compromised sectors are presumed hostile.”

“Shields up. Madegwa, what’s going on with those runabouts?”

“One visible; they’re circling the base.”

“Giotto to bridge. Captain, the security on the whole base is compromised. The mercs were using trans warp tech to beam personnel outside the station. The commander and the remaining crew are hunkered in the auxiliary bridge, but it’s inaccessible via transport.”

“Fuck. Can we get someone in there? Close enough to make contact?”

“Inadvisable, Captain. Base shielding is null and the integrity of the structure is beginning to fail.”

“No shit! Uhura, a comm burst? Something?”

“All of their systems are fried, I can’t make contact.”
“Something’s not right,” Steve said, a worried note creeping into his voice, and Tony kind of agreed.

“Those little ships are up to something,” Clint said.

“I lost the battleship—I think they went dark.”

“Runabout confirmed hit. Major damage.”

“Well, not that one, I guess,” Clint added.

“They can’t fire if they’re cloaked. Keep us moving and find the other fucking runabout!”

“Transport signature detected; more hostiles are boarding the station.”

“Well if they can do it, so can we! Spock, take the conn. I’m going in there.”

“What?” Steve gaped while Tony uttered a “No way.”

“Captain—”

“What the hell was that?” Clint said, leaning forward and pointing at the streak of light that had just left their view.

“What the… one of the runabouts just went to warp. The other is… oh no.”

“What is it? Talk to me, Lieutenant!”

“I—I think I damaged their nav systems when I hit them, sir.”

“Captain, I’m getting a redundant distress signal. Their navigation is confirmed compromised. They’re locked on a trajectory for the base.”

“What?”

“They’re picking up speed, what are they doing?”

“This looks bad,” Clint said.

“Engage tractor beam! Stop it before it hits the station!”

“Tractor beam engaged—we’ve got them.”

“Alter the cou—”

“Battleship detected! They’re locking onto us!”

“Keep tractor beam steady, our shields can take the hit!”

The ship shook around them for a third time, and Tony swore as he almost lost his footing.

“Oh no,” Steve said quietly, watching the damaged ship continue its trajectory. The bridge feed was a flurry of raised voices and barked orders all tumbling over each other.

Tony stared, horrified at the implication of what he was seeing.

“Son of a bitch, the blast dislodged them. Captain, they’re—”
“Reengage, reengage!”

“I can’t—it’s too close, they’re—”

Tony’s eyes widened. He stretched a hand out in a futile gesture.

“Oh my god.”

The explosion was bright. Blinding, almost. Tony didn’t look away. Couldn’t.

“Full retreat on impulse, get us out of range!”

Everything was silent in their little room, watching the remnants of the base grow further away.

Tony barely felt like he was breathing. Quiet voices sounded on the bridge, but Tony could barely hear them over the rush of blood in his ears.

“Quarter parsec out, Captain. Out of range of all radiation and debris fields.”

“The battleship went to warp, sir. They’re gone.”

“Spock, scan for life-signs.”

“Scanning.”

“Status.”

“Shields running steady at forty percent; previous hull damage to the surface of decks G through K still minor. Auto-repair is under way. Confirmed twenty-two base personnel aboard; five critical in Sickbay.”

“Scans complete, Captain. No life-signs.”

Tony dropped his arm, breath punching out of him. The voices continued.

“Captain?”

“Uhura, please compile preliminary reports from the other department heads for Starfleet. Kirk to Giotto.”

“Giotto here.”

“I need to speak with that Lieutenant. Please escort him and anyone else you think will shed some light on this to Conference B.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Lieutenant Madegwa, please monitor the debris field for personnel recovery. Tag and transport to medical if you find anyone.”

“I—”

“For their families, Lieutenant.”

“Yes. Of course, Captain.”

“Alpha crew, once transmission to Starfleet is confirmed, please surrender your posts to Beta
reliefs.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Spock. You have the conn.”

“Captain—”

“Patch me through if ‘Fleet calls before I’m done.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Tony stared.

It felt like he was falling. Like the world was rushing by in bright colors when it was probably just light shadows dancing before his eyes.

Something familiar, something welcome and waiting, tugged at his senses. Slowly, his awareness slipped away.

Steve stared at the view screen, the wreckage of the Starbase an ugly tableau flickering before his eyes. His stomach clenched with nausea and he tucked his sweating palms under his arms.

As surreal as what they’d just witnessed had been, it was an unmistakable loss of life. Steve swallowed and sat down hard in a vacant chair, briefly bowing his head.

His looked to the door when it opened without announcement and Captain Kirk stepped in.

The man was pale, his expression closed off and blank, but with an unmistakably haunted look about his eyes.

“Computer, stop feed.”

The screen went blank, but Tony continued to stare at it.

“I’m—” Kirk stopped. Swallowed. He didn’t finish the sentence.

“Captain—” Natasha started, the first she’d spoken the feed had begun, but Kirk just turned around and headed back for the door.

“Go back to your quarters.”

“Kirk—” Natasha tried again, her voice soft in a way Steve rarely heard, but the door opened and shut without another word from Kirk as he left.

Clint pulled himself to his feet and began hobbling to the door without a word. Natasha fixed Steve with a significant look, her eyes drifting over to Tony before following Clint out the door, leaving Steve in the room with Tony, who still stared blankly at the expanse of wall where the view screen had been.

It was a vacant look Steve had come to recognize well from the past few months, and a little more of his heart broke for seeing it again. Whatever was going on in Tony’s head, it wasn’t going to do him any good, but he’d never actually been able to snap Tony out of these… states, before.
“Tony, we should go.”

Tony didn’t respond, and Steve sighed, knowing what he had to do. Walking over to Tony, he laid a hand on his shoulder. A brief shudder was the only indication that he’d even felt the touch.

“Let’s go back to our room. I’ll see if I can get Astrid to rustle up some better coffee, okay?”

It was just talking, he knew that Tony probably wasn’t listening to him. Definitely not following the words, even if he heard them.

Gently tugging on his arm got him to stumble out of his stand-still, and Steve led a disturbingly pliant Tony out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

So. Uh. That happened.
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

The first step to recovery is a back massage, Jim can admit when he's made a mistake (just to the wrong person) and the Avengers don't need parents.

Chapter Notes

So, predictably, I wrote 15k and then had to split the chapter. Again. Chapter 16 is with my beta and will be up within the week.

Potential trigger warning for mentions of dissociation, PTSD and involuntary self harm.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They all sat in the chairs of their suite, staring at nothing, not looking at one another.

Steve had led Tony back to the room and, well, put him to bed. Put him in the bed, at least. He had no idea if Tony would actually sleep, or just keep staring at nothing. He wasn’t even sure if he’d seen Tony blink whenever he’d caught a glimpse of his face.

Clint and Natasha had already been waiting there, blankly staring. They’d acknowledged him and Tony when they’d come in the room with knowing looks but hadn't made a move to do anything. They’d all dealt with their friend in this state at one time or another over the past months—months that were actually centuries ago—and knew that there wasn’t anything they could really do to help. It wasn’t as if even carrying Tony would have been a burden for him. The man was even moving under his own steam, just… not really caring about a destination. Cruise control without a steering wheel.

Idly, Steve wondered if people still drove cars, or if those flying vehicles Howard had dreamt of all those years before had become a reality.

It was that thought, those thoughts that made this real for Steve. Not the irrefutable evidence in the form of aliens, the spaceship in which they currently sat, the atomic dismantling that had brought them here, the silent destruction of a space station before his very eyes. It was the reminder of a past—a life he’d never gotten to live—that cemented his new reality as truth.

“How long, do you think, until he comes out of it?” Steve asked, not to break the silence so much as to share the burden of floundering in it.

“I don’t know if he will,” Natasha said, almost immediately. Steve drew back sharply and looked at her.

“What?” He asked.

“Why should he?” She responded, gazing at him with that calm façade that made his blood run cold.
“What’s he got to come back to?”

“He’s got us,” Steve emphasized. “We need him. We need—” Steve stopped himself. He didn’t know what he was trying to say, largely trying to convince himself that losing Tony to catatonia was not an option. “We need him,” he finished, quiet but insistent.

“I’m not sure that’s going to be enough, this time,” Natasha said, and something in the set of her shoulders made him think she actually meant it.

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Steve snapped, suddenly angry at her passive acceptance.

“Everyone he loves is dead, Steve. There’s no enemy to fight, nothing to avenge. We’re refugees in a flying saucer, waiting for an axe to fall down on our heads. The earth moved on without us and Thor never came back. We exist,” she said, and Steve didn’t miss the minute clench of her fist where it lay against her thigh. “What does he have left to fight for? What do we have that’s worth coming back to? What exactly does reality have that’s better than wherever he’s gone?”

Steve looked desperately to Clint, but the man could be asleep for all the response he was showing to their conversation. He grasped for an answer, and couldn’t find one. The only one he had was the one he’d been carrying with him since he’d found a purpose the last time he’d woken up to this reality.

“He has us,” he insisted again. “We’re his team. We’re…” Steve breathed in and out. “Family. How many times has he risked his life to save us from one thing or another? He gave us all a home. He took what was his and made it ours. The fact that we’re even here having this conversation we owe to him.”

“And do you think he believes that that’s something we should be grateful for?” Natasha asked him, halting his diatribe with the earnest question.

“What? Of course we should. We’re alive because of him.”

“Yes, but at what cost? We survived, and that’s about it. His best friend is frozen and everything else is gone. Our lives. His life. Pepper and Rhodes, Happy and JARVIS and his company. Iron Man. Fury and Coulson. Hill. Your shield. Kate Bishop and Lucky and Clint’s bow and his crappy apartment in Bed-Stuy. That retro diner with the spicy fries you liked so much. Every person you ever met or knew or saw. It’s all dust,” she finished on a hiss, the anger she’d been concealing now obvious in her face and mien.

Steve honestly didn’t know what to say. His chest felt tight, his eyes stung; for a second he couldn’t breathe at all.

Because god. She was right.

“So I’ll ask you again, Steve. What the hell is left for us to fight for?”

For a long moment Steve wanted to concede to her. To let the hopelessness and the grief take hold and drag him under, maybe leave him as unresponsive and blank as Tony to feel something less present, less painful.

But then it was like he heard what she said again. She hadn’t asked what was left for him to fight for. She’d said us.

A sad smile broke on his face, but it was a hopeful one. Because she was wrong. It wasn’t all dust. When it came down to it, even in grief and loss they were still a team. They were still together.
“A second chance,” Steve said. “A chance to be a team, to be the most insane, dysfunctional family that we’ve been since aliens dropped out of the sky over Manhattan,” because maybe they hadn’t known it then, wouldn’t know it for a long time, but that was when it had started. “Maybe all of that is true, what you said, about what we’ve lost, but we’re still here. You, and me and Clint and Tony and Bruce. Against all the odds we’re alive and we’re together, and I’m not giving that up because it’s hard.”

It felt like he should be standing. Tony would make a joke about an American flag billowing behind him, patriotic music rising in the background, and it gave Steve strength because he would have that Tony back. He would.

Steve took a deep breath and went for the lowest, cheapest shot he knew how to take.

“It’s sure as hell more than I had the first time around.”

The look on Natasha’s face was something Steve would have to treasure for the rest of his life, because she looked honest to god surprised.

A slapping noise interrupted the moment, and they both turned to look at Clint, who was staring in fascination at Natasha and...clapping.

The mook was actually slow clapping.

When neither of them looked at Clint with anything but confusion or annoyance, Clint stopped and rolled his eyes.

“Well somebody had to ruin the moment,” he huffed, folding his arms. “And man, that really did deserve a standing ovation. I’ve never seen that look on Tasha’s face, and I’ve known her for a lot longer than you,” Clint pointed out.

Natasha looked unimpressed.

“Shut up, Barton.”

Clint just kind of shrugged one shouldered and spread his arms. “I’m the annoying little brother in this fucked up family of ours. I’ve got to annoy you. It's in the job title.”

Steve huffed in exasperation, but a smile curled on his lips. It felt like there was a weight off of his shoulders. Clint was on his side.

“And Nat, you’re obviously the cynical, semi-abusive older sister,” Clint continued, looking thoughtful. “Tony is our alcoholic middle sibling—Bruce is his more reasonable twin.”

“So what does that make Steve, in this incredibly overstretched metaphor?” Natasha asked, deadpan.

The wide grin Clint sent him gave Steve the feeling that he knew what was coming.

“Oh, he’s our idealistic baby brother, with more heart than sense and more muscles than he knows what to do with.”

“Clint,” Steve groaned, glaring at him with less than his usual intensity.

“And who’s always there to give us a swift kick in the ass when we forget what’s important,” Clint finished, quieter, and Steve sobered at the look he was getting.

When Clint put on his serious face, it was very difficult to consider him as anything but.
“I’ve had families of blood and choice in my life, and been fucked over by both. You crazy fucking weirdoes are the only thing I’ve had in my incredibly screwed up existence that has ever made me feel like I had people really looking out for me and actually trusted that I’d do the same. Sure,” Clint shrugged. “It was nice to have custom bows and weird trick arrows built for me because Stark was bored and save the world—or at least Brooklyn—a few times, but that isn’t why I stayed.”

Clint looked over at Natasha, whose face was doing something that seemed to indicate either suppressed annoyance or thoughts of violence. Considering both were not unusual, Steve couldn’t be sure which one. Clint gave her a small smile and a little shrug, like he was saying what can you do?

“I didn’t choose to end up here,” Clint admitted. “I didn’t sign up to be the non-superpowered sniper on a team of superheroes. Hell, I wasn’t even supposed to be part of the Initiative,” Clint continued. “But I’m here now, so you guys are fucking stuck with me.”

Clint sat back into the cushions and propped up his leg, tucking his arms behind his head and closing his eyes, like, now that he’d said his piece the conversation was obviously over.

“Why are there no parents?”

The question was soft, almost like she hadn’t wanted to be heard, and Clint must have been as surprised as Steve to hear it because he jerked hard enough to almost dislodge himself from his sprawl on the couch.

“What?” Clint sputtered, like he’d choked on air.

“Our... fucked up little family,” Natasha repeated, voice still soft, like she wasn’t sure she should be speaking. “Why are we all siblings? Why are there no parents?”

For a second, Steve thought Clint might not have an answer for her, but then he cracked a grin.

“Because we’re orphans.” Steve blinked in surprise. “And our awesome fucked up little family wouldn’t be messed up by something as fucking unimportant as parents.”

Somehow, that answer seemed to satisfy Natasha, as she sent a throw pillow on a vicious trajectory right for Clint's face.

Clint, predictably, caught it, tucking the cushion behind his head with a wink.

“It’s for your leg, you idiot,” Natasha said, putting paid to the idea that she’d always meant for him to catch it.

“Aww, thanks, sis,” Clint drawled, and Steve thought her next projectile might not be so…fluffy.

“I will maim you,” she said, calmly as she folded her legs beneath her on her now pillowless chair, pulling a PADD out from the pocket beside the cushion.

“Not to interrupt, but, if we’re all on the same page…” he trailed off. “What are we going to do about Tony?”

Steve watched Natasha’s frame rise and fall in what was probably a silent sigh. “Whatever we can,” she said.

Clint screwed up his face and sat up on the couch. “Well, you did drag his ass back here. I guess I can go keep an eye on him, try to annoy him back to reality.”
After a brief nod from Steve and Natasha, Clint rose and limped down the hall to Tony’s room.

Looking to Natasha expectantly, because there was always something going on in that brain of hers, he was rewarded with an eye roll and a heft of her PADD.

“I think I know who might be able to help.”

Clint sat at the foot of Tony’s bed, leg propped up on the pillow he’d stolen from the common room and sort of… watching.

Catatonic probably wasn’t the exact right word for whatever Tony experienced when he checked out like this, because he wasn’t completely unresponsive. He didn’t appear to be listening or responding to auditory cues or prompts, but he occasionally reacted to physical stimulus. Sometimes he would even interact with his environment.

Like now. Tony sat at the head of the bed where Rogers had placed him when he’d come in. In his hands, he cradled the memory drive that contained the data he’d liberated from his cryotube, and though he was looking at it, it was more like he was looking through it. Like, perhaps, he could see the data itself swirling inside its plastic prison.

His cheek was already bruising from where Kirk had struck him, and Clint suppressed a belated surge of anger. Yeah, it had been funny at the time, because sometimes Stark really did deserve to get punched in the face. He’d had it coming for being a shit. But there was nothing funny about this. There wasn’t anything funny about watching people get fucking blown up.

That little speech about family might have given Clint a belated sense of the “nobody messes with Stark except me” shtick.

Clint grimaced.

Thing was, it never got easier to watch Tony like this, but there had been an occasion where Tony had seemed to take a page from the Book of Banner and hulked the fuck out on one of his bunkers, almost blowing himself to kingdom come in the process. The whole thing had been incredibly eerie, because instead of raging and crying and smashing, Tony had just gone all terminator and calmly levelled his lab equipment with repulsor blasts. He’d only donned the Iron Man gauntlets, leaving the remainder of his body unprotected from the blowback, and a combination of override codes from JARVIS and Rogers physically subduing him had been the only thing preventing the man from bringing a ton of rocks down on his head.

So Clint was watching.

But that didn’t mean he was going to be boring about it. Plus, it was weird to sit with Tony in complete silence, when he was usually so loquacious. Besides, maybe if Clint were annoying enough Tony would snap the fuck out of it and try to punch him, or something.

“So. We all decided, and you and Bruce are officially twins.” Clint drew his good leg up and rested his elbow on the bended knee. “He’s the reasonable, well-adjusted one, and you’re the alcoholic angst-machine.”

Tony stared, turning the drive over in his hands. Clint drummed his fingers on the outside of his knee.
“You know they have trees on this thing?” Clint nudged Tony with his foot without result. “Actual fucking trees. It’s like a weird little rain-forest park thing they’ve got below the engineering decks. They call it an arboretum, but seriously, it’s definitely more like a mini rain-forest. I think I saw something that was labelled a flesh eating plant, though. Not sure why they’d keep those around, but what do I know? I totally climbed one of the trees. It wasn’t exactly as tall as it should be for that, but I’ve done worse. Not sure where the root system would go, but I’d imagine they’ve worked it out pretty well since I didn’t bring the tree down with me when I fell out of it.”

Undeterred by the silence, Clint sat forward, squinting at Tony’s impassive face.

“You realize that when you do this, it’s a clear invitation to draw dicks on your face, don’t you?” Clint mused aloud. “You think they still have sharpies in the future? I mean, I don’t know how long that company was around to begin with, but I’ve never known a time in my life when there wasn’t someone around with a sharpie and impressive dick drawing abilities. Then again, I spent a lot of time with drunk clowns, so maybe my worldview is skewed.”

Clint continued on like that, talking about everything and nothing; describing in detail the way he’d hauled himself up through Jefferies tubes with just his arms—“Wicked upper body workout. Almost as much fun as a salmon ladder. I’m pretty sure I scared the crap out of some kid who was messing around with the wiring”—and his speculation on the function of the maintenance tunnels that snaked above the corridors, throwing out bits and pieces of tech speak that might make more sense to Tony than anyone else.

Huffing a sigh, Clint took a break to stretch the muscles in his neck and shoulders, which were still sort of throbbing from whatever Vulcan ninja move Spock had pulled on him. Wincing, he looked over at Tony and observed that, despite the pliancy he’d displayed when Rogers had led him into the room and the general apathy he projected, his frame was actually rife with tension.

Well, that couldn’t be comfortable. Clint frowned, but an idea struck him. It wasn’t actually anything that any of them had ever tried before, per se, but hey, he could experiment with the best of them.

Scooting closer to him on the bed, Clint reached out with more confidence than he felt and laid a hand on Tony’s shoulder. The man twitched a little at the contact, but otherwise remained unmoved, the data drive still making the rounds between his palms.

Christ, he could feel the tension in the man’s shoulders.

“Hey, so, I don’t know if anyone’s ever mentioned this—well, probably because I’d threaten them with pain of death if they did—but I literally have the most magical fingers that anyone has ever known, and I give a mean shoulder rub. Unfortunately, I haven’t had occasion to practice in a while, so you’re gonna be my guinea pig.”

Clint moved himself so he was sitting behind Tony. The position was awkward and definitely one that would probably have someone accuse him of bad touching, but it wasn’t his fault, okay? And he and Tony were bros. They’d talked that shit out ages ago and decided that, while they agreed to be each other’s failsafes if there were ever any kind of alien or engineered mind whammy that necessitated immediate sexy times, they otherwise had no overt interest in fucking one another.

He stretched out his bum leg and curled the other beneath him so he was seated in an awkward kind of half straddle. The hunch of Tony’s shoulders gave Clint a minute height advantage on the firm bed, which was good, because Clint didn’t feel like needing a shoulder rub himself after this.

“Alright, prepare to be amazed. Safe word is grenadine if it gets too awesome.”
Briefly rubbing his palms together to warm them, Clint got to work.

Holy fuck did this man have some serious tension. Clint knew his hands were strong, strong enough to break the bones of someone else’s in his grip, so he kneaded at the stiff muscles as firmly as he dared.

But seriously, there were more knots than a god damn pirate ship.

Clint almost winced in sympathy as he pressed and kneaded a little more firmly at a knot right at the top of his infraspinatus.

Tony actually uttered a soft grunt as the knot released, and Clint eased up, smoothing his thumbs around the column of his spine in slow strokes.

Slowly, he felt the tension in Tony’s frame ease. Even his breathing, which had been quiet before, seemed to deepen and slow to something more natural.

His hands were more rubbing than massaging, now, and Clint matched his breath with Tony’s, which was why he noticed immediately when it began to stutter.

Clint blinked in surprise, stilling his motions immediately.

“Tony?” He asked, but didn’t get an answer. He felt Tony’s shoulders move with the force of a breath drawn in, and then still completely when it wasn’t let out.

Clint adjusted his leg and leaned around to make sure the man wasn’t having some kind of seizure.

“Hey man, are you—oh shit,” Clint cursed, balking at the glistening tear tracks on Tony’s face. Oh hell. The man was crying, and judging by the damp stains on the front of his shirt, had been for some time.

“Hey. Hey hey hey,” Clint said, trying to go for something that approximated soothing. “It can’t have been that bad, right? I know I’m out of practice, but shit. I’ve never massaged someone to tears before. Don’t cry, you’re hurting my feelings.”

Tony didn’t respond, just kept breathing and crying. One hand still pressed to Tony’s shoulder, Clint felt more than saw the weight of the breaths that seemed almost painful as they went in and out. His eyes were still fixed on the data drive in his hands, tears just leaking from his eyes without the aid of blinking.

Mortified, and in the absence of any better ideas, Clint scooted himself back behind Tony and started up rubbing his shoulders again, small, gentle sweeps of his hands because apparently the crying had just undone all of his hard work.

When Tony whispered, Clint wasn’t sure he hadn’t imagined hearing anything. Clint heaved a quiet sigh and leaned forward a little, keeping his hands moving.

“Come again?” He asked, almost wishing he could take back the words but not enough of an asshole to actually do it.

“I killed them.”

Yeah, that was what Clint had thought he’d said. Scrunching his eyes closed, Clint stopped rubbing for a moment and just gently squeezed Tony’s shoulders.
“No, you didn’t,” Clint said, not even sure Tony was talking about that fucked up explosion with the space station because, when it came to Tony Stark, there were plenty of bodies to choose from, the blood of whom he obviously thought was entirely on his hands.

And because Clint was apparently better at the touching than the talking—or so Natasha had told him, on several occasions—Clint just shut the fuck up and kept rubbing Tony’s back and shoulders. Nothing he could do but repeat himself, and that wasn’t going to help.

“I killed them,” Tony said again, the whisper catching on a hoarse sob, and fuck Clint if it didn’t just hurt to hear the despair, to literally feel it under his hands.

Tony held the data drive clenched so tightly in his fist that Clint could see blood welling up between his knuckles. Gently, insistently, he pried the drive away and with one hand and placed it on the short table next to the bed.

Over and over, Tony said it—*I killed them I killed them I killed them*—crumbling apart until Clint just wrapped his arms around his trembling shoulders and held Tony together himself.

The crying never intensified, and didn’t let up, and Tony didn’t move except to say *I killed them*. Clint held his arms secure around Tony’s shoulders, bracketing him with a leg on either side. Tony could complain about the invasion of his personal space later, when he was coherent.

Clint gently pulled Tony backward until his own back was pressed to the wall along which the bed was placed and arranged Tony in his arms, settling his body between Clint’s outstretched legs and safely ensconcing Tony’s shaking body in his embrace.

Clint pressed his forehead to Tony’s trembling shoulder and tried not to let it break his heart every time he heard the choked, whined, whispered words.

*I killed them. I killed them. I killed them. I killed them.*

Jim stared at his now blank console screen and tried to think about something—*anything*—that wasn’t the wreckage of the Starbase they’d been called to save.

It didn’t work.

He’d interviewed the base personnel. He’d taken fifteen minutes to finalize the formal charges against Doctor Djembe and her team, authorizing a transfer to the ships en route. He’d hunted down departmental analyses and drawn up a final report, sent it off to Spock for proofing, had it sent back with a few additions and annotations and then shipped it off to Starfleet for someone else to determine if mistakes had been made.

He knew there wouldn’t be any to find. On paper, nobody had done anything wrong.

*Hadn’t they?* Jim’s brain whispered to him, mutinously.

For the last two hours things had been quiet, subdued in a way a ship with nearly five-hundred people aboard never was. But at times like this it was clear that every person on the ship had just been smacked with a painful, tragic reminder of how easy it was to die ugly out here in the black.

A few people had gotten that lesson for the first time, and Jim felt like a pile of dicks for having done it.

It hadn’t been the point he was trying to make.
Jim actually laughed out loud at himself, the sound rough and cynical in the hard silence of his quarters. He pressed fingers into his eyes and forced himself to breathe before the laugh could turn into sobs.

What point had he been trying to make? He’d been so angry, so angry at those people for disrespecting his ship, disrespecting him. Jim had wanted to show off, to shove it in their faces that they didn’t know what they were dealing with (how could they?) and that they were playing with a kind of fire they’d never seen before.

Jim Kirk from Riverside Iowa, still a little shit with a chip on his shoulder and something to prove.

All that burning, steely rage was still locked tight in his chest. Maybe if they’d gotten there five, ten, two minutes earlier, they could have made a difference. Saved more people. Saved the station. Taken out the battleship.

Would it have mattered?

The Lieutenant from the base had laid it all out for him, that almost as soon as the hangar had been compromised, the Base Commander had retreated to the auxiliary bridge with full knowledge that it was a transporter-free zone.

Cavalry or no, they hadn’t expected to be rescued. Jim and Spock were apparently the only ones with the clearance to know that the base had been dealing with classified technology and had very clear self-destruct protocols in the event of an insurmountable attack—but the arrival of the 
Enterprise had accelerated that timetable. He could have gone in there, he could have gotten them out, done something, anything that wasn’t watching them be vaporized.

The mercs had purportedly been packing some serious heat. Leftovers scavenged from an arsenal Marcus had been hoarding for his fucked up plans. If they’d managed to hit the Enterprise with whatever torpedo they’d been firing when her shields were down, Jim wouldn’t be here to self-flagellate.

It was like having his own impotence shoved in his face all over again. The futility of trying to save something that couldn’t be saved.

But he could have done more, if they’d gotten there sooner.

Jim slammed his fist into the desk, a stylus rolling onto the floor with the impact.

So now the Enterprise stood silent vigil over the debris field, a sentinel awaiting a clean-up crew and someone higher ranked than him to whisk away the people he’d rescued for a debrief he’d probably never hear about.

And there it was, rage burgeoning in his chest all over again. Being kept in the dark, being thrust out of the loop like that, was never something that was going to sit well with him. He hated the secrecy, the lies and the ever present feeling that he was missing something.

The rage was an unpleasant reminder that he’d never stopped being angry at Spock. Hadn’t forgiven him for stringing Jim along on an intensely personal deception, even when he knew, intellectually, that it was the best way to find the mole on his ship.

It still hurt. It hurt that Spock was willing to damage the trust they’d worked so hard to build with each other when there had to have been another way. A better than “best” way. But, then again, hadn’t their relationship already been fractured at that point?
Before Jim could let that train of thought go any further, he ruthlessly shut it down. There wasn’t any point in thinking about it. If it was ever something he was going to move past, it would be done in the passive silence of his subconscious and never, never ever out loud.

His door chime sounded.

*Saved by the bell.*

“Enter,” Jim said tiredly, still sitting at his blank console.

“Well, you look like shit.”

Jim’s lips tugged in a mirthless smile. He turned to give Bones a frank once over and quirked his eyebrows at him.

“Look who’s talking.”

“Yeah,” the older man said, his shoulders slumping as he crossed the room to flop onto the couch.

Eyebrows drawing together, Jim felt something sink inside of him. He knew that look.

“I’m sorry,” Jim said, apologizing for a million things but knowing which one Bones would take.

Bones shrugged silently. “Nothing I could do,” he said gruffly. “Radiation and rapid decompression. She was never gonna make it.”

“None of them would have,” Jim said, not caring about the beans he shouldn’t be spilling. “We were lucky to save the ones we did.”

Bones head lifted with the force of a dour scoff. “Why am I not surprised? Jesus, Jim. We sure know how to pick ‘em.”

“We were never close enough, were we?” Jim pondered, quietly.

The silence reigned between them, charged but commiserate. At least until Bones ruined it.

“Probably not, but Stark doesn’t know that.”

Jim winced, but stayed silent.

“Was all that really necessary? Did they really deserve to see that?”

Bones’ questions weren’t unkind, nor were they delivered with an overt air of judgment, but he could hear the conscience in it enough to admit that he’d been wrong.

“No,” he sighed out, lifting himself out of his chair with exhausted limbs and trudging to the couch to flop down next to Bones. “It was a mistake.”

“Damn right it was,” Bones said, a little more cutting. “Making them watch that was a right mean thing to do, Jim.”

“If I’d known—shit,” he bit out, letting the rest of the thought go. If he’d known they were warping into a forgone conclusion, if he’d known the shit-show that he and everyone else would witness, if he’d known he’d have to suffer this feeling again—digging, churning, malevolent and ubiquitous—he’d have done whatever he could to spare someone else the same.
He wasn’t even aware he was close to tears until he felt Bones press a hand to the stiff set of his shoulders.

“Ah, hell, look at me making everything worse. Son of a bitch,” Bones sighed, scooting in closer to put his arm around Jim’s shoulders, pulling his head to rest sideways beside his own.

It didn’t feel fair that he was the one being comforted, in all this. It was, after all, just part of the job.

“How do I keep fucking this up?” He asked, directing it at no one in particular. He brought a hand up to wipe the wetness from his face.

“You’re not fucking up, Jim. You just got stuck with a shitty hand. It’s not your fault.”

Jim shook his head. “Not just this. All of it. The base. This mission. Romanoff, Stark.” Jim paused, letting out a shaky breath. “Spock.”

He could feel Bones shaking his head as the man withdrew from their embrace, huffing out a short laugh. “Now there’s a can of worms I ain’t touching.”

Jim couldn’t help a rueful chuckle of his own. “You and me both.”

“You know that isn’t gonna work forever, Jim,” Bones said, leaning over to rummage in the cabinet he kept stocked beside the couch.

“I know.” Jim said, eyeing the glasses and bourbon in his hands speculatively.

“What?” Bones grumped, pouring them each a generous portion. “We’re off duty until the reinforcements come, right?”

Instead of answering, Jim took the proffered drink, raising the glass to Bones in acknowledgement.

“To being victims of shitty circumstance,” Bones said, taking a hearty sip.

Settling into the cushions, Jim drank.

When he finally returned to his room, Leonard’s PADD was flashing with a message alert, but he ignored it in favor of his bed. Middle of Beta or not, he was exhausted.

Jim was finally passed out after more than two days without adequate rest, and now Leonard was going to blissfully follow suit.

The PADD buzzed again—new message alert. God dammit he was off duty.

Pulling himself out of his bed and dutifully ignoring the creak in his joints he fully intended on never admitting was there, he stomped over to the PADD and snatched it up. Swiping his fingers violently across the screen, he read the messages.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” he muttered. “I’m not drunk enough to deal with this.”

McCoy strode into their room without requesting entry.

“Alright, Romanoff. I’m here.” He grumbled, and Natasha had to blink for a second as she looked at him.
There was no blue shirt. He was wearing a white t-shirt and—were those sweat pants?

“So, where is he?” McCoy looked around, a small bag slung over his shoulder bumping his hip with the motion.

“He’s in his room,” Natasha said, still eyeing him. “Clint is in there with him. I think maybe we should talk first.”

“Of course you do,” McCoy muttered, but dutifully flopped down on the couch Clint had been occupying earlier, legs splayed open and arms petulantly folded.

Natasha shared a look with Steve before scrutinizing McCoy again. He looked up at her and frowned, hard.

“What?” He snapped.

“Are you drunk?” She asked.

“I’m off duty,” McCoy responded, readjusting his folded arms. “And I’m here anyway, so maybe you could tell me what’s going on?” He waved an arm at her, eyebrow raised expectantly.

Well, that certainly explained why it had taken so long to respond. Steve looked at her, shrugged, and they sat down.

“Do you remember the panic attack Tony had while you were treating his burns?”

Steve looked at her askance, but she ignored it. It wasn’t like she needed to call everyone for a group meeting every time one of them had their buttons pushed.

McCoy nodded in response to her question. “I do. Not surprising, he looked like he’d had a pretty rough time of it.”

Natasha nodded in agreement, but sighed as she tried to think about how to explain this.

“Most of the time, I’d say Stark does a good job of pretending to be well adjusted, or at least deflecting, but he’s pretty much as messed up as they come.”

“Natasha,” Steve chided, but she fixed him with an unimpressed look.

Fingers pressed to his eyelids, McCoy muttered something like “Oh lord”, but motioned for her to go on.

“You have to understand,” Natasha began, slowly. “He’s a… civilian, but he’s lived through more hell than some of the people I’ve worked with, and with none of the training.” She paused, debating on whether or not to say what came next. “A lot of it was of his own making.”

“Natasha, no,” Steve began, but she shook her head before he could get going.

“That’s not to say the things that have happened to him, or to anyone else, are his fault. Because they aren’t, but he’s always put that weight on his own shoulders. He’s a narcissist,” Natasha shrugged. “So making even the bad things about himself is as natural to him as breathing.”

“I think I can see where this is going,” McCoy said, leaning forward a bit from his slump.

“Stark is incredibly brilliant,” Natasha went on. “His memory is near flawless when he bothers to concentrate on something hard enough to remember it.”
“So he’s got a lifetime of trauma knocking around in his brain just waiting for someone to press play,” McCoy said with a full-faced frown. “Son of a bitch.”

Steve looked surprised, but Natasha almost wanted to smile. That was the reason she’d called him. McCoy had his own brand of brilliance.

“We just added another high resolution disaster to his playlist, didn’t we?” McCoy dropped his head into an open palm. “And Jim sat him down in a fucking chair to make him watch those people die like it was his fault.”

They were silent for a minute, in which Steve sat quietly seething next to her. Natasha knew that he’d have a few choice words for Kirk the next time they saw each other, and maybe even a reciprocal fist to the jaw, but it was just as much guilt as it was anything else.

After all, hadn’t they all pointed the finger at Stark as much as Kirk?

“It wasn’t,” McCoy said, pulling his face out of his palms. “Look, I don’t know the final score on this. I’m a doctor, not an analyst, but there is nothing about this that can be laid on one person, and whatever blame is going around, I’m not convinced it should be laid on Stark.” He shook his head. “I don’t know about that crap with the coding, you’d have to ask Jim or Scotty or Spock—I’m sure one of them is looking into it—but with the things I’ve seen out here, the things that happen,” he trailed off.

The haunted look on McCoy’s face was one that Natasha knew well. It was the same one she’d seen on the faces of every asset that she’d worked with who still had a soul; on Steve’s, her own. Something about it made her think that what they’d seen was the tip of the iceberg for death in space.

“The mercs killed those people, not your friend,” McCoy finished, rising to his feet. “What happened, after…?” He waved a hand, encompassing the disaster they’d all witnessed.

“He checked out,” Steve said, his face drawn tight. “Just… shut down. It’s—happened before, but never lasted so long. Clint is with him, keeping an eye on him, but,” Steve stopped, looking down the short hallway to Stark’s room. “We don’t really know what to do.”

McCoy nodded sharply. “I told Jim it was a shit idea,” he said. “I told Jim it was a shit idea.” He said. “I’m sorry that you all had to see that. Things out here, they don’t end pretty, and it doesn’t get easier. Not for me, not for Jim.”

“He didn’t know,” Steve said, even if he still looked like he might punch Kirk at the first available opportunity.

“No,” McCoy sighed, looking tired and drawn. “No, he didn’t.”

Taking in his expression, Natasha wondered how many of the people they’d gotten off of the station had died on his table. No wonder he’d been drinking.

Making a show of clearing his throat and arranging his bag on his shoulder, McCoy looked toward Stark’s room. “So, can I see my patient, now?”

Natasha rose to her feet, motioning for Steve to stay. “This way.”

Entering the room, Natasha actually stopped short in surprise.

Stark was asleep. And Clint was spooning him.
Bright, blue-grey eyes snapped open in the dim light the moment the door had made a sound, staring at her intently. Barton had his arms locked around Stark’s upper body, boxing him in.

She raised an eyebrow at him even as McCoy made a surprised sound.

Clint narrowed his eyes in response, saying nothing as he looked to McCoy and then back to her.

She nodded once before leading McCoy over to the bed.

“How long?” she asked, quietly, while McCoy settled next to the bed and rummaged quietly through his kit.

“Not long,” Clint murmured, keeping his arms around Stark in spite of his audience. “Not sure when he passed out, but he stopped talking maybe an hour ago.”

“How long?”

Clint pressed his lips together and shook his head. Okay. Not pushing it.

McCoy nudged her aside, meeting Clint’s suspicious look without a trace of hesitancy. He made a quick scan with his tricorder, grimacing as he looked at the readout and eyeing the bruise on his cheek with obvious distaste. Reaching back into his bag, he loaded a hypospray and reached to press it to Stark’s neck.

Clint’s hand shot out too fast for her to follow, gripping his wrist tightly and staring him down.

McCoy didn’t even flinch. “He’s completely exhausted, dehydrated and his dopamine is in the shitter. I’d have more luck waking the dead,” he said, though he spoke quietly.

Clint didn’t let him go, if anything, appeared to squeeze tighter. Natasha raised her eyebrows. Huh. She hadn’t seen Clint’s protective streak come out in a long time.

Jaw visibly clenching, McCoy didn’t waver. “Saline, some vitamins, and a light sedative to keep him down.”

The staring contest stretched on for a moment before Clint slowly, very slowly, released the doctor’s hand, bringing it back down to settle over Stark’s hands where they were bunched in front of the arc reactor, blocking its muted glow.

The hiss of the hypospray sounded loud in the stillness of the room, but, as he’d said, Stark didn’t even flinch.

McCoy went to put the hypospray back in his kit, but stopped short.

“Is that blood?” He asked.

“He hurt his hand,” Clint murmured, eyes flickering from Natasha back to the limb in question.

Slowly, telegraphing the movements to prevent another protective outburst, McCoy gently manipulated Stark’s bloodstained hand to examine the injury. After a brief assessment, he gently cleaned it with an antiseptic wipe before expertly wrapping it in a white bandage.

“Regenerator can wait,” he said, leaning back on his heels and moving to stand.

Waiting between the bed and the door, Natasha looked at Clint askance as McCoy left the room.
“’M gonna stay,” Clint said, not looking at her.

Something in Natasha’s chest tightened and released, watching him. Did Clint think she was judging him for the display? That his stupid speech about family hadn’t held some significance for her, as well?

“Good,” she answered, and followed McCoy out before Clint’s surprised look could make her climb into the bed with the both of them just to spite him.

Natasha found McCoy and Steve conversing quietly in the common room.

“—sounds like a dissociative, depersonalized state. He might not even remember how he got here.”

“He’ll remember some of it,” Natasha interjected. “He always does.”

McCoy jumped at her sudden appearance behind him, huffing in annoyance. “Well, I did all I could for him right now. I don’t know what Barton did to bring him down, but he’s out like a light. He’s not in great shape. His stress hormones are sky high, but it’s looking like he’s been neglecting the whole ‘routine maintenance’ thing on his body for a while.”

Steve sighed, the sound heavy with guilt. “He forgets to eat. Or sleep. Or drink anything that isn’t coffee or booze.”

Wrinkling his nose, McCoy reached into his medkit and removed a hypospray and a few cartridges, pressing them into Steve’s hands.

“Those are some basic vitamins and nutrients to give him a boost, but you need to make sure he eats and drinks some fucking water when he wakes up. He’s sleeping off the exhaustion but he ain’t gonna bounce back. Poor physical health exacerbates post-traumatic conditions.”

Shaking his head, McCoy grimaced at nothing in particular.

“I’ll check in sometime tomorrow during Alpha, but you guys are gonna have to give him those. Romanoff knows how they work, so she can show you. I’ve got my own stupid genius to hound, so you’re on your own with that.”

Looking like he’d said too much, McCoy sealed up his bag and went for the door. Hand raised to open it, he paused and turned back to them.

“This all sucks,” he said. “I don’t know what’s going to happen. To him, to any of you. It ain’t gonna be easy and you’ve got a long road ahead of you, but,” McCoy shrugged. “At least you don’t have to walk it alone.”

“Thank you,” Steve said, holding the borrowed hypospray in his hand.

McCoy nodded and turned to leave again.

“Is—” Steve started, and McCoy turned around, eyebrow raised. “Is he—is Captain Kirk okay?”

Rubbing his face with one hand, McCoy huffed out a sigh before shaking his head ruefully. “You can ask him yourself when he apologizes.”

Jim read through the report from Scotty twice, verified it with Spock, checked the findings himself and verbally confirmed before throwing his PADD to shatter against the bulkhead and sinking to his
The first thing that Tony noticed when he woke up was that he did not want to be awake.

Or, at least his body didn't, and then his brain got with the program because his head was killing him and unconsciousness had been much nicer.

The second thing he noticed was that his face also hurt. Wait. Why did his face hurt? Oh, right. He'd been punched. He'd kind of deserved it.

No, he'd definitely deserved it.

Another reason he kind of wanted to be unconscious, again. Unconsciousness meant not having to look anyone in the eye when he'd just jumped back on the facilitation of mass destruction wagon.

The fourth thing he noticed was—

"What the fuck?" Tony mumbled, blinking his swollen, crusty eyes—holy hell had he been crying?—at the arm around his waist.

"G'back to sleep, Stark."

"Jesus!" Tony jumped at the gravelly voice that spoke right in his ear. Well, more like the back of his neck.

Right. The fourth thing Tony noticed was that he was not alone in his fucking bed.

Clint—because of course it was Clint. Who the fuck else would just climb into bed with him in a depersonalized episode of PTSD?—groaned, rolling over and snuggling into a blanket.

"Or don't, whatever," he grumbled.

Tony took a moment to just sort of blink and stare at Clint's back.

"Tell me you at least bought me a drink, first."

Clint huffed, rolling onto his back and stretching, cracking an eye to glare at Tony before rolling over onto his stomach and determinedly stuffing his face into the pillow.

"Worst sex of my life," he responded, voice muffled.

"Well, considering you didn't even bother to take off my pants, I'd have to agree. I do sex better without pants."

“Be grateful you don’t have a dick on your face.”

“I'm grateful I don't have your dick on my face.”

"Bet you say that to all the girls."

"Just the ones with dicks," Tony mumbled, scooting himself up to rest against the short headboard, the lower half of his body pretty much pressed to Clint's side. These beds really sucked, but fuck, he was tired. His head was fuzzy and he really did just want to go back to sleep.

But he was awake now, and weren't there like, expectations for this sort of post-breakdown crap?
Fuck. Tony hated his life.

Sitting there in silence, hunched uncomfortably forward, Tony fingered his mysteriously bandaged hand that wouldn't stop shaking and wondered what the hell happened to it. It should probably freak him out more, but he was too fucking exhausted, too numb, to care. Maybe Barton had fallen asleep and he could just stumble through this part without an audience.

"So, uh, um. About the thing."

"Stark," Clint said, moving his head so half his face was mashed into the pillow and the other half was staring at him.

"What?"

"Do you actually want to talk about it?"

Tony swallowed. "Um, not really, no." He paused. "Fuck no?"

"Then go the fuck back to sleep," Clint said, returning to face-mash position.

Tony stared in confusion.

After a moment, Clint leaned his head over again to stare right back. "You wanna be alone?"

Something lurched in Tony's gut.

"No," he tried not to answer too quickly, and failed judging by the half of Clint's smile that was visible.

"Then get in here," he said, plucking the blanket and letting it fall back down in invitation.

Tony held out for half a minute before he slowly, suspiciously, lifted the blanket and slid back down beneath the covers. Despite his exhaustion, he lay still as a corpse on his back—unless you counted his still shaking hands as movement, in which case he was a walking goddamn vibrator.

He felt tired. He was tired. His eyes hurt and his head hurt and he just wanted to drift back down into unconsciousness, but now that he was awake his brain was trying desperately to bite him in the ass and generally ruin his life.

When he closed his eyes, explosions flashed behind his lids and he quickly snapped them open again. He opened and closed his hands, trying to stop the shaking, but it wasn't working. He was drifting again, losing himself in the flashes of light and panic and fuck me not again—

"Tony."

Tony's eyes snapped open at the sound and suddenly he was back in his own body, the sound of his breathing loud in the stillness of the dark room. No lights except the one in his chest.

"Fuck," he breathed out, bringing his hands up to cover the light of the reactor.

He could feel Clint looking at him, noticing him, cataloguing the ways in which Tony Stark continued to reveal his mental instability. Then again, he couldn't actually recall a time in his life when 'mental' and 'stability' would have even been a combination that applied to him in the absence of a negative.

"Big spoon or little spoon?"
In any other circumstances, Tony might have laughed, maybe elbowed Clint in the ribs or something, but right now, Tony kind of felt like he might shake apart from his stupid hands outwards, and Clint's voice didn't have the snarky, judge-y tone that it took when he was actually being a dick.

It was weird, but at the same time, it kind of made Tony want to weep with gratitude, because he really didn't fucking deserve to have someone who was this nice to him when he was such a fucked up mess of a person.

"Little spoon," he admitted, expecting a gotcha! but Clint just scooted backward to make room without a word.

They did the awkward shuffle of adjusting arms and legs, but in short order Clint's arm was wrapped again around his middle, resting far enough below the arc reactor and above his navel that Tony wasn't feeling anything but a gradual release of tension.

Breathing slowly in and out, Tony tried to calm his brain and closed his eyes.

A bright flash forced them open again.

Clint's arm tightened about his middle and, without even thinking about it, Tony reached down to grab his hand and squeezed it, hard. He almost immediately released it, trying to draw it away with a muttered apology when Clint just lazily reached up and grabbed his hand again, pulling it back down.

"S'okay, man," Clint mumbled. "'Got strong hands," he said, flexing his fingers to make the point. "Just keep that shit above the belt."

Tony huffed a manic laugh, but squeezed back, and finally relaxed into the support of Clint's chest at his back.

Chapter End Notes

EVERYTHING IS PAIN AND NO ONE IS HAPPY

a fic by officiumdefunctorum

Three things:

1. Chapter 16 coming up soon. There will be face punching!
2. NEWS! Good and bad. The good news for me, is that in less than a week I start my first year of teaching. Yay for career employment! Bad news is, updates will come more slowly, and for that I apologize, but the summer could not last forever!

3. If anyone is interested, I posted a sequel to Business as usual, apparently, in celebration of the one year anniversary of my first AO3 fic. It's called the hardest part about being a hero (is making sure no one finds out) and you should go take a gander if cracky Merlin/Avengers is your thing.

Note on PTSD:

I kind of maybe did a fuckton of research, and realized I had unknowingly written Tony into the Dissociative subtype of PTSD. If you're a nerd like me, here's a link to one of the very informative articles I read if you're interested.

Thank you for reading, I love you all. Find me on tumblr or leave a comment. Commenters are my favorites.
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Spock drops in, which goes about as well as one would expect. Steve gets an unexpected audience with the Captain.

Chapter Notes

In essence, Chapter 15: Part II.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"What about the Helmsman, Hikaru Sulu?" Steve asked, skimming through the personnel files Natasha had shared with him.

"Not enough demonstrated skill with computers. I met him on the tour they gave me. He seems to be pretty handy in the biology department, but doesn't meet the criteria," Natasha stared for a moment as she stopped Steve's scrolling with a hand over his shoulder.

"Really?" Steve asked, when he saw where she was looking. "Fencing?"

Natasha hummed in response. "Interesting," she said, before going back to her review.

Placing the PADD on the table, Steve rubbed the bridge of his nose. They'd both caught a few hours of much needed rest, but the reality of their situation sat heavily on Steve's mind. He was restless. Antsy. While it felt good to be doing something that wasn't a whole new round of 'what happened while I was frozen', he couldn't reconcile the cognitive dissonance of working for people who might be out for Tony's blood. He itched for action where there was none to be had.

"Why are we doing this?" He asked, setting the PADD down irritably.

"Because I don't call a bridge burned before I see a fire," Natasha responded, without looking at him.

Steve contemplated the table beneath his hands more closely than it deserved.

"We all heard what Kirk said," Steve bit out. "I don't like the waiting. I like to be prepared for a fight."

"Then be prepared," Natasha said, offering him a brief moment of eye contact. "But don't go looking for one where there isn't one to be had. Give them some time to assess the facts."

For want of anything else to say, Steve reluctantly picked up his PADD and continued reading.

"We've excluded more than half the crew out of hand. Are you sure about those?" He inquired.

"According to the security data Spock's given me access to, they were all visibly attending to other
tasks when the subspace transmissions were made."

"But if this guy has the skills to scrub them, wouldn't he have the skills to alter that kind of information?" Steve asked, standing up and beginning to pace. "Like, changing the timestamp or something?"

Natasha's lip twitched and Steve suppressed an annoyed huff. That was as good as laughing at him.

"I actually thought the same thing," she responded, holding up a conversation record on her PADD. "Spock says that that kind of data is impossible to alter because of the nature of subspace transmissions and the ship's databanks. Apparently it's possible to destroy the information, but not to manufacture new information to put in its place."

Steve sighed, moving restlessly across the floor. "Is that really all there is to go on? Are they sure that this means there is someone informing on them?"

"Spock doesn't seem like the paranoid, dramatic type. If he says there's something going on, there probably is. From what he said, purging that kind of information takes a lot of effort and premeditation. Why would someone do that if they wanted to hide phone sex, or whatever? That whole thing with the doctors is kind of a mark in the suspicious column, too."

Fists clenching at the memory, Steve nodded. "I'm with you on that one."

A minute passed in which Steve paced, PADD in hand, and Natasha went back to her own research.

"Kirk isn't going to be happy that three of his command crew aren't in the clear," he said, breaking the silence.

Natasha hummed noncommittally. "We already told him that no one is beyond reproach. Chekov, Wallace and Uhura all have the background necessary to scrub the data and remain otherwise undetected. Wallace even had unimpeded access to the cryotech," Natasha added. "He knows that this is necessary, he just likes to complain."

Steve grunted in acknowledgement, paging through the remaining personnel files and flagging or dismissing them according to the criteria Natasha had given him, then sending them along to her for further evaluation.

After a few minutes of skimming and wearing a hole in the floor, Steve felt the unmistakable weight of Natasha's gaze on him.

"What?" He asked, stopping.

"Why don't you go check out the rec facilities? I can keep working on this, it won't take me long."

"There are over a hundred people left," Steve said, nonplussed.

"Spock is bound to come knocking, soon. He'll probably whip up some kind of program to filter through everything and put paid to all our work, anyway. Go," she said, nodding to the door. "Astrid is out there, she'll show you everything. You really look like you need to punch something."

Steve didn't want to admit how right she was. His skin was itchy from the anxiety over Tony, and whether or not he was actively thinking about it, the knowledge that he was inside of a spaceship left him with a lingering sense of claustrophobia, piling more stress onto his already hyperactive nervous system.
"Okay," Steve conceded, embarrassingly quickly, and ducked into his room to retrieve something to else to wear.

When he emerged in what he guessed was the best approximation of workout clothing—a sleeved white undershirt and a pair of somewhat clingy black pants—Natasha barely glanced at him.

"Not leaving much to the imagination there, Rogers," she said as he made his way to the exit.

Pulling a face, Steve looked down at himself. "What is it with the future and tight clothing?"

"Pretty breathable, though," Natasha shrugged. "McCoy had me doing PT in something similar, it doesn't hold the sweat in."

"Good to know," Steve drawled, opening the door.

"Knock 'em dead!" Natasha called after him.

Hopefully boxing hadn't gone out of style in the last two centuries, because he intended to.

---

Tony was actually awake now, and apparently dying of thirst. He scrubbed at his crusty eyes and watched Clint grumble and generally fuss about rejoining the land of the living.

"So, is this one of those 'I'll deny it to my dying breath' situations?"

Clint sort of scoff-grunted, his hair sticking up in tufts as he raised it up from the pillow, creases clearly marked on one half of his face.

"That ship's sailed, man. Natasha brought in the doc to fix you up while you were out cold. Caught us red handed. You literally," he said, nodding to the bandage on Tony’s right hand.

Tony groaned, pressing his fingers to his sore eyes in an effort to soothe his sore brain. Great. Awesome. There was absolutely nothing about this that he would ever be able to live down.

More importantly, he was fucked. Or no, the passive voice didn’t really fit, here. He’d gone and fucked himself this time around. Oh, the irony.

After a bit more grumbling, Clint managed to disentangle himself from the blankets and maneuver himself to sit on the edge of the bed next to Tony while he absently flexed his bandaged hand.

"If it makes you feel better, I'll probably make fun of you for it more than she will," Clint said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Tony's mouth felt like sandpaper and his throat like a vice, so he just glared at Clint instead of replying. Also—Tony took an experimental sniff—gross, his shirt was crusty with sleep-sweat and smelled like Barton.

"You're welcome, by the way," Clint said. "Normally I charge for that kind of service. Cuddle by the hour and all that."

Mouth forming a moue of distaste at the word cuddle and the inevitable reformation into cuddle-sweat in his brain, Tony glared some more.

"Guess you’ll have to put it on my tab," he rasped ruefully, peeling off his shirt and tossing it over his shoulder.
"Nah, first one's a freebie. Gotta build the client base," Clint grinned, voice distorted through his full body stretch, the loud pop of several joints making Tony wince in sympathy.

Yeah, getting old sucked, and apparently he and Barton were the only ones who had to deal with that crap. The only time Tony could really tell Natasha had joints at all was when she was getting a shoulder popped back into place.

But Clint apparently handled it all with the grace of a former acrobat, Tony staring at him in near disgust as he fell into series of vigorous push-ups.

Awesome. He was being ignored now. Real fucking subtle.

Standing up with a partial stumble, Tony managed to retain the scraps of his dignity while he skirted Clint in the limited floor space. He hesitated a moment at the door, but took one look at Clint as he flipped his body upside down against the wall to continue his push-ups in a more vertical fashion and fled before his masculinity took any more of a beating.

Yeah. Tony was definitely the little spoon.

Emerging into the hallway and heading straight to the replicator—do not pass go, do not collect two-hundred dollars, do not make eye-contact with anyone—Tony figured he did a pretty good job of tuning out the world and might actually acquire a gallon of water to both drink and dump over his head without incident.

Water in hand, he turned around with the glass at his lips and stopped, cursing himself for being caught out in the open.

"Stark," Natasha said, clearly tense even if there was no expression to betray it.

But it wasn't Natasha that had stopped Tony like a deer in the headlights with one foot still hovering above the floor. It was Commander Spock, perched next to her at a table with data PADDs stacked in front of him.

"Mr. Stark," Spock greeted him with a nod and a weird little hand motion, fingers forming a V. Oddly, he wasn't wearing the sparkly shirt, instead a black one with the same Nike-esque symbol on the left pectoral. Minus the blue, the man was actually sort of alien-hot, but right now he was just a foreboding presence.

Swallowing his mouthful of water, Tony tried not to look like he wanted to bolt.

"Uh," he said, trying to think of something to say when he noticed Spock's eyes had descended to scrutinize the arc reactor.

Right, he wasn't wearing a fucking shirt.

After so many years of having the reactor in his chest, Tony figured the self-consciousness would have waned. Hell, he'd even cut holes in his shirts so the arc reactor would stick out of them. More to prevent nipple chafing than anything else, but he still felt the instant flush of defensive anger slice through his apprehension upon seeing the First Officer in his room.

"My eyes are up here, buddy," Tony snarled, voice still rough with sleep and dehydration.

With no fanfare, Spock ceased his study of the arc reactor and brought his eyes back up to pierce him with that creepy, dark eyed stare.
"Indeed they are," Spock answered.

Tony flicked his eyes over to Natasha for help and noticed that she, too, had noticed where Spock was looking and had taken up a subtle defensive stance. Bless her. It was so great to have people who seemed to be willing to beat up other people for him. It should have beenemasculating, but Natasha was fucking scary and he would be the first to admit how nice it was to have her in his corner.

Even if occasionally he was the one getting beaten up.

"Yeah," Tony drawled, shifting sideways toward Barton's room, seeing as his own was occupied. "I'm just gonna," Tony waved his free hand readied himself for a swift exit.

"Mr. Stark, if you are available to speak, I have some matters I wish to discuss with you," Spock said, and Tony froze, again, that fear and apprehension punching into his gut again like it had never left.

Staring, wide-eyed, Tony tried not to blink and couldn't find his voice.

There was a crash and Tony jumped, hands coming up to reflexively cover the arc reactor. He looked down and realized that he'd dropped the glass.

"Shit," he mumbled absently, then jumped again when he turned his head to see Natasha right up in his personal space.

She scrutinized his eyes and even brought a hand up to prod his face, humming once before stepping back.

And stabbing him in the neck.

"Ow, for fuck's—what the hell, Romanoff?" Tony groused, rubbing at his neck.

"Doctor's orders," she said, twirling the hypospray in her hand and looking smug for a beat before holding his eyes with a long look. Maybe it was meant to convey comfort, or solidarity, but all Tony could feel was fear.

"Everything okay out here?" Clint said, popping up like a fucking daisy and Tony flinched again—god dammit—trying not to groan aloud in frustration at the god damn ninjas he hung out with.

"Has anyone ever expressed the desire to put a bell on you two?" he hissed, instead. "Jesus christ, man with a heart condition, here!"

Barton shot him a dubious look before looking between the shattered glass, Tony's hands still clutching the arc reactor, and Commander Spock standing a few feet away and generally looking out of place as he stood placidly with arms behind his back, apparently nonplussed by being wholly ignored for the time being.

"Can I help you?" Clint asked, joining Natasha to form a sweaty, protective human shield as he inserted himself between Tony and Spock.

If he actually deserved it, Tony would have been very grateful in that moment. His hands were shaking again.

"I have come with the interest of speaking to Tony Stark about his invasion of the Enterprise's security systems."
Tony inhaled sharply. God, he was so screwed.

"As you and he were asleep when I arrived," Spock continued, likely unaware of Tony's urgent desire to faint. "I chose to wait and continue my work with Natasha Romanoff. Now that you are both awake and present, it is logical to address the topic now as it will have an impact on my remaining tasks for the day."

God, he was so… vacant. Formal. Unfeeling, like he was penciling in an inquisition before lunch, because right. Remaining tasks. That probably meant locking him up.

Tony felt himself grow smaller, hunching his shoulders in the way Bruce did when he tried to appear non-threatening. Mostly, Tony just kind of wanted to go back to bed for another two-hundred years. The world had recovered while he’d been asleep, maybe this time he wouldn’t wake up to ruin it.

Clint must have noticed whatever was going on with him, because he took another step forward.

"Yeah, no," Clint said, arm out in front of him and Tony could hear the danger in his voice. "You got something to say, you can say it to all of us because I don't give a shit what you think he did, you're not taking him anywhere."

"Barton, wait," Natasha said, but Spock had already begun speaking.

"I do not understand," he said. "I have no intention of removing Mr. Stark from this suite. As for what he has done, the evidence of his actions is obvious and irrefutable. I am merely here to further investigate his methods and discuss the current status of his study in computational coding and data. If you wish to take part in the discussion, I have no objection."

While Tony was trying to parse what the fuck that all meant, Clint let his mouth do the thinking.

"Hold up," Barton said, obviously as confused as Tony. "So you're not here to, like, arrest him?"

Spock's head tilted to one side in a very feline gesture of confusion. "Why would I be here to arrest him?"

"Because I killed them," Tony blurted.

Three heads snapped to look at him, Natasha looking surprised as much as Clint looked pissed off. And why the hell were they looking at him, like that? It's not like it was a huge revelation, or anything. It was fucking obvious, and Spock coming in here to talk about the coding like it didn't fucking happen was kind of messing with his head, so why the hell not lay it all out there?

"Stark," Natasha said. "Just listen for a second—"

"No," Tony said, pulling his shaking hands away from the reactor in an attempt to straighten himself and stand up like a fucking man. "Kirk said it himself. I fucked with the systems and blew up the cooling interface and the ship couldn't get here in time to save those people. It's my fault they're dead." Tony laughed, the sound high pitched and slightly hysterical. "Just like old times, eh Romanoff?"

A moment of stunned silence hung over their heads, all of them looking at Tony, but Spock, still staring at him with his unblinking, creepy Vulcan eyes didn't let the moment last.

"You labor under a misapprehension, Mr. Stark," he began. "While your invasion of the system was indeed amateurish and ill-advised, the effects are not what you claim."
Tony wasn’t following.

“What?”

“Your coding merely disabled the diagnostic and warning sensors for a short time, it had no actual effect on the equipment itself,” Spock recited. “The failure was caused by a power strain in the relays, not the interruption in diagnostics. Montgomery Scott claims the power flow was a problem you took part in correcting, and extends his thanks. The equipment failure and invasion of the systems notwithstanding, our investigation into the attack has led me to conclude that the end result of Starbase 24’s destruction would have occurred had we even arrived sooner than what was physically possible. The timeline of damage sustained as reported by those we recovered indicate that our intervention resulted in the lowest possible number of casualties in any scenario without further risk of life.”

The room might have been spinning. Tony wasn’t sure.

“But I—the hack—you were too late,” he said, trying to focus and failing.

“As I have already explained, the equipment failure was imminent. It is illogical to harbor any guilt over your actions with regard to your tampering with the security codes and destruction of the Starbase, as the two are unrelated,” Spock said.

Tony was definitely going to faint. At the very least, he was gonna fall over.

"Run that by me again?" Clint said, voice sounding strained.

"The effect of Mr. Stark’s—"

"No no," Clint said, taking a menacing step forward. "The part where you said that it's not his fault, that his coding stunt didn't do shit."

Clint sounded angry, now, and for what Tony didn't fucking know because Spock just kept talking.

"Indeed. The destruction of the Starbase cannot be construed so as to blame Tony Stark. In fact, Lieutenant-Commander Scott has indicated that his assistance with the powering of the relays in the warp coils contributed to expediting our arrival."

There was a choked noise and oh god, he was the one making it. He felt a hand on his arm and looked into Clint's murderous face as he was half stumble-dragged into a chair at the table.

"You're telling me," Clint grit out, hand clamped in a bruising grip on Tony’s arm. “That Captain Kirk sat Tony down in front of that shit-show, told him it was all his fucking fault and then let him stew all god damn night when that wasn’t the case?” Clint all but roared at Spock.

"Clint, back off," Natasha said, her voice firm and commanding. "Kirk didn't have all the facts."

"Then where the ever-loving fuck did he get off throwing that in Tony’s face? In my face?" Clint snapped, and that's right, wasn't it? Clint had helped him, maybe he'd thought it was his fault too and was just better at hiding it.

"Mr. Barton, what Ms. Romanoff says is the truth. The Captain's actions were inadvisable and executed without the full extent of written reports from engineering and a comprehensive investigation of the circumstances. At the time it was not a wholly illogical conclusion. It was, however, motivated by frustration and anger and therefore an unnecessary exercise."
"Unnecessary?" Clint laughed, releasing his grip on Tony’s arm.

Tony kind of wanted it back.

"Unnecessary, he says! Do you have any idea, any fucking idea how much—"

The sound cut out, Tony’s ears ringing while Clint waved his arms, but Tony was just kind of dazed and really hung up on the part of the conversation they’d left behind.

God. It wasn't his fault.

Tony put his face into his hands and wept.

The sound of Tony bursting into tears pretty much killed Clint's rant.

Turning around to stare at Tony in vague horror, shoulders shaking as he buried his face in his hands, Clint kind of wanted to punch himself in the face for getting so worked up, even if the evidence of why he had was right there in front of his face. Probably not the time.

* Barton, you dummy. *

Spock just looked kind of alarmed, like the crying might be contagious.

"Spock, Barton, with me. Now," Natasha snapped, and there was absolutely no arguing with that tone, so he and Spock followed her into the adjoining office type room connected to the common area.

"Are you done?" She glared at him, and Clint shrank. He was still righteously pissed and Kirk was definitely getting his ass kicked, but he probably shouldn't shoot the messenger.

"Yes," he said, sullen.

"Wonderful. Spock, thank you for laying that all out for us. I appreciate it. Doctor McCoy implied as much, but it is helpful to have a bit more insight, especially for Tony."

Spock nodded. "If the exact circumstances had been known to us sooner, you would have been informed. The accusations levelled at Mr. Stark were erroneous, and I believe the Captain is aware of this. It is my understanding that he will likely seek you out to offer some form of an apology when he has taken the requisite time to process his own emotions."

Clint scoffed, but flinched when Natasha hit him in the arm.

"I'm sure he will if Steve hasn't found him already."

Eyebrow raised, Clint made brief eye contact with Natasha and she offered a tiny shrug.

"Indeed," Spock said, then after a moment: "Perhaps now is not an ideal time to speak with Mr. Stark."

Clint screwed up his face, looking over at the door. "Yeah," he drawled. "Probably not. Kind of a rough night. And morning."

"Please extend my invitation to commence our discussion over the afternoon meal. I shall call again at that time and be available via communicator should he wish to contact me prior."
"We'll tell him," Natasha said, nodding. "Clint, can you go out there and..." she waved a hand at him.

Clint balked.

"What? Why me?"

"You spent the night spooning him. You've got rapport."

Sputtering, Clint tried not to be too indignant. "But that was different! He's like—" Clint waved his hands in front of his face. "—ugly crying. Mostly I was just sleeping, last night."

"Mostly?" Natasha raised an eyebrow, and god this woman was pure fucking evil.

"I hate you," Clint deadpanned.

"Of course you do," she said, opening the door and shoving him out. Clint turned around to glare at her, but marched into the kitchen to deal with Tony nonetheless.

Spock and Natasha smoothly exited the room to talk in the outside corridor while Clint approached a —thank fuck—less overwrought Tony Stark at the table.

"Um," Clint said, standing awkwardly with his hands at his sides. "Congratulations?"

Tony lifted his face out of his hands to give Clint a terrifying, tear-streaked glare. "Fuck you," he said, coughing on the words.

Rolling his eyes, Clint side-stepped the shattered glass on the floor to retrieve another one. He plopped down in the chair next to Tony and thrust it at him.

"Here. Drink it. You're losing all your water through your face."

Tony flipped him off with a shaking, bandaged hand, but took the water nonetheless and drained the glass. Inhaling and exhaling with a visible hitch in his breath, he pawed at his eyes and sniffled loudly.

"Well aren't I the fucking drama-queen of the century? Christ," he swore, pressing fingers to his eyeballs.

"Yeah. Kind of extreme even for you, dude," Clint agreed.

"Asshole," Tony said, but it lacked an abundance of sincerity, so Clint grinned at him. Hey, maybe he wasn't so shit at this comfort thing.

"Years of practice, my friend," Clint clapped Tony's bare shoulder. "So, you done? Need a tissue? Hug? Want me to kiss it better?"

Clint easily avoided Tony's attempt at swatting him in the chest.

"I need a fucking drink," Tony said, and Clint laughed.

"You and me both. Settle for a shower?"

"How is a shower an acceptable compromise for alcohol?"

"It isn't, but you still kinda smell like Sickbay, and I'm sweaty and don't know how to work the sonic
showers."

"Clint," Tony said slowly. "You seriously need my help with the shower?"

"Sonic shower," Clint emphasized. "It's weird. You're the tech guy, so I figured you'd be able to reassure me that it won't explode my eyes or something if I press the wrong button."

Staring at him from puffy, still wet eyes, Tony was obviously aware that Clint was giving him an out, a distraction, something to deflect the whole emotional upheaval of their life from the past day.

"Sounds like fun," Tony said, sarcastic but avoiding eye contact.

Clint grinned at him, jumping out of his seat and dragging him along to the head.

When Steve exited into the corridor, he was met with a sight he wasn't sure he'd expected to see, and certainly not on a spaceship.

It was Lieutenant Astrid, the woman who'd been working their security detail since before he'd even been revived, standing at rigid attention across from their door. It was so much like his days with Peggy and men in uniform everywhere that he unconsciously shifted to a parade rest.

"Lieutenant," Steve greeted her, warily, uncomfortably aware of his hodgepodge attire.

The woman seemed to tense even more, if that had been possible, and she nodded at him before acknowledging with a short, "Mr. Rogers. Something you need?"

Steve was a lot of things, but unobservant was not one of them. Astrid looked wan, a pinched look about her eyes that spoke to the same lack of sleep he'd seen in both himself and his teammates, and even with her flawless form he could read the wariness in her expression.

"Yeah, actually," he responded, offering a small smile and relaxed posture. After his lengthy talk with Kirk, he was even more uncomfortably aware of his stature and presence than he'd been on tour with the USO. "Natasha, she said that the rec facilities here are pretty impressive. It's been awhile—" a couple centuries, "—since I've had a good workout. Would you be able to show me to them?"

Astrid looked at him weirdly for a second, like it was an odd request, before she relaxed a bit and nodded.

"Should have guessed by the outfit," she said, returning his smile with something like understanding. "The facilities are pretty great," she said, nodding. "Follow me."

The departure was so abrupt that Steve just stood there for a second, not moving. Obviously noticing the lack of following, Astrid paused and turned around.

"Something wrong?" She asked.

Lingering stupidly, Steve looked back at the door and her now empty post. Before he could answer, her expression shifted again, this time into a kind of wry understanding, but mostly a heaviness that he'd long associated with guilt.

"Do you really think any of them are going to run off?" The after what happened was heavily implied.

It was an unpleasant reminder that Astrid had been the officer who'd accompanied Clint and Tony to the Sickbay; the unwitting accomplice to the scheme that had ultimately had some disastrous
consequences, the extent of which she probably didn’t even know.

Something in his face must have been answer enough, because she motioned for him to follow her, once more, and this time he didn’t hesitate.

Their walk was quiet, the both of them with thoughts obviously elsewhere. It wasn’t until they were in the turbolift on the way to their final destination that Steve ventured to say anything.

"I'm sorry about—Barton and Stark, they can be—" Steve huffed. "I'm just sorry."

Astrid didn’t say anything back, at first, just stood there next to him, facing the doors.

"What is it with starting these conversations in turbolifts?" She said, eventually, and Steve looked at her askance.

Studying his face for a second, Astrid blinked wide and huffed a disbelieving laugh. "I can't believe—wow, you're serious. I'm getting a 'lift talk. You're not going to press the stop button, are you?"

Steve stared, uncomprehending, and Astrid shook her head before looking back to the closed doors.

"They were my responsibility, not yours," she said evenly.

Steve wanted to laugh. "If only that were the case," he said. "Stark’s a genius and Barton, well, he’s a bag of cats. You shouldn’t—I should have known they’d try something. Given you a head's up, at least."

"Might have been nice, but still not your fault."

"Not yours, either," Steve offered, the lift coming to a stop and spitting them out on a level he didn’t recognize.

Instead of answering, Astrid just led the way down the curved corridor.

"Did you, I mean, obviously you’re still on our detail, but," Steve stopped himself, not sure it was his place to ask.

"Did I get my ass chewed out? Oh, definitely. Commander Spock is terrifying, by the way. You should try not to piss him off, again. But Captain Kirk believes in people learning from their mistakes, so instead of getting busted, he's stuck me with you until further notice," Astrid shrugged.

"Now I'm really sorry," Steve laughed, amused against his better judgment.

"I'm told with familiarity comes trust," she said wryly, coming to a stop outside of a wide set of doors, turning fully to face him. "That, and I'm thinking those two won't be so quick to use me as a patsy the next time around."

A hot feeling coiled in his guts, and Steve took a deep breath. "Look, I—"

"If you're looking for privacy, you're not gonna get it," Astrid interrupted, motioning to the doors. "Rec facilities get pretty full after—" she stopped, clenched her jaw. "I'll show you the equipment."

Entering the room, Steve was a little taken aback. It wasn't as big as some of the enormous facilities he’d seen, not even as big as the run down field-house he’d used during his training back in '43, but it was certainly... varied.

And, like she'd said, crowded.
A few people glanced at them upon their entrance, a handful stared at him a bit longer, but for the most part they went around the room ignored and unmolested.

It wasn't the empty basements or sprawling private gyms he was used to from SHIELD and the tower, but it had such a familiar feeling to it that Steve wasn't as apprehensive as he might have been about getting in a workout with so many new and unknown people around.

"Any questions?" Astrid said, after they'd made their circuit.

Embarrassed, Steve put a hand to the back of his neck as he contemplated the boxing equipment near the training mats.

"Do you know what the, ah, force capacity and tensile strength of the bags are?" He motioned to them.

Fixing him with a strange look, Astrid shook her head. "Not specifically, no. But I've seen Lieutenant Thelal whale on them pretty good. Ze's Andorian; they pack a mean punch. Why?" She looked him up and down. "You worried about breaking something?" She asked, jokingly.

Steve looked away. "I probably shouldn't…"

Thinking about what Kirk had said, about his crew having experience with people he called 'augments', Steve decided against pressing his luck.

"I think I'll stick to the holo-track you showed me," he said, finally, casting a last longing look at the equipment.

The look Astrid gave him was indecipherable.

"Well, whatever you're comfortable with. The general crew hasn't been given a full brief on you and your friends, but they know you're one of the people we were transporting," she said. "Despite what's happened, you can expect us to be professional. If you need help, just ask someone. I'm sure some of the security people would be more than happy to go a round with you, too. You aren't the only one who needs to work out some issues." She quirked a smile, her own gaze lingering on the door that lead to the sparring and weapons area she'd showed him earlier.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said, nodding his thanks. "I'll let you get back to your post, Lieutenant."

"No problem, Mr. Rogers."

"Steve," he said, his gut twisting a little. It had been a long time since anyone had addressed him as anything other than Captain, and he didn't think that was appropriate.

Nodding once more, Astrid turned to pick her way through the facility and left him to his own devices.

Looking around, Steve sighed once before heading for the far wall lined with the boxy-looking holo tracks.

He got a good pace going, but the artificial landscape displayed about him was kind of disconcerting. Though Astrid had pointed them out to him and showed him the ropes, so to speak, Steve still struggled with changing the display as he ran, flipping through endless landscapes in his quest to turn them off altogether.

Swearing, Steve was about to give up and just deal with it when a hand appeared in his vision,
tapping quickly across the screen before the display dropped.

"Thanks," he turned his head to say, and then nearly stumbled when he saw Kirk, back turned as he walked away and toward the mats without a word.

Suddenly feeling less than charitable, Steve upped the speed and tried to ignore the anger burning in his gut.

It worked long enough for him to get about a half-marathon in; build up a little bit of a sweat. The holo-track was too smooth, too noiseless. After seventy years in ice and then two centuries more, running didn't do much for him if it wasn't in a wide open space. He slowed the program and worked his way through a cool down before shutting it off so he could get some water.

The room was startlingly empty when he turned around.

Well, with the exception of Kirk, who was running on his own holo-track as far from Steve's as he could get.

Biting back a grimace, Steve went to the replicator and ordered himself the water he'd intended to retrieve, trying to stuff his desire to get in Kirk's face about Tony, about everything, so he wouldn't do something rash and stupid.

That lasted up until the man himself appeared beside Steve to get water of his own, looking a lot more like he needed it.

"Thought you could use some privacy," Kirk said, leaning against the wall beside the replicator.

Steve clenched his jaw.

"You did, did you?" He asked, looking at his water bottle.

"You were at a dead sprint for more than five minutes. People notice that kind of thing. I had them relocate."

"You shouldn't have done that," Steve snapped. Those people had needed this as much as him, probably more.

At first, Kirk didn't say anything, just stared ahead.

"They're scared enough as it is," he said, draining his water bottle. "I don't want to add 'augment on board' to their list of things to worry about."

"Would that go just above or below getting blown to hell?" Steve asked, turning to look at Kirk with more calm than he actually felt.

Kirk flinched, and Steve felt a vicious kind of satisfaction.

"I'm sorry," he said, but Steve was having none of it.

"I get that you were angry at Stark, at all of us, but what you did was cruel," Steve said. "People see enough awful things on their own, they don't need a front row seat just because you wanted to teach us a some kind of lesson."

"You think that's what I wanted?" Kirk shot back, pushing off the wall and finally, this was going somewhere.
"I think it's exactly what you wanted," Steve answered.

There was a moment where Steve was sure Kirk was going to hit him, and something in him wanted desperately for him to try, to give Steve a reason to lash out. Kirk's face was contorted with rage, his eyes burning fiery blue and Steve could feel it—

—and then it all stopped. Kirk's face smoothed out, his body relaxed and it was quiet, so quiet that Steve could hear the pound of his own heartbeat.

"Maybe you're right," Kirk said, and through the mussed hair and damp t-shirt, through the tunnel vision of his own anger, Steve saw a man weighed down with guilt. "I wanted you to step out of your own fairy-tale long enough to see that this? This is it, for me. Space and aliens and faceless people who want to kill you for no reason," Kirk laughed, rueful. "That's my job. That's my life."

Steve folded his arms, swallowing tightly to keep a lid on the things that wanted to burst out of his mouth.

"But if I had known, if I had thought for a second that that was how it was going to go down, if I hadn't been the arrogant son of a bitch that I am to think that I could roll in there like the fucking cavalry and save the day, I would have locked you in the brig to keep you from seeing that and not thought twice about it."

Taken aback, Steve just stared at Kirk and tried to parse what he'd heard for the honest admission it was.

"I'm not a stupid man, Rogers. I know you've all seen some shit, but it's a brave new world of crap out here. I watched a planet of six billion people crumble into a black hole before I even had a commission, awful shit I never saw coming, and if I could unsee any of it, I'd do it in a heartbeat."

Kirk stood up straight, arms at his sides, and Steve unconsciously mimicked the posture.

"I made a mistake, and I'm sorry."

The anger was still there, but Steve could recognize contrition when he saw it. Meeting Kirk's eyes, he took a moment to really look at him, and realized all too abruptly that the man talking to him was young. Young and brash, just like Steve had been all those years ago when he'd been raring to get himself shot at for his country, but infinitely more tired.

Steve had seen that look in the mirror. God, and they were probably technically the same age.

Forcing his shoulders down and taking a step back, Steve thought about the real reason he was upset.

"And what about Stark? Do you have any idea what that did to him?" He asked, unwilling to let it go so easily.

The flinch he received this time wasn't as satisfying.

"You hit him. You stood there and pointed the finger at him, made him watch and told him it was his fault."

"Well it wasn't, okay?" Kirk blurted out, and Steve drew back in surprise. "Jesus, fuck. The engineering report came in an hour ago. I checked and re-checked everything, the god damn equipment blew out all on its own, and even if it hadn't, you know whose fault it really is?" Kirk spread his arms. "Mine. Because I'm the Captain of this ship, and everyone on it, every decision they make, is ultimately my responsibility. That's what this job means, Rogers. It means that everything,
Pushing the anger at bay was easier, this time, because what this guy was saying, it was a page out of his own book.

"I know how it feels to be responsible for other people, Captain," Steve said, eventually. "And believe me when I say I understand the sacrifice you're prepared to make for us, and I'm grateful for it. We all are. I've made mistakes, too, because this ship might be your responsibility, but those people? They're mine." Steve stepped forward meaningfully. "So the next time they do something to piss you off, you take it up with me, you got it?"

A half-minute passed in silence, the two of them sizing each other up, before Kirk finally nodded and looked away.

"You make this right," Steve pointed to the door. "Or I will."

Steve turned to walk away, completely unsatisfied with his workout, but before he'd gotten in two strides, Steve stopped.

Closing his eyes, Steve took a deep breath—

"One more thing."

—turned around, and punched Kirk right off of his feet.

Lying on the floor, Kirk blinked slack-jawed at the ceiling in surprise.

"Ow," he articulated, flexing his jaw.

Crouching down, Steve looked him in the eye. "You ever hit one of my friends again, and the next one won't be a love tap."

Patting Kirk twice on the cheek, Steve stood up and left, feeling much more satisfied with his workout than he had a minute ago.

Natasha was right. He had needed to punch something.

Chapter End Notes

Whew. Everyone okay?

(In case anyone is interested, actress Jasika Nicole plays the part of Lt. Astrid in this fic, whose name I, yes, liberally stole from her character on "Fringe". But that's where the resemblance ends, I suppose. I never did finish watching that series.)
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Tony makes some new friends, and Jim is beginning to realize the shit and the fan will be meeting pretty soon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ten hours.

They'd had ten hours of peace. Ten hours of napping. Ten hours of Clint and Tony arguing about sonic showers and replicators, comms from Doctor McCoy about PT and wanting to regenerate a hand Tony still won't let him touch, and of Natasha with her face buried in a PADD sending messages back and forth with Commander Spock.

The Vulcan never had called in his lunch-date with Tony, even after Natasha had told him about it.

A security detail was still posted outside their room—Astrid finally let off duty—but it wasn't like they couldn't leave, Steve had proven that. Ten hours of sharing space with one another like they hadn't in a long time, and none of them wanted to talk about how they were staying holed up in the suite, locking themselves up in the hopes that they wouldn't do any more damage, or have any more done to them.

Steve was—well. Steve was managing.

The irony of being frozen and waking up in the future for a second time was definitely not lost on him. But things were different this time around. For a while after Natasha had cracked open his cryotube and he'd flopped out spitting bullets, he'd been lost in the rush of information and the stress of making sure that his team was okay, listening to Natasha's brief on everything that she'd learned and the near instantaneous drop from the frying pan into the fire.

With a few hours to himself, he'd hunkered down in his room and waited for the other shoe to drop.

But it hadn't. Memories of his first time waking up out of the ice played back in his brain, and the more he thought about it and waited for the inevitable, gut-wrenching depression and homesickness of that first time to come crashing down on him, the more he realized that it wasn't going to happen.

This time, well, he hadn't lost as much. This time, he wasn't hurting for himself, he was hurting for his friends. Because his friends, the people with whom he'd made a team and found a place in the twenty-first century were still here with him in the twenty-third, and that? That pretty much made up for any of the weirdness of being on a spaceship brought.

It was still overwhelming, but it paled in comparison to how utterly lost he'd been making the jump from the 1940s to 2012. All of the people he'd had to lose were already lost that time around, and now the people he cared most about were here with him. Clint had been right. His team, they were his family. They had been for a while, and what more could he ask for, under the circumstances?

So instead of soul-crushing depression, what had started settling in his gut was a deep sense of guilt.
Steve had practice losing everything and needing to rebuild himself without the people he'd loved, but his teammates? This was their first time, and hiding out, pretending that they were coping—he wasn't going to begrudge them that.

So it was ten hours after he'd punched Captain James Kirk in the face and given him an ultimatum, found out that it hadn't really mattered, since Spock had vindicated Tony in his absence (though Steve didn't regret knocking Kirk off his feet for a second), that the man showed up at their door with a black eye and one hell of an apology.

"Captain," Steve said, blocking the doorway.

"Captain," Kirk responded.

Steve eyed the shiner for a moment, weighed the significance of being addressed by rank against the likelihood that one or more of his teammates would do Kirk further damage, and let him in.

"Holy fuck, dude, what happened to your face?" Clint crowed.

Raising his eyes heavenward, Steve tried not to look guilty, but the wry look he caught Kirk sending in his direction pretty much ruined that.

"No way," Clint said, looking between the two of them, before vaulting over the couch and bounding over to Steve on bare feet. "Steve, you're my hero." He held up a hand. "Up top."

Unimpressed, Steve stared at the hand and then brushed past Clint, leaving Kirk looming just inside the door while Steve went to stand by Tony, still and wary where he sat at a coffee table strewn with a disassembled... thing. Yeah. Steve wasn't even going to try to identify that.

Natasha appeared from wherever she'd been like she'd expected Kirk to be there. Knowing her, she'd probably orchestrated it.

It took a few moments of uncomfortable silence, but Kirk eventually spoke.

"You haven't left your room," he said.

"Are we allowed to?" Natasha raised her eyebrow, eyes narrowed in a way that had made stronger men flee. He'd seen it happen.

Admirably, the man didn't flinch.

"As much as my recent behavior might speak to the contrary, I'm not actually that much of a dick," Kirk began. "What I did yesterday was short-sighted and unnecessary, and I'm sorry for having done it. I—" Kirk stopped, swallowing. "I can't take it back."

Silence stretched, and Steve waited.

"Disease and danger wrapped in darkness and silence," Kirk shook his head, wry smile tugging at his face. "We all know the score now. There's too much at stake for me to keep fighting you on this. I can't make you trust me, but you're stuck here with me as much as I'm stuck with you, so you know what? Have at it." He gestured to the door. "We've got another day in orbit before we go back to base, so just... take it or leave it, okay?"

Arms folded, back straight, Steve stood and matched the stare Kirk was giving him. Breaking it to look at Natasha, Tony and Clint, Steve finally came back to Kirk and nodded once. If this was going to be water under the bridge, they were both going to have to give some ground, and Kirk had
already ceded his.

And then... well, then Clint sucker-punched Kirk right in the gut.

"Clint!" Steve barked, taking a few steps toward them before Natasha held him back, shaking her head.

"That was for making Tony cry," Clint said, hand clamped around the man's shoulder. He held his fist where it had landed and kindly let Kirk sink down into a chair.

"Barton," Tony whinged. “Contrary to your weird little family metaphor, I’m not actually your bullied brother. What the hell."

"Apology accepted," Clint said to Kirk, sounding smug. He clapped Kirk on the shoulder before releasing him and walking right out the door, tossing a lazy salute with his back turned.

Tony was staring open mouthed, face contorted with mortification, as Kirk wheezed in the chair.

"Hohh," Kirk breathed out. "Okay, yeah, I probably should have expected that."

Steve watched Natasha follow Clint out the door. It would be better that she was with him, though Lord only knew what the two of them might get up to.

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

Surprise, surprise. It was Natasha who followed him out.

“Yeah, probably.”

“Feel better?” She asked, lightly.

“Not really,” Clint mumbled, padding down a corridor.

“Thought so. Walking it off, then?”

“Maybe,” Clint muttered, clenching his teeth.

Natasha walked alongside, not looking at him.

“Want me to kick your ass and make it better?”

“God, yes.”

"Can we talk? Or does anyone else need to get a swing in, first?" Jim asked the room at large. "Fuck," he breathed, bending over his stomach with a wince.

"I think I'm good," Stark said, still looking mortified.

“Awesome. Stark, you got a minute? I didn’t actually come here just to be abused.”

Jim caught the questioning look Rogers threw Stark’s way.

"Steve, why don't you go see what the spies are getting up to," Stark patted Rogers on a meaty bicep, nodding toward the door. "The grown-ups need to talk."
"Tony—" Rogers started, but Stark waved him off, fiddling with what looked like the innards of a communicator on the table.

"Relax. Contrary to my usual level of displayed maturity, I am actually capable of looking after myself."

With an exaggerated eye roll, Rogers left Tony on the couch, though he did make it a point to stop beside Jim's chair on his way out.

Lifting his brows at the man, Jim waited.

"You should have Doctor McCoy look at that," Rogers said, looking a bit sheepish.

"I'll get around to it," Jim said, rubbing his jaw with a grimace. "You've got one hell of a love tap."

Flustered, Rogers huffed a silent laugh.

"Right. I'll just be going, then."

The room to themselves, Jim rose from the chair with a slight grunt of pain. Barton hadn't hit him that hard, but it had definitely knocked the wind out of him. This whole being the bigger man thing was not going to happen a third time.

"I swear, I didn't tell Barton to punch you," Stark said, eyeing him warily. "Or Steve. It's frankly embarrassing. If I wanted you punched, I'd have done it myself."

Settling down in a chair across the table from Stark, Jim sighed.

"Yeah, well," Jim shrugged. "I know a thing or two about overprotective friends."

Stark grunted in acknowledgement.

Rolling his eyes, Jim eyed Stark, the other man doing the same to him.

"This isn't going to be some kind of elaborate, touchy feely speech, is it? Because I have had enough of the emoting thing. Pretty sure I'd rather stick this in my eye." Stark brandished a stylus.

Fixing him with a skeptical look, Jim shook his head. "No, I just wanted to say it to your face. I shouldn't have accused you of—" Jim clenched his jaw, because even in hindsight punching him hadn't felt wrong. "I overreacted."

"Oh for fuck's—no. Stop. Immediately." Stark cringed, tossing the stylus in Jim's direction. "Seriously, with the guilt and the eyes and—just knock it off. I get it, okay? I messed with your baby and you saw red. I basically fingered your girlfriend while you were in the other room and didn't even get her off. I'd have punched me in the face."

Jim barked out a startled laugh. "Wow. That's one way of putting it."

"For realsies though," Stark said. Jim tried to parse that expression and failed. "I get it. I've done worse for less when it comes to other people's hands in my cookie jar, so don't sweat it. As for the other thing, I'd be delighted if we never spoke of it again. Ever."

Jim eyed Stark, the man twiddling a micro-transistor in his hands. "Deal," he said.

"Awesome. Good talk," Stark said, and proceeded to go back to whatever it was he was doing with the comm tech, ignoring Jim entirely.
Jim opened his mouth and shut it again, staring. God, this man was really kind of infuriating.

"Spock wants to talk with you," Jim forced the words out, leaning back.

Stark fidgeted suspiciously. "So he's said," he responded without looking up.

"And?" Jim prompted, annoyed for a reason he couldn’t pin.

"And what?" Stark glanced up and back down, but Jim could see the interest there. Yeah. Spock’s brain had that effect on people. Jim wasn’t so sure he liked the idea of Stark having a go at it.

"Spock is gonna overhaul the security protocols because of that shit you pulled. He wants to know how you got in so quickly."

"Genius," Stark muttered almost negligently as he tapped the side of his head, concentrating on the parts he was assembling.

“Right.” Because it was just every person that threw around the word genius like it was a forgone conclusion and not relevant at all. Jesus, these people. "I think the word 'fascinating' was used with more that its usual frequency when he was talking about your code,” Jim said, irrationally irritated. “Coming from Spock, that's the highest praise."

What Jim didn't say was that, despite the rage he'd felt knowing that Stark had essentially violated his ship, was that he had gotten his hands on that code before Spock had, and while he wasn't quite up to Spock's A7 rating, he was no slouch in the code department. If Jim hadn't been so pissed and subsequently feeling an intense desire to keep Stark away from Spock, Jim would have been asking questions a mile a minute. It honestly kind of embarrassed him.

Also, fucking infuriating.

Jim watched Stark's hands still briefly before he continued his tinkering, shooting Kirk a furtive glance that obviously said he was tempted. "Computers. Code. Tech. Kind of my thing. Not my first rodeo, et cetera."

"They're kind of Spock's thing, too. He's the best.” Jim set his jaw, looking forward.

Stark inspected a data chip closely, but his gaze lingered on Jim for a long moment before he leaned back. Some kind of weird staring contest ensued, in which Jim wasn’t quite sure what was going on.

"Show me where to get some real fucking coffee and I'll spill my secrets," Stark said, and Jim nearly choked, a bark of laughter taking him by surprise.

“Seriously?”

“Have you tasted the nuclear sludge that comes out of that—admittedly sexy—contraption?”

Jim didn’t want to think about a replicator being described as sexy. "Replicated coffee is pretty terrible."

"It's a vile abomination. Even Starbucks could do better," Stark said, with gusto.

"Starbucks?" Jim asked, trying out the unfamiliar word.

Stark stared at him for a second, data chip held aloft. "Oh god, not another one."

“Another what?” Jim asked, confused.
Stark opened his mouth, then closed it with a shake of his head, holding up his hands as if in defeat. “Never mind.”

Choosing to ignore that particular part of the exchange, Jim pressed onward. It wasn’t like Spock was going to rest until he had a handle on this whole security snafu anyway; Jim might as well help him out.

"Bones has a real coffee maker."

The look on Stark's face could only be described as lust.

"Take me to your leader," he said, tossing the chip over his shoulder as he stood up, arms spread.

“O…kay,” Jim said, rising more slowly, his gut still tender. "I'll let Commander Spock you're interested."

Walking down the corridor with Stark in tow, Jim was sending Spock a text comm when Stark started talking. Again.

"So. Steve really clocked you one," Stark mused, pointing to Jim's face.

"He did," Jim confirmed, unconsciously flexing his jaw.

" Seriously. I'd have told him not to, if I'd known he was gonna go all mother hen. Both of them. Flattering though it is, I'm perfectly capable of my own face punching. Very capable," Stark tacked on.

"Thanks, I guess," Jim responded, leading them around a curve and nodding at a passing Ensign as they saluted. "But it's—" Jim waved a hand, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Whatever. I get it. I'll take a couple licks if it means a cessation of hostilities.”

"Cessation of hostilities?" Stark parroted with a laugh. “Is that what this is? My, how very diplomatic of you, Captain."

"Wait 'til you meet a Klingon," Jim muttered, thinking about the blows to the head he'd received in the past. What a painful fucking handshake. Jim hated being the first choice for those diplomatic missions.

"That sounds... vaguely dirty," Stark responded airily. "You know it really was a love tap, right? Steve could have literally knocked your block off. I've seen it."

"Yeah, I figured," Jim said wryly. "I got the story while you were still on ice. Captain America. What a name."

"It was the forties," Stark said, then stopped. "Nineteen forties. Do I need to specify that? Jesus, and I thought referring to the aughts was weird," he muttered. "So, Cap spilled the beans then, huh?" Stark mused. "Well, he's a good guy. Don't let the Captain America face fool you. Steve's a teddy bear. It's kind of embarrassing, really. Hanging out with him seriously damaged my playboy cred."

"Really," Jim responded skeptically, eyeing Stark and not really seeing it; the obvious stubble, dark circles and disheveled hair weren't doing him any favors, but maybe he cleaned up well.

"Money, good looks and a gigantic brain, my man," Stark quipped as they entered the turbolift. "They make it incredibly easy to philander. Steve is like... the anti-philander. Associating with Captain America and being in a relationship with—" Stark’s voice stuttered to a halt. “Well, my
philandering was pretty much voided, is the point. Nullified. Curtains.”

"I don't think I've ever heard the word 'philander' used that much in one conversation," Jim redirected, Stark’s discomfort almost palpable.

"Well you obviously haven't met many billionaires," Stark replied, taking the out.

Jim stared for a second, the turbolift whirring softly as it approached its destination.

"Billionaire?" He echoed. Jim tried to think back to commerce and inflation from a couple centuries ago, and still couldn't come up with that being anything other than a fuck-ton of money.

"I said that out loud, didn't I?" Stark sighed, looking annoyed. "Yes. Billionaire. Inherited a fortune and a company from my dad, got stupidly rich making weapons, had a change of heart and tried to be a hero. Worked out pretty well, as you can see." Stark spread his hands sarcastically.

Money and a weapons legacy? Obviously, Jim needed to do more research. There was just… no way something like that could just be erased from history. Someone, somewhere had to have heard of him, and by association, his friends. A mystery for later, he supposed.

"Change of heart?" Jim frowned.

"Is there an echo in here?" Stark asked, folding his arms and staring at Jim like he was an idiot. Jim fixed him with a skeptical look.

"Okay, whatever," Stark muttered. "Literal change of heart," he tapped his chest, the clinking sound an obvious reference to the hardware in his chest. "Low point in my life. Let's not talk about it and say we did, okay? Okay."

The end of their ride in the turbolift was silent, and Jim had to wonder if it was the two centuries separating them that made these people so reluctant to talk, or if that was just how they were.

"Dammit, Jim."

Rolling his eyes at the sigh in Bones' voice, Jim held up his hands.

"I'm just here for coffee."

"The hell you are," Bones muttered, eyeing where Stark stood looking around the Sickbay outside the office, already bearing down on Jim with a tricorder.

"Bones—"

"Sit." Bones pointed.

Grumbling as little as possible, Jim sat and acquiesced to the treatment.

"Barton?" Bones asked, scanning his face.

"Rogers."

Bones *hmphed*, but otherwise didn't say anything.

"Barton punched me in the stomach."
Bones' hand stilled where it was adjusting the settings on a regenerator, but after a moment he carefully resumed his work.

"This has to stop," he said gruffly, moving the regenerator above his skin in slow, measured strokes.

"I know. I'm taking care of it."

Bones met his eyes for a significant moment as he worked on Jim's face before looking back to the bruising.

"You know, you run a ship filled with people insane enough to want a career in space. You juggle the combined crazy of your genius command team—which includes a Vulcan, god help us all—you're friends with me, and you're letting this get to you, and I don't fuckin' know why."

"I've got a lot on my plate," Jim scowled. "Give me a break for not eating it all in one go."

Bones scoffed. "That's bullshit. Now tell me what you've got going on in that damn fool head of yours so I can call you stupid and we can end this ridiculous pissing contest."

Jim batted Bones hand and the regenerator away, fixing the man with his most exasperated look.

"I'm just stressed out, okay? Jesus. It's been a long fucking week and I'm not really seeing an end to it."

"And? That's how it works out here, Jim. It's not what's got your head messed up."

Putting his face in his hand, Jim breathed for a second before dragging the limb away and huffing an annoyed laugh.

"I want to help them. Jesus, I am helping them. I keep throwing myself into a trust fall and nobody is catching me. It's like the twenty-first century rounded up the most infuriating people it could find and spat them out on my ship. I'm putting my career on the line so they can feel safe and they're—they're—"

"Stomping around like a bunch of lost, angry toddlers?"

"Yes!" Jim blurted. "I screwed up, I get it. But they didn't come with a manual. I keep stepping in their shit, but I've got my own problems to deal with right here."

"Jim, look, the thing with Spock—"

"It's not just Spock," Jim sighed. "It's Starfleet. This mission. Something stinks, but I can't put it together, yet." Jim rubbed his face with both hands.

"What's going on?" Bones said, the earlier train of conversation about their guests forgotten.

Jim hesitated for a second, not sure if he should bring Bones in just yet, but now that he'd asked, telling him wasn't really debatable.

"Spock—Spock and I—we think that someone on the ship is… informing on us. We don’t know about what, or to whom, or why. Archer said something weird to him before we shipped out and he found some scrubbed subspace transmissions. Nothing in the last two days, but it's damning. Something is up enough for Archer to want us on our guard."

Bones stood up and away from Jim, an expression of disbelief on his face. "That's what your tiff was about, wasn't it? Him being weird. He didn't tell you, the green-blooded asshole"
"No, no he didn't," Jim confirmed.

"Jesus."

"Yeah."

"Does this have anything to do with..." Bones trailed off, jerking his head in Stark's direction.

"Not sure," Jim shook his head. "It seems like too much of coincidence to not be related, but we haven't really had much of a chance to get anywhere with the investigation. Spock doesn't think much of the ship is secure—don't give me that look, your office is clean—but it's possible that another Admiral from 'Fleet is involved."

"Which would make it another Starfleet sanctioned conspiracy," Bones growled. "Jesus fucking wept."

"If that's the case, yeah, probably," Jim sighed. "We don't have any idea of an endgame, though. Spock and Romanoff are looking into the crew to find people who would be able to do the kind of data scrub that went into what he found."

"Oh, this is just—wait, did you say Romanoff?" Bones sputtered.

"Well it's not like she could be involved. We weren't getting anywhere between the two of us, and Spock suggested the woman with covert experience might be able to lend a hand. It's not like we're rolling in people we can trust if someone from the crew is informer on us," Jim settled back in the chair, and Bones angrily resumed the regenerating of his face.

"Who else knows?"

"Just Rogers, I think. Not sure if they've brought Barton and Stark into it."

"Christ."

"Really hamming it up with the blasphemy, there, Bones," Jim quipped.

"I live in a world of aliens and centuries preserved zombie popsicles. Blasphemy isn't high on my list of sins, Jim."

"Of course. So. Is this one of those yell at me now, or later, things?"

"I get the feeling that you're a bit busy at the moment," Bones grumbled. "But tell me this. Doctor Djembe, is she part of it?"

"Hard to say," Jim sighed. "My gut says yes, to a point. Nobody on her team has the qualifications to be the informant, but they weren't working for Archer, and somebody tipped them off about what was going on back at the base. I don't know why, exactly, but it was probably because we were keeping a lid on anything to do with them. I'm beginning to see that isn't an option."

"You haven’t talked to Djembe’s team?" Bones asked.

"No, no, Spock had a go at them, so did Giotto and I. The other doctors say Djembe sent them, but she would barely speak with us. I think she’s convinced there’s a conspiracy going on against her. It’s all really…"

"Weird," Bones finished.
“Yeah. Now that I’ve got the frozen brigade roaming the ship, I’m not sure where to go from here, especially if this is about them, which I’m not at all sure it is.”

“Well, I’d say that telling those idiots that their own safety is on the chopping block would help, but I get the feeling that they’re not used to following orders,” Bones said, pausing to adjust the regenerator.

"It's not just their safety, Bones. It's everyone's," Jim set his jaw. "It's all just got me on edge. My gut's saying something is wrong, that something is going to go wrong, but I don't know what it is. It feels like there’s a clock ticking down and I can't figure it out. I don't know how to be a Captain that doesn't trust his crew."

"Shouldn't have to be, Jimmy," Bones said. "Though I'm not really surprised something is still rotten in Starfleet. Marcus can't have been the only one."

Silence stretched for a minute while Bones worked.

"When you're done with my face you should put on a pot of coffee." Jim said, his voice betraying his fatigue, even after a bit of sleep. "I'm taking Stark to Spock so he can pick his brain about the coding. Stark demanded real coffee as a bribe."

"So, what? You would have just walked around the ship with a shiner if you hadn't needed by caffeine? The coffee supply isn't endless, Jim. Shit's worth its weight in latinum on these missions."

"I know," Jim stiffly patted Bones' arm, trying not to move his head. "That's why it's a bribe."

"This is abuse of power," Bones grumbled, eyeing his coffee pot where it sat on the shelf behind his disheveled looking desk.

"You realize you're technically the most powerful person on this ship, right?" Jim quirked an eyebrow. "Tied third for rank with Scotty, and you could have me declared unfit for duty at any time. Probably actually make it happen."

Bones gave him a sidelong look. "Saving that for when I need it, Jim-boy."

Jim shook his head, pushing Bones' hand away, prompting a noise of protest.

"It's good enough, Bones. Coffee, before Stark breaks something."

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So, maybe Tony was a little... apprehensive. He didn't do nervous. That was not his thing. Apprehensive. Appreciably wary. Reasonable fucking shitting his pants.

After all, dude was an alien. A brilliant, nerdy-cosplay-hot, alien.

Spock and Tony stared at one another. It would have been a sizing up if the man's eyes had deviated one iota from boring directly into his brain. Tony did the perfunctory sweep anyway. Jesus, this guy was creepy. And tall. Tall, dark and creepy.

"Mister Stark. You are aware of the matter on which I have requested your presence. If we can begin?"

Begin? Tony could totally begin. His mouth, of course, was all about beginning for him without his brain's consent. Story of his life, really.

"It's Doctor Stark, if you want to get technical. Only did one officially, the other seven were
honorary. Not my idea. People said it was good for publicity, so I accepted. I'm told the speeches were flattering."

The Vulcan stared at him for a second, though it seemed longer than that, and Tony fidgeted. Fuck. Kirk could totally fucking go, now. No chaperones needed. No one else to bear witness to his pants-shitting non-apprehension.

Pulling up a holo-graphic projection of code that would have given Tony a stiffy in any other circumstances decidedly erased that apprehension, and who was Kirk again? Because man, he could recognize his own work anywhere, and that shit looked pretty awesome, if he did say so himself.

"I have made several observations about your coding. If you could elaborate, it would aid in the process of securing the ship.

Pretty colors. Pretty codes.

"Security. Right. I'm great at security."

He'd spent too much time with Barton. Fuck.

"And breaking it," Kirk muttered, in the doorway.

Apparently, he and Spock were both great at ignoring people, too, because Spock didn't object when Tony hefted the holographic code into his hands like he'd thought it would work—and it did, wasn't that sexy—and started cycling through it.

"I'll just——"

"You should check on Romanoff," Tony muttered absently, Spock already lining up another holograph beside the one in which his hands were twining. God. His own tech had been great, but he could almost feel this in his fingers. He could probably literally get off on this in less stifling company.

"Doctor Stark, if you would direct your attention. This subroutine is of particular note, as it..."

When Spock said it, it didn't sound so fucking weird. He'd been 'Mister Stark' or 'Master Stark' or 'Tony' long before a PhD had been added to his name. That thought flitting through his brain, Tony forgot about Kirk completely, bright green code and pointed ears filling his existence.

"I think we just became best friends," he whispered, staring at Spock as the man enlarged a line of code and presented it to Tony like a gift wrapped bottle of Scotch.

"I fear for my life," Kirk sighed, but the swish of the door closing was the last thing Tony heard before monotonous Vulcan speech and green lights took over his brain.

After the third off-duty crewman almost flew past him in the same direction as the other two, Jim gave up his attempt to sweep the corridors for foreign frequencies and followed. Jesus. Didn't anyone on his ship sleep?

So of course he would end up in the rec room. Where—of course—Barton and Romanoff had managed to attract a crowd.

Elbowing his way through a throng of security officers, Jim made his way to the front, only to stop in horrified fascination at what he saw.
"Oh, god, I give, I give!" Barton said, Romanoff's thighs wrapped snugly around his neck, his face purpling.

"What's the magic word?" She murmured, sweetly.

"Es esmu muļķis, lūdzu, ļaujiet man elpot," Barton gritted out with a wheeze.

A couple of officers who apparently understood whatever Slavic language Barton was speaking laughed into their sleeves, and Romanoff smoothly released him before rising to her feet and offering him a hand. He really needed Uhura to upgrade their UTs for sub-planetary language variants and dialects. He might speak twelve languages (with varying proficiency), but only five of them were actually from Earth.

Uhura only knew about three of them, which was fun. He'd yet to surprise her with the other two.

Rolling onto his back, panting, Barton shook his head at Romanoff's hand up.

"Just leave me to die."

"You're getting soft," she said, yanking him up by a hand anyway.

A smattering of applause broke out, and Jim watched the two of them; a stupid grin on Barton's face even as he rubbed at his abused neck. Jim's eyes unwittingly followed a drop of sweat as it snaked it's way down Barton's clavicle.

Yeah. Wow. So not the time, Kirk.

Jim ruined the moment by clearing his throat, loudly.

The two sparring partners looked at him, and Barton's face didn't shut down so much as morph into a complicated series of emotions that settled on fake cheer.

"Captain," he acknowledged. "Come to see the show?"

Folding his arms to cover his distraction, Jim lifted his eyebrows. "The one where Romanoff just choked you out with her thighs? Wouldn't miss it," he said.

A few of the assembled crewman laughed, but he'd managed to bring some tension with him. Romanoff flicked her eyes between Barton and himself before nudging her friend roughly with an elbow.

"Why don't you go get cleaned up, check in with McCoy about that leg. It's still weak," she said, pointedly.

Barton grimaced before shooting him a look, but nodded at Romanoff and gestured his apologies to the assembly before stalking out of the room.

Romanoff approached him.

"Captain," she greeted. "I brought him here for PT. He'd be in your maintenance vents, otherwise."

"Didn't look like PT," he said, folding his arms with a little amusement. "Though I appreciate the effort to keep him out of trouble."

"He's easily bored," she rocked back on her heels. "Even weakened, he's a fair opponent. I figured that sparring with him would be less damaging to the self-esteem of any of your crew."
"Pretty sure you just made yourself a fan club, instead," Jim muttered, seeing a familiar figure approaching them from behind Romanoff. He’d wondered how long it would take.

"Holy crap," Sulu said, coming up next to Jim. "That was awesome. Do you use swords?" He asked Romanoff, starry eyed and completely tactless.

Jim hid a smile in his hand while Romanoff stared blankly at Sulu, the old USF t-shirt and shorts not making him look particularly threatening.

"Occasionally," she answered eventually, sizing him up. "They’re more one of Barton's specialties than mine."

"But you had throwing knives," Sulu prompted, hearts all but dancing in his eyes.

"Sulu," Jim sighed, but it was too late.

"I did," Romanoff answered.

"It would be an honor to get my ass kicked by you," Sulu said, reverence in his voice as he threw a campy salute, and Jim almost groaned aloud.

Romanoff looked at Sulu for a minute like he was suicidal, and Jim couldn't help but agree. Eventually, her face morphed into a kind of dangerous smile, and she nodded at him. Yep, the man was toast.

"Go get the swords," she said, and Sulu scampered off like a trained puppy.

"Please don't maim him," Jim asked with a sigh. "I need him to fly my ship."

"Oh, somehow I think you'd manage fine on your own." She shot him a knowing look.

"Well, yeah, but he's the best," Jim said, waving a hand, a little distracted by the lingering throng of onlookers.

"I won't break anything that can't be fixed," she said, and Jim looked at her, annoyed to find a knowing expression on her face.

"Thanks," he replied dryly, deliberately not looking in the direction Barton had gone.

"It would be best not to approach him. He is still quite annoyed with you about Stark," Romanoff said. "And I believe he probably swiped some knives from your practice armory."

Jim didn't do anything untoward with his face. At all.

"Of course he did." Jim made a mental note to request their return next he saw Barton.

"Which, really. It’s the space age, and… swords? Knives?” Romanoff looked amused.

“Remind me some time to tell you about the Prime Directive, and also, that kind of weaponry has come in handy on more than a few occasions. Sulu might be a goof, but I don’t think I’d go toe to toe with him in close quarters even if I had a phaser.”

Humming with something that might be interest or dismissal, Romanoff stood beside him to survey the room. “Did you and Stark have a good talk?” she asked, watching as Sulu chased some Ensigns away from the mats.
"Well, considering he and Spock pretty much forgot that I existed as soon as the holo-codes came out, I'd say my talk was comparatively negligible. Especially considering he did most of the talking."

"That sounds like Stark," Romanoff said, fondness in her tone if not her face.

"He really is brilliant," Jim muttered, that knot of weird jealousy twining in his stomach again.

"He is," Romanoff nodded. "But so are you."

"What?" Jim asked.

A skeptical, knowing look in his direction as Sulu approached them prevented him from further comment.

Jim was eating in the mess, like a good Captain—who absolutely was not now hyper-aware and suspicious of, oh, a quarter of his crew—and trying to pretend it was a normal off shift.

How the hell were there that many people on his ship with the probable ability to hack communications like that, anyway? Jesus. Maybe he shouldn't have hoarded all the best and brightest for the Enterprise, after all.

As soon as he had the thought, he dismissed it. There was a reason that the Enterprise had a good track record, despite the one or two catastrophes. His crew was competent, well trained and, above all—and against his view of the world and understanding—fiercely loyal to him. It was what made this whole conspiracy pill that much harder to swallow, and cemented in him the desire to figure out what the fuck was going on so he could help whoever it was that had been coerced or blackmailed into feeding some unknown asshole information.

Because he couldn't believe that anyone on his ship, the people that he and his command crew had personally vetted, would sell them out.

His brooding lasted about as long as it took someone to gently set down a tray opposite him and clear their throat pointedly.

"Wha?" He asked, blinking and looking up.

"Captain," Uhura acknowledged, her face serene but for the slight quirk of her lips. "Long time since we last ate together. Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all," Jim said, gesturing for her to continue, wondering how people kept finding him when he was in the mess. Was there some sort of 'Jim is eating' signal that he didn't know about? "Sorry I've had us on opposite shifts, but it's better for training the sub crews. It'd be nice if, for once, we didn't all have to pull triple shifts when emergencies happen."

"You mean sextuple shifts?" Uhura responded, pointedly eating a spoonful of yogurt.

Jim rolled his eyes. "You and Bones, I swear. Nag nag nag. It's been insane. Shit to do. Ain't no rest for the wicked, et cetera. You know I can get by for longer on some of Bones' coffee and some stims."

"As if the two aren't one and the same," Uhura laughed, and Jim had to laugh too, because yeah. Bones' real coffee could put a bounce in the step of a corpse. "So I guess that means your stalwart refusal to let anyone else handle things has nothing to do with whatever fight you're having with Spock."
"Of course it doesn't!" Jim defended. "That's—" and he stopped, mid word.

He had fallen right into that trap, hadn't he. Damn it.

Uhura sat backward, eating another spoonful with obvious smugness.

"We're not fighting," Jim muttered, stabbing at his plate of eggs.

"Don't pull that crap with me, Kirk. I might not be on shift with you two much, but I know both of you too well to not see that something is going on. You were off your game before this mission, and I haven't so much as seen you talking to one another for three days unless one of those pod-people is around."

Jim stared down at his food, not eating it. Shame and suspicion colored his thoughts in equal measure; one part of him wanting to talk to someone about it, and ask for help, the other not entirely sure if he could trust the woman who had, for all intents and purposes, been the first domino in a series of events that changed his life. Before Bones, before Spock, even before Pike, there had been Uhura. That he had any doubt in him about her friendship right now almost made him sick.

Letting his hands fall into his lap and twist in a napkin, Jim breathed out slowly and looked at her, a probing, peerless expression on her face.

"You'd tell me, if—" Jim paused. "If there was ever anything... wrong. Wouldn't you? You'd trust me to help you?"

Uhura's expression changed, morphing into a sort of confused worry. "Jim," she started, cautiously. "What are you talking about? Are you okay?"

"Just—humor me, please," Jim said, staring into her eyes, searching. "You'd trust me to help, if you were in trouble."

Her own brown eyes flickered across his face, brow creasing with confusion. Uhura set her food down and placed her hands on the table.

"Of course I would. You know I trust you with my life," she said seriously. "What's this about?"

Watching, looking for a hint of anything, Jim finally released a breath and nodded, feeling that much more ashamed at his relief. "Okay, that's—good," he said, ignoring her question.

"Jim, why would you ask me that?" Uhura prompted again, seeking out his eyes. "Is everything okay?"

"It's—yeah, everything is fine. I'm just tired. Stressed. Weird mission, you know?" Jim offered a weak grin.

"Uh uh," Uhura shook her head, pushing both their plates of food aside so she could lean across the table. "You don't get to ask me a question like that and just brush it off. What's going on with you? Is it Romanoff and her friends? Did something happen?"

A lot of things had happened, but Jim couldn't talk about them. Fuck Romanoff's evaluations, he knew he could trust Uhura, could probably use her expertise on this, but until there was more to go on, could he bring more people into this?

"It's Spock," Jim said, not entirely lying. "He kept something from me, something important. I guess I'm just trying to adjust my paradigm into one where a Vulcan, especially my First Officer, can lie to
There was a skeptical tilt to Uhura's mouth, but she obviously let it pass, because she sat backward and out of his space.

They sat in contemplative silence for a few minutes, both of them resuming their meals.

"That's actually kind of why we broke up, you know," Uhura said, deceptively casual. Jim choked a bit on a mouthful of toast.

"Huh?" he spluttered.

"Spock and I," she clarified, though it wasn't necessary. "He was never an open book about things, but that's just how he is, you know? Vulcans. Very private. Not volunteering anything. But he always—" She pursed her lips. "If I asked about something and had a good reason for it, he would tell me." She shrugged, the motion small and ill-fitting on the woman he knew. "After our last time out, he was just—closed off," she sighed. "Something was wrong, obviously, but he wouldn't tell me. It was big, and I knew. I could tell he was trying to fit back into our life, our routine, but he was never one for really working at something so illogically futile." Uhura smiled, then. "I respected that he wasn't going to talk about it, and I think that was pretty much it for us. And maybe I knew it would be like that, in the end."

Her smile was sad, and Jim ached for the knowledge that it was partially his fault for putting that sadness in a place where there should be a sharp, dangerous smirk, ready to tear down a Klingon where he stood.

"There were things he was never going to give me," Uhura said, straightening up. "And for a long time I was okay with it. But there are some things you have to share, to be in a relationship, and if he couldn't tell me, then he sure as shit wouldn't want me peeking around in his head at it through a bond. So we both figured, why waste the time? Illogical," and now her smile was more genuine, the expression unusually free.

"I didn't know that," Jim said.

"Of course you didn't," Uhura scoffed, scraping and the dregs of her yogurt. "I'm not a blabbermouth, and Spock is Spock, so why would you? Then again," Uhura shrugged. "He does talk to you. I mean, whatever it was he kept from you, he told you eventually, didn't he?"

"Well, yeah—"

"Then what's the problem?" Uhura looked at him with a raised eyebrow. "Spock wouldn't keep something from his Captain, from a friend, without a damn good reason. The fact that he told you should be enough."

"But—"

"Oh, Jim," Uhura shook her head, long suffering written on her features. "You're really an idiot sometimes," she muttered. "So what if he held out? He told you. He owned up. It's more than he did with me."

Jim immediately felt bad, but there was no resentment in her voice or mien.

"I know you're not going to tell me, whatever it is, but you wish that you could, right?" Uhura said, her hand reaching vaguely toward his.
Jim opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again, and finally settled on nodding, frowning down at the remnants of his cold breakfast.

"Good. Now please, please fix whatever it is that's going on with you and Spock, because things are tense enough around here as it is without Mommy and Daddy fighting."

"Hey!" Jim said, watching her get up from the table. "That's not—no. Don't say things like that."

Flipping her long ponytail as she turned her head to look at him, Uhura sent him the most skeptical of looks.

"Kirk, really. For a genius, you can be very stupid. Fix it, and preferably before whatever is going on blows up in our faces."

Jim stared at her, mouth hanging open, when she turned around one last time.

"Oh, and you should probably head down to engineering. I ran into Spock outside the comm lab and he mentioned something about Scotty whisking away one of your new friends."

Dread pooled in Jim's stomach as she walked away. He didn't even bother cleaning up his tray as he bolted from the table for the nearest turbolift.

"Goddammit, Stark."

---

**Clint was still. Very still. This was the most important op of his life, and he could not fuck it up. He didn’t breathe, he didn’t so much as move a muscle that wasn’t locking him in place where he was braced in the high alcove of a corridor, waiting for his target.**

*With a low, inaudible breath, Clint prepared to drop and make his move.*

"Try it, Barton, and I will personally ensure a desk with your name on it for a year."

*Dropping down from his perch, to his muscles protest, Clint let out a frustrated groan.*

"Aw, man. I was waiting up there for like three hours."

"And I’ve been watching you for four," Nick Fury said, giving him the most unimpressed eyeball that Clint had ever seen. "Try your luck with Sitwell."

"Sitwell only ever drops his coffee and shrieks. Too easy, not a big enough payoff. Also, boring. He doesn’t even watch porn in his office."

"So you were hoping I’d shoot you? Because I can still do that, no charge."

"Nah," Clint waved a hand. "I’ll go stake out the Strike team. They’re trigger happy but their aim is worse, less likely to land me in medical."

"I suppose I’ll take the compliment," Fury said, blithely ignoring him and walking down the corridor.

*Smug bastard. Clint would get him, one of these days.*

So maybe old habits die hard. If Clint was going to be stuck on this ship for the foreseeable future, he may as well get to know its inhabitants.
Using the tried and true, no-personal-interaction-required, blackmail-guaranteed, Clint Barton method, of course: stakeout and master level stalking.

In a low-ceilinged, generally confined space like this, perches were hard to come by, but he’d managed to find a sufficiently cramped and accessible area in the wide bend of an arching overlay that spanned three decks connecting the rec, mess and residential levels in a strange little triple crossroads that seemed better suited to a videogame than real life.

Wedged into a strut underneath the topmost bridge that lead to the mess, Clint watched the various crewmembers flit by late on alpha shift. The changeover was coming soon, and he guessed it would be maximum spy time.

Twenty minutes, one break-up, an ‘exciting’ breakthrough about something called a Gaspar plant, two dewy-eyed crushes on Captain Kirk, a hand cramp and a possible pregnancy later, Clint was bored again.

“Mazel tov,” he muttered under his breath.

“Barton?”

Clint did not startle. He strategically released his position and dropped down onto the lower walkway with a knife tucked into his hand, but he did not fucking startle. Hands up in a ‘hey, whoa, chill’ gesture, Lieutenant Astrid stared at him from a few paces away.

Standing up from his crouch, Clint ensured the knife was safely obscured before clearing his throat.

“Lieutenant,” he greeted with nonchalance. “Hi there.”

“Why were you wedged under the walk-way?” She asked, eyeing him like he was some kind of escaped mental patient.

“Oh, you know, just taking in the sights,” he waved a hand, the other deftly tucking the knife back into his pants.

“Without shoes,” she drawled, eyeing his bare feet pointedly.

“Needed my toes for the grip,” he shrugged. “Also, I left my shoes in our room when I made a dramatic exit. Didn’t want to ruin the moment by going back for them.”

“Oh, sure, of course,” she nodded, like it was a completely logical explanation. “You hungry?”

“Um,” Clint responded.

Rolling her eyes, Astrid stepped forward and grabbed his arm. “Come on, if you want the dirty gossip, the mess is better than whatever you were trying to do. They’re making real food today, anyway. It’ll be worth it.”

Wanting to protest, because hey, his super-spy skills were nothing to scoff at, thanks, Clint allowed himself to be led away.

When they settled in with some food, Astrid having pointed out which foods to avoid because they weren’t safe for human consumption—literally, apparently—Clint found himself unwittingly engaged as Astrid discreetly and expertly pointed out various crewmembers and the ongoing drama of life in a flying tin-can.
And that’s—oh, no, wait. Over there. Ensign Carver was in the same graduating class as Captain Kirk; she’s one of the originals of the Enterprise crew. She claims that they slept together when they were Cadets which, well, wouldn’t be weird at all, except for how it was actually her roommate Kevin that Kirk slept with, and she walked in on them. It would be a more convincing tale, considering she knows all his, ah, measurements and such from the eyeful she got, but I’ve heard Kirk himself deny it. The man is many things, but ashamed of his sexual conquests is not one of them.”

“Uhh,” Clint said, trying and failing not to imagine all the places that conversation could go if he allowed it to continue. “Is it normal to talk so… openly about your commanding officer?” He asked, instead, thoughts of the varied and creative ways Nick Fury would have tortured someone for speculating on his sex life at all, let alone aloud and with frequency.

Astrid laughed. “It’s a big ship, Barton, but not that big. Kirk is the same age as a lot of us, younger than some. He’s our Captain now, and he deserves it, but it doesn’t mean that everything he did at the Academy just… went away.” Astrid paused to chew a bite of a sandwich. “He’s a person, you know? A hero, yeah, and a legacy, but when you’re at ground zero for the stuff that made the guy famous, it kind of kills the mystery, you know?”

“He’s famous?” Clint asked, mouth full of some weird root vegetable stew thing he wasn’t questioning, because it was pretty good.

Laughing at him again, Astrid shook her head. “You really have been frozen for two centuries, haven’t you?”

Clint swallowed and glared. “Not exactly a lot of time for, you know, research and all that. Nat gave me the bullet points, not the finer details.”

Holding up a hand, Astrid shook her head. “Sorry, sorry. Forget I said anything.”

“No,” Clint sighed, rubbing his face. “It’s fine. This is just… really weird.”

“I bet,” she agreed, taking another bite.

“So, why is the illustrious Captain Kirk famous?”

Astrid chewed, swallowed, and went quiet. She sighed, and suddenly seemed weighed down, sad. “When he was a cadet, before he even had his first commission, he saved Earth,” she said quietly, looking at her sandwich and not at him.

“Shouldn’t that be a good thing? Sounds like you’re kind of bummed about it,” Clint said without thinking. Tact had never been his strong suit.

“No, no, it is a good thing. it’s just—” Astrid sighed, pushing away the rest of her sandwich and leaning back in her chair. “He saved Earth, but he couldn’t save Vulcan or the three Federation ships filled with our friends, teachers and officers that bit it on the same day.”

Clint stopped chewing, swallowing the partially masticated mouthful hard as he sat back, mirroring her position. “Damn,” he breathed. “Sorry I brought it up.”

“It’s fine,” Astrid shook her head, offering him a weak but genuine smile. “Just still kind of a fresh wound, you know? Happened about two years ago. I mean, it’s not like anyone could have done more, but…”

“It still sucks,” Clint said staring off over her shoulder.
“Yeah,” Astrid agreed, eyeing him.

—“God dammit, you bastard. You are not doing this to me again!”

“Clint. Clint, he’s gone. We have to go.”

“He can’t—he just—“

“I know, Clint.”

“We just got him back.”

“Clint, come on. We have to go.”

“Nat—”

“Now, Hawkeye!”—

“Hey, you okay?”

“Huh?” Clint started, a soft touch on her arm busting him out of his reverie.

“You wanna tell me where you went, just now?” Astrid asked, frankly but not unkindly.

No, no he did not want to tell her.

“Nowhere good,” Clint mumbled, rubbing his hands together in his lap, trying to dispel the memory of slick blood covering them.

“Yeah, I could tell,” Astrid said, her smile a little sheepish.

Clint just stared at her.

“Sorry,” she said, fidgeting with her napkin. “Probably should have mentioned. I have mild empathic ability. Grammy on my Mama’s side was half Betazoid. The telepathy is carried by women in hybrids or I wouldn’t have any ability at all. It’s not very strong, but, well. It’s there,” Astrid shrugged.

Clint tried to parse that, and only came away with empathic. He thought of Charles Xavier and wondered briefly if any of the kids had survived the bombings in Westchester. That had been before the Sentinels, so he almost hoped that they hadn’t. Might’ve been a cleaner end for them.

Stuffing that away, Clint dragged his brain back to the present conversation.

“So you like, what, read people’s minds?” He asked, vaguely uncomfortable and trying to remember if he’d had any kind of porny thoughts in the last ten minutes.

“Our, she said. “More like… auras, if you want to think of it that way. Impressions. I know when to steer clear of the Captain if he’s having a bad day, stuff like that. I guess you could say I can feel people’s imprints, too. Their own little energy signature. It’s how I knew you were creeping in the cross-dome,” Astrid grinned at him.

Frowning, Clint folded his arms and stared at her, not totally sure how he felt about the whole walking mood-ring thing, but definitely knowing how he felt about the other. “That’s cheating. I was perfectly camouflaged.”
“Welcome to the twenty-third century, Barton,” Astrid said, opening her arms magnanimously.

“Yeah, well,” Clint grumbled, draining water from his cup. “Sounds to me like it sucks about as much as the twenty-first. Just more places to get shot at and die.”

“You’re not wrong,” Astrid shrugged, though she didn’t sound like she was really agreeing with him. “It’s a big galaxy. Lot of bad things out there, but a lot of good things, too. The Enterprise was commissioned as an exploratory vessel,” she said, indicating the ship around them. “Designed for long term deployment, years at a time in space. We’re slated for a five year mission. I mean, if you want to get technical, we’re on one. But we’re still the flagship, and Kirk is still Kirk, so when ‘Fleet calls, we come running.”

“Well, sorry to drag you away from your adventure, Columbus,” Clint said, propping his chin up on his fist as he looked around, scoping out the decidedly non-human crewmembers.

“Is that supposed to be funny, because you’re two hundred years old? ‘Cause I’m pretty sure Christopher Columbus was half a millennia before even your time.”

“Two hundred eighty-six years old,” Clint corrected. “Which, now that I’ve said that out loud, is horrifying. Jesus. How old are you?” Clint eyed her.

“Um, twenty-five?” Astrid said.

“Aww, children,” Clint groaned. “How am I even—Jesus. Are all of you that young?”

“Well, no,” Astrid said, defensively. “But after most of Kirk’s graduating class was killed along with a huge chunk of the more senior officers, well. A lot of us got an early commission. Not that we don’t deserve it, but there wasn’t exactly competition. So, yes. The Enterprise in particular does have the lowest median age of any ship in the ‘Fleet right now.”

“Well, at least Stark is still older than I am,” Clint sighed.

“There are some Andorians and Betazoids who were granted commission reciprocity through the military branches of their home worlds,” Astrid shrugged. “Starfleet needed experienced people for the ships they had left after the attack on Vulcan, so there are a handful of them on board.”

“The Andorians are the blue ones, right?”

Astrid snorted. “Yeah, that’s not going to help much. Yes, they’re blue, but so are four other Federation species. Tall, blue, white or gray hair usually, and antennae. Also pretty badass.” She mimed a fighting pose. “Warrior culture.”

“Huh,” Clint said, mulling that over.

“You’d probably want to avoid getting in a fight with one, if you can. It’s a tossup who’s stronger on average, Andorians or Vulcans, but between the two, Andorians are definitely… scrappier,” she finished.

“I dunno, Commander Spock seemed pretty scrappy to me,” Clint rubbed his shoulder with the memory.

“Yes, well. Pacifists or not, Vulcans can kick ass when they need to. Or just scramble your brains.”

“Come again?”
“Touch telepathy,” Astrid wiggled her fingers. “Not like Betazoids, who have proximal telepathy. Vulcans, most of them, anyway, need to touch to engage telepathically unless they’re bonded. I’m pretty sure that none of them use aggressive telepathy if they can help it, though. Pretty high up on their moral no-nos.”

“So Spock didn’t dig into my brain when he knocked my ass out?” Clint asked, skeptical. The man had barely touched him and he was out cold.

“No, that would be the nerve pinch. Tame, but highly effective.”

“Ah,” Clint said. Well, that made sense. Cluster of nerves near the scapula. Pressure applied with precision… yeah, that would probably knock his ass out. It made him feel mildly better about himself. “I suppose that’s better than another concussion on my record. Pretty sure I met my yearly quota for those before I went into deep freeze.”

It took Clint a second to see that Astrid was looking at him weirdly.

“What?” He asked.

“What the hell kind of job did you have?” She asked.

“You know,” Clint mused. “Sometimes I ask myself the same thing.”

Jim made it down to Engineering just in time to see Scotty and Stark emerge from his office, the former waving his arms about in obvious animation, the latter listening intently with a serious look on his face.

“Scotty!” Jim called out, jogging over to them. “Tell me that you haven’t—”

His Chief of Engineering turned around with a wild, manic look in his eyes. Before Jim could get out another word, Scotty had clasped him at hand and shoulder.

“Can I keep him? Please?” The man said, earnestly.

“What?” Jim blinked.

“Some o’ his information is a mite dusty, aye, but nothing a few days with me and a pile o’ sandwiches cannae fix,” Scotty grinned, releasing Jim. “He fixed that ancient little plastic box I had rattlin’ around in my collectibles, you see—”

“For the tenth time, Scott, it’s a Game Boy—”

“—bloody little thing lit up like a phaser fire! Brilliant!” Scotty laughed, and Jim could only stare between them and pray for his eternal soul.

“Scotty. Please tell me you haven’t let him into the works, again,” Jim said, trying to keep the panic out of his voice.

“Hey, I think I did pretty well last time—”

“Ach, dinnae be ridiculous, Captain,” Scotty scoffed, striding away with the obvious expectation that Jim and Stark would follow him, which they did. “Now that I know he can’t tell his Plasma Transfer Conduits from his Bussard Collectors, I’ve been a perfect chaperone.”

“But the repairs on the Interface,” Jim started, but Scotty waved a hand, indicating the direction in
which they were going.

“Nearly done. Laddie here had some solid ideas. Does make a halfway decent sounding board, if I do say so,” Scotty nodded, beaming at Stark like he’d paid him the highest form of compliment.

Stark looked over at Kirk as they walked, putting his hands up in a gesture of innocence. “Haven’t touched anything, I swear. Which you should be very grateful for, because this is all very touchable.”

“Aye, that she is,” Scotty said, patting an enormous water drum as they passed it. “Ah, and here we are. See, Captain? Almost good as new. The little bypass rig Stark suggested before we warped out here worked like a charm. A very dangerous, risky charm, but it got the job done.”

“Scotty, no, what—”

“And have you seen the wee little beauty the man has in his chest?” Scotty crowed, oblivious to the way Stark tensed up at the word. “Glowin’ and hummin’ like a beautiful little warp core. Makes me a bit jealous not to have one meself, though I s’pose it’d be a mite inconvenient for—”

“Okay, Lieutenant-Commander,” Jim said, using his Captain’s voice. “That’s enough, thanks for the update. How long until we’re ready for a quick trip back to the Starbase? I need a timeline for Archer,” Jim said, establishing a reasonable explanation beyond blind panic for showing up in Engineering without comm’ing first.

“Four hours ‘til we’re solid for Warp 6, Captain,” Scotty said, his body having shifted to something approximating attention. “Few more than that with some tweaks here and there, we might be closer to Warp 7. Though I was hoping to show Doctor Stark here the—”

“Nope, okay, stopping you there,” Jim held up his hands. “Scotty, how long have you been down here? When was your last off shift?”

Scotty opened his mouth to respond, then shut it, obviously pondering the question with deep thought.

“Well I was elbow deep in the filtration upgrades when we shipped out, an’ it’s been a ruckus down here since then so—ah.”

Jim stared at him, folding his arms expectantly.

“I was off Gamma two days ago,” Scotty muttered. “But I had a nap, here and there!”

“Alright, yeah. Lieutenant-Commander, you are relieved of duty for the next ten hours, and if I hear anything about you tinkering down here before those ten are up, I’m putting Keenser on your rotations for a week.”

Scotty looked aghast. “You wouldn’t dare!”

“I need you sharp when we head out. Go take Stark to the mess and introduce him to your lackeys or something, but get the hell out of here. I’ll make sure you’ve got someone on duty.”

“Well Keenser, bloody layabout that he is, should be down here in a few.”

“I’ll take care of it,” Jim said, shoving Scotty toward the entrance and motioning for Stark to follow. The other man put his hands up and went after him without a word.

“Sleep!” Jim called after the both of them. Shaking his head, Jim turned around and strode over to
inspect the progress of the repairs himself. If he was down here already, he may as well lend a hand.

Three hours and too many reports to count later, Jim sat reluctantly in front of his console, cursing himself for ever thinking that Captaining a Starship would ever contain more adventure than paperwork. Wasn’t this why he had a yeoman? Christ. Who even needed to sign off on these many briefs, really.

So, today had happened. And really, for having pretty much thrown in the towel on containing the whirling dervish of the newest Enterprise occupants, it could have been much worse.

In less than twelve hours, the relief ships would arrive, Djembe and her team would be on their way to court martial pending a review, and here Jim was, paging through reports detailing his crewmembers and hunting for anomalies in outgoing communications.

Aside from his run ins with Stark, Barton and Romanoff, things had been quiet with his guests. He hadn’t heard from Rogers, which was just as well, but keeping his ear to the ground and generally paying attention told him that at least this time around nothing was getting hacked, broken or otherwise invaded without proper supervision.

Spock had uploaded and implemented several of the new security protocols, and Jim had to admit that they were impressive. Apparently, whatever ancient brand of genius Stark had utilized to hack them the first time around circled back to an extinct but apparently viable form of programming. Spock, super Vulcan braniac that he was, had all but cocked his head and just… run with it. Adapted. If Jim hadn’t been on the inside, himself, the new security measures would be so confusing and otherworldly that he wouldn’t know where to start with any kind of breach.

It was equal parts comforting and terrifying. The fact remained, though, that there was still someone inside his ship feeding information to someone on the outside. Between Jim and Spock, they had left enough controlled holes in their new security to allow the exchange of information if it happened—a neat little trap—but that still meant they were playing the waiting game.

And while the waiting game was under way, they were going to be headed back to the Class L Burner Base and continue the mission. He needed to talk to Archer.

Queuing up his comm, Jim was about to place the subspace call when his door chime sounded.

Dimming the console with the call unsent, Jim swiveled to face the door.

“Enter.”

“Captain,” Romanoff nodded at him from the doorway before stepping in.

“Twice in one day, Romanoff? People will start to talk,” Jim drawled. “What can I do for you?”

“We need to talk.”

Jim sighed. Of course they did.

"That sounds awfully forthcoming of you," Jim responded, motioning her to sit. As if she wouldn't do it of her own volition.

"I won’t apologize for my suspicion or allowing my team the courtesy of their choice with revealing their own information, but I should have anticipated that they'd react this way."
So, that was the conversation they were having. Wonderful.

"And what way would that be?" Jim lifted his eyebrows. "With deep distrust and overprotective behavior? Sounds an awful lot like a certain woman who had me fly a shuttle through an atmospheric storm so she could keep watch over some cryotubes."

"That's fair," Romanoff shrugged. "We were never an easy group to handle. Too many strong personalities, too much trauma. It's not—" Romanoff stopped, evidently considering her words. "We aren't equipped for this life. We weren't really equipped for our previous one. It's not something I should have expected you to take in stride, and I wasn't exactly giving out dossiers to help you out."

"No, you weren't."

"But you see what I'm saying," Romanoff pressed.

"Unfortunately, yes. You kept their confidence but that means I only know what's gonna blow up in my face after the fact." Jim sighed. "I'm not going to walk on eggshells, Romanoff. I've got a ship to run. A conspiracy to thwart. Your collective asses to save."

"Then let us help, even if we're not helping." Romanoff shrugged. "We need direction. Something to do. Allowing us to wander and marvel at the trappings of your ship is only going to get Rogers and Barton so far. Stark, well," Romanoff shrugged, as if that was enough said.

"Look," Jim began. "I know you're helping, but it's more than that. I can understand needing to be distracted, completing a mission, achieving an objective, whatever." Jim waved a hand. "But it's the principal. Secrets and under the table bullshit. I'm trying to protect you because I don't know where the targets actually are. There's just too much… fog. We're supposed to be on an exploratory mission, you know? Not this crap."

Romanoff made herself at home, settling into a chair and leaning back, considering him for a long moment.

"People keep secrets, Kirk. They do what they believe they have to, for good or ill. Nobody likes being played, being kept in the dark. Sometimes it even hurts. When you know what it's like to be the person keeping secrets, maybe you'll stop holding it against him."

"Jesus Christ, why is everyone on me about this?" Jim spat, exasperated. "What are you trying to say now, Romanoff? That I should just let the whole thing slide? Brush off being kept in the dark my first officer and the Starfleet conspiracy because, if I were in their shoes, I'd know how it feels?" Jim scoffed.

"No. I'm saying you could probably cut Spock a break and make your life easier. Starfleet, I don't know. Like you said, we don't know the angle, do we?" She asked, rhetorically. "It's hard to justify means without knowing an end. I've been burned pretty badly by both people and organizations I trusted with my life. With other people's lives. I may not be the best person to consult on this particular topic."

Jim grunted lowly, massaging his temples. "It all might have something to do with you, you know?" He gestured, knowing she'd take his meaning.

"It's a possibility I've considered," she answered smoothly. "It would sound arrogant to say it usually is, but I've been around the block."

Jim chuckled. "That's not an expression people use much, anymore."
Romanoff smiled, small, but real. "I'm not really the person that would appreciate the anthropological implications of that."

"Stark?" Jim looked at her, and she shook her head.

"Bruce."

"Right. The frozen guy. Feel like letting me in on that, yet?" Jim hedged, knowing the answer.

Romanoff shut down almost immediately. It wasn't overt, but her smile went from natural to practiced. "Not my call," she said.

"And there it is again," Jim sighed. "Whatever. Problem for another time. But if this is about you, you know he's just as much at risk, don't you? More so than the rest of you."

Romanoff didn't look away, but the smile dropped. "There are risks either way, Captain. Believe me when I say I've considered the possibilities."

"I'm sure you have," he muttered. "So, what's your point then, with this? Because we've both got things we could be doing that isn't dancing around technicalities."

"My point is that I've been a liar my entire life," Romanoff's eyes centered on him. "I've worked with liars of all kinds. Dishonesty is in my bones, and I can tell when it's malicious. I can tell when it's personal, insignificant or polite. Honesty is overrated, frankly," she shrugged, settling back. "But I can see you hold it in high regard, especially for people you think you can trust. You're in a different ballgame now, Kirk. You're smart enough to know because you've played it before."

"Still looking for a point," Jim said acerbically.

"People you trust can still lie to you, but it doesn't mean they aren't worth trusting with what matters. I knew a man—" She stopped, adjusting her seat on the chair. "I knew a man who I didn't trust to tell me the truth. I never trusted him to tell me the whole story, or to even tell me why I was doing what he asked of me. But I trusted him with my life. I trusted that he knew what I could and could not do, that regardless of his endgame, he always had my back. Even when he let me think he was dead, I trusted in his vision. That's not a perfect relationship, or even a healthy one, but I admired him more than nearly anyone I've ever known, because when it really mattered, he never let me down. It's not in my nature to be hung up on lies when it comes to something like that. Trust is more important than honesty."

Jim's jaw clenched, teeth grinding. Yeah. He knew what she was trying to say.

"I don't like having the two people who I'm trusting to have my back at odds with one another. Maybe you should take Spock down off that pedestal you've got him on. It may be a brave new world, but it can't be that new."

Closing his eyes so he wouldn't yell or throw something, Jim breathed deeply.

"Get out."

Without saying anything more, he heard the soft cadence of Romanoff's steps and the swish of the door as she exited.

Breathing out the breath he'd been holding, Jim rubbed his eyes and looked back to the work on his console.
Jesus. He had shit to do.

He settled into the interview transcripts and personnel reviews Spock had forwarded, and tried not to think about a paradigm shift of Vulcan honesty and the trust in Spock that he couldn't shake, despite evidence to the contrary.

*Trust is more important than honesty.*

When the words blurred in front of his eyes and he couldn’t put it off any longer, Jim sat back and stared at the screen.

“Computer, initiate subspace call. Contact: Archer, Jonathan H.”

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**Chapter End Notes**

*Es esmu muķis, lādzu, laujiet man elpot.* - "I'm an idiot. Please let me breathe."

(Latvian)

Here you are, readers. This is the last chapter of... transition, so to speak. I anticipate that the next chapter will not take as long for me to write, considering my plan, but, well. Teaching.

Many thanks to my fantastic beta Kay for ver help, and as usual, still on Tumblr. The picture of me meeting Sebastian Stan and Anthony Mackie is up, now, including the dorky faces they're making.

Thanks for sticking with me! Be well.

-OD
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Jim and Spock missed something, Clint butts in, and the Avengers prepare for the unknown.

Chapter Notes

Look at that! I'm updating instead of planning lessons. My priorities are fucking straight.
A million thanks to my beta Kay!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The conversation with Archer had been frighteningly short.

"Kirk to Spock. Spock, goddamn, you'd better answer me."

"Spock here, Captain," his First Officer answered immediately. "It is illogical to assume that—"

"Not now, Spock." Jim didn't care that assuming Spock was busy and wouldn't answer immediately was illogical. "Our fucking timeline just got moved up. One of our relief ships isn't a god damn relief ship, it's a motherfucking Starfleet Command Cruiser designated to haul off our resident crazy doctor and her team."

"Why were we not informed? That is—"

"Fucking shady, I know," Jim replied, tearing through the corridors on his way to Spock's location. Yeah, he hadn't bothered to ask. "Our comms aren't fucking broken. We should have been notified."

"While not the words I intended to use, it is indeed suspicious."

"I talked to Archer. If I hadn't comm'd his secure frequency we'd be screwed. Good thing you set that up with him," another thing you neglected to tell me about, Jim didn't add. "He's hamstrunged back there with trying to blow through Cartwright's minions. The man looked about ready to mow them down with a phaser; all but reamed me out for not comm'ing sooner. We missed something. We need to talk to Djembe again."

"It would seem so," Spock answered, the door to his quarters sliding open as soon as Jim arrived. Spock ushered him in without another word.

Jim paced restlessly in the space, his comm still clutched in his hand.

"Jim," Spock said, eventually, his smooth voice cutting into Jim's racing thoughts. "What did the Admiral tell you?"

"He said—" Jim swallowed, running a hand through his hair. "He said he's pretty sure it's Cartwright. Archer managed to ping the right ship, on a hunch, meaning Cartwright might be on
board, and when he gets here he's probably going to try and take them."

The fact that Spock didn't tell him to 'clarify' who he was referring to spoke volumes about the conclusion they'd both drawn.

"That is unacceptable," Spock said.

"Fucking right it is," Jim growled. "Damn it, Spock, what the hell are we going to do? That ship is going to be here in—" Jim checked the chrono. "—fuck, two hours."

Silence reigned in the room, and Jim was beginning to contemplate the logistics of treason and fleeing with a Federation ship into the Neutral Zone when Spock finally spoke up.

"You must make the preparations for Doctor Djembe and her team and settle their departure, as prisoners, with the staff in the shuttle bay. Transmit the data to Starfleet per protocol," Spock said, staring intently at the wall, the intensity of his gaze indicative of some serious Vulcan pondering. "Speak with Doctor Djembe again. Do not allow her to prevaricate. If our hypothesis is correct, she is likely a pawn in this as well."

"Spock, I don't see how that's going to—"

"I will attend to the bridge. Our continuous scans of the area surrounding our current location and the Neutral Zone have yet to yield results, but Lieutenant Uhura assures me that scattered communications fragments in this sector can be difficult to interpret." Spock turned his sharp gaze to Jim. "With the elevated threat level after the most recent attack, it would not be implausible for a fragmented message carrying any such potential of a threat to the nearest unprotected base to occur, necessitating our immediate intervention."

Jim opened his mouth and the quickly shut it again, realization dawning. He snapped it shut again and felt a rush of... something shoot through his body, as he and Spock shared a weighted look filled with mutual determination.

Fuck him if it didn't feel good. Well, he could put water under the bridge, for now.

"Uhura," Jim said, the single name carrying the questions, answers, and conclusions of a hundred conversations they'd never had.

Spock nodded sharply; Jim sucked in a breath, blew it out and nodded back.

"Talk to Romanoff, tell her to brief the others. I'll interface with Bones about the Med Shuttles and deal with Djembe."

"Understood," Spock said, and they both made their way to the door. Before it opened, Jim paused.

"Spock," Jim said, staring forward. "We're gonna have to cut this close, and I mean really fucking close. We need to look like we're ready to roll over for Cartwright or whoever is coming until the moment we're not, or they're going to be on our asses."

"You are aware that I am capable of plausible pretense, Captain," Spock said.

Against his better judgment, Jim actually felt the urge to grin. This could work; be it one hell of a ruse. He nodded in acknowledgement and strode through the door.

Well, the shit had to hit the fan sometime. He'd always done his best work on his feet and with a black hole at his back, anyway.
"What's going on?"

Jim didn't even flinch when Barton materialized beside him on his way to Sickbay to talk to Bones.

"Nothing you need to be concerned about, Barton," Jim said, rounding a bend.

"Bullshit," Barton replied, following him with ease. "It's—what, ass end of Gamma? You should be sleeping, or at least in your quarters pretending to be. Spock just hauled ass to the bridge for whatever reason and now you're tearing through the ship. Something's up."

"Shouldn't you be sleeping?" Jim replied pointedly.

"Nice deflection," Barton quipped. "But no dice. I've been living off naps for almost five months now. I'm getting to know the space," he said airily. The 'and you' was heavily implied. "Save it and tell me what's happening."

"Leave it, Barton," Jim replied, jaw clenched.

"I'm going to follow you anyway," the man replied with a shrug.

"Jesus," Jim muttered. "No, you're not. You're going to go back to your quarters and sit tight until I tell you to."

"Ooh," Barton cooed with interest. "Such authority. Too bad that's not going to happen."

With a short breath in, Jim calculated his next few steps before whirling to the side and slamming Barton into the bulkhead of a security doorway with a forearm across his chest. Barton made a skillful attempt to use his leg to shove Jim off, but Jim just pressed harder until his arm was up against Barton's throat, grabbing the man's wrist and locking his own leg around Barton's right ankle to hold him bodily against the wall, knee pressed firmly between his thighs.

Barton was strong; Jim could feel the tension of the muscles against his own, and if he didn't have the leverage he did of Barton's weakened leg, he probably wouldn't have been able to hold him. In other circumstances, this position would be decidedly awkward. Jim couldn't quite convince himself that it wasn't awkward.

"Do not make the mistake of thinking that you can bully me, Clint," Jim hissed into the man's angry face. "I have some very important shit to take care of, and not a lot of time to do it, so you run along back to your quarters and leave me the fuck alone until I say so, or I will put you to sleep right the fuck now."

Something defiant flashed in Barton's eyes, and Jim pressed their bodies even closer when he briefly struggled in the hold. Recently broken wrist and weak leg aside, it was not easy to keep Barton immobilized.

After a long moment of staring at one another, Barton slowly relaxed in his strain and tapped two fingers against Jim's wrist. Jim backed off and let the man's feet settle on the ground.

"Tell me it doesn't have anything to do with us and I'll go," Barton said, voice rough from the brief constriction of his airway.

Jim set his jaw and didn't bother lying. "I'm handling it."

"You're gonna go put the screws to that Doctor lady, right?" Barton said, folding his arms. "Let me
"Put the screws to her?" Jim parroted with a laugh. "I'm going to talk to her, and no, I don't need any professional interrogative help."

"Didn't say I was going to do your job for you," Barton countered. "Second pair of eyes. I see a lot. Let me help," Barton emphasized the word. "You and Spock have been working with Nat, anyway. She hasn't told me the specifics but I know what I know."

So Barton knew that Romanoff was with Spock right now, at the very least. He’d told Spock to have Romanoff brief them, but maybe Barton had been skulking for longer than that. What else he knew, Jim could probably guess, but he wasn't betting latinum on it.

Jim sized Barton up for a second, weighing the cons of wasting his time here and letting Barton tag along against the pros of getting rid of him and dealing with the fallout later. Either way, they couldn't talk about it here.

"Follow me," Jim ground out, turning on his heel and not waiting for a confirmation.

Bones did not look pleased.

"Of course I have them ready for transport, but Jim—" Bones stopped and glared at Jim with insistent displeasure. "It's not right, leaving people's loved ones on a handful of shuttles for a ship that may or may not bring them home because of another agenda. They're dead, not leverage."

"Bones, we don't really have a choice," Jim rubbed his face. "I don't like it either, but this way Cartwright at least has the legal obligation to wait for the other relief ships to come relieve him of the bodies before he comes after us. We need that head start to figure this out."

"You're banking on some asshole we barely know having the decency to comply with compassionate regulation. I'm not okay with this."

"We don't do this and we'll have a cruiser on our ass with those bodies on board, anyway, and we'll lose the living people we're still trying to protect." He glanced at Barton, who was waiting impatiently outside of Bones' office.

"It's not right," Bones sighed. "You don't even know for sure that's what they're coming for."

"Bones," Jim started, sadly. "I wouldn't have even known they were coming at all if I hadn't had contacted Archer when I did. Whatever they're coming for, it's not good. We leave the shuttles with the prisoners and the dead and they're obligated to report it. Cartwright's subordinates will do it, even if he doesn't. We get half a day on him and time to regroup. Hell, if you send out the notification to base yourself when we depart and they won't have a choice."

Bones looked ready to protest again, but then nodded with determination. "I know just who to tell," he growled. "Even Cartwright can't fuck with Puri if he already sends out dates to the families. Fleet will have one hell of a public relations nightmare on its hands if he tries anything when he should be bringing bodies back to headquarters."

Jim didn't smile, because there was nothing to smile about, but he couldn't help but admire the additional leverage in their half-baked plan.

"Okay. So you'll be ready by 0600 hours?" Jim asked.
"I'm ready now, Jim, but I'll have everything in place by then, yes. What's going on with him?"
Bones motioned to Barton.

"Jumped me on the way here, and wouldn't leave me alone. He's observant, I'll give him that, he
knows something is up. Spock already brought Romanoff in, and Barton insists he can help by
observing my interrogation with Djembe. I don't like it, but I can't say that I'm—objectively—averse
to another set of eyes on the situation."

"Especially if they're his," Bones muttered.

"Meaning?" Jim pressed.

"Eh," Bones shrugged. "Can't put my finger on it, but he's only been on the ship what, a day? And
he already knows his way around? My nurses are swooning because he calls them by name and asks
about things he shouldn't know. Whatever else he is, like you said, he's definitely observant. When I
had him in here he could see his stats on my chart from across the room."

"Huh," Jim said. "In any case, he's at least accounted for for the next hour. Be ready for a quick
departure, but don't let on that you know it's happening."

"Who am I gonna tell?" Bones grouched. "It's gamma skeletons around here. I should be asleep, but
apparently that's out of fashion, for us. So here I am, helping you out of a spectacular mess, as
usual."

"Thanks, Bones," Jim said, sincerely. "One of these days, it will be a run of the mill disaster, you
know? Uncharted planet, hostile aliens—none of the conspiracy bullshit."

"We can only hope," Bones drawled. "Now, get the hell out of my office." He shoved Jim toward
the door. "Clock's ticking."

"Aye, aye, Doc," Jim said, and swiftly left the office, Barton on his heels.

The clock was, indeed, ticking.

"You know, that wasn't a bad hold," Barton mused while they were trapped in the turbolift on the
way to the secured hangar.

"Thanks," Jim replied, blandly.

"No, really," Barton said, folding his arms as he leaned against the wall, studying Jim. "Multiple
points of immobilization, using points of physical weakness to your advantage, didn't telegraph the
attack. It was good."

"Captain of a Starship, saving your bacon by putting my own on the line, and it's my dance moves
that has you impressed?" Jim scoffed. "Remind me of that next time I let you punch me."

Barton retorted with a scoff of his own. "Like hell. You didn't see that coming."

"You were pissed."

"Didn't mean I was going to punch you."

"Left foot forward, head cocked to the right."

Barton didn't say anything. Jim smirked.
"Still think I need your help, oh observant one?" Jim asked, as the doors opened to the short corridor, ending in the expansive space of the hangar.

Barton watched him through slitted eyes as they walked out.

"Hm," the man said. "I'd say no—if I'd punched you with my right hand."

Jim caught the slow smirk spreading on Barton's face, and cursed inwardly. Of course, the bastard had sucker punched him with his left hand, not his right, and if Jim had attempted to block based on what he'd observed, he'd have blocked the wrong shot and ended up punched anyway.

"You get to watch the feeds and she doesn't get to know you're there. You'll stay outside even if you get your panties in a twist, and when we're done, you go back to your quarters regardless of what you hear."

"Deal," Barton said immediately. "Though I expected better from the twenty-third century. Scrunched panties? Very sexist. Don't say that shit in front of Natasha, because she'll cut you."

"I don't see Romanoff here, do you?" Jim quipped.

"You didn't see me," Barton retorted. "And she's better."

Jim sighed, placing his palm to the security lock of the shuttle and waiting for the door to open.

"Just wait here," he said, pointing to the security station in the cockpit and activating the feeds.

"Aye aye, Captain," Barton said, tossing him a lazy salute as he plopped down into the chair, spreading his legs and leaning back like it was the most comfortable thing he'd ever sat in.

Jim shook his head. When he'd turned his back and entered the validation sequence to the room, he sent a quick text comm to Spock as an update. At least he'd know there was a second pair of eyes on the whole thing. Even if those eyes were cocky, obnoxious and possessing of an inflated sense of importance to what Jim was about to do.

To Jim's eternal chagrin, Barton was not irritating him as much as he should.

"Doctor," Jim said, by way of greeting, standing just inside the secure holding of the transport shuttle.

Djembe glared at him, sullen and unmoving in her cell.

"Look, this isn't how I wanted this to turn out," Jim said, eking his way toward sympathetic. "But if you aren't going to talk to me, this is it. The Court Martial is going to happen, you disobeyed a standing order and then proceeded to ignore a direct one. Your subordinates invaded a medical procedure and they disobeyed direct orders. That isn't something that I'm going to wipe off your slate when you won't even tell me why."

"I don't get it," she said, staring at her feet where they were placed on the floor in front of the bench. "I was drafted into this situation. I was the original scientist in charge of the discovery and care of the cryotubes and their inhabitants. What did you think I would do, Captain? Stand by while my directives and the research opportunity of a lifetime was corrupted by... command bureaucrats?" She spat.

"What are you talking about? You were given access as soon as everything was cleared." Jim said,
confused.

"Oh, 'access', yes. What a strange way you have of showing that. Have Doctor McCoy tell me the plan, then stuff me into a box while it was executed!" She looked away, scoffing. "But you were just taunting me, right? Wanted to get rid of me to have the research all to yourself. Typical Starfleet, cutting out the brains to give the glory to the brawn. The famous Captain Kirk strikes again!"

Djembe laughed ruefully. "To think I was pleased you were the head of this assignment."

"Doctor," Jim said gently, fearing that the mental strain of the last few days had been too taxing on her. He should probably have Dehner come down here before they were transferred, run psych evaluations. "We went through your communications, and from where I'm standing you've been running a different mission than the one I'm aware of. Were you planning on cluing me in to the reports you were sending to Cartwright?" Jim asked. She wasn't the informant, but she'd been reporting to a different commander, bypassing Jim's authority completely. She had to know he'd find out. "I don't really appreciate operating with people who keep things from me."

"So what exactly is it that you were doing?" She stood up, striding over to the transparent wall separating them. "Shutting me out, curtailing my access, giving me scraps and crumbs of information after others had been through it? I was put here to do research!" She hissed.

"I was trying to make sure we knew what we were dealing with, Doctor. Trying to keep those people safe so we didn't end up with another Vengeance on our hands," Jim growled.

"Is that what you think of me?" Djembe asked, taken aback. "That because I separate my objective observations from their human element, that I have no care for the people they are? I'll be the first to admit that I am not a psychologist, but I am not in this to make weapons or ally with madmen. I'm looking for answers, not trying to start a war."

It sounded true enough, but still didn't make sense.

"Then why? Why would you do what you did, bust into the facility when I had given clear orders to let the Enterprise crew handle it until we were sure it was safe?" Confusion swirling in his brain, Jim wracked his thoughts for something to say. "Did Cartwright put you up to all this?" Jim asked.

"Cartwright," Djembe spat. "Another bureaucrat after information he couldn't hope to understand. Really, Captain, as if you don't know. You certainly do play the fool so well."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Jim snapped, at his wit's end with the disjointed talk.

"If you didn't want me in there, then why make the announcement?" She seethed, glaring at him. "Why inform me in at all? Why would you tell me if you did not want me there?"

"What?" Jim took a step back. "What announcement?"

"Yes! Announcement!" She waved a manic hand. "It was there, clear as day on my communications log. 'Third subject revived and transported; scans and testing under way in base medical facility.'" Djembe laughed bitterly.

"Whoa whoa whoa," Jim held his hands up. "No, I did not make an announcement. Neither did anyone else. That's impossible," Jim said, staring at her. "And there's no record on your comm logs, we checked. I never sent anything."

"Of course you didn't," Djembe sneered. "Minutes after I received it it wasn't even there anymore. Like it never existed. What, slip of the hand? Didn't intend for me to see it? I don't really care," she turned, arms folded. "You've got what you want now, haven't you? We're out of the picture. All the
access and research rights to yourself and your pet scientists. I'm sure Doctor Marcus will be thrilled."

Jim bristled, but banked his anger. "I promise you that I did not send out any message," Jim said, fear knotting in his gut. "Doctor, just talk to me. I don't play games like that, not with anyone. I can help you out of this if you'll just talk to me. Was there anything else in the message? When was it sent?"

"No, Captain," Djembe shook her head, shutting down. "I think I've compromised myself quite enough as it is. I knew that Starfleet had its faults, it's rotten apples, but I never did think that the Hero of the Federation would turn out to be quite so deep in it," she said, turning to him, her eyes suspiciously wet. "I am a scientist, an anthropologist in a field that nearly no one cares about. Bounced from appointment to appointment with uncaring cadets with no respect for history, and now I've lost the greatest opportunity I ever had. More the fool for believing that someone in command gold would have any respect for that."

"Doctor—"

"Enough, Kirk. I do believe I'll wait until my escort is here. You needn't worry, I'm not stupid enough to extend my punishment by pointing the finger at Captain Kirk for my perceived transgressions. You've won. I'll go quietly, lest I end up in cryostasis myself."

Watching Djembe sink back down onto the bench, Jim felt a kind of horrified understanding bloom in his gut, and knew that he and Spock had missed something big.

Already frantically scrolling through his own comm logs as he shot out of the room, not even acknowledging Barton dogging his steps out of the shuttle, Jim activated his communicator.

"Urgent, Kirk to Spock."

"Spock here," came the immediate response.

"Intraship communication, Spock," Jim hissed, slamming his hand to open the turbolift, meeting Barton's grim gaze. "We haven't been checking internal communications for scrubbing. Djembe's logs have been doctored. They hijacked my frequency, maybe yours, maybe others'. We need to scan those logs, now."

"I will begin scans. Where—"

"Conference D," Jim said, dashing toward a turbolift. "I've got Barton with me. Bring Romanoff."

"Yes, Captain. Spock out."

Flipping through the log, Jim finally came to a stop on an innocuous outgoing alert that he had never seen before in his life.

"Son of a bitch."

"Kirk..." Barton started, but Jim couldn't even look away from the comm.

"Oh, fuck," Jim breathed out in a light panic, because they had been so very, very well played.

Natasha watched Kirk pace restlessly in the conference room, Spock manipulating a holo-screen in the air while Stark watched and intermittently pointed at things.

Kirk occasionally mixed-up his pacing by shooting Stark dirty looks, but really. It wasn't like their
other two teammates noticing she and Barton's conspicuous absence and thereby showing up uninvited was surprising. Of course they'd noticed, and of course they weren't going to sit by when something was going down.

"There," Stark said, stopping the projection on a smattering of code that, to Natasha, looked about the same as the others.

Spock studied it for a second before nodding, highlighting the lines of code and transferring them to the search criteria they had been collecting since starting the scans.

After another few minutes of scanning and another round of dirty looks from Kirk—Clint was making faces at his back, and Natasha stepped on his foot under the table—Stark let out a whistle and rubbed his hands together.

"Call me crazy, but I think that's it. The rest of the data goes back before the first transmissions you said were scrubbed. Even if there's more, it's not going to be relevant," Stark finished, taking a step back and surveying the collection they'd made.

"Your conclusion is accurate; it would be illogical for me to consider your mental health unsound," Spock said, shutting down one projection to enlarge the other. Kirk, frothing at the bit, elbowed Stark out of the way to survey the results.

"Shit, well, at least there isn't much here," he said, grabbing a section of code and eyeballing it. "Son of a—this asshole has been doing a bait and switch with our maintenance crew!"

"Whoa, what's the timestamp on that one?" Barton asked, peering over Kirk's shoulder.

"Yesterday, just before we arrived."

Natasha watched Clint think for a moment before cocking his head in understanding. "Huh," he said. "Jefferies 13-Q. I think I actually ran into the kid who got that message. Looked like an installation."

Kirk looked somewhere between crying and murder.

"Goddamn it," he hissed. "He must have known we were on to him; he's been having other people do his dirty work. With a hardware installation, he didn't even need to cover his tracks, just used other people's frequencies to pull the strings."

"But there's been nothing since you upgraded security," Stark added. "The upgrade included intraship communication as well, whoever it is won't be able to pull this stunt anymore. The hardware is obsolete within the new system."

"Okay. Okay," Kirk said, taking a breath. "Summarize those logs and see if we can't figure out what's been fucked with and where. When we get back to the base, we won't have a lot of time to investigate them and see if it points to anyone."

"If the communications are going to be blocked, I don't think subtle is going to be the most effective approach, anymore," Natasha said.

"So I've gotta, what, start interrogating people?" Kirk snapped.

"Natasha is right," Steve butted in, before Kirk could strain something. "You said you think whoever it is is probably being coerced, right? Well, if they know the comms are blocked, it means that nobody will be able to get to them either. It's a window for them to come clean without risk."
"The frequencies utilized does narrow down the list of suspects," Spock said. "Unless the information was provided by an outside source, the informant would have needed more intimate knowledge of duty rosters and rotations so that they would not arouse suspicion by issuing orders or sending messages from an officer who was either off-duty or outside the correct chain of command."

"S'pose it would be weird if some yeoman got a direct order from the Captain to do a random installation," Clint said.

"Okay. Alright. So we do a hardline investigation of whoever's left. But first things first," Kirk said, looking at Natasha and her assembled team. "We're hauling serious ass to that base, and when we get back there, we need you secured and with some airtight fucking documentation."

"Yeah, totally got that covered," Stark said, raising a hand.

"Really?" Steve looked at Tony askance.

"What, you thought I was just futzing around the whole time I was playing around with PADDs and consoles?" Stark asked, looking mildly offended.

"Yeah, actually," Clint said, like it was obvious.

"I'm hurt, really." Tony put a hand to the arc reactor glowing through his black shirt.

"Stark," Kirk said, voice impatient.

"Okay, alright, cool your warp engines, sheesh," he muttered, rapidly typing something into the keys of the wall-console before a series of documents were projected onto the screen. "Ta-da!" He said, waving his arm.

Spock appeared to scan the documents before raising a delicate brow in Stark's direction.

"These are not forgeries," Spock said.

"Well, yeah. Forgeries weren't going to hold up in any kind of Federation court, and certainly not if Starfleet was trying to sweep us under the rug," Stark said, swiping away one set of documents to pull up another. "It took a little finagling and some input from your illustrious Chief Engineer, but we're bonafide citizens of United Earth, complete with retroactive residency that would trump God for how long we've been living there."

"Scotty helped you?" Kirk asked, incredulous.

"He apparently did quite a lot of the research involved in the specifics of citizenship and emigration when he was contemplating fleeing Earth after some kind of incident with a Beagle," Stark shrugged. "The precedents were strange, but, then again, so are we. He has a solid contact in the African Continental Council that apparently has a stupidly high security clearance and was able to act as what amounts to Power of Attorney and get this approved as of—" Stark squinted at the chrono. "Five hours ago. Ish."

Well, Natasha couldn't help but be impressed. She made a noise of approval, and Tony beamed.

"Well, fuck," Kirk breathed, staring at the documents. "That's the first good news I've had today. That's actually fantastic."

Tony shrugged in an almost comical display of discomfort for a man who was used to having his ego stroked.
"Well, awesome. Good to know I have legal citizenship of the planet I've spent my adult life trying to save," Clint muttered.

"What happens now?" Steve spoke up. "We might have the documents, but it's not going to be that easy if someone is really after us. That's never stopped them before, and that was when we had the leverage of—"

Natasha cleared her throat pointedly, and it earned her a dirty look from Kirk. She just met the look with an eyebrow of her own.

"Well now we—"

"Bridge to Captain Kirk."

"Son of a—" Kirk started, flicking open his comm. "Kirk here."

"We've just received communication of incoming Starfleet cruiser, ETA thirty standard minutes, priority alpha. Orders?"

Kirk pressed the comm to his forehead, meeting Spock's eyes and waiting for a nod. He got it, and Spock was already out the door when Kirk answered.

"Confirm reception and keep the channel open. Alert Doctor McCoy and Security to prime transport shuttles. Commander Spock will take the conn."

"Yes, sir. Bridge out."

"Well, show time, everyone." Kirk breathed out. "Lieutenant Astrid is clearing out your suite and you'll be moved to separate unidentified quarters until we're back to the base. Stay off the hardware comms and consoles, because as far as our records show, they're unoccupied. Replicators and sonics aren't monitored so those are fine."


"No," Kirk emphasized. "And your friend in cryostasis is going into unmarked storage. Bones and Scotty will be on it."

"Hey, whoa, nope. Nuh uh, he's not going anywhere without a chaperone," Stark butted in, and Natasha had to agree. If Bruce wasn't being monitored, they needed one of their own to know exactly where he was in case of disaster.

"Stark goes with him to storage or he stays in quarters with one of us," Natasha said, fixing Kirk with the same look she'd used on him before.

Throwing his hands up in the air, Kirk let out a noise of frustration, swearing in some guttural language Natasha figured was alien. Well, at least she assumed he was swearing.

"He won't fit in standard crew quarters, and it would be impossible to move him undetected anyway."

"Then I guess I'm tagging along, huh?" Stark said, folding his arms pointedly.

"Oh my—fine. Bones!" Kirk snarled into his communicator.

"Jesus christ, Jim, what the hell is it?"
"Stark is coming down to move the cryotube with you."

"What the hell for?"


A sigh was audible over the line. "Alright. McCoy out."

"You need me to walk you down there?" Kirk asked Tony, snapping his communicator closed with more force than necessary.

"Nope, I think I got it," Stark quipped, and shot both Kirk and Steve a salute as he strode through the doors.

"Is that it, then? Can I get on with the saving your asses thing now?" Kirk growled.

"Thank you, Captain," Steve said, rising and extending a hand to grasp the man on the shoulder, even though Kirk visibly tensed at the touch. "I know we've been less than grateful in all of this, but it means a lot, what you're risking for us."

Kirk shrugged the hand off and met Steve's eyes, then hers, with a hard look.

"You can thank me by doing what I ask. We're going red alert in twenty and this needs to look real. Stay in your rooms, keep yourselves safe. You won't be able to monitor the feeds, so you just have to trust me, okay?"

Steve looked ready to respond, but Natasha stepped in. She'd been here the longest, she'd been Kirk's biggest pain in the ass. The man hadn't given her a reason yet to doubt that he was going to keep his promises, and if she was going to trust him, well, no time like the present to act like it.

"I trust you," she said, and couldn't help but feel exposed when Clint and Steve gave her identical looks of surprise.

Kirk seemed to understand the significance of the statement, and held her gaze before nodding briefly. He made to leave the room, but Natasha rose from her seat and stopped him just before he departed.

"Thank you, Captain," she said, softly. "For everything."

A small smile formed on his lips, and he shook his head. "You know, for a pain-in-the-ass frozen artifact, you're not so bad. Keep your head down."

With a final nod, he left, and Natasha breathed in and out deeply.

"Tash?" Clint said, sounding small, the weight of the situation having clearly dropped in the few moments that had passed.

"Call Astrid," Natasha said. "Let's get to our rooms."

Jim paced in the shuttle bay, in turn eyeing the chrono and his communicator, willing one or both of them to just make something happen. Bones made his way over from the last of the med-shuttles and Jim stilled.

"Everything's set," Bones sighed. "What's our countdown?"
"Five minutes. Stark give you any trouble?"

Bones grunted in the negative. "Hovered a lot, babbled, gave me the hairy eyeball every time I twitched wrong, but their buddy and the empty tubes are secure."

"Good," Jim breathed. "Okay, well. You should head back to Sickbay."

"What for?" Bones snorted. "Wouldn't the dash back there add some realism to this little farce?"

Jim shrugged. "I guess it couldn't hurt. I'm just waiting here with my thumb up my ass, anyway."

Rolling his eyes, Bones tugged Jim away from the center of the hangar.

"You got the rest of your brood all locked up safe?"

Jim scowled. "They are not my brood, but yes. They're separated and only a handful of people know where they actually are. Nobody is going to be snatching them up with wayward transporter beams, if that's what you're asking."

"It wasn't, but it's always nice to be reminded that that's in the cards," Bones grumbled. "You sure they'll stay out of the way? Their track record is pretty clear on following your orders."

"You know, this time I think they actually might," Jim sighed, something anxious and uncomfortable curling in his gut.

"What makes you say that?" Bones inquired, leaning against the wall of the hangar when they got to it.

"Romanoff actually out and out said she trusted me. It was weird. I mean, I felt responsible for them, before, but now it's all..."

"Just got real, huh?" Bones finished, a knowing look on his face.

"Don't give me that look," Jim huffed. "I mean, I got what I asked for, right? She's trusting me to keep them safe, and that's what I'm going to do."

"You know that might be a tall order. You ain't got any idea what Cartwright or anybody else in 'Fleet has up their sleeves." Bones sniffed, folding his arms.

"Yeah, I know. But doing this, helping them, it feels right. Nothing about this has sat well with me, and I know there are a lot of reasons for that, but you're—you're right," Jim looked at his hands, one clenching his communicator tightly. "It's real."

Bones sighed heavily, patting Jim on his shoulder.

"They're scared," Jim murmured, looking up into Bones' eyes, somehow surprised at the revelation. "They're really, really scared."

Squeezing Jim's shoulder where his hand had been resting, Bones shook his head ruefully. "Wouldn't you be?"

The chrono was ticking down, and with it, anxiety—panic—mounted in Jim's gut.

"What if I can't do it, Bones? What if I can't help them?" Jim croaked.

The noise Bones made could only be described as disgusted, and the whack to the back of his head
shouldn't have been a surprise.

"Hey!"

"When you say stupid shit like that, you deserve to get hit, you numbskull," Bones growled. "Now quit shitting your pants now that you’ve got all that fucking responsibility that you asked for and go piss off an Admiral by foiling his nefarious plans."

The hangar was flooded with lights when the Red Alert klaxons began blaring, and requests for the Captain to come to the bridge filtered through the noise.

Bones lifted his eyebrows expectantly.

"Or did you have somewhere else to be?"

Jim swatted Bones on the shoulder, and with red lights flashing around him, felt his momentary panic dissolve. He grinned wide and jogged backwards away from the doctor.

"Bet I'll make it to the bridge before you get to Sickbay!" He said, and turned around to dash out of the hangar.

"I'll keep a bed open for you!" Bones called after him.

They had cut it very close.

Had it been possible, Jim would have said he could see the warp trails of the Starfleet Cruiser Bethesda in their rearview as they warped away, and felt an immature urge to crow eat my dust, suckers! As they made their way back to the Starbase at a cheery Warp 7. At least this way, even if the cruiser decided to pursue as soon as they could—to ‘lend a hand’—they’d have a good two hours to sort shit out.

“How’re we looking down there, Scotty?”

“Better than good, Captain. ‘Twas awful nice to have a full day to work out things with the intercooler and finish the code upgrades.”

“Well, I’m glad you got them,” Jim replied. “Keep me updated. Don’t push it too hard, but any safe increase in speed wouldn’t go unacknowledged.”

“Aye, Scott out.”

They’d killed the Red Alert in favor of a Yellow Alert for stand-by while they were en route, and Jim had sent the message ahead to Commander Treska of the potential threat, so Jim would get to see how good the man was at battening down the hatches when the time came. For now, things were clear. It was like running an emergency drill, and it was always good to be in practice for them the real crises arose.

“Spock.” Jim twirled around, vacating the chair to walk over to Spock’s console. “We ready for what happens when we get to Base?”

“Indeed. After initial scans, we are set to beam down the first group of the command crew for briefing on base with Natasha Romanoff and Steve Rogers,” Spock uttered lowly, barely glancing away from his console to acknowledge Jim any other way.

Nodding, Jim drew in a slow breath. “Okay.” His gut twisted with anxiety. He didn’t want to build
distrust among his command team, but doing the briefing in two groups was the only way to both keep things in house and make sure the Enterprise was appropriately staffed during what amounted to Red Alert with high potential for an attack.

All things considered, even if the Bethesda didn’t come hot on their trail, there wouldn’t be much time to flush out the informant. Getting his best people on the inside to work their collective magic could only help accelerate the process, and it was something they sorely needed.

It felt good, in an anticipatory way, to finally be getting this clusterfuck off his chest and out into the open. Oh, sure, they were going to be pissed at him—Uhura especially—but he’d been told by irreputable spying sources that he couldn’t know for sure they were trustworthy.

Well, sitting them down in a room and dropping this on them would relieve him of all doubt. Short of having Spock meld with all of them, there wasn’t a cleaner way to ease Romanoff’s suspicions than a cold briefing.

“Captain,” Uhura busted through his thoughts. “I’ve got an incoming transmission from the Bethesda.”

Jim sighed. “They want me on screen?” He asked.

“No,” Uhura answered, twisting a knob and pressing a finger to her earpiece. “They’re confirming they’ve taken on the transport shuttles. Captain Tal-Roh isn’t happy that we left them the care package, but they’re going to remain in orbit until the relief ships arrive.”

Jim caught the look that she sent him and nodded. “Tell her we’ve got it handled, and thanks for picking up the slack.”

Hunkering back down in his chair, Jim resisted the urge to go to his ready room and place another call to Archer. If he wasn’t getting an angry call from Cartwright, who Jim knew would have shit a brick and demanded an on-screen conference with him, the man therefore wasn’t on the ship. Which could only be a good thing, right?

Shaking his head to himself, Jim tried to puzzle it out, his brain itching in the way that told him he was missing something, still. God, he just didn’t get it. Why send out the Bethesda if not to try and recover the people taken out of cryostasis? What the hell did it mean? It felt too easy, that they weren’t being pursued, or even being notified that the Bethesda would come out to assist as soon as they were relieved of their burden.

Chancing a look at Spock over his shoulder, Jim couldn’t tell by his posture or the side of his face, but Jim knew Spock was thinking the same thing.

Okay. So maybe Tony had never been the type to... hang out. Revel in the company of others. He’d spent far too much of his life schmoozing and talking to people in whom he had approximately zero interest, having his life pried open and psychoanalyzed by reporters and biographers and stalker-esque weirdoes to really prefer much else to the solitude and safety of his workshop and his bots.

But now? Well, it might just be for a couple hours (he hoped), but being cooped up in unmarked, impersonal crew quarters on a fucking spaceship by himself was wearing on his calm. It felt like, for every minute that passed here by himself, a little more of his bravado and the veneer of anything short of a nervous breakdown or complete psychotic break slipped away.

There really wasn’t anything to help the fact that the last thing he’d done before being escorted to his
erstwhile accommodations was cart his still-frozen best friend into nondescript storage, right beside the sealed crates of inert organic *rasa* that was used as the base for replicated food. As if he hadn’t spent the whole trip thinking of how he could discretely activate the ejection sequence and have Bruce with him again.

Because he really kind of needed Bruce. If the man hadn’t been a bastion of science and brainy companionship before the world had gone to hell, after the fact, he had been a rock of faith and understanding. Bruce *I’m-not-that-kind-of-doctor* Banner hadn’t needed Tony to say anything about how his brain and his emotions got the better of him, and had never made him feel any lesser for just doing what he needed to keep going. To survive.

On the one hand, Tony needed Bruce. On the other, he wasn’t sure he wanted to drop the whole ‘Hey! We’ve all been frozen for two centuries and now we’re on a spaceship. Spock the alien says the tea is still pretty good’ on him. Either way, it felt like a betrayal.

And here Tony was, tinkering and trying not to freak out in isolation.

To take himself out of his head, get away from the thoughts and memories and vicious paranoia not quite lurking in the forefront of his mind, he read up on warp mechanics and dilithium chambers—and tinkered.

After all, Kirk *had* said that the replicator wasn’t off limits. He was going to science himself up some halfway decent coffee—or any kind of booze. Hell, maybe *both*—or drive himself insane trying.

It was a poor substitute for the glory days of his basement shenanigans at his house in Malibu, or the less glorious but still fondly remembered days at the Tower, but it kept some of the demons at bay. He really couldn’t help that he had to pause every few minutes in what he was doing to let his hands stop shaking, or take a second to calm his racing heart at any kind of wayward beep or hum from the ship around him.

So really, Tony could have punched himself in the face for not thinking of it sooner when his personal comm buzzed.

Despite nearly braining himself on the replicator’s wide open maintenance panel, Tony dove for the device and flicked it open—he swore to *Odin* that he would make a better goddamn communicator—revealing a short text from Clint.

*what are you wearing*

Tony tried to muster some shame at the way the tightness in his chest eased at the simple, waifish connection, but his life had somehow devolved into a series of ever more embarrassing feels related failures, so really? Fuck it. No one was around to see him grinning at Clint’s stupid text, anyway.

Waiting had never been one of Steve’s strong suits. Patience, it seemed, was never going to be one of his—of which there were apparently many, if you asked Tony—virtues. He was a man of action, with a long history of getting things done when they needed doing.

Natasha had known he would be scaling the walls during this flight back to the base, and had taken pity on him by lending him the PADD she had gotten from Spock with the language modules loaded into it. It wasn’t a sketchpad and a stick of charcoal, but as far as ways to pass the time without going absolutely stir crazy, it wasn’t bad.

Alien languages were fascinating. He’d muddled through the Federation standard, but like Natasha had said, it was all so similar to English that he didn’t think he’d have too hard of a time adjusting if
he were without the translator stuck to his shirt. For no reason in particular, he’d decided to look through Andorian, and it just kind of kept hitting him that he was in space, looking at grammar exercises for an alien language.

In the past, this would have been time he’d have spent strategizing; going over targets and goals and potential outcomes and backup plan after backup plan until he couldn’t remember what he was so anxious about. But it was out of his hands. He wasn’t the leader or the strategist, and this wasn’t a mission. If it were a mission, it wouldn’t be his. For a change, he was on the other side, the one being rescued instead of doing the rescuing.

Who even knew what was really going on? For all that the wars and problems of the twenty-first century had been left behind, someone Steve Rogers had landed in the middle of another crisis. Different, but oh so familiar. Conspiracy, spying and lives on the line, per usual.

The PADD had also been loaded with some articles and other documents about the Federation, but he’d mostly ignored them, having already put in a bit of research himself. The breadth of something like the UFP actually kind of scared him. The thought of trillions of people connected, and Starfleet being at the center of it all was just… amazing. It made sense that, in the scheme of things, people on Earth had forgotten to be so petty about their own differences when there were other worlds out there to contend with.

It had certainly taken fucking long enough.

But where he’d really gotten drawn in was the files and bits of information about the ship they were on, and its crew. A publication called the *UFP Quarterly* had done an in depth piece in the months after Vulcan had been destroyed—Steve had taken a minute to contemplate the sheer magnitude of that information, that an *entire planet* was gone because of a single person, that Commander Spock was a member of what was literally an endangered species—and Steve devoured it with near disbelief.

It just went to show that first impressions could never be enough to know someone—and the reverse, that there was always a person behind a ‘hero’ in print.

James Tiberius Kirk had become an unwitting—and occasionally reluctant—hero, after recognizing the parallels between the events surrounding his father’s death and the attack on Vulcan, going on to take over control of the *Enterprise* and save Earth from a madman’s vengeance. Apparently Starfleet wasn’t inclined to give the job to anyone more experienced, and let him keep the ship.

That was over two years ago. The article went on to describe other significant figures on the crew, including Commander Spock—and Steve was pleased to see that they didn’t focus too heavily on him being Vulcan—Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, Lieutenant-Commander Montgomery Scott and Ensign (now Lieutenant, Steve knew) Pavel Chekov.

It was with an almost humorous tone that the author of the piece described the crew of the *Enterprise* as a boat of ‘young geniuses’, but Steve could see that it wasn’t wrong.

And here he was, a man out of time—again—puttering around like he was anything to anyone. Jesus. He’d socked the hero of the Federation in the jaw. How was he supposed to fit into a new life of space travel and aliens and… geniuses? Maybe Tony could do this, but Steve wasn’t so sure he could.

It was probably just being isolated in that room, waiting for something to come down on all of their heads, that made Steve so melancholy. He still had his team, his friends, his family, but what could he actually do for them, in all of this?
If they made it out of this situation, alive and unfettered, where would they go? What were they supposed to do, with no roots, no home, and no identities?

Enlist?

Steve quashed the thought, nearly laughing at himself. He’d experienced what it was like waking up to the ghost of his military service and being tied to S.H.I.E.L.D. with nowhere else to go. He wasn’t throwing in his lot with what seemed to be another questionable organization with the memories of what happened with S.H.I.E.L.D so fresh in his mind. For once, he was free of it. Free of the military, free of the shield and the cowl.

If they made it out of whatever this was.

Putting the PADD down, Steve rubbed at his eyes. Maybe he was jumping the gun. He might not like Kirk very much right now, but the man was trying to help them. Would help them.

In the absence of the patience and will to do anything else, Steve fiddled with the replicator and got himself some kind of sandwich.

Biting into it, Steve grimaced a little. Why did the food always have to taste different?

Never in his goddamn life had Clint wished so fervently for his bow and access to a fucking range.

He longed for the familiar, repetitive movements and the burn in his back and shoulders. The thwack of an arrow hitting a target, or even the faint whistle of the projectile leaving his weapon when the target was too far away to hear the impact.

But he didn’t have his bow. He didn’t have anything except his teammates and some kind of fucking prayer pissing in the wind that this Captain Kirk and his alien first mate were going to make this whole nightmare somehow not be as bad as the one he’d been in before.

Lifting himself off of the floor from a series of sit-ups, Clint briefly stretched and downed some water before falling down again into push-ups, wishing for the exhaustion of a good workout.

Somehow, he knew it wouldn’t come. After all, he could spent four hours in a range flinging arrows without the monkey of the day crawling off his back, so what the hell was he supposed to do with a measly two, and no mission to keep him focused?

He wasn’t kidding himself about the whole…future thing. Clint was an ex-circus freak and now an ex-archer/assassin/super-spy with no degrees or non-violent skills to his name. Wherever they ended up on the other side of this thing—if he made it that far, which he wasn’t sure they would, in spite of Natasha’s confidence—it wasn’t going to be as anything other than a tag-along.

Sure, he’d follow Natasha wherever she went, and she would let him, but he used to have the failsafe of being able to make his own way in the world, if S.H.I.E.L.D kicked him out and the rest of the Avengers finally realized he was replaceable by any other shmuck with perfect aim.

Okay. Maybe it wouldn’t be that easy to replace the Amazing Hawkeye, but still. Ex-circus freak with a whole heap of baggage, not anyone’s idea of family values.

But he had been the one to give that whole spiel about family, hadn’t he? Natasha had even seemed to be receptive. Stark had, too, but he was without his science bro and riding the crazy train pretty hard. Clint wasn’t about to put himself under any illusions that he was really some kind of deal breaker for all of them.
And seriously, what the *fuck* was with him and getting all introspective when he was alone? He couldn’t care less about this shit, most of the time. He shot what he needed to shoot, did what needed to be done, and said what needed to be said, usually pissing off all and sundry on his way to doing all of the above. Perfectly valid life-options, all around.

Eyeing the small space of his ‘undocumented quarters’, Clint calculated what kind of tumbling he could get away with, and decided he could use the work on refining the tightness of his backflips.

Five flips and one nearly broken neck later, Clint caved and shucked his sweaty clothing. Stepping into the sonic shower, he dubiously activated the controls and tried not to be *completely* weirded out by the tingle it left on his skin, the slight, clean dampness it left behind even though it was supposedly a waterless process.

Natasha had spent *days* with these people before he’d been woken up. Of course she knew what she was talking about. If she trusted them, then so should he. He might have been the one who brought her in, but she was always the brains and survivalist compass of their partnership. It shouldn’t freak him out so much, the not knowing, because Natasha was okay with it. It would be fine.

Staring at himself in the mirror of the cramped bathroom in his quarters, Clint tried to stare his own bleak spirits into submission.

There hadn’t been a lot of time to think about… everything. The shit that had gone down just *days* before. The running and the fighting, their hopeless cause and all of their dead friends and allies. The people who they hadn’t known for sure to be dead, but couldn’t be anything else, now.

Losing people was old hat, for Clint. He’d lost his mother to his father’s drunken, sociopathic rage. He’d lost his brother to the siren song of money and a life of crime. He’d lost countless buddies and soldiers during his tenure in the army, and since joining SHIELD, well, he’d lost a lot more than that.

He’d never lost a whole planet. A whole lifetime wiped out by a decision to stop running, to wait and try to fight another day. It wasn’t—it wasn’t so bad, really. Because Natasha was still here. There were people who knew, but it was still so insane, so beyond the ken of anything he knew to really try and compartmentalize the fact that he was—

He was Steve. He was a man out of time. They all were. No more dubious breakfast burritos. No more apartment in Bed-Stuy. No more Dog Cops or other shitty reality television waiting for him when he came back from a long op (though that had been gone for months, now, he thought).

So now, here he was, working out his frustrations and anxiety with physical exertion and a desperate faith in the woman who had yet to let him down.

He could do this. He could be something for his teammates—his family. He could be there for them, if nothing other than a bad joke and a bit of muscle for anyone who might be stupid enough to try and get at them. Hell, maybe archery was still a thing in the twenty-third century.

Maybe he could finally compete in the Olympics. If the Olympics were still a thing.

Nearly smacking himself in the face for all his ridiculous navel gazing, Clint grumbled and pulled out his comm as he flopped down onto the stiff bed wearing some loose, black pants that he procured from a clothing replicator. Wasn’t *that* nifty.

If he knew Tony, he was crawling the walls as much as Clint was. Probably best to be anxious and paranoid together, than alone.
Sitting in a small, dark room, Natasha wondered if this was what giving up felt like.

Oh, certainly, she’d given in, before. Known the odds, seen the writing on the wall and made the best choices available to her. But she’d always had her own back. Sure, there were some people she trusted to have her six, but they were always backup. Failsafes. Her reputation, after all, was not built merely on the ghosts of rumor and intrigue.

She was the Black Widow. The world was her web, and she plucked the strands, eating alive anyone who came too close.

Now, two and a half centuries removed from any files and body counts, she felt inexplicably small. Her life, for the first time since she cared to remember, was in someone else’s hands. The fate of not only herself, but of the people she had clawed and fought to protect with every good intention left in her body was hanging in the balance of something she couldn’t fully understand, and she was trusting near strangers to get the job done.

Giving up did not sit well. It stung. It churned. It ached.

It wasn’t like ceding command, because she’d never been in charge of missions and operatives. It wasn’t allowing another to take the pilot’s seat, because more often than not, she was the one jumping out of a plane. Natasha was not a leader. She infiltrated, she slunk and searched and knew.

Now… now she didn’t know. The Black Widow, Natasha Romanoff, Natalia Romanova, did not know what was going to happen. She didn’t know the identity of the mole on Captain Kirk’s ship. She didn’t know the inner workings of Starfleet. In spite of the research and the questions and the watching, she did not know.

After everything, she had only the promises of a young Captain and his stalwart Vulcan Commander on which to fall back. In their time of need, Stark and her team had trusted that she would make the hard calls, to see and hear what they didn’t, to know. But she didn’t. The uncertainty mounting in her chest was as surprising and painful as a knife to the ribs.

In front of her partner and her leader, she had given up, handed over the reins to Captain Kirk. It was as close as she’d ever come to admitting that she didn’t have the answers, that they were adrift and at the mercy of this brave new world.

Knowing had always been her gift—her curse—and even now, it didn’t fail her completely.

Deep in her gut, in the small, scared place of a young girl thrown into a life of blood and death, she knew.

Something was coming.

Chapter End Notes

So here we are, folks. The turning point. Prepare yourselves, because things are going to happen fast.

As always, comments and any love my way feed the soul that is rapidly being ripped away by miscreant children. Find me on tumblr for any random life and fanfic updates/general flailing about superheroes and stupidly adorable people.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Maybe Jim shouldn't come up with excuses for warping out of tense situations that are so on the nose.

Chapter Notes

Thanks a million to my wonderful Beta, who soothes my insecurities.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was with something like tentative relief that Jim and the Enterprise arrived back at the Burner Base, just under three hours after their close shave with the Bethesda. He hadn't bothered trying to contact Archer again, knowing that whatever was going on back at HQ with Cartwright or whoever else was involved would be taking up the majority of the Admiral's attention.

Jim and Spock were just going to have to suck it up and deal with their share of this clusterfuck on their own.

"Lieutenant, contact Commander Treska and arrange for a briefing. We're gonna need a full rundown of base defenses and I want you and Drs. Wallace and McCoy there with me. Beam down in ten."

Uhura sent him a brief, inquisitive glance, but affirmed anyway and set to work.

Jim rose from the Captain's chair and met Spock at his console, the Vulcan rising as well.

"Is Lieutenant Astrid ready?" He asked, voice low.

"Affirmative," Spock responded. "The Lieutenant and her accompaniment will meet you in the transporter room."

"Okay," Jim breathed, nodding. "Okay. You've got the conn. I'll try to keep you queued in with what's happening on site."

For a brief moment after Spock's answering nod, they stood there, sort of... occupying one another's field of vision. It felt like he should say something, that by leaving Spock up here and beaming down to start what amounted to an inquisition, a part of himself was staying behind too.

Shit, they'd been partners since right about the time they'd been literally at each other's throats.

Something visceral objected to being parted from Spock for this, urging him to fuck the consequences and make sure his friend and First Officer was at his side while he took on the task ahead of him; Spock at his back while they ferreted out a mole and ultimately took on what was looking like another epic conspiracy.
That was also the part of him that wanted to ignore his stubborn unwillingness to just let go of his fractured trust and, honestly, his wounded pride. It wasn't just the logic of keeping Spock in command—where he was most useful both for the protocol of handling the ship and monitoring 'the situation'—that kept him from blurting out that the green-blooded jerk should just come with him. It was ubiquitous, malingering doubt. Not doubt of Spock's competency, or even Jim's own, but doubt that so much water could really just stay under the bridge; doubt that when all was said and done, Spock would still be by Jim's side and follow him out into the black again.

If they still had their commissions, in any case.

For all that Jim and Spock had had their fights, their differences and arguments, Jim had never had reason to doubt Spock's mind, because the bastard liberally spewed whatever conclusions or thoughts he had where Jim's command, and personal choices, were concerned- without mercy or hesitation. Now, their encounters were fraught with strained, charged silences. Stretches of space and time that had once been filled with Spock's borderline offensive comments and Jim's snarky rejoinders were now conspicuously quiet; rife with the tension of the unspoken.

What Jim wanted was to go back in time and erase all the moments and events that had lead them from there to here. He wanted Spock at his side and at his back, but not—like this.

So as that conspicuous silence between them stretched just a moment too long, Jim stuffed down what he was not going to call yearning, returned Spock's nod and headed for the turbolift and the certitude of taking action.

"You ready?"

"Yes."

Steve tried not to fidget as he stood on the transporter pad; six of them assembled, each with a little circle beneath their feet. He was abruptly reminded of The Hunger Games. Clint had insisted that he read the books before watching the movies, but the feeling of being launched into the unknown transcended both text and film. To an extent, he knew what awaited him on the other side, and now he stood, no longer trying to suppress the feeling that he was walking into a battle.

Stolid beside and just in front of him, Natasha met his eyes and gave him a brief, tight smile. The same smile she wore before stepping out into similar circumstances to the ones Steve was remembering. It made him feel a little better about it all, that the two of them were on the same page. Once again, they were going in as partners—leaving Clint and Tony on the ship to handle this didn't exactly sit well with him, but he knew it was a strategy they had to risk. At least Astrid would be with them while Steve and Natasha saw to helping Kirk.

And helping, while it might not really be that much, in actuality, meant that they at least had a job to do. Observe and protect, though whether it was themselves or Captain Kirk they were protecting, Steve couldn't discern.

One was about the same as the other at this point, wasn't it?

When Kirk's clipped "Energize," sounded from opposite Natasha, Steve tensed.

Only twice now he'd done it, and Steve knew he hated being 'beamed' anywhere. This, he thought with surety, he would never get used to.

"Commander," Jim greeted briefly, with a curt nod.
"Captain," Treska replied, sleeplessness and concern readily apparent in the tense set of his jaw.

"I'll make this quick," Jim sighed, pulling out a PADD. "The attack on Starbase 24 was mercenary. Twenty-eight recovered, eighteen alive. They mercs were after tech, something in the hangar. Officers on site weren't at liberty to discuss the specifics of what might have been stolen."

"That's helpful," Treska responded wryly, pacing around his office.

"I know, but it's what we've got. What we do know is that there's a confirmed mercenary presence in close proximity to us, with at least one Battle Cruiser equipped with both cloaking tech and advanced weaponry." Jim set his jaw. "They're definitely Marcus' guys. Might be allied with others, but we can't be sure. We didn't take any prisoners or recover bodies. I think..." Jim paused, waiting until Treska did the same and met his eyes. "It's time to pack it up, here. The people we recovered from cryostasis have made their opinions on medical study very clear, and it's too risky to maintain any kind of op out here with the mercs so close."

If anything, Treska looked relieved. "The biodome is secure, but we're not a starbase. We don't have the kind of defenses that 24 had, even as an orbiting station. I've been ready to go since we got here, to be honest."

"Yeah, the Neutral Zone will do that to you," Jim quirked a rueful smile.

"Tell me about it," Treska muttered, rubbing a hand across his face. "So what's our timeline? I'm not going to argue with you about getting out of here, even if the mission is a wash. I was put here for security and liaising for oversight with you. Without Djembe and her team, there's not much of a point to sticking around. 'Specially if those people are refusing any sort of research."

Jim nodded in agreement, glad he didn't have to fight the point. "I've got to meet with my command crew about a few things. As soon as I have the go ahead from Archer for a full evac and burn, we're gone. The Enterprise is sticking around until he either confirms we're your transport or another ship arrives under orders for the same. You won't go undefended."

Treska nodded once, seating himself in a chair that looked too small for his broad shoulders. "You don't know how happy I am to hear you say that, Kirk," the man sighed.

"Probably as happy as I am to get the hell away from the Neutral Zone with so many people around in lab coats instead of red shirts."

"So it's hurry up and wait, then?" Treska asked.

"More or less. Spock is on the Enterprise, and our scans are running nonstop. The meetings shouldn't take more than a couple hours, and between the two of us—" Jim gestured, indicating the base at large. "—we'll handle whatever comes up. By the way, I'm impressed. You've got this place locked down tight and nobody seems to be freaking out."

"I run a tight ship, Captain. Haven't always been behind a desk on a dusty rock, you know," Treska responded, a hint of challenge in his voice.

"Yeah, I can see that," Jim laughed, holding up his hands in deference to the older man. "Really, though. I'm glad you're running things down here. I'll make sure Archer knows it."

Treska waved away the compliment with a grunt. Obviously a man with no taste for politics, then. Jim found himself warming more than ever to the no-nonsense Base Commander.

"The Enterprise is on Yellow Alert for the time being, and I think we'll keep it that way until full
"Evac."

"Same here. We ran at Red for a while after you communicated potential hostiles, but until we're actually being blasted with photon torpedoes, Ops is running the same as always."

"Those bastards have more than photon torpedoes, Commander," Jim said lowly, and Treska's face hardened.

"Marcus' tech?" He asked.


"So why didn't 'Fleet send some reinforcements with you?" Treska asked, searching Jim's face. "I know at least two ships were heading for 'Base 24 for the clean-up."

"Compassionate regs," Jim answered smoothly, glad of the excuse. "We left the base personnel, the prisoners and the dead on shuttles for them to take home. A cruiser arrived ahead of schedule, but they're sticking around waiting for orders as much as we are."

Treska nodded again, satisfied enough with the answer. "It's not that I don't think the Enterprise will be enough," he started, but Jim held up a hand to forestall further comment.

"But two ships are better than one," Jim finished for him. "I agree. But things are the way they are, and we can handle it."

Finishing up the briefing, Jim left for his command conference and tried to tell himself that that was true.

"Are you gonna be okay?"

Jim fought the simultaneous urges to glare and stick his head between his legs and hyperventilate.

"Yes, Romanoff. Just shut the fuck up, so we can get this show on the road already," he grumbled.

Holding up both hands in polite surrender, Romanoff nodded her acquiescence and motioned for Rogers to follow her and Jim into the base's lone conference room.

Polite surprise was the only way to describe the looks on Carol and Uhura's faces when both Romanoff and Rogers took seats at the slightly oblong table.

"Captain," Uhura greeted, rising along with Carol. Bones gave what was, for him, a contained eye roll and stayed where he was.

"Lieutenant, Doctor," Jim nodded. "Bones," he added with a wry grin. "As I'm sure you're aware, this is Natasha Romanoff and Steve Rogers."

"Yes, I'm aware," Carol said, eyeing the two unexpected additions. "Captain—Jim," she amended. "Forgive me for being blunt, but why are we here? Why are they here?"

Sighing, Jim gestured for her to sit down, and did so himself. "No apologies necessary, Carol. I'm just going to start by saying that what we discuss here is classified by my own orders and vested interest in keeping us alive and out of a court martial. Just—" Jim leaned forward, massaging his brow. "Try to refrain from punching me until I'm finished, okay?"

Uhura sent him a sharp look, only slightly menacing, but that was probably because she was a
terrifyingly smart woman and had already picked up that some kind of game was afoot. A slight incline of her head was all Jim needed to get the ball rolling.

For a moment, he met Natasha Romanoff’s keen eyes, and the barest nod affirmed what they’d already discussed. She was watching. "You know what I do. What I’ve done. Trust me, if this is the litmus test you’re looking for, I’ll know what I’m seeing. You keep to the honesty, and I’ll look for the lies," she’d said.

Opening his mouth felt like jumping out of a shuttle above a dying planet, but Jim did it anyway.

None of these people were liars—at least, not the kind Natasha was looking for.

She’d been sure about Doctor McCoy. The other two—not so much. She didn’t have the relationship or the background clouding her assessment of both their skills and potential vulnerabilities. Dr. Wallace's filial connection to the Admiral- whose actions were likely in part responsible for their current predicament- had had Natasha betting on her being the one blackmailed, or worse, part and parcel to the deception.

But she’d been wrong before, so it didn’t trouble her to be wrong now. What did trouble her was that they were now wasting time with hurt feelings and arguments about need to know information.

At least SHIELD agents had lived with the comfortable acceptance that they were being lied to at any given time about a number of things. As she’d told Captain Kirk, it was more important that they trusted it was for the right reasons than getting hung up on not having the full picture.

Sitting back and sliding a look to Steve, who sat tense and silent while Lieutenant Uhura and Doctor Wallace raged in turn at having this kept from them, Natasha couldn't tell if he was as ready to move on as she was, or if he felt the women who were obviously loyal to the young Captain due the release of emotion.

"—and the issues with the comms and the frequencies, do you know how much sleep I’ve lost trying to fix that? God, if you’d just told me I could have done something—"

"Commander Spock had it well in hand, seriously. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't—not until yesterday and then there wasn't time—"

"If my father's legacy has something to do with this, you damn well should have made time! I have piles of research and links to the investigations. Nyota is right, this could have been over by now if you'd just brought us in."

"I couldn't just delegate things out without knowing who or where was secure, Carol. Jesus!"

Natasha sighed, really wishing that Doctor McCoy would step in to do anything other than offer referee commentary. She was about to step in and just end it when a sharp movement from Steve caught her eye.

The man was sitting up straighter, gaze and attention trained on the door leading out of the room with a narrow focus.

"Steve?" She asked quietly, body already alert and primed for action.

He didn’t say anything, but leaned forward a bit, obviously listening with intent. Whatever it was he heard with his own ears must be more than she could, so she waited.
Suddenly standing up, Steve took a few steps toward the door and the argument ceased.

"Something’s happening. People are moving," he said, clipped and serious.

As if on cue, a red shirted security officer burst through the door, grim faced and not quite breathless.

"Captain, apologies for the intrusion, but the Base Commander needs to see you. Our scans are picking up some odd readings."

The lights of yellow alert klaxons began flashing in the corridor and above their door, and Natasha stood along with the others, muscles tensed for fight or flight.

"Enterprise to Captain Kirk," Kirk's communicator lit up, and Jim held up a hand to the security officer as he answered.

"Kirk here. Spock, what's going on up there?"

"Fluctuating energy signatures in close proximity. Scans are yet inconclusive but I am correlating known data to the anomalies."

Waving at the assembled people in the room, Kirk left the room at the brisk walk, and they followed. Natasha caught Steve's look and trailed after them.

"Put us on Red Alert and prep for receiving Base Personnel. I'm going to Treska now with the order to Evac all non-essentials immediately. I'm not waiting for the other shoe to drop," Kirk said tersely into the communicator.

"Acknowledged. Scans processing now. Stand by for updates. Spock out."

"Kirk to Base Commander," Kirk spoke into his communicator, turning sharply down one tubular corridor.

"Treska here. I need orders, Kirk."

"Red Alert. I'm ordering a full Evac of all non-ess. If they're not security or life-support tech, they're going on the Enterprise. This is on me, I'll handle 'Fleet when we're out of here."

Klaxons began blaring out the Red Alert before Kirk even ended his call. The flurry of activity around them was evidence enough that these people had likely already been prepped for evacuation protocols, merely waiting for a concrete order to enact them. It was an impressive display of controlled chaos, but apprehension was building in the pit of her stomach.

"Kirk," Natasha drew up alongside him, speaking lowly. "That's only half of your command crew, we still don't know—"

"I know, Romanoff. I fucking know. But right now I need to trust that even an informant doesn't want to get shot to hell. This is going on the back burner until the base is secure."

"The possibility of sabotage or an internal attack—"

"I know, god dammit!" Kirk snapped at her. Darting a look behind him to see Wallace and Uhura watching their exchange with interest, Kirk lowered his voice. "Spock and Astrid are monitoring our whole work-up, okay? We might not be able to stop whoever it is from trying something, but we'll know what it is if it happens. It's the best I've got until we're away from the Neutral Zone."

Setting her jaw, Natasha refrained from commenting further, dropping back until she was level with
Steve. If Kirk wasn't going to make this his priority, then she would make it hers.

"Steve, we need to get back on the Enterprise. I can find them," she said, barely whispering and knowing he would hear it.

"Natasha, I think I'm with Kirk on this. There are more people at stake here than just us and—DOWN!"

Between one breath and the next, Natasha felt herself knocked to the floor by Steve's arm at her shoulders. All of the hair on her neck and arms stood on end as she felt the palpable shift in energy, likely just a half a second after her sensory enhanced partner.

Voices rose around them, but were drowned out by an intense, earth shaking rumble and high pitched crackling. Natasha lifted her head, gaze locking with Kirk's for a brief moment before the corridor was plunged into darkness.

For a brief moment, Spock believed there was too much happening at once.

His PADD flashed with a notification; the monitoring program had been triggered. The informant had acted.

Anomalous scans had coalesced to determine the signature present was a eighty-nine point six three percent match to the cloaked battleship that had attacked them at Starbase 24.

The selfsame battleship had uncoaled, and begun targeting the base on the Class L planet.

In the way that instances—moments—were, however, quite brief, Spock burst into action before most of the bridge crew could begin shouting status updates at him.

"Shields up. Transmit status and distress call to all Starfleet frequencies in the sector. Attempt to hail Captain Kirk. Lieutenant." Spock's gaze settled sharply on Hikaru Sulu. "Maintain proximity and do not descend further into orbit. Use evasive maneuvers as necessary. Ready photon torpedoes and draw their fire in any way you deem appropriate without unnecessary risk."

When Jim was in the Captain's chair, the man dug down into what he did best, and would have surely rattled off more specific instructions. While one might consider it contradictory for Spock, a Vulcan, not to do the same, he preferred to delegate. Hikaru Sulu was an exceptional pilot, and with the aid of both Lieutenant Chekov and the others under his purview, could adequately handle the task set to him without micromanagement.

He was, after all, the Acting First Officer of the Enterprise while Spock was in command.

Turning a larger part of his attention to the computational data still processing from the scans, Spock continued to issue orders and receive feedback from the bridge as he reviewed the information. This, he could manage with ease.

The scans had struggled to compute the unfamiliar strings of data until nearly the last second before the battleship had appeared. The cloaking technology's signature had indeed been recorded while they were engaged at Starbase 24, but the imprints had been brief. Spock had directed the scans with a more precise algorithm on what Jim would call a hunch, but he himself considered a logical assumption based on both the timing and their proximity to the location of the previous attack.

The assumption had been correct.
"Firing," Lieutenant Sulu said, voice modulated with stress and concentration.

Activity whirled around him, Spock at the center of a maelstrom of communications and a frenzied exchange of updates. While assured that the Enterprise had successfully distracted the battleship from inflicting further damage on the planet and base below, he knew without a doubt that it would not be alone, and something much more dire was afoot. Jim was on that planet, inside the target base. Natasha Romanoff and Steve Rogers, two of his charges, were with him. Nyota was there.

Spock could not afford to neglect the bit of information to which only he was privy. It may cost them their lives if he did not.

Scanning the alert on his PADD, Spock concluded that the informant had, after days of inactivity, finally acted.

Watching briefly as a second volley of photon torpedoes struck true, Spock narrowed his gaze at the negligible damage they inflicted.

Spock allowed himself another fifty-eight seconds to review the data from the security alert before compiling and sending the entirety of it to Doctor Tony Stark. As both one of the three personnel intimately aware of the specifics of the new secure coding system, and not currently engaged in active defense of both the ship and the base, he was the logical candidate to pursue the threads existing in the evidence of the transmission.

Splitting his focus further at this juncture would be illogical. The greatest possibility for loss of life lay in the immediate threat of the unknown battleship and its likely still cloaked reinforcements, and so thereupon was where Spock settled his concentration.

"Status on Captain Kirk and the planetary base."

"Communications to Base are blocked, no response from Captain Kirk."

"First round of fire took out the main power supply and damaged the biodome, but they're actively defending from the ground. Backup at full power should last for an hour, tops."

"Maintain standard contact loop. Monitor for power fluctuations." Spock asserted. "What is the status of the anomalous energy signatures?"

"No longer mixed, but still present. Computer has no basis for comparison. Whatever it is, it's new."

"Source?" Spock asked the officer substituting him at the Science Station.

"The signatures are no longer fluctuating, but I can't place it. Estimated within five hundred-thousand kilometers of planetary orbit. Whatever is jamming the base communications could be throwing the scans, or it could be another cloaked ship."

Knowing the officer would have offered more specific information were it available, Spock accepted the information even as the ship lurched with Lieutenant Sulu's attempts to evade enemy fire.

The guess that another cloaked ship was responsible for both the blocked communications and remaining anomalous signature was just that, a guess, but an educated one. One Spock believed would likely prove to be true.

Another cloaked ship, perhaps smaller, more maneuverable, within five hundred-thousand kilometers of the planet—
"Spock to Security. Keep combat shuttles on standby pending possible dispatch to the planetary base; possible cloaked hostile ship in close proximity to the ground."

"Commander—" Lieutenant Chekov looked over his shoulder at Spock, his face suddenly pale. "What—"

"It is a logical conclusion, Lieutenant," Spock responded. "Our available information suggests the presence of an additional ship proximal enough to the location to hinder communications, while scans continue to show energy fluctuations tangentially similar to those of the cloaked battleship."

"Commander," Lieutenant Sulu broke in. "Something's not right. The kind of firepower that ship has, they should be trying to flatten us, but it's like they're not even trying," the Helmsman swore, maneuvering the ship to evade a volley of phaser fire. "It might look like it, but even if that shit hit us it wouldn't do serious damage. I think—I think they're toying with us."

Eyes narrowed at the sleek, oblong shape of the black ship on the view screen, Spock suppressed a spike of rage in his core.

"I believe you are correct, Lieutenant," Spock said evenly, though he could not mask the danger in his voice. "They are attempting to distract us."

Coughing roughly, Jim sat up, red lights combining with the lights of his own brain to form sinister shapes in his field of vision.

"Fuck," he rasped. "Spock. Spock what the hell is going on," he growled, hand fisted around his comm. When only a whining static answered, he snapped the device shut with a groan and rolled to his knees.

An arm jerked him roughly to his feet, and Jim staggered momentarily before righting himself.

"Captain, it looks like we have a situation."

"Rogers?" Jim asked, placing hands on the man’s outstretched arms to steady himself. "Was that you yelling?

"Yeah, felt a… thing. Don’t know what it was. Nothing good, apparently," Rogers voice was grim. "Come on, we need to get you somewhere with more air."

"Probably a good idea," Jim mumbled, half stumbling beside Rogers as the man towed him at a relentless pace. "Where’s—"

"Here," Romanoff said, Uhura draped over her shoulders as both women doggedly followed Rogers’ footsteps. "Wallace and McCoy are using their masks, bringing up the rear."

"Oh," Jim said stupidly, blinking spots from his vision as they approached an airlock door. He briefly pressed his palm to the console and it whooshed open with a gust of pressurized air to admit them. Ignoring the frenzy of officers jetting to and fro on the other side, Rogers dragged them into a tiny abandoned office and set Jim down in a hard chair.

Romanoff gave Uhura the same treatment, but on the desk, as the two rounded on him.
“Better?” She asked.

“Yeah,” Jim wheezed, taking deep breaths of the oxygen rich air. “But this is bad. You got any idea what hit us?” He looked from Rogers to Romanoff for confirmation.

“No,” Rogers said, shaking his head and looking to the door. “I just felt it, like a tiny blast wave. Then the roof blew in and the lights went dark.”

“Perfect,” Jim sighed. “We’re running on backup power, then. We’ve got an hour, maybe before we’re sucking low oxygen, again.”

“We need masks,” Bones said, pulling his own off of his face, Carol doing the same. “And a goddamn plan, for once. Jim, what in the blazes is going on?”

Shaking his head, Jim rubbed a throbbing temple with one hand. “I don’t know, Bones, and that’s the problem. What I do know is that this base is under attack, and the only reason we’re still alive is because either the *Enterprise* is giving a hell of a firefight up there, or there’s something here these people want.”

“Mercenaries?” Romanoff asked.

“Gotta be,” Jim took deep, even breaths. “If it were Klingons, we’d be dead already. Romulans wouldn’t come this far into the N-zone because of the Klingons. Orions keep to themselves.”

“What the hell are they after?” Bones growled with exasperation. “There’s nothing here that couldn’t be scrounged somewhere else.”

“Even if this informant were communicating with them, that just means they’d know there isn’t anything here worth the risk of trying to take it,” Carol added.

“Okay, let’s just—” Jim pulled himself to his feet, heading for the console on the wall and pulling up what he could. “—table this for now. We need to know what’s going on before we have more questions than answers.”

A short moment later, Jim stared at the base schematics. “That strike in the corridor was the only hit they got on us. Orbital scans are dodgy, probably the same thing that’s blocking our comms, but it came from roughly the same altitude as the *Enterprise*. There’s a ship up there.”

“I’m sure Spock’s handling it,” Uhura said.

“I’m sure he is, but we’re incommunicado and there can’t be just one of them. If Spock is tangled up with a ship like the one at 24, then we’re sitting ducks down here. We can’t evac in a firefight. Fuck,” Jim swore, pulling up more information. “Bones, we’ve gotta get to Medical or one of the emergency hutches for masks. There’s nowhere to hide down here and we’re gonna have to abandon base when power gets low enough to trigger the burn protocols.”

“Any word from the Base Commander?” Rogers asked, looming over his shoulder and surveying the information Jim was reading.

“Internal comms are shot, too. He’s a smart man, though, and his people know the drill. They’re gearing up for the same, so let’s get to it.”

“Captain,” Romanoff halted them all at the door as they made to beat a hasty exit. “Have you considered that, whoever these people are, running in the open is what they want?”
Jim met her placid gaze with a dark look of his own. “We don’t have much of a choice, Romanoff. Power is down, comms are blocked and this base will implode in less than an hour whether we’re inside of it or not.”

“I get that, but Captain—why strike now? What could they want here that wasn’t at the Starbase or anywhere else?”

Knowing where this was going, Jim hardened his resolve. “Romanoff.”

“It’s not a what,” Uhura interrupted with dawning realization, looking with wide eyes between Romanoff and the others.

“It’s a who,” Rogers finished the grim thought.

“Well ain’t this just a regular night on the town,” Bones drawled. “If they’re after someone, or someones—” He shot a significant look in Rogers and Romanoff’s direction. “Then we’re playing right into their hands.”

“What the hell else are we supposed to do? We can’t stay here, can’t run, can’t get back to the ship without comms. Hell, even if we could communicate, the Enterprise can’t beam us up without lowering shields, and that ship would blow them to hell.”

“We can stop the destruction sequence. Kill it before the power gets too low,” Carol said, heading back to the console Jim had left open.

“Even if we did that, this base doesn’t offer much protection.”

“Yes, but it is a place to hide if someone is after th—us,” Uhura quickly amended.

Thoughts whirling into action, Jim nodded once. “Find Treska. We’ll need him to access Ops security hub.”

“Done,” Carol said. “Lucky for us, that’s where he is.”

“Alright,” Jim breathed out, lungs still stinging from their brush with low oxygen. “Then let’s go. Uhura, once we get there, you and I are gonna see about getting some comms back on line.”

“Got it,” Uhura responded, and then they were filing out the door and jogging down another corridor, the grim faces of the base personnel as they worked a perfect echo of Jim’s and the others’.

“Are surface scans of the base still viable?” Spock asked Ensign S’Ori, the substitute science officer.

“With shields up we can’t get more than thirty-five percent accuracy. Without shields it might bring us up another thirty percent.”

“Stand by for scanning with shields down. Attempt to locate the signatures of away Enterprise crew.”

“Standing by,” he replied.

“Lieutenant,” Spock addressed Chekov. “Prepare a pre-emptive evasive maneuver, we will lower shields to attempt an assessment of the personnel on the ground.”

“Aye, Commander,” Chekov responded, eyes fixed on his console as Lieutenant Sulu continued to navigate evasive and return fire from the battle-ship. They had been locked in a stalemate of a match
for the previous twenty-one minutes, and it did not appear that the ship had any inclination to increase fire or retreat. With the available data, Spock concluded that they may be able to attempt retrieval of the base personnel in bursts without the other ship being aware.

However, it would mean isolating the transport from all but a select few.

“Lieutenant, you have the conn. I will return in two minutes.”

Spock vacated the chair and made for the ready room.

“Spock to Lieutenant-Commander Scott.”

“Scott here. What's goin’ on up there? We’re rockin’ to and fro like a see-saw down here!”

“I require you to assume auxiliary control of the transporters for rescue and retrieval, Lieutenant-Commander. Can you safely leave your post to see to this matter?”

Scott sputtered incoherently on the line for a moment before answering. “Are ye’ mad? I cannae just up and leave for somethin’ any tech worth their commission could do!”

“It is a matter of security, Mr. Scott, and I must ask you to trust my judgment and my assessment when I say that I require your services and yours alone.”

For a moment, silence reigned.

“Well, alrigh’ then. I s'pose I can help you out. Where'm I goin’, Commander?”

“Attend the cargo transporter. All recovered personnel will be moved and kept there until further notice. Doctor Stark will be joining you and assist with scans.”

“What happened to ‘yours and yours alone’?” Scott replied.

“You alone will be operating the transporter. Doctor Stark is to assist with scans while he carries out other tasks.”

“Ach, you bloody vague Vulcan—” Scott began before the transmission cut out.

Returning to the bridge, Spock sat in his chair and gave the order.

“Shields down.”

It had only taken about thirty seconds of explanation before Treska had just waved his hands at them collectively and told them to get on with saving their collective asses.

Elbow deep in the innards of the main security hub, Dr. Wallace was grunting and swearing as she pulled and prodded at wires with her bare hands.

“PADD, Captain,” she said, and Kirk paused long enough in frantic coding and rewiring of his own to slide the device in her direction.

“Should we be, I don’t know, doing something to help?” Steve asked Natasha from where he stood beside her.

Shrugging, she looked at Doctor McCoy askance.
“Nothin’ we can do to help until we’ve got mercs actively shooting at us. Then you punch them and I make sure we don’t die,” the man replied sourly, checking and re-checking the number of masks and supplies he had on hand. The man was as fastidious as he was paranoid, good qualities for a field doctor.

Suddenly, Steve tensed beside her and she whirled around to see where he was looking, but needn’t have bothered.

All at once, both Dr. Wallace and Dr. McCoy were enveloped in the swirling lights of a transporter beam.

“Jim, what the hell—” was al McCoy managed to say before both of them disappeared.

Mouth agape, Kirk looked around, clearly baffled and anxious.

“What the fuck!” He yelled, diving for an intact console and eyeing the scans. “Treska, was that one of ours?”

“No,” the Commander said, elbowing aside a tech to dive into a console of his own. “Scans are still processing incomplete, but there aren’t any other ships, either.”

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Kirk was muttering as he continued to gaze intently into the screen.

“Nat, what—” Steve asked, in an aborted question, his body tensed for a fight where none was to be had. Yet.

“Holy shit,” Kirk said, hands hovering above the keys. “I know that signature. It was the Enterprise!” Kirk crowed, and now there was relief in his voice.

“Which means…” Natasha began.

“It means Spock is trying to get us out of here. I don’t know how many more he managed to grab, but he’s probably lowering shields when he can to get us out of here.”

“When he can,” Natasha repeated.

“Transporters won’t work through shielding,” Kirk started, moving to the opened panel Dr. Wallace had been working in and picking up where she left off on the PADD. “If they’re facing off with that battleship we saw, the ship can’t afford a hit with shields down, so he’s probably waiting for the right moment and picking people up where he can.”

“And does he know who he’s getting?” Steve asked.

“From the Enterprise crew, yes. We’ve got comm signals and sub dermal implants for transport tracking. I don’t know about you guys, your signals might not be programmed.”

“They might be,” Natasha said, thinking of Stark and how much he’d been tweaking them and playing with them. Which—“Hold on, let me try something.”

Pulling out her comm, Natasha held it up. “Widow to Iron Man.”


Static reigned again, and Uhura looked up from her console. “There’s a jamming signal, there’s no
A loud, whining noise erupted from Natasha’s comm, and she pulled it away from her body, the noise slowly resolving into a series of high-pitched beeps and pops.

Mouth agape, Uhura stared at her for a moment, Kirk eyeing them with confusion at the same time.

“Bring that over here,” Uhura said, and Natasha obliged, handing over the comm. “Son of a bitch, you shouldn’t be able to get a signal through to the ship but I—I think you’ve got one. It’s weak and nothing is translating through, but I think I can boost it.”

Prying open the back of the comm, Uhura stared at it for a moment in consternation. “Where the hell did you get this?” She asked.

“From Spock,” Natasha said. “But Stark has been… playing with it,” she finished, for lack of a better word.

For a moment, Uhura just stared, but shook her head and hunched over the comm, pushing and prodding at the wiring, moving between the communication’s console and the small device, muttering under her breath.

Natasha watched her work for a minute before Kirk’s muffled curse redirected her attention.

“What is it?” Steve said, closer than Natasha.

“God dammit, Carol,” Kirk swore again. “Some of the commands she wrote into this aren’t working with how I’m trying to finish it. I’ve got to go back and rewrite them. Hopefully she’s told Spock what we’re trying to do down here so he won’t beam me up before we’re finished. We’ve got less than twenty before the power gets too low, and that’s not enough time to get everyone out,” he said, voice strained.

Locking eyes with Steve, Natasha shared a grim look with him.

“Son of a bitch!” McCoy emerged from the transporter beam spitting curses.

“Hey, doc!” Tony said, brightly, waving at him and the few gathered personnel from the base with a PADD. “Fancy meeting you here.”

“Where in the fuck do you get off—” McCoy halted to look around the cargo bay. “This isn’t the transporter room,” he finished.

“Nooo,” Tony confirmed, sidling up to the doctor and murmuring in his ear. “Informant’s still on board. It’s just Scott and I trying to get everyone out without tipping them off, I can’t isolate where the transmission came from, but they tripped security just about when the battleship showed up.”

“Fuck,” McCoy whispered, looking around at the confused base personnel. Huffing, he rubbed his temples as he grumbled, “God dammit, I hate ordering people around outside of Sickbay. Alright, people,” he raised his voice, waving his arms at the new arrivals. “For security reasons, we’re staying here. Cargo bay is locked down, comms dark. Huddle up and keep each other company. Scott,” McCoy walked over to him at the console. “What’s our status?”

Tony blinked at the change in McCoy’s demeanor, how quickly he went from surly doctor to assuming charge of the situation.
Distantly, he remembered the man was fourth ranking officer, technically below Montgomery Scott in the chain of command, but with him wrapped up in the transporter and the only one in contact with Spock, that left McCoy to corral the people.

“Huh,” Tony said, going back to the PADD and attempting to chase down whatever bastard was trying to sell them down the river.

“Doctor Stark,” Tony startled slightly when a blonde woman who was all legs walked up to him.

“Uh, have we met?” Tony squinted, keeping his eyes on safe territory.

“We have not. Doctor Wallace, Science Officer and Technology and Weapons Specialist,” she shook his hands. “Commander Spock has spoken of you. A word?”

“Yeah, sure,” Tony responded, bemused.

“I am not the informant,” she prefaced.

“Yeah, no, got that much,” Tony said, holding up the PADD. “What’s up?”

“The main power cells for the base have been compromised,” she said. “When the auxiliary power reaches critically low levels, the burn protocols will activate and the base will implode. I was attempting to redirect and stop those protocols when I was beamed out. Captain Kirk can pick up where I left off, but he’s got about twenty minutes to do it. You can’t beam him out.”

“Oh, shit,” Tony said, dashing over to Scott. “Hey, bro, Scotty. Yeah, can’t beam out the Captain on the next run. He’s trying to stop the base from exploding. Critical power and burn protocols, apparently.”

“What!” Scott said. “The mad bastard!” He finished, before activating his comm and feeding the information to Spock.

Watching the handful of officers milling about in the cargo space, Tony returned to his work, trying not to think about how Natasha and Steve might be minutes away from going boom, and Clint was still trapped in his quarters, in the dark about all of it.

Feeling mutinous, Tony pulled out his comm to call birdbrain down here, or at least give him a heads up, when the device squealed to life in his hands.

“Ah!” He exclaimed, nearly dropping it. “What the hell!”

Doctor Wallace appeared at his side, snatching the comm from his hand and peering at it. “My god, you’re getting a signal from the base,” she breathed.

“Wait, isn’t that a good thing?” Tony asked, brow furrowed. “What the fuck is that horrible noise?”

“The transmission is garbled, but—it’s coming through. Mr. Scott,” she shouted, fleeing Tony’s side to harass the man at the console. “Do we have anything to boost a comm signal down here?”

“Fraid not, lassie,” Scott said, gearing up for another round of transport. “Stark, get your behind over here!”

“Coming, coming,” he said, jogging over. “How many we looking at?”

“Ten,” Scott said. “Monitor the capacitors there and shout bloody murder if they go too low.”
“Will do. Wallace, gimme your comm,” Tony said, watching the console opposite Scott while making grabby hands in her direction.

“What?” She asked, suspiciously, though she handed it over. She made a distressed sound when he pried it open and began pulling it apart.

“Gonna steal your battery and piggyback your frequency allocation. Not much, but it’s a double boost for my own personal cell tower, here,” he said.

“Cell tower?” She parroted.

“Jesus,” Tony muttered. “Twenty-third century, Asgard or nineteen forties, no one ever knows what the fuck I’m talking about.” Successfully liberating the parts he needed, Tony set to work. “My comm is not like your comm. I, uh, modified it. The channels between my comm and certain people who will not be named are direct links that don’t run on the same flow as the rest of the ship.”

“Seriously?” Wallace asked.

“I never joke about tech. Well, that’s a lie. But yes. Seriously. Dollars to donuts that it’s Rogers or Romanoff trying to get in touch. I can work on a boost on our end that might let us get text or voice through. Dunno about both.”

“That’s bloody brilliant,” Wallace breathed, watching him work.

Tony didn’t pause, but kept his eyes steadily moving between the console and the comms as he worked. “I usually am.”

“If the signal bounced back strong enough, Lieutenant Uhura is probably working on a boost from the other end,” Wallace informed him.

“Awesome, well, this might actually work, then.”

“Energizing!” Scott said, and Tony didn’t bat an eyelash as ten more people materialized in their space.

He did, however, bat several eyelashes when Barton dropped into the room from above, scaring the crap out of him.

“Holy mother of—for fuck’s sake, Barton! Bells! I’m going to put fucking bells on you!” Tony cried.

“Why the hell is my comm making this horrible shrieking noise?” Clint asked, entirely unconcerned for Tony’s heart condition or anything else.

“Because Natasha and Steve are trying to tell us not to let them get blown up.”

“What,” Barton said lowly. “When the hell were you planning on telling me this?”

“I just found out. Now shoo, I’m saving them.”

“Technically Jim is saving them,” McCoy said, striding up to them. “Barton, what the hell were you doing in the maintenance tubes?”

“Nobody invited me to the party,” Clint shrugged. “So I decided to drop by.”

“Ha,” Tony deadpanned, making a final connection to the battery packs before starting on the frequency transponder.
“That damn leg is never gonna heal if you keep abusing it like that,” McCoy sighed. “Where’s Astrid?”

“Um,” Clint said, looking guiltily toward maintenance shaft.

McCoy sighed heavily, and pulled out his own comm. “McCoy to Lieutenant Astrid.”

Tony snickered to himself, but kept working.

“Shit’s getting blown up, shit’s about to blow up and we, or at least I, have no idea what the hell I’m doing. And honestly, this is like the closest to home that I’ve felt since waking up here. I was just thinking that, you know.” Clint shrugged with one shoulder. “We’re really bad at reacting to crisis situations,” he observed as he leaned into Tony’s space, peering over his shoulder.

“Laugh or cry, Barton. I know which one I’d rather be doing.”

“Yeah,” Clint said, clapping him on the back, ignoring Tony’s scowl at the motion. “You already filled your crying quota for the week.”

Grumbling, Tony continued attaching the transponder.

“Bells, Barton,” he warned.

Having given the all clear just minutes before, Jim was hovering around Uhura as she worked at the communications console.

“Okay, just one more—there,” she said, settling back. “Try it now,” he handed the thoroughly wired comm back to Romanoff.

Holding the separate pieces in her hands, Romanoff brought the mouthpiece close to her lips.

“Widow to Iron Man.”

“Iron Man copy,” came Stark’s voice over the comm, and Jim thought briefly about what the hell these codenames meant before Stark spoke again. “Status?”

“We’re secure, for now. Base is going dark in—”

The lights went out, only the barest minimum of red security lighting still illuminating them.

“—now, I guess,” Romanoff finished. “We’ve got enough power in the boost for a few minutes. What’s going on up there?”

“Enterprise is engaged with a battleship, supposedly the same we saw at the Starbase. Not excessively aggressive, though, Spock thinks it’s a decoy. About sixty percent of the base is evacuated. We can have you out in the next round, whenever that is.”

“No,” Jim butted in, leaning close to Romanoff so he would be heard. “You get them out first. Take Romanoff and Rogers but I’m staying with the base commander until everyone is out.”

“Seriously? That biodome’s gonna run out of viable oxygen in—hey, what—”

After a brief scuffling sound on the other end, another voice came clear over the comm.

“Like hell you’re staying there, Jim! We need you up here. I’m trying to corral forty people in cargo
“bay and there’s the situation going on and—”

“Not leaving anyone behind. Get them out, then get us. Don’t argue with me, that’s an order,” Jim said, Captain’s voice at full tilt.

“The hell I—”

Another scuffle.

“Okay then, well!” Stark again, swearing in the background. “Next round is coming up. Kirk, keep your ass safe down there. Wallace says you’ve got masks. Keep close to the base and we’ll get you out as soon as the others are clear. But keep a fucking eye out because—”

Before Stark could finish his sentence, the entire base was rocked with the sound of firing weapons, the consoles sparking and dying even as the dim lights puttered out.

“Fuck, masks!” Jim yelled as air began to rush outward from the door that had been blown right out of place.

Rogers and Uhura handed out masks to Jim, Romanoff and Treska before donning their own, pulling out the glowing green lights Bones had gathered for this exact situation.

“The base is compromised, we need to get away from it now. The burn protocol is running on a dead man’s switch. We’ve got two minutes,” Treska said, the mask-comms activating through proximity sensors.

Jim looked around for a second before nearly jumping out of his skin when Rogers shot past him with a blur, holding the blown-off door in his arms and barreling through the wall of the control room. More air whipped at their faces, and Jim pulled down his goggles, blinking in consternation as the man tossed aside the ruined door and gestured at the newly made exit to the dusty brown sand outside.

The biodome hadn’t been active since power had gone critical, so the air was even thinner, and Jim felt the mask compensating for the change in pressure and oxygen density as they filed out into the dusky sands of the barren planet.

Two minutes after the transmission cut, Spock sent a message to Scott that seemed to make the man go weak in the knees.

“My god,” he said, looking at the console with wide eyes.

“What, what the hell happened, I can’t get them on comms—”

“The base self-destructed,” Scott said in a breath, giving him wide eyes. “There’s something down there, a ship or a shuttle. It’s attacking.”

“Son of a bitch,” Clint hissed, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Didn’t Kirk say he’d disabled the—that—whatever the hell thing it was?”

Carol commandeered one of the consoles at the transporter station. “It was only a temporary fix. If the power was completely disconnected by an outside attack, it would revert to the dead-man’s protocol and destruct in two minutes. They—” she swallowed visibly, steeling herself with a shake of her head. “Jim would have known. They had time to clear the blast radius. They must be alive down there.”
“But they’ve got no fucking backup,” Clint snarled. “We need to do something to help them, we have to—”

Clint and the rest of them were nearly knocked to the floor as the ship rumbled around them.

Picking himself up off the floor where he had been knocked down, McCoy climbed unsteadily to his feet before doing a quirk circle check of the room.

“Okay, folks. Time to wrap up this charade here. McCoy to Quartermaster,” he said into his comm, holding a brief conversation with whatever officer was there before closing it again. “Base officers, stay here and the Quartermaster will meet you and bring you to emergency quarters. Scotty, what’s the word from Spock?”

Paralyzed with something like shock, or fear, Tony just stood there, PADD dangling uselessly in his hand, his inquest for the still lingering informant put on hold even as new data streamed directly to it.

“Tony,” Clint said to him, grabbing his arm and hunching his head close. It snapped him out of his numb state before anything more permanent could set in, at least. “Tony, we need to do something.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed, even though he didn’t know with exactly what he was agreeing.

When the base personnel had cleared out along with Doctor Wallace, headed to the bridge to brief Spock on everything she knew, it was just Clint, Tony, McCoy and Scott lingering in the large space.

“Well, this is a disaster,” McCoy sighed, looking more resigned and angry than anything else.

“Aye,” Scott agreed, glued to console and communicator alike, waiting for some kind of order to scan and beam up whoever was left on base before any pesky laws of physics could hope to stop him.

“So, what?” Clint said, glancing rapidly from one man to the next. “What do we do? What’s the plan?”

“The plan? ’We’?” McCoy asked, staring at him. “There’s no plan! And there’s certainly no we, frozen man,” he huffed. “Jim’s got himself in another god damn pickle down there, and we’re in one ourselves up here. We’ve got no comms,” he ticked off on his fingers. “We’re under fire, probably can’t scan the surface for shit with radiation interference, no way to know if ‘Fleet is sending backup, and a snitch fucking around our ship feeding information to the people trying to either blow us up or worse. I’m a doctor, not a strategist!”

“No comms,” Tony muttered, clawing his way back to full reality once more. “No—no, we’ve got comms. Or I do. Clint!” Tony barked, making grabby hands. “Gimme your comm.”

McCoy made a face at him for obviously raining on his rainy parade, but Clint handed the device over without a word.

Before he could bother to try and clue anyone in on what he was doing or thinking, Tony set to his task, Clint’s comm clutched in his grasp. He hunkered down to work faster than he’d ever worked in his life.

“What’s goin’ on over there?” Scott called out, but Clint waved a shushing hand in his direction, watching Tony work on the comm and making sure the man didn’t try to engage further. Tony would just ignore him, anyway.
“Barton, I don’t know what you two think you’re gonna do, but I know I’m not gonna like it,” McCoy sighed, and Clint couldn’t help but notice how he didn’t sound reprimanding so much as maybe a little bit interested. Not one to sit idly by and let things happen, then, he was itching for something to do, himself.

Clint was getting that familiar feeling of wanting to head for his gear and weapons, but didn’t want to give up the jig on his… stash quite yet.

“This isn’t about laughing or crying anymore,” Clint said to McCoy, an echo of his earlier interaction with Tony, his voice hard to even his own ears as he caught the quick glance Tony sent him. “Something is fucking going down, we all know it, and I’m not leaving anybody down there to go it alone. They’ve got fuck-all to work with, no cover, and no backup.”

“And what the hell do you think you’re gonna do about it?” McCoy blustered. “You don’t know shit about the tech or the enemy. Going down there, if we could even do it, is as likely to get all of them, and us, killed as it is to do any good.”

“Not if we have an open line,” Tony muttered, apparently still following the conversation, or parts of it, as he feverishly worked on the comm. “Spock’s flying blind up here, right? The big ass spaceship has him locked up with diversion while the real deal is happening down there. If we can get him specs or any kind of information, he can make a move to give us the upper hand.”

Tony paused to click something into place, stare at it, and then continue fiddling. “And it’ll be our ears only, this line can’t be hacked because it’s not even in the same universe as what the snitch has been dealing with. Cut out the metaphorical middle man.”

“Really?” Scott perked up from where he was at the transporter console. If Clint hadn’t been pacing a little with tension, he’d have rolled his eyes at the budding science bromance. Bruce was gonna be so jealous.

McCoy looked torn between exasperation and desperate hope. Clint wasn’t an expert on crisis situations of the twenty-third century, but he’d been in more than his fair share of sideways missions in the twenty-first that went the way of bullets in legs and no extraction plan, a curse and the hope that the people he’d trusted to pull his ass actually did the only things keeping him crawling through the mud.

Metaphorically speaking. Mostly.

“Tony’s gonna do his thing with the comm, and we’re gonna go down there,” Clint concluded without preamble.

“You can’t be serious,” McCoy said, arms folded and voice tinged with disbelief.

Tony did his little staring, head-shaking thing that meant the white noise of conversation barely filtering through his techno-daze was wearing off. Finished, then. He’d just clicked the backing into place on the Franken-comm when Clint nodded decisively, making for the maintenance hatch through which he’d entered before.

“Time to suit up, doc,” Clint said, eyeing the still open hatch before bending his legs and leaping up to leverage himself inside.

“Suit up? What in the—Barton!” McCoy sputtered after him, but Clint was already gone.

“Commander, I’m picking up transwarp signatures!” Chekov called out to him, voice undeniably
panicked.

“To what purpose?” Spock leaned forward, momentarily halting the stilted briefing he was receiving from Doctor Wallace.

“I—I am not sure,” Chekov answered, jabbing frantically away at his console. “Sulu, take over evasive routing,” he said, putting his full attention to the task.

“Got it,” Lieutenant Sulu replied. Spock could see the sweat shining on his forehead. The battleship had switched to a full aggressive barrage, and it was taking every bit of skill they all possessed to stay out of the line of fire.

“Oh, мой Бог,” Chekov said, fingers moving even faster before he stopped moving altogether. “Ze men at ze Starbase, zey said ze ships were beaming people out of ze station. Ze signatures here, zey are fast, not far enough apart to be full transfers,” the man looked at Spock with wide eyes. “It could be zey are trying to circumvent zeir own jamming devices and scan ze people on ze ground, but…”

“They are beaming people off the ground and dropping them,” Spock completed the thought, a slight feeling of horror permeating his thoughts for a moment.

“Oh my god,” Doctor Wallace breathed from behind him. “But why not just—” She paused. “… shoot them?”

“To cause chaos and confusion,” Spock said, duplicating Chekov’s console on his own PADD and verifying the data.

“Or for entertainment,” Doctor Wallace added, her voice grim but shaking with emotion. Emotion Spock could not afford to cloud his judgment in the matter.

Silence but for the continued necessary communications to continue evasive actions and return fire permeated the bridge. A flurry of activity broke out over Spock’s PADD, and he narrowed his eyes at it as Chekov began a fervent muttering.

“препятствие, препятствие, jamming. Jamming!”

Chekov stood and turned so abruptly that he stumbled over his own chair.

“Commander, I can stop it!”

Spock hadn’t even opened his mouth to reply when Chekov barreled on.

“Zeir own frequencies and scans are jammed by what zey are using to block ours, yes? But zeir transporters are not. I can stop zat! Beam to ze surface with an anti-transport dewice to keep zem from taking anyone!”

“We have no such device,” Spock said, narrowing his gaze.

Chekov was not dissuaded. “No, but I do! It is my own design, a prototype, but it will work, I am sure of it.”

“Lieutenant, you cannot abandon your post,” Spock began.

“Commander, if I do not, zen ze Captain and ze others will be killed if they are not already.”

“My god, Pavel,” Doctor Wallace said from beside him. “That’s what you’ve been working on?” She said with obvious incredulity. “That’s brilliant!”
“I cannot allow—” Spock began, only to be interrupted.

“I can take over his post,” Doctor Wallace said, voice firm and confident as she turned to him. “If he can stop the beaming, they’ll have a chance to evade long enough for us to be of help to them. Captain Kirk needs time, and Lieutenant Chekov can buy them that. We could send whatever weapons we can spare down with him.”

The ship rocked with another near miss as Lieutenant Sulu sent them in a sharp dive to evade fire.

“Whatever you’re gonna do, do it quick, because I need a hand here!” the man shouted.

It was not logical to risk another life. It was not logical to gamble to success of a potentially untested and certainly untried device in a venture that may only prolong an inevitable loss of life.

It was not logical, and yet—

“Lieutenant, retrieve the device and report to Lieutenant-Commander Scott in cargo transport. Security will meet you with arms. Doctor, take his post.”

—Jim would not leave a man behind, and Spock had no intention of doing so either.

It was a suspiciously short time after he’d made his exit with a dramatic one-liner that Clint reappeared, decked out in what had to be stolen combat gear and carrying a bag Tony really hoped was filled with goodies of the shooting and exploding variety.

“What in the hell—” McCoy said, pausing in his continued ranting to stare at Clint.

Tony accepted an armful of gear from Clint that he neither questioned nor bothered feeling shame for stripping off his pants and shirt to get into. It was just McCoy and Scott still down here with them anyway, Bruce’s cryotube settled snugly somewhere in the labyrinth of boxes and crates.

Solidarity, buddy, Tony thought grimly of his oft pantsless friend.

“Are you insane?” McCoy sputtered, gaping at both a half-dressed Tony and Clint. “Where in the blazes did you even—whoa!”

Tony looked up sharply to see Clint with a phaser levelled at McCoy’s chest from several arm lengths away.

“Hey, Barton, whoa. Chill, man,” Tony tried, but Clint set his jaw.

“McCoy, I like you. You’re a good guy and you’ve done a lot for me, but if you try to stop us going down there to help my friends, and yours, I will stun you and not even feel bad about it.”

“Oi, what is goin’ on over here?” Scotty said, approaching with a thunderous look.

“These two idiots still think they can just beam down to the surface like a goddamn rescue team!” McCoy all but shouted, glaring daggers at an unmoved Clint.

“An’ how in the bloody hell do you plan on goin’ about that, eh?” Scott glared at them. “We’ve got shields up and you couldn’t beam down even if I was inclined to do it!” Scott added.

“Our people are down there,” Clint said, phaser still pointed at McCoy. “You said it yourself that Spock is looking for an opportunity to get them out when he can. The base is gone, so it’s recovery, right? Well you’re gonna fucking find them and get us down there if you can’t get them up.”
“What exactly do you think you’re going to do, huh, Barton?” McCoy snapped, obviously unconcerned with the phaser pointed in his general direction.

“Been in hairier jams,” Clint shrugged. “Not gonna leave my friends alone down there, even if it’s to die.”

“Oh, great. A suicide mission,” McCoy drawled acerbically. “Because that always works out so—hey, what the hell!”

Tony had pocketed his newly modified comm and darted over to the transporter controls, already priming the system. He could hear Scott sputtering and approaching from behind him, but he knew the man wouldn’t dare touch the console when it was already live.

“When shields are down, we’ll scan for them. When we don’t find them, because I know enough to know the interference is gonna be too strong, even without the added variable of a new ship and potentially more jamming tech, Barton and I are going down there. If by some miracle of physics we do find them, they come back up here and we can forget this ever happened.” Tony didn’t look away from the board as he spoke.

Scott’s visible hesitation was enough for Tony.

“It’s a bad plan, I know that, but Barton is right. We can’t leave them on their own down there, at least with this,” Tony withdrew the comm. “You’ll be able to find us once we find them.”

Another rumble shook the ship, and McCoy’s frustrated cursing filled the momentary silence.

“—ridiculous idea! And who the hell did you steal that shit from, anyway?”

“I’ll give it back when I’m done with it.”

“Er, Doctor, I think Stark here is at least here is making sense.”

“The hell he is!” McCoy blurted with incredulity.

“Whatever he’s done to the comms here seems to get a signal that’s stronger and more precise that whatever else they may have down there. With the base all blasted to smithereens and some unknown muckin’ about down there, well… he’s right,” Scott said, frowning. “We’ll no’ be able to find the Captain and the others without eyes on the ground.” Scott fidgeted, meeting McCoy’s eyes through the middling space between the two men. “Might not be the worst idea if you went with ‘em, though.”

Something in McCoy’s tense, aggressive posture seemed to change, and after a moment, Tony knew they had him. As if the man hadn’t been ready to go along with it from the get go. His grumpy posturing really would have been adorable in any other situation.

“Ah, hell,” McCoy rubbed his brow. “We’re really gonna fuckin’ do this, aren’t we?” He sighed, raising his eyes up. “We gonna tell Spock?”

As if on cue, Scott’s comm chirped, and after a brief interface with whom Tony could only assume was Spock, he ended the transmission and stared at the device in shock.

“Well I s’pose he would have figured it out when I activated the transporter and we didn’t end up with recovered personnel, but,” Scott looked toward the door of the cargo bay as if expecting someone to burst through. “But I think the mad bastard’s on the same page.”
Someone did burst through the door then—a short blonde kid and Astrid, carrying armfuls of gear and tech between them—and dashed for the transporter pad.

“Or at least, somewhat,” Scott tacked on.

“Clock’s ticking,” Clint said, lowering his phaser but keeping it in his palm. McCoy had paused in slinging his medpack over his shoulder to stare at the tableau of the kid and Astrid unloading onto the pad.

“Um,” Tony said, staring.

“They’re in trouble, down there,” Astrid said without looking up. “Pulling something with transwarp beams. We gotta move.”

When she finally straightened from securing the bags on the pad, she stared at all of them askance.

“Well? You coming?” She asked.

Tony didn’t need to be asked twice.

Sighing in frustration, McCoy ran a hand through his hair, glaring at Tony and Clint in turn as the two joined Astrid and baby-face. “I’m a doctor, not a goddamn security specialist,” he sighed, securing his phaser onto his belt and following them.

“Good thing I am,” Clint said, his face stony and posture exuding confident danger.

“Not in this century, you’re not.”

Clint stood tall and confident on large transporter pad, eyeing the width of it before tossing a look over his shoulder at McCoy.

“We’ll see about that.”

Locking eyes with Clint where he stood, Tony raised his brows and offered a one armed shrug.

Yeah, he figured it all sounded too easy, as well. It could only mean that these people were as fucking crazy as the two of them.

“If you can’t beat ‘em, join ‘em, right Stark?” Clint offered him a dangerous smile that betrayed his readiness to kick ass wherever it was there to be kicked.

“Hope you’ve got something capable of taking out an aircraft in there, guys,” Tony nodded to the bag slung low on Clint’s hip and the one on the floor.

“We do,” baby-face confirmed, clutching a boxy looking thing to his chest.

“I might have a few things,” Clint added.

“We’re all gonna die,” McCoy muttered.

“Spock says shields down in twenty!” Scott shouted from the console, looking up at them all with something like pained excitement.

“Who the hell are you, anyway?” Tony eyed the man-child across from him.

“Lieutenant Chekov, Pavel Andreivich,” the kid answered, eyes wild and determined as he stared
down at the device in his arms, which Tony was now eyeing with interest.

“Don’t even think about it, Stark,” Astrid warned, and Tony held up his hands.

In the remaining five seconds of the countdown Tony was running in his head, he scanned the grim, determined faces of the five assembled on the pad, and felt a swirly sense of something between dread and excitement, himself.

“You do realize we’re in over our head, here, right Barton?” Tony muttered to Clint.

“Primed!” Scott barked.

“Not yet we’re not,” Clint responded, settling a hand on Tony’s shoulder.

_Sometimes you gotta run before you can walk._

“Energize,” Chekov said, and Tony’s thoughts were replaced by white lights.

There was barely any cover to be had on the surface of the planet, and that was before people had started being beamed into the sky.

The first time, he’d had a moment of relief and gratitude wash over him so strong he’d nearly stumbled, but then the light had reappeared, and the security officer that had been so mercifully taken away from the ruins of the base plummeted screaming right back to the ground.

“Get closer to the fire!” Jim had screamed inside his mask, though he knew it would be excessively loud over the comms. If transporter beams were being used against them, the only hope they had of avoiding it was whatever interference the flames and residual radiation would offer them.

Close enough that his skin had begun to feel uncomfortably hot, Jim turned around in time to see Romanoff disappear in a swirl of light. Uselessly, Jim pointed his phaser skyward, but their enemy was still cloaked or otherwise too far away to see, and there was nothing a phaser could do against that.

“No,” the word fell from his lips as he saw the beam of light reappear high above them, nothing to do but watch as she fell.

And then Rogers, with a bellow loud enough to hurt Jim’s ears, had rushed past Jim in a blur of black fabric and leaped impossibly high, snatching Romanoff out of the air before crashing down, cushioning the landing with his own back.

“I give it a 7.7,” Romanoff groaned over the comm line. “Flubbed the landing.”

“Shut _up_, Natasha,” Rogers had responded, pulling them both to their feet and dashing for Jim’s position.

Jim could only stare for a moment in consternation at what he’d seen before they all turned their heads skyward as a yawning, black splotch appeared to break upon the dull light of the distant sun.

A shuttle, twice the size of any they had on the _Enterprise_ and black as starless space, hovered uncloaked in the air, and began firing at the ruins of the base behind them.

As the flames reigned where they’d died down and the entire mass of destroyed architecture coalesced from embers to a roaring blaze, Jim cried out from the force of the heat.
An arm tugged him in another direction, and he let it.

The masks were exceptional, and even as he struggled to see through the smoke that billowed doggedly around the flames, he could breathe easily. It was Rogers’ hand leading him away from the worst of the heat, but Jim attempted to stop when he saw the telltale light of a transporter beam snatch another officer bare meters from their position.

As the woman fell from the sky, too far away even for Rogers to do anything about it, Jim doubled his effort to halt his forward momentum, gripping Rogers’ hand with his own.

“Stop!” Jim ordered, even though the heat was making him sweat under his uniform.

“Kirk, what the hell can we do?” Romanoff whirled on him, favoring her right leg.

“They’re trying to draw us out,” Jim panted. “We gotta stay close to the fire and keep moving, but that shuttle,” he shook his head, breathing hard. “We’re not gonna be able to outrun it. We can’t—”

“Down!” Rogers yelled, and Jim barely had time to register swirling lights so close to their position before he was knocked unceremoniously to the ground.

“Barton?” He heard Romanoff’s voice over the comm, and pushed Rogers’ arm off of him to sit up and stare bewildered at the sight of Barton, Stark, Bones and Chekov of all people standing just a meter away from them, masks covering their faces.

“Here to save the day,” the man answered, closing the distance and dropping a large duffel onto the ground. Phaser fire from the ship blew the ground to pieces much to closely for comfort, and Jim scrambled to his feet.

“What the hell—”

“Here,” Barton pressed a huge phaser rifle into his hands, and with reflexive movements Jim primed the weapon, hefting the bulk of it to his shoulder. “Cover us,” he said, the proximity comm picking up his voice.

“Not that I’m complaining,” Jim said, taking aim at the shuttle and releasing a solid blast, satisfaction curling in his gut when it connected and the craft swung backwards to retreat. “But what the hell am I covering? Chekov—” Jim paused, taking in the sight of the man crouched over a small box on the ground. “What are you doing?”

“Blocking ze transporters!” Chekov said without looking.

“Ye bloody lunatics, can ye’ hear me?”

Jim nearly choked at the sound of Scotty’s voice over the comm line. “Scotty?” Uhura beat him to asking, her voice incredulous. “How—?”

“That would be me,” Stark said, snapping some kind of beacon into the ground. “I upgraded your comm tech, hope you don’t mind.”

Jim nearly laughed aloud, taking aim and raining a few more blasts at the shuttle to discourage it from returning so close to them. “In this instance I most certainly do not—”

A familiar tug and tingle started in his limbs, and before Jim could even utter a gasp he saw the lights of a transporter beam swirling around him. Shit—
The sound of a phaser discharging at rapid fire full capacity knocked him right on his ass, and he opened his eyes to the sight of the unfamiliar dusty sky of the planet, much further away than he’d thought it would be.

“Well, good thing that worked,” Barton said, closer than Jim remembered.

“The hell?” Jim croaked out, sitting and then standing when Barton tugged him to his feet.

Shrugging, the man pressed a rifle of his own to his shoulder and struck the enemy shuttle with frightening accuracy, driving it back further.

“Tony said the radiation and energy discharge disrupted the transporter beam,” Barton paused to watch the ship as it swung around and hovered. “Figured it wouldn’t hurt to see if a phaser would do the trick.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Jim breathed, before pausing. “Wait, you shot at me?”

“I shot around you,” Barton clarified, not making Jim feel any better. “And you’re welcome.”

“Captain,” Spock’s voice materialized in his ear suddenly, and Jim felt a weight he didn’t realize he was carrying lift from his chest. “Status.”

“Under fire and weaponized transport beams from a single unknown shuttle. Spock, what the hell is going on up there?”

“We are engaged with what I believe is the same battleship from Starbase 24. We are unable to yet detect a viable signature for you and the others on planet. Lieutenant Chekov has with him a device he claims can disrupt the transporter beams from the enemy ship, perhaps more.”

“We’re exposed, down here,” Jim said inside his mask. “Even without transport, this ship has way more firepower than us. They’re toying with us. I almost got beamed to hell, just now!” Jim snapped. “The jamming signal has to be coming from your end, or the beaming wouldn’t work down here, either. You gotta get in there and disable it.”

“I assure you, I am trying,” Spock responded.

“Captain!” Chekov cried, standing back from the device and whirling around to look at him with wide eyes. “It is working!”

True to form, Jim watched as all of the lights he could see on the fringes of their safe-zone blinked out.

“Good work, Chekov, now what are we—”

A huge blast threw Jim to the dusty ground.

“—ain. The battleship—”

“—live! I’ve got signatures!”
Fighting off the ringing in his ears, Jim pushed himself onto his hands and knees, wheezing through his compromised mask. Chaos had erupted in the blink of an eye, his weapon too far away to reach and Rogers staggering to his feet not far away from where Jim hunched.

The remaining base personnel were scrambling across the grainy earth toward their position, and Jim tried to get to his feet, but felt a flash of pain in his thigh and cried out.

“God dammit, Jim!” He felt a hand close over his shoulder and turned to see Bones hovering with his medpack open. “Don’t move, you’ve got a hunk of shrapnel in your—”

Another blast rang out and Jim felt hard lumps of dirt rain down onto his head, the proximity shorting out his comm, and he pulled the remains of his mask away from his face with a gasp.

Over the sound of return fire, Jim could hear raised voices, shrieks and the sound of bodies hitting the ground. Spots of white light appeared at the corners of his vision, but he might just be close to passing out from lack of oxygen.

Somewhere, someone was calling his name—it sounded like Spock, but Spock wasn’t here, he didn’t have his comm and—

Suddenly the rumbling and sickening sound of bodies dropping ceased, leaving only panicked voices and the sound of Jim’s own wheezing breath and the ringing in his ears.

His leg was cramping with pain, but Jim tried to sit up, gasping for breath. Something was pressed over his mouth but he blinked dust out of his eyes to see frantic people running, some on their comms—comms back online—the shuttle nowhere in sight.

“Natasha! Stark, help me check—”

“Clint, I don’t see her, where—”

“Has anyone seen Chekov?”

Groaning in pain, Jim batted Bones’ hands aside and struggled up onto one knee, eyes darting around the familiar and unfamiliar faces, scanning and searching.

The white lights of people beaming down to the surface coalesced in Jim’s field of vision, but as he looked around, still struggling for breath, there was someone notably absent. There were several notably absent.

“Bones,” Jim gasped out, holding his emergency mask in place. “Bones, where’s Uhura?”

“I don’t know. Jim, you’ve gotta keep still, you’re bleeding and you’re not getting enough—”

“They have to look,” Jim insisted. “We—they could be hurt, we have to find them,” he wheezed, attempting to stand, but found himself forced back down by dizziness and pain.

“Chekov—god, this thing is in pieces. Chekov?”

“Steve, we’ve got to find—son of a bitch, Tony, stop, don’t—”

“We have to find them,” Jim mumbled, his tongue not working as he collapsed against the arm Bones had under head shoulders. “Uhura, she was just here, gotta find her.”
“Jim, just breathe.”

A sting in his neck, and the darkness came.

_We have to find them._

Chapter End Notes

Let's just consider this the beginning of, not exactly _part two_, but the next big thing.

Sorry for the wait for this chapter, but I'm having some stressful difficulties with my students and it's really sapping my energy. It was finished like a week ago, but I couldn't put the finishing touches on it until tonight!

Please feel free to comment with your thoughts or flails, as usual. It makes me forget about terrible children. And as always, find me on [tumblr](http://tumblr.com), where I'm crying about the Age of Ultron trailer.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Jim and Spock consider what they’re willing to give up to save their friends and keep their promises; the Avengers are down one, and it hurts.

Chapter Notes

Many thanks to Kay for ongoing help, support and kind words.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jim wasn't overly used to waking up in Sickbay. Comfortably acquainted, perhaps. All in all, he hadn't been out in the black long enough to be on many away missions that went awry for it to be a regular thing. But shit happened, and so the lights and surroundings were standard enough.

"Hooly shit. Oh my god. What the—where—"

But the bolt upright feeling of his limbs wanting to fight their way right off of his body was definitely new.

"Jim, Jim! You with us?" Bones—of course it was Bones—asked, poised over him with an empty hypospray in his hand.

Heart pounding, Jim blinked owlishly and heaved in a few gasping breaths. "What the hell," he said, breath heaving in and out of his body. "Bones, what the hell, Uhura—Romanoff—"Jim scrubbed a shaky hand down his face, hands twitching for a weapon he remembered holding.

"Stims," Bones said, perfunctory as he began switching off the biobed mechanisms and shoving a gold shirt into Jim's trembling arms. "Get dressed. We need you."

Well, that was certainly new. Holding the shirt in his hands, he automatically began to comply. Usually Bones was huffing and fussing about needing to stay in bed when—

Reality slammed back into Jim's brain more strongly than the stimulants Bones had evidently just shot into him.

"What happened? Is everyone okay? Where's—" Jim's renewed brain-power shorted out for a second. Uhura. The transporters, the explosions, and he couldn't remember seeing her, and Chekov had been so close—

"You'll hear it when you're dressed," Bones said, and he looked more manic than Jim had ever seen. "Your leg's healed but it's gonna be sore."

Pulling the shirt over his head, Jim felt the racing of his heart in his ribcage and stood to pull on the rest of his uniform. "Bones—" Jim started, caring less about his aches by the second, but was interrupted by Spock's arrival.
"Captain," Spock said, striding over. "I would not deprive you of full recuperation were the need not dire. We must speak."

"My office," Bones said, already heading that way. Jim followed, wincing at the deep ache in his thigh, mind racing over the events that had happened just—

Jim didn't know.

"How long was I out?" Jim asked as they entered Bones' office. Sweat gathered on his brow, but he ignored it.

"Just long enough to get your fluid levels up and heal the goddamn hole in your leg," Bones snapped. "Half an hour, maybe. Spock, just fucking tell him so you can get on with it."

Turning sharply to Spock, Jim stared unflinchingly at what was probably the grimmest expression he'd ever seen the Vulcan wearing.

"Shortly after Lieutenant Chekov and his accompanied beamed down, the shuttle attacking the base issued a final barrage that destroyed the prototype he had taken to prevent beaming people off the surface. Verbal reports confirm the shuttle then cloaked and fled. The battleship disengaged and followed suit. Per protocol, roll of the personnel remaining on the ground was called. Of those present, sixteen are dead, ten living and five missing."

Jim listened intently right up until that last part. Feeling as if the breath was knocked out of him, Jim focused on Spock's unmoving face.

"What do you mean missing?" Jim asked, horror curling in his gut.

"Recovery crews are continuing to search and scan the area around the destroyed base, but we are currently unable to locate Ensigns Merridor and D'Sen of the base crew, nor Lieutenants Uhura, Chekov and Natasha Romanoff."

It had to be the stims that kept Jim's heart racing in his chest, because he was absolutely fucking sure that it should have stopped in that instant.

"Captain, given the saturation of transport signatures during the final minutes before the mercenary vessels fled, it is impossible to determine with one hundred percent accuracy if any ground to ship transports were fully completed. Circumstances being as they are, however, I cannot make any other conclusion but that they have been taken."

"No," Jim breathed. "No fucking way," he added, more strongly, looking from Spock to Bones.

"Jim, they ain't down there and they certainly ain't up here!" Bones snapped at him, eyes alight with urgency. "Those merc fuckers took three of our own, and you need to get your ass on the line with an Admiral so we can go after them!"

Suddenly smacked with the memory of what had transpired before they'd fled the base, Jim felt like punching himself right in the face.

It's not a what.

It's a who.

"Oh my god," Jim uttered, staring wide-eyed at nothing for a moment before hot rage flooded his veins. "Why the hell are we waiting for an Admiral? Spock, where's my comm. We need to move."
"Captain," Spock said, jogging after him as Jim tore out of Bones' office as fast as his bum leg would carry him, leaving the doctor to his work. "We cannot engage pursuit without authorization. It would violate the current cease fire and incite a war."

"To hell with that!" Jim snarled, slamming a fist against the sensor to open a turbolift as the two of them skidded to a halt. "Those bastards have our people, I'm not letting them get away with it."

"While I share your urgency," Spock said, sliding into the lift beside Jim. "We must go about this logically. If they have indeed been taken, they are currently beyond our reach. Going after them into the Neutral Zone without Starfleet support or intelligence may very well spell our own deaths and leave our presumably abducted crewmembers without hope of rescue."

Uttering a short scream of frustration, Jim slid his hands through his hair, trying to calm himself enough to think like a fucking Starfleet Captain. Spock was right. Spock was right. The Neutral Zone. The Klingons. Fucking stupid promises to frozen people.

He could do this. There had to be a way.

"I need Archer," Jim said, fighting the stims to keep his hands still as he swallowed down everything that threatened to burst from him.

"I have already contacted him. He will be available as soon as we attend the bridge."

Nodding, Jim sucked in several deep breaths. Crisis situation. Lives on the line. _Put up, or shut up, Kirk._

"What's the status on Romanoff's friends?" Jim asked as the turbolift slowed.

"According to Doctor McCoy, superficial injuries," Spock supplied, a step back from Jim's position in the turbolift. "Mr. Barton is—noteably upset, and Doctor Stark appears to have succumbed to another bout of catatonia. Mr. Rogers and Lieutenant Astrid are attending to them."

"And I'm handling _this,_" Jim said with ferocity as the turbolift came to a stop. He halted the doors from opening, staring at the panel and trying to regulate his breathing.

"What about the informant?" Jim said through clenched teeth, hatred warring with stimulants and panic for most persistent in his brain.

"There has been no action since the engagement with the battleship ended. Doctor Stark was filtering the data, but there were too many transmissions blocked in the feedback loop created by the jamming technology to identify the source. It is logical to conclude from the timing that they alerted the mercenaries to our position and actions."

Letting the door slide open without responding, Jim didn't say anything so trite or obvious as _I'm going to fucking kill him_; that was a forgone conclusion.

With swift, confident movements, he sat himself down in the Captain's chair. He must look like a fucking mess, sweaty and buzzing with stimulants, but now was not the time to freak out. Now was the time to sit up straight, stare an Admiral in the face and be the goddamn backbone of his obviously frightened crew.

"Where's Bones?" Jim asked, looking for the Doctor that had apparently neglected to follow them.

"He is attending to the injured in Sickbay," Spock said. "More personnel are still being beamed up."
"He's doing what he has to do, then," Jim said, eyeing the distressed, expectant looks he was getting from Sulu and Carol—Jim's stomach clenched in his gut—who sat at Chekov's station.

"As are you," Spock said, taking his seat at the Science Console.

Staring ahead, Jim set his jaw and thought of Spock, calm and determined at his back.

Jim had to be that and more, right now.

"Admiral Archer on standby, Captain," Spock—not Uhura—said.

"On screen."

It didn't matter that his heart was hammering in his chest. The sweat seemed to dry up on his forehead in an instant, his spine relaxing to a pose of power and control that he knew would be necessary for this conversation, ally or no.

"Captain, you'd better tell me what the hell is going on, out there. Report!"

Staring down Archer's grim face, Jim channeled every ounce of authority earned and not into his words.

"The base was attacked by the same battleship that attacked Starbase 24. Mercenary. They jammed our communications, and while The Enterprise engaged in orbit, a shuttle with advanced weapons and cloaking tech hit the base at ground level while I was on planet. Evidently, they were somehow alerted to our location and movements. Sir—" Jim started, leaning forward slightly with meaning. "It had transwarp capabilities. A shuttle. They were using it to beam people away from the ground and drop them. For no apparent reason, the ship disengaged and fled into the N-Zone, along with the shuttle. Admiral, at some point during the firefight on the ground, Lieutenants Uhura and Chekov as well as one of the people from the cryotubes and two base officers were abducted."

Archer's face stared back at Jim, waiting for him to continue.

Jim clenched his jaw as well as his hands on the rests of the Captain's chair, knowing he was about to ask the unaskable. "Lieutenant Sulu and Doctor Wallace have been able rough out a trajectory for the fleeing ships. Request permission to pursue into the Neutral zone."

The bridge fell quiet but for the intermittent beeps of consoles. He could feel Spock's presence like a heavy weight around his neck where his First Officer stood behind the chair.

Tension crackled where Admiral Archer's stolid presence hung on the view screen, the request suspended in space like a guillotine ready to fall.

"Request denied, Captain."

Jim could almost hear the phantom sound of his own head thudding to the floor with a dull thud. His fury exploded outward in a rush of words.

"Admiral, those are my people! I cannot just abandon them. We're tracking them, we can find them before—"

"Captain Kirk!" Archer's imperious tone cut through his tirade, forcing him to stop. "I will not risk the safety of the entire Federation—and Starfleet's best crew—when tensions with the Klingons are at a breaking point. You realize our last round of talks ended with three diplomats nearly torn to
pieces? Kirk, I'm sorry, but you can't just barrel into the Neutral Zone after those ships."

"The Klingons?" said Jim with incredulity. "You've got to be kidding me. These were mercs. If they're working with the Klingons, hell, they're probably the ones who sold out this location! Those bastards knew we were here!" He thundered.

"And if that's true, then they could be cloaked and waiting for you to make a move, Captain. They'll blow The Enterprise into space junk before you get anywhere. You think it's a coincidence that they took your people and ran? You need to get your head on straight and think about this," Archer said.

"Captain, if there is any Klingon involvement in this attack, it is logical to assume they mean to provoke our movement and attack us as we give chase. It is an efficient means of expediting a war on their terms," Spock said.

It was with a great amount of control and not a little biting of his cheek that Jim refrained from turning around and strangling Spock in that moment. The murderous glare Sulu sent the Vulcan was a small comfort.

"So I'm just supposed to, what, let them go? Leave them to their fate while we sit here? The Bradbury and the Magdalena are less than five hours away at warp, you could call them in and we'd be more than a match."

Jim scrambled through his brain. There had to be a way. This wasn't some violation of the fucking Prime Directive. It was a tall order, Jim knew that, he did. But this had been planned, somehow. It wasn't just some Klingon act of war or merc hit. This came from the Starfleet, too, somehow. There was no way Archer would just tell Jim to abandon his officers to whatever the mercs had planned for them when Jim could get to the fucking bottom of it if they pursued.

"Do you even hear yourself, Kirk? Are you listening to the words that are coming out of your mouth?" Archer sighed in apparent anger and weariness. "I don't like this any more than you do. In fact, I absolutely hate to be the one giving you these orders. There is no way I'm pulling two ships off critical missions to back you up in a violation of the Neutral Zone so we can happily start a war with Klingons and mercenaries," Archer paused, watching Jim as he struggled to maintain his composure. "You go into the Neutral Zone and you'll not only start a war, but you'll probably lose your ship and the lives of your crew in the process."

Helplessness and impotent rage bore down on him like millions of gallons of crushing water.

"I'll see what I can do about the Klingons, but I'm sorry, Kirk. They're gone."

The word ricocheted around in his head, leaving him as breathless as Barton's punch to his gut.

No. He couldn't just... there had to be a way. There was no such god damn thing as a no-win scenario.

"Stand-by for further orders, Captain. Archer out."

A heavy silence hung on the bridge, the Ensign at Uhura's station staring at the blinking console with a gob smacked expression. Sulu was gripping the edge of his console with white knuckles, and Jim didn't need to see his face to know he was fighting back helpless tears of rage. Jim was in a similar state himself.

He'd find a god damn way. He'd do it. Now was not the time to rage and freak out. He had a fucking promise to keep.
Allowing a cool numbness to wash over him, Jim relaxed his herculean grip on the arms of his chair. He had to do something. He couldn't sit here. He couldn't sit on the bridge with all these people watching him like he'd failed, when he hand’t even—he couldn't do it.

"Lieutenant Sulu, you're dismissed. Ensign Kasha will take the remainder of your shift."

It was testament to his helmsman’s grief that the man only gave a short nod, uttering a strangled "Aye, Captain," as he scurried away from his console.

Waiting until the turbolift doors closed behind him, Jim stood from his chair. "Commander Spock, you have the conn. Await further transmissions from Starfleet. I'll be in my quarters."

He ignored Spock's address to him as he made his way to the lift himself.

Jim was barely two steps into his quarters before he whirled around and slammed his fist into the bulkhead with an anguished roar. The skin on his knuckles split and his hand throbbed with pain, but he punched the unyielding surface twice more before sinking down to his knees, cradling his head with bleeding hands.

Beep Beep.

His console prompted him with an incoming transmission. Jim ignored it.

Beep beep. Beep beep, the console continued insistently.

Looking up at the blinking red light with a furious glare, he rose to his feet and looked at the transmission. Whoever was coming him right now was about to get a face full of righteous shit, regardless of their intention.

Confusion replaced some of his rage as he realized that someone had transmitted directly to his secure line. The one that he had created himself, and that the transmission itself was encrypted six ways to Sunday.

A jolt of hope shot through his chest. This could be something about the abduction. It might be someone calling to negotiate.

With his heart in his throat, Kirk bent over the console and accepted the call.

Admiral Archer's face materialized and suddenly his rage was back in full force.

"Archer, you son of a bitch—" Kirk started, but Archer held up a hand and glared him down with a harried expression.

"Is this line secure, Kirk?"

"What?" Kirk balked. "Of course it's fucking secure, you asshole. You're the one who transmitted directly to it! How in the hell did you do that, anyway?"

Archer didn't roll his eyes, but Kirk could see the impulse. "You realize I spent a couple decades on starships myself before they stuck me behind a desk, right?" Kirk felt the urge to respond with a venomous indictment climb up his throat, and opened his mouth to let it spew, but Archer cut him off again. "Sit down and shut up unless you want to let your crewmembers die or worse, Kirk. I need to make this quick,"

Jim's jaw shut itself with an audible click, and his ass followed suit into the chair. "Talk," he said,
when his ability to speak reasserted itself.

"Before I say anything else, answer me this. Are the lives of your crewmembers worth your command? Your commission? You freedom?"

Staring Archer down through the connection, Jim didn't even hesitate.

"I'd climb into a warp core to save them, Admiral."

Nodding his head, Archer continued. "That's what I thought. Contrary to what you believe right now, I'm not actually a soulless bastard. I wasn't kidding when I said the Klingons might be waiting for you right over the border. Kirk, it's a goddamn mess over here. Cartwright is holed up with his cronies and I'm not getting much, but the whole thing stinks like some kind of set up. I'm digging, but you can't go after them in the Enterprise; it's suicide. The first thing they'd expect would be for you to go headfirst after them. I absolutely refuse to authorize a rescue mission of any kind."

And there it was. The rage was back.

"Then what the hell—"

"Kirk, so help me, I will reach through space and time to punch you in the face if you don't shut your mouth right now."

Jim folded his arms sullenly, but held his peace.

"You find your mole, yet?"

"No," Jim bit out. "We narrowed it down, but as much as I'd like to strangle him myself, I'm not really fucking concerned about the mole right now."

"Well if the endgame was to get you all blown up in an act of war, then we're at the end of that rope. But I didn't make a career out of leaving men behind, and I don't think you're inclined to do that either, but as I was saying, I am not authorizing a rescue mission."

Jim bristled, but stayed silent.

"The Enterprise should be receiving orders now to make for Starbase 91 for debrief and a diplomatic rendezvous. But you know those diplomatic vessels can be unreliable. I wouldn't be surprised if the Starfleet officials are mysteriously delayed. Along with denying your request for a rescue mission, I am not telling you that there is a small Vulcan battleship retrofit with classified experimental cloaking technology in a secure hangar on the Starbase, or that authorization override theta-gamma-seven-seven-three-alpha-alpha-two will get you past the first layer of firewalls. I imagine someone worth their salt with computers could handle the rest if they were going to steal the ship with a crew of no more than eleven."

It took Jim a few seconds to realize that his jaw was hanging open. Working it open and shut a couple times, Jim stared at Archer in baffled awe.

"...Admiral?"

"Do I need to repeat any of that, Kirk? Or did you get the message?"

"I—I think I got it. Seriously?" Jim asked, shock and urgency flooding his system at the same time. "What the hell was with that little show on the bridge?"
"Well I couldn't damn well spout off about Cartwright and informants when we don't even know who it is, could I?" Archer shot back. "It was an official transmission, and The Enterprise is officially not authorized to make any rescue attempt or cross into the Neutral Zone under any circumstances, and I need whatever poor bastard you leave in charge of the ship to understand that."

The implications of what Archer was saying rendered Jim speechless for a moment.

"Kirk?"

"Jesus," Jim breathed. "Understood, sir."

"Oh, so it's back to the 'sirs' now, are we?" Archer quirked a wry smile at him.

"I feel slightly less like I want to strangle you, sir," Jim answered with a cautious smirk of his own. "Admiral, this leaves us with a lot of loose ends. Are you sure this is a mess you can handle?"

"Kirk, I've been doing this since before even Pike was snot-nosed cadet. I can and am handling this. Your ass being out of the picture for a while can only make my life easier."

"The mole was hacking our intraship communication. If the Enterprise gets investigated, it's gonna implicate me and a lot of other people. It's gonna be pretty easy to pin this shit on me, maybe even Spock."

"Let me deal with it. You got people I can trust on your ship?"

"Yes," Jim confirmed immediately. "I think I know just the person."

"Leave me a report on the encrypted data network and I'll do what I can to keep your ass out of the mud."

"'Fleet's always been looking for a reason to get rid of me, Admiral. Maybe it's time they found it," Jim said darkly.

"Not everyone," Archer responded, looking tired for a moment before grabbing a PADD from his desk and tapping at it. "Take a look at this. Seem familiar?"

The rotating model of a sleek, black shuttle that appeared on Jim's screen was immediately recognizable.

"Son of a—that's the shuttle that took them," Jim leaned forward, manipulating the diagram.

"It's also the shuttle those merc bastards stole from Base 24," Archer said, and the diagram disappeared. "Salvaged from Marcus' Jupiter base and retro-engineered within an inch of its life. 24 has been on the books for a long time as a benign research facility, so them knowing it was there, well," Archer gave Jim a meaningful look.

"The mole," Jim clenched his fists.

"That shuttle has Khan's fingerprints all over the design. From the specs, it was designed specifically for infiltration and retrieval."

"Then they were after people, not tech. Not this time," Jim looked to the side, mind racing.

"Kirk, I think they were after you."

Thoughts stuttering to a halt, Jim looked at Archer incredulously. "Me? Why the hell—"
"You said it yourself, you almost got beamed to hell. Well, maybe you almost got beamed to them. You tell me this, you think anyone on your ship would have waited even five minutes before going after them if he knew it was you they'd taken? That your crew would have given two shits about protocol, least of all Spock?"

Jim shook his head. "Spock wouldn't have—"

"He'd have found a way. But Kirk, this is a mystery I don't have the time to unravel with you right now. What I do know is that if you were their target, then they aren't looking at negotiations the way they planned. Maybe not at all. You've got a window, here, and I'm giving it to you."

"Fuck," Jim swiped a hand down his face. "Fuck."

"This is a shit show from both ends, and it looks like our clean-up is far from done, but it's not gonna be your problem. Whatever you find out there, you keep track of it. Build me a case."

"I'm so fired," Jim laughed, the sound slightly hysterical.

Rolling his eyes, Archer fixed Kirk with a glare. "If we're lucky and you survive, we might make this work for us, in the end."

"Right, well. You do what you have to do. If this is the 'Fleet I'm coming back to, I'm not sure my commission is worth trying to keep," Jim said, jaw set.

"Right. Well," Archer cleared his throat. "I'll expect news of you going rogue in less than twelve hours. I don't have to tell you that you're on your own out there. Take care of yourself and your crew." Archer's face contorted in a grimace before he gave Jim a knowing look. "Whoever they may be."

"I'll bring you back a souvenir," Jim said.

"Please don't. Archer out."

No sooner had Archer's face faded from the console than his comm chirped in his pocket.

"Kirk here," he answered, flipping it open.

"Captain," Spock's voice sounded over the connection. "We have received new orders from Starfleet."

"Yeah, I've got them here," Jim said, setting down his comm and scanning the missive on his console. "You need me on the bridge for this, or can you handle it?"

"I am capable of maintaining control of the bridge in your absence, Captain."

Jim nearly laughed. Spock had spent more time as the Captain than Jim had, in the last two hours.

"Thanks, Spock. Tell Kasha to lay in at maximum warp. The sooner we get there, the sooner this is all over," Jim paused.

"Captain?" Spock inquired.

Rubbing his forehead with the back of a hand that wasn't injured, he decided a visit to Bones would be his first stop when he figured out what the fuck he was doing. "We'll talk soon. Kirk out."

No sooner had Jim entered the turbolift bound for Sickbay before one Clint Barton slipped his way
inside at the last instant before the doors closed. The blonde man made to stand next to Jim, facing forward and unmoving.

Tension crackled in the small space, echoed in the line of Jim's shoulders. He waited.

They both sprang into action at the same time. Barton's arm shot out toward the all stop button, and Jim reached out to grab it and twist it behind Barton's back. It was an immobilizing maneuver that would have worked on most people, but Jim knew—Barton kicked his legs out to walk up the wall of the turbolift and physically rotate his entire body to escape the hold in about three movements—Clint Barton wasn't most people.

Jim held up both hands, halting Barton in his tracks.

"Barton, stop. Let's not get ahead of ourselves. I'm headed to Sickbay but I'd rather neither of us show up any more banged up than we need to be. Bones gets pretty trigger happy with the hyposprays."

"Tell me what the fuck is going on. Are you going after them? What the hell did your boss say?" Barton was just shy of crowding Jim's space, and Jim stepped around him as the doors opened, the other man keeping to his heels as Jim strode toward Sickbay.

"Admiral Archer—my boss, as you put it—told me leave my crew and your friend to their very unhappy fates, so, me? As the Captain of this ship, I'm not gonna do anything," Jim watched the mix of rage and despair cloud Barton's features for a half second before grabbing his arm and dragging him into an alcove near a wall console. "We, however, are most definitely going to fucking do something," he hissed under his breath, looking down into the slightly shorter man's eyes. "Get Stark and Rogers and meet me outside Captain's quarters in fifteen minutes."

Barton didn't ask questions, just tightened his jaw and gave a quick nod before departing. Jim had to admire his tenacity, really. His skills, too, because in a fair fight, well—Barton could probably kick Jim's ass. It was kind of intimidating and unsettlingly arousing at the same time.

No wonder he and Romanoff were partners.

No time to think of that now, though.

Giving his smashed up hand a weary glance, he walked through the doors of Sickbay and looked around for a familiar scowl.

"Dammit, Jim! What the hell did you do?" The doctor asked, looking over at Jim from where he stood with an armful of hyposprays.

"Those aren't all for me, are they?" Jim asked.

"They're damn well going to be if you don't sit your ass down and tell me what the hell is going on. Carol just went over the ship's comm saying we're headed to Starbase 91. What the hell, Jim? What about Uhura and Chekov? What about Natasha?" Bones sounded frantic, even as he abandoned his hypos to drag Jim to a biobed.

"Not here, Bones," Jim said in a low voice, jerking his head toward McCoy's office.

Grumbling about a lack of biobeds, Bones conceded and they tucked themselves into the privacy of the CMO's office, where Bones got to work both fixing Jim's hand and interrogating him.

"Now tell me what damn fool plan you've got cooked up in that head of yours, because if your hand
is smashed and we're headed for a Starbase that means 'Fleet told you to shove it when you requested a rescue mission, the fuckers,' Bones added with a snarl, cleaning Jim's hand with a little too much vigor.

"Ow, Jesus! Bones! Maybe you could dig deep and find a little bit of the gentle that goes with that Southern Gentleman in there somewhere?"

"Jim!" Bones prompted, hefting a hypospray like a weapon ready to fire. Which it basically was.

"Okay, okay! Jesus, calm down. Yes. Archer has forbidden the Enterprise from entering the Neutral Zone in pursuit of the ships that took the three of them and the base officers."

Bones' grip on Jim's hand tightened.

"But I have a plan," Jim put a hand on Bones shoulder and let a reckless grin spread across his face.

On some level, Clint knew that what he was feeling was a deep, visceral sense of absolute panic. Natasha was gone. Taken. He hadn't seen it happen with his own eyes, but he'd seen the aftermath, and she wasn't there. Somehow she'd disappeared in a swirl of white lights and Clint had missed it. He'd saved Captain Jim fucking Kirk, but he hadn't seen enough to do the same for Natasha.

Their roles had been reversed, before, when Loki had taken him, but Clint didn't even have to think about it very hard to know that Natasha would have handled this better. She had handled it better. The second Coulson had told her that Clint had been compromised, she'd set her jaw and raised hell in her own personal way to get him back, and damn it, she'd succeeded.

But here Clint was, on a fucking spaceship with people he barely knew and didn't have many reasons to trust and Natasha was gone and there was fuck all he could do about it. He should—he should steal a shuttle and weapons and go after her, but how would he find her when he didn't speak any of these languages, when he didn't know who had her, why they took her, what their firepower was, where they were going?

It was only his years of experience as a sniper that kept him from dropping to the ground and putting his head between his legs to scream and cry in impotent rage and frustration. For half an hour he'd paced and torn his hair out and nearly punched some nurse in the face for trying to patch him up, glaring and yelling at Doctor McCoy in turn to just get someone to fucking do something, already.

Because if Clint couldn't go after Natasha himself, he could damn sure badger his way into getting someone else to do it with him.

McCoy, he knew, was on his side. It had barely taken any effort to get the man to go after his friends when they had a good chance of being blown to bits, and even though he'd been kicked out of Medical before Kirk had woken up, he saw a kindred spirit. There just... wasn't any way that these people wouldn't go after them. Was there?

He hadn't needed Astrid or anyone else to tell him how the call with Kirk's superior had ended, though. The subtle shift in sound and activity on the other side of Tony's door had been enough to set him after Kirk, knowing it hadn't gone their way. How could it? Things never did.

Maybe a bit of that panic had clawed its way to the surface and it had seemed like a really good idea to snap Kirk's neck. Sue him. But Kirk had had that same look about him; the one McCoy had, the one Stark had had on his face while Clint was bleeding out and getting shoved into a cryotube: possibly insane, reckless determination.
It had earned the man the benefit of the doubt. Not much of a doubt, but it was there.

Clint didn’t do anything so undignified as race through the corridors to get back to Tony’s cramped little room. He did the expedient thing: he took the Jefferies’s tubes.

Well, maybe a turbolift would have been more expedient, but he was beginning to realize that they were like a perpetual rat-trap for awkward conversations and confrontations, worse because—like Hitchhiker's Guide to the fucking Galaxy—they went in multiple directions.

So he popped out of a Jefferies, duly scaring the shit out of some guy in a blue shirt, and then raced the last few paces to Tony's door and let himself in.

"Pack it up, Rogers. We've got a meeting with the Captain."

Looking up from where he was seated next to Tony's awake but slumped form on the narrow bed, Steve gave Clint a hard look that told Clint he'd probably misinterpreted the tone.

"Not that kind of meeting," Clint shook his head. "Apparently the higher-ups told him to go fuck himself, but he gave me the crazy eyes and said to meet him at his quarters in fifteen."

"I knew it!" Astrid said, popping out a doorway that lead to the head. Clint raised an eyebrow at her.

"What? I don't know the specifics of the bridge conversation, it hasn't made the rounds yet and I'm obviously stuck here, but he violated the Prime Directive to get Spock out of a volcano, one time. There's no way he wouldn't find a way to go after his crew—and your friend," she added after a moment.

"You think he can do it?" Steve asked.

"Not by himself, no," Astrid shrugged, but a sly smile began to creep over her face. "Which is why he invited us to a secret meeting."

Clint's hands twitched in agitation. Benefit of the doubt or not, this was going too slow for him. Meetings. He didn't want a god damn meeting, he wanted to grab Steve, Tony and Bruce in his cryotube, hijack a shuttle and go after Natasha right the fuck now.

"This is taking too long," he snarled, pacing restlessly. "It's been almost an hour. And how fast do those ships go?" Clint resisted the urge to punch the bulkhead. "We should already be in pursuit!"

"Clint, hey, calm down," Astrid said, taking a few steps toward him with her hands up. "The only thing we know is that they were taken. Those ships fled with them when they could have tried to stay and kill all of us, that counts for something. I know you're not up to date on borders and politics, but this is the Neutral Zone we're talking about. Crossing into it even accidentally with a ship like the Enterprise would be an act of war if Klingons or anyone else were there to see it, and even then we'd be too busy getting ourselves blown up to do anything for them."

"Fucking politics," Clint muttered darkly. "I don't give a shit about politics, I give a shit about some merc scum sailing off into the sunset with my partner."

"Barton," Steve said firmly. "I know you're sc—"

Clint shot Steve a venomous look that dared him to finish that sentence.
"—angry," Steve amended. "But we're obviously out of our depth. You coming after us on that planet was one thing, but this? I want to be out there going after her, too, but we need Kirk's help. Natasha was the one of us who knew the most, and with Tony..." Steve looked at the man in question with an anguished expression. "At least hear him out before we try and steal a shuttle, okay?"

"Please," Astrid said. "Give him the chance and you won't be disappointed. Believe me, there's enough crazy and brains between he and Spock do exactly what you're thinking, and more, but with a higher probability of success."

Eyeing the chrono, Clint grunted in noncommittal acknowledgement. "Whatever, I came here to say we had the meeting, didn't I? We should go."

Striding over to Steve, Clint reached out a hand and gripped Tony gently, but firmly under his arm. "Okay, c'mon Stark, upsy-daisy. Let's go commit treason or something."

Jim stood in his quarters among a sea of solemn faces.

It probably wasn’t the best idea to have the Captain, First Officer, Helmsman, Chief Medical Officer and Chief Engineering Officer all shirking their respective duties at the same time, but they were about to do a fuck of a lot more than that, so he thought that it was probably okay. Lieutenant Astrid had just been a kind of de facto addition, given that neither Barton nor Rogers had allowed her to be excluded.

They were all waiting on him, and, well, they’d waited long enough. Too long.

“Okay, well, not to start this off like a bad holo-vid, but the conversation we’re about to have is pretty fucking heavy. Our friends and fellow officers’ lives are at stake, here, and what I’m about to propose is gross insubordination at best and treason at worst. If anybody wants out right now, there’s the door.” He gestured behind him. “I won’t hold it against you.”

“All respect given, Cap’n,” Scotty started, his face darker and more solemn than he’d ever seen the normally sanguine engineer, “But there's been somethin' a brewin' that I've no' been told about, and if it's anythin' like what we dealt with before, I’d be doin’ a hell of a lot more than that if it meant getting’ our people back safe and sound.”

Jim looked at each of the gathered people in turn, both his crew and the three others. Their looks of grim determination were all he needed.

“Alright, then,” he sighed. “Official story is this: the Enterprise is, under no circumstances, allowed to violate the Neutral Zone. My formal request for pursuit and rescue were denied wholesale and we're on the way to report to Starbase 91 for debrief."

Barton visibly bristled, but he held his peace when Rogers touched his arm.

"However," Jim held up a hand. “A certain sneaky Admiral let on that if we’re willing to risk our lives and careers to get them back, there might be a way.”

"Captain, it is impossible for us to pursue in the Enterprise. The activity has certainly alerted the Klingons to our proximity."

"I know, Spock, hear me out," Jim said.
Pacing a little as he outlined parts of what Archer had told him, Jim stopped to take a breath and get to the hard part of his conversation: soliciting input. This was going to be a combined effort, and Jim needed all of the brains on his side that he could get.

“Once we dock at 91, we’re not gonna have a lot of time to get that ship out of there, and they won't let us go easily. We'll be labelled rogue, targeted, and likely pursued. It's basically a smash and grab. I don’t even know what kind of ship this is, specifically. We may not be able to outrun them, even with the cloaking device.”

“No sense in a modified stealth ship that can’t make a quick getaway,” Scotty chimed in. “If the ship’s been refit with cloaking, I’d say you can bet your arse it’s a fast little bugger.”

“That’s what I’m counting on,” Jim mumbled. "Archer seemed pretty confident that it’s the way to go."

"Vulcan battleships were designed for maximum efficiency with a minimum of extraneous hardware," Spock expounded. "Even with additional devices, the older models designed by the VSA are capable of quick maneuvering and can easily achieve Warp 6 with dilithium chambers at full power.”

“Okay, okay,” Jim nodded, nearly tripping over Sulu's foot as he wound his way through the crowed room. "That’s good. But what about pre-flight and priming the reactor? We can’t warp out of there cold."

“Theoretically, you could.”

All heads snapped to Stark when he spoke in an astonishingly clear voice. The man hadn’t said so much as a word, blank and seemingly listless when Rogers and Astrid had ushered him in. It startled Jim to see bright awareness in the man's eyes when it felt like moments ago they'd been glazed over.

“We’d need about five minutes," Stark continued, ignoring or oblivious to the incredulous looks Barton and Rogers were giving him. "But if you throw the cooling system into overdrive for about ninety seconds and manually trip the safety protocols, it would boost the warp coils enough for a quick getaway before you’d have to slow down and put the brunt of the power back in the dilithium chambers. I don’t know the model or the specifics, but if warp dynamics are consistent, it’ll probably work.”

Stark’s voice was serious, contemplative… a bit manic. Jim suddenly wondered if it wasn't just the PTSD or whatever, if the man had even slept in the past day. Everyone was pretty much staring at him, and when he came out of his thoughtful stupor, Stark folded his arms defensively.

“What?” He snapped.

Even Barton was staring at Stark like he'd grown antennae.

“When did you become an expert on warp dynamics and engine design?” Jim asked suspiciously.

“Last night,” Stark answered, a briefly bemused look passing his face before he shook his head, muttering something that sounded like “déjà vu”. "Spock, Scotty? Is that true?” Jim looked at them both.

“Well, theoretically, yes. But then again," Scotty made a see-sawing motion with his hand. "Theoretically is what gets this ship through the day half the time, Jim,” Scotty sighed. “It’s nay the way I’d like to handle a ship, but it would probably work. Not very elegant, but this sort of business
never is."

“Okay, well, you and Stark can hash it out. Get me a back-up plan, anyway. We've got four hours to prep and a lot to do.”

Suddenly, Jim stopped and just let the whole mess wash over him.

*Jesus motherfucking christ, I'm planning a rogue rescue mission with spies and soldiers from two centuries ago.*

"Captain?"

Spock's voice brought him back to reality, but Jim just had to ask.

"Guys," Jim said, seriousness and mounting adrenaline coloring his tone. "I just have to ask again—are we ready for this?"

Are you ready to throw away your commission and your allegiance? Are you ready to risk everything you have or might have?

The questions went unasked, but they filled the stillness of the room, anyway.

"Were it myself that was taken," Spock began. "I would not ask this of anyone left behind, just as I have not before. But it was not me they took. I swore an oath, and I intend to keep it."

"Spock," Jim said, trying to ram the point home to himself as much as anyone left in the room. "We're effectively giving Starfleet a literal 'fuck you'. I don't care what Archer thinks, they'll probably hang us out to dry to avoid the blowback once we cross the Neutral Zone. If we make it back, our lives as officers will be over. No more missions, no more *Enterprise*." No more destiny.

Jim thought he heard Scotty suck in a breath, but he only had eyes for Spock, in that moment.

"I once planned to resign my commission so that I might aid the cause of rebuilding my people," the Vulcan began. "I was dissuaded. Now, I can fathom no more worthy reason to give up Starfleet that for this."

A slightly strangled noise in Stark's direction probably meant that someone had elbowed him to keep him from ruining the moment. But really, there wasn't a moment to be had.

Maybe his destiny, in this universe, had always been building up to this. To him and Spock fucking off from a Starfleet that was so different to the one he imagined it might be had things gone differently; had George Kirk lived, had Vulcan still hung in orbit around two brilliant suns, had Pike been here to tell Jim what to do.

Jim squared his shoulders, nodding once. The tension in the room abated, only to be replaced by a mounting sense of purpose.

"Okay," Jim said. "Let's make this happen."

There was so much to say, that it felt like there really weren’t any words for it at all.

“I should be going with you,” Carol said, softly, but with resignation.

“We need you here. You're the only one—” Jim broke off, the words tasting bitter in his mouth, because *of course* she was the only one who knew. She was the only one left who wasn’t leaving or
“I know, which is why I’m not stunning you and leaving you behind,” Carol said, acid in her voice even as the words carried her understanding.

“You were right, I should have told you. I didn’t—I never doubted you, Carol. Not after what happened,” Jim said, reaching out a hand to take hers in the quiet space of his quarters, now empty after short deliberations and hours of preparation. This was the last thing.

“But you were right not to take any chances. It seems we never really know who to trust, these days, does it?”

The wry smile on her face broke Jim’s heart. He’d never known his father, but to have him carved out of existence both in any figurative or literal sense on the same day, he couldn’t imagine. He’d never really given the matter much thought, but he did it now, and realized how utterly foolish he was to have ever underestimated this woman in any way.

“Archer is… good. I believe he’s reliable, but it’s a dangerous game that he’s playing right now. I wish that I didn’t have to leave this mess for anyone else to handle, but—”

“No,” Carol cut him off, releasing his hand and waving his words away. “You go after them and you get them back. I will do whatever it takes to get to the bottom of all of this. I’m good at that. It’s really better that I’m here,” she gestured to the space around them, the hull of the Enterprise through his small porthole. “You’re a man of action, and there isn’t anyone I’d trust more to find me if I’d been taken, instead.”

The faith hurt him on a physical level. He was so full of simultaneous doubt and determination that he honestly couldn’t tell which outweighed the other. Every minute they spent not going directly after the others was distance between them. They were slipping further and further away and all Jim could do was prepare for some uncertain, intangible—

“Jesus, I am, aren’t I?” Jim laughed breathlessly, running a hand down his face. “Couldn’t wait for anything in my life.”

“Maybe you were patient, in another life,” Carol said, echoing his crazed laughter with a brittle huff of her own, and god, she didn’t know how right she was.

Jim was literally going AWOL with the entirety of his command crew. Captain, First Officer, Helmsman, Chief Engineering Officer, Chief Medical Officer… and his Communications Officer and Navigator were the reason they were leaving.

He was effectively leaving Carol in charge of the Enterprise, and the thought didn’t really even bother him. She could do it. She was smart, competent, and above all, she knew when to be absolutely fucking dubious of the right (or wrong) people.

Because Jim couldn’t wait. They’d waited too long.

Another life, and Jim thought… well, it couldn’t possibly make things worse, could it?

“Find out what you can,” Jim prefaced. “But I’m going to put you in touch with someone. It may not help, but it certainly can’t hurt.”

“You okay, Stark?”
“Yeah. Sure.”

Tony was most definitely *not okay*.

Yeah. Lifetime of practice with active denial didn’t actually stop the fact that, genius that he was, Tony was pretty good at the whole self-reflection thing. But getting his head shrunk right now, but *Clint Barton* of all people? Not on his to-do list.

At the same time, though, he felt stuck. Like he was living in that nanosecond it had once taken him to decide, *yeah, I can fly*. Maybe his brain could catch up with the century he’d found himself living in, but his body remembered all too well everything that had happened in the lead-up.

Natasha was gone, taken from right under their noses, and Tony hadn’t even seen enough to try and stop it. Hadn’t noticed, because he was too busy whiting out of conscious existence. Sure, he knew it had happened, but his descent into oblivion had begun before that had happened.

At least, he thought it had. There was a time when he’d had someone else there to fill in the spaces, the data and vitals of exactly when he’d—

“We’ll get her back,” Clint said, somewhere to Tony’s right. “Losing her isn’t an option.”

Tony didn’t respond, something heavy sitting in his chest that had nothing to do with the arc reactor.

Because none of this, none of it at all, would have been happening if he hadn’t done what he did. They’d be long dead and away from this farce of a fucking series of unfortunate events, for one. If he hadn’t stuffed them all into cryotubes with a last bid to survive. Hide them away, like freezing eternity would be the better option.

And now, here he was again, alone with this secret. Because *Natasha had known*. Of course she had. Aside from she and Barton, Natasha and Tony were the oldest of acquaintances. She’d seen what a dying, desperate Tony Stark looked like, and she’d known even then, and let him do it.

Of all of them. Natasha had been the strongest. She’d *saved* them, done above and beyond what Tony could ever have imagined might happen when—if—they woke up. And how had Tony repaid that? What had he done for this beautiful, brilliant, terrifying woman?

Failed her, that’s what.

Tony stared at the data drive in his hands, turning it over in his palms in a way that he knew was familiar, but couldn’t quite place the memory. *More blood on your hands, Stark.*

The Merchant of Death, and he wasn’t even being paid for it, this time around.

Tightening his fist around it, he tucked the drive into his pocket and breathed in a heavy breath.

Well, time for compartmentalization. Wallowing was best done without an audience, and he had *Hawkeye* for a spectator. Time to buck up and get on with trying to fix the spectacular mess he’d managed to get them into.

Standing and pulling all of the pieces of himself back into place, he turned and gave Clint his best, most shit-eating, *let’s-blow-some-assholes-up* grin, and clapped the archer on the shoulder.

“Treason’s a waitin’, Katniss. Let’s go get ourselves killed, or save a princess, or whatever.”

Steve had excused himself back to his temporary quarters under the guise of collecting his things
when all that he could do to help with preparation was done.

It was a weak excuse. Steve didn’t have any things.

He just wanted to be alone. A quiet moment to himself, away from the inevitable drop back into battle.

Clenching his hands into impossible fists, he wanted to pound them against every unyielding surface he saw, but… instead, he just dropped his head into their waiting embrace.

God, would it never be over? Was he doomed to a cycle of war, sleep, wake, repeat?

Always, there was something, and it was always his duty, in one way or another, to keep fighting, when Steve had wanted nothing more in his life than to rest. He’d thought that it was a blessing not to remember the years he had spent frozen and suspended in ice, but now, he thought—

Maybe it would be nice, to remember a time when he was peaceful. A time where he wasn’t fighting, struggling to hold on to friends and family, to keep going when he lost them. To let go of his courage and just… sleep.

Steve raised his head from his fists and was not surprised to feel wetness on his white-knuckled thumbs, nor the hot streaks marking a hot path down his face. His own guilt mixed with a terrible fury that he had given so much and had so little offered to him in return.

How selfish, to think of himself when somewhere, Natasha could be dead. But it was not as if he was expected to lead. At the very least, fate had granted him the reprieve of a subordinate. He was again a soldier, though he honestly didn’t know if it would work out for anyone, in the end.

He had never been very good at following orders. But, if it meant getting Natasha back, he might just try.

Logic was far from Spock’s mind. Not far in the sense that it had been abandoned, but far in that he had chosen and accepted that the paradigm he once held for Starfleet and for hi commission was altered, and with it his sense of right and wrong.

Inherently, some things were the same. But in this context, he could not fully account for the logic in following orders that may very well be as compromised as the ones Captain Kirk had once given in a mission that ultimately lead to his death.

Until such a time as he reshaped a paradigm of Starfleet in which logic could prevail to aid his decisions, he was left with his sometimes unutterable faith in that same Captain that, in remaining with him and aiding him through whatever may come, ultimately the results of their efforts would yield to the better.

He had made a vow upon a slain planet to protect Natasha Romanoff and her friends—perhaps then he had even known such a vow would be called upon in this way. Perhaps that was why he made it. Prescience was not one of the Vulcan’s telepathic traits, nor that of any living race of which he knew, but his decisions and Jim’s had lead them here.

Spock had intelligence enough to predict that an outcome of such disastrous proportions was not improbable.

“Captain,” Spock said, into the charged stillness of his own quarters. It had not been long now since he and Jim had conversed here, but the distance between them felt like lifetimes.
“You’re not gonna be able to call me that for much longer, Spock,” Jim said, his face veiled as he turned it away from Spock’s scrutiny.

“Wherever this path takes us, under whichever loyalty we are forced to tread, you will always be my Captain.”

Something in Jim’s posture stiffened, from affliction or emotion, likely the latter. Spock could not tell for sure.

“When you say things like that, Spock, it—” Jim faltered, halting to take air into his lungs, inspiring and expiring with the weight of one bearing a heavy load.

Spock waited. He would finish the thought.

“It almost makes me want to forgive you,” Jim said, at last.

“I do not seek absolution,” Spock said.

“Yeah,” Jim said with a gust of laughter, perhaps forced. “I know that you don’t. That’s kind of the problem, here,” Jim gestured to the space that separated them. It felt larger than the actual paces between he and Jim’s bodies.

“Will you not trust me, when we are forsaking Starfleet in the name of our friends?” Spock asked. “If my transgressions prevent us from functioning, perhaps I should stay.”

Logic, as far away as it may seem, was still at the forefront of his mental processes. Jim was more suited to the task of a rogue mission. Should Spock’s presence compromise their goal, he would remain on the Enterprise without hesitation.

“No!” Jim blurted, but restrained himself when a twitch of his arm indicated a desire to reach out.

“No, Spock. Jesus, I need you. They need you. Even when you piss me off you’re the best fucking First Officer in the ‘Fleet.”

“A title that I will soon no longer carry,” Spock said, in an echo of Jim’s earlier sentiment.

“Right,” Jim said, bringing a hand up to pinch the bridge of his nose. Perhaps he was still plagued my cephalgia. A call to Doctor McCoy in the interim would not be amiss. “Spock.” Jim continued. “We’re good at shoveling our shit without letting it stick to us. We’ve been doing it for a while now. I’m really not…” Jim gestured vaguely. “Concerned that it’s going to affect us. It hasn’t yet, has it?”

The question was more sincere that the rhetorical tone implied. Spock thought on it, and could not logically conclude either in the affirmative or negative. He stayed silent.

“Has it?” Jim asked, his tone modulating into one more urgent.

“I believe not, Jim,” Spock said.

His frame relaxed with the force of the air leaving his lungs. Spock watched him breathe with closed eyes and could not say if he had told a lie or not. Vulcans embraced technicalities.

“Oh, then. We’re going. You’re going. Jesus, if we showed up without you on the rescue team, Uhura would pitch a fit,” Jim laughed, obviously awareness of its forced quality doing nothing to hinder the effort made in executing it.

“Natasha Romanoff would likely be displeased, as well,” Spock said.
Jim’s laugh was more authentic, this time. He looked at Spock for a long moment before standing from his chair. Spock did the same.

“Engineering is set, so is Command. I doubt Carol will have any problem with double duties between Captain and Science Officer, but if you have any doubts...”

“I do not,” Spock said. “She will perform admirably in both, whatever expectations we leave her.”

“Great,” Jim exhaled the word. “Okay, well. I guess I’ll—see you at base, then,” Jim said, lingering by the door panel.

Abrupt departures had become regular in he and Jim’s interactions, of late. Why he paused now was a mystery to Spock, but as the tension mounted, so did the lingering expectation that he speak.

Spock held his silence.

After a few more seconds, Jim nodded, turning to the door and leaving.

Though Spock could not conjure regret for the actions that had forced this gulf between them, he found some place for the emotion in the ever present evidence of what those actions had begotten.

Together, they had never done more than what they were about to do. Partners before in death and madness, but now in defecting, Spock felt the space as keenly as he once had seeing Jim perish from aside impenetrable glass.

Chapter End Notes

Suppose this means we're getting on with the boldly going, huh?

Please do share your thoughts, if you will. You're all fantastic for sticking with me. Report cards due in a week, so I'm posting this now before I lose myself to endless assessments.

Still over here on tumblr.
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Really, there are things about this daring escape that Jim would change. The Avengers, meanwhile, are just trying to keep a lid on their respective freak outs.

Chapter Notes

Here is my 12k apology for the month it took to update. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“How is this my life?” Jim asked the room at large, not really looking for an answer.

Good thing there was Bones there to give him one anyway, then.

“Because you’re a Starfleet Legacy too damn smart for his own good, and you took up with a goddamn Vulcan before anyone could see what a spectacularly bad idea that would be.”

Jim watched Bones down the remainder of his bourbon.

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

“Jim, I hopped on a shuttle to join Starfleet after a bender in fucking Iowa, I don’t give a rat’s ass if it’s a good idea. It’s fucking tradition.”

Shaking his head, Jim couldn’t help but smile a little.

“You’re right, though.”

Bones sniffed. “Course I am. Which part?”

“Taking up with a Vulcan.”

The eye roll he received could have altered a planet’s rotational axis.

“You’re not still on about this shit, are you?”

Defensive anger curled in Jim’s stomach, but his voice sounded petulant, even to his own ears.

“He lied to me, Bones, about something really fucking important. Even if we aren’t… friends, or whatever, I’m still the Captain and look where we are now. If I’d known sooner—”

“Or whatever’,” Bones parroted, cutting Jim off. “For fuck’s sake, Jim. You’ve known about the informant for, what, all but the first few days we were out here? And you still don’t know who it is, or what precisely they wanted, if it even had anything to do with Romanoff and the rest of them, and you really think it would have made that much of a difference if you’d known from the get go?”
“If I’d known from the start, maybe I would have refused the fucking mission!” Jim snapped.

When Bones didn’t retort immediately, Jim looked up at him and felt the vein of anger dissipate at the surprise on Bones’ face.

“Well, shit,” Bones said, blinking at him and pouring a healthy measure of bourbon for the both of them. Jim accepted it wordlessly, confused by Bones abrupt turnaround.

“What?” He asked.

“This isn’t really about Spock, is it?” Bones asked. “Not entirely, I think,” he continued, answering his own question.

“How is me being pissed about my friend and first officer betraying my trust not about him?”

“Oh, I misspoke,” Bones waved a hand, taking a fortifying sip. “This isn’t about this time around. You think this is Marcus all over again.”

“No!” Jim blurted. “I—what?”

Sighing, Bones slumped back in his chair. “He wasn’t the only person that failed you on that shitstorm of a mission, Jim.”

Suddenly confused as to what they were talking about, Jim shook his head. “Bones, seriously, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Alright then. Jim, either I or Spock could have stopped you going out after Khan at any point before it got bad. Me more so than him, because I actually have the authority to stand you down if you’re compromised, which we both know you were. So here’s what I think: I think that this time around, you’re seeing too many parallels, and hell, there are a few. More than I wish there were, but it’s not the same.”

Something tightened in Jim’s chest, and he opened his mouth to refute what Bones was saying, but shut it again at the doctor’s glare.

“No one knew that time around how fucked up things were, but this time Spock did, and you know what I think? I think he didn’t say anything because it wouldn’t have made a lick of difference, same as we did before. I think we’d still be right here, except you’d be blaming yourself instead of him.”

When he didn’t continue, Jim figured he was allowed to speak.

“That’s bullshit.”

“Oh, come on, Jim,” Bones drawled. “The hell it is. Would you really have stayed back this time because Spock said it was dangerous?”

Opening his mouth to say something, Jim shut it again with a frustrated noise. Goddamn Bones and his stupid psychology degree. “No,” he muttered sulkily.

“Exactly,” Bones took a swig to mark his point. “I’d bet you dollars to donuts the bastard was trying to fix it all before it got out of hand, but then Romanoff popped up like a little assassin daisy and, well, we know the rest.”
“But he still lied to me, he still hid it from me because—because, what, he thinks I couldn’t have handled it? He doesn’t trust me! I know that I fucked up with Marcus, and on our last mission, but I’m not—I’m not a stupid cadet, anymore. I have a crew to protect, and he didn’t trust that I could do that, and look where we are now. Uhura, and Romanoff, and fucking Chekov are gone!”

Apparently unmoved by Jim’s outburst, Bones sighed heavily. “You’re talking yourself in circles, Jim. I don’t see why you want to hold on to this so much when you could just talk to Spock and clear the air. Things were bad enough before we added all this shit to the mix. We’re all going to need the both of you working together, if we’re gonna get them back in one piece.”

“I know, Jesus, I know,” Jim scrubbed a hand through his hair, at a loss as to actually explain the sort of desperation he was feeling to hold on to this… grudge, or whatever it was, with Spock. He wasn’t this petty, really, but no matter which path of logic he followed, it just came down to Spock not trusting him to do the right thing, or do the right wrong thing, or just handle his own god damn shit, instead of trying to handle it all on his own.

“So fix it, then,” Bones said, raising his glass before taking another sip.

“I can’t,” Jim sighed, feeling lost. “I don’t know, Bones, it just feels like something’s broken, and maybe it isn’t something that I should fix. We worked, in the beginning, but after the thing with the Vengeance and Khan, even then it was just—off, or something. Then we went on that stupid fucking survey mission, and now this. It’s not the same. Whatever epic destiny we’re supposed to have, I don’t think it’s in the cards.”

“Oh, for fuck’s,” Bones threw up his hands, draining his drink and pushing back from his desk. “I’m so done with this conversation. Jim, you stew in this if you want you, but you’re a right fucking idiot. Spock trusts you, he trusts you with his life and the lives of every last person on this ship, somehow even your own, though you wouldn’t know why given how very little self-preservation you seem to have. If you don’t believe anything else I have to say about what I know is going on in that fool head of yours, at least believe that.”

Bones slapped his palms on the desk and leaned back. “Now, considering we’re no longer talking about feelings, you wanna finish that drink before we go rogue? Because I’m pretty sure we won’t be able to find bourbon wherever it is we’re going.”

Staring at the drink in his hands, Jim frowned at it. Maybe he should listen to Bones. He was, after all, usually right.

Well, about the bourbon, anyway.

Jim drank.

“What are we even doing?” Tony asked aloud, pacing back and forth across the now cramped quarters, Steve and Clint taking up the little space available.

“Tony—” Steve began with a sigh, having answered variations of that question somewhere around nine times already.

“I mean, we’re displaced little urchins relying on some jackassed boy genius and his alien boyfriend because we managed to lose Natasha. Bruce is still in his fucking cryotube when we should have let him out days ago. Hell, if he’d been around it would probably be a non issue because he would have Hulk smashed that fucking shuttle thing into space junk!”

“Stark—” Clint attempted to cut him off, as it was evidently his turn to stop the tirade.
“So we’re just… just gonna skip out and try and rescue her because what could possibly go wrong, right? What could we possibly encounter that the Avengers plus a handful of space people can’t handle? Aliens, starships, fucking bombs and probably more portals and—”

The crack of his palm hitting Tony’s face was more than a little bit loud in the enclosed space, but it did the trick.

“Tony fucking Stark, you look at me right the fuck now or I’ll smack you again,” Clint said, his voice low and dangerous. Yeah, Tony’s breathing had spiked and they couldn’t afford a panic attack right now, but mostly the whole thing was hedging in on some of his own misgivings, and he was perfectly fine ignoring those for the near future.

“You hit me,” Tony said, evidently surprised as he worked his jaw a couple times, blinking owlishly.

“Yeah, because you need to snap the fuck out of it. We are going after her because what the hell else are we gonna do? Let Kirk go off without us?” Clint scoffed. “We’re going after Natasha because she would do the same for us, and she’s counting on us to get her out of there, and maybe alien braniac and his blonde sidekick have the edge in this territory, but we’ve done this before. This is our ballgame and it doesn’t matter if she’s halfway across the fucking universe, because we will find a way and get her back, and your fucking self-doubt doesn’t have thing to say about it because we need to be a team, or this isn’t going to work. Get your fucking head screwed on as straight as you can get it because we need you.” Clint paused for breath, trying to get his voice back to a level volume. “She needs you,” he said, with all the conviction he had.

Tony and Steve blinked at him with identical looks of surprise.

“Yeah, okay,” Tony said, and sat down, looking more dazed than chastised. “Really, Barton? You save that motivational speech for a special occasion?”

“What, like Rogers is the only one who can give a rousing speech?” Clint folded his arms, glad to see the subject was covered and appropriately dropped. Good old Tony Stark avoiding feelings.

“No, no. It was good. You practice that much?”

“Man, fuck you, Stark,” Clint groused, flopping down next to Steve on the narrow couch, which meant he was more flopped down half on top of him and the arm rest than anything else.

“You’re right, though,” Steve said, into the more amicable quiet.

“Hmm?” Clint hummed, pulling one of Tony’s discarded PADDs over to him and pulling up a few things he’d been… studying.

“She needs us,” Steve finished, and Clint paused, breathing in and out to stop his heart clenching inside his chest. It didn’t really work, but he hadn’t expected it to. Nothing would ever stop him from hating every moment Natasha was missing or hurt—or both.

Mostly he just missed her. There hadn’t been much time they’d been apart in nearly the last year, and even though he’d never pretend to understand her as well as she let him think, she was his friend. His partner.

There just wasn’t any other way he could go than after her, except now… now he had friends, a team, a family to help him do it. They couldn’t care the way he did, but they still cared.

“Yeah,” Clint said, voice hoarse.
So they were gonna go out and fucking get her back, and she’d be sitting there filing her nails wondering what the hell took them so long, and could they please get her a real gun?

Anything else just wasn’t an option.

To be honest, when it came down to their arrival at the base and entrance through security and what felt a lot like fucking customs at the Canadian border, they didn't really look like a bunch of people who were about to steal a super-secret shuttle and fuck off into no-man's land on an unsanctioned, illegal rescue mission.

Clint spared a thought for how proud Natasha would be of his epic poker face as he and the other remaining Avengers were processed through the initial checks for non-Starfleet personnel at Starbase 91.

*No shenanigans in the works at all. Nothing to see here.*

Tony got a twice over when the officers' equipment got futzed by the arc reactor, something about no mention of androids or anything, but a kind of scary look from Doctor McCoy got him through in a jiffy.

Mostly, Clint was just glad the mission headscape into which he'd managed to lock his brain was keeping the ever simmering panic at bay. Natasha was out there somewhere without him, but this was what he had to do to get her back, so he wasn't about to fuck it up because he couldn't keep his goddamn fingers from twitching.

"The 'Fleet ship is still a few hours out. Got delayed," some local official, a Lieutenant-Commander and... not human, judging by the stripes on her uniform and the lack of irises respectively, said to Captain Kirk. "But we've got you all set up in the guest officer's quarters in the meantime. You're stressed, go take some time, Captain. I'm very sorry about your loss."

Clint took a second to blink in consternation and wonder what the fuck kind of chain of command told everyone and their mother about crew abductions before Kirk, with bewildering sincerity, smiled at the woman and inclined his head.

"That's very kind of you, Lieutenant-Commander." Score one for Clint's observational skills. "I'll take care of our guests from here. Mr. Spock and Doctor McCoy will see to the transport of the tech and the remaining cryotube."

"Very good. I'll leave you to it. The Base computer will guide you to your lodgings."

Tony and Clint shared a variety of significant and meaningful looks as they walked away from the woman. When they were well on their way to their 'lodgings', and finally free of any hangers-on, Clint sputtered to life.

"The hell was that?" He hissed in Kirk's direction.

"What was what?" Kirk said, obviously distracted.

"Is there some kind of Starfleet Twitter where they dish the dirt on what goes down on other ships?" Clint asked.

"Clint," Steve sighed, obviously trying not to pry, but Kirk just gave him a confused look, mouthing 'twitter' for a second before understanding dawned.
"No," Kirk shook his head. "She's Betazoid; they're proximal telepaths. Anyone who makes it as an officer is absolutely discrete about it and highly skilled with shielding, but with strong emotions it's more like—" Kirk halted for a second as they walked. "—reading body language, to them. Automatic."

"Oh," Clint said, remembering what Astrid had said about her own biology. That made sense with the declarative statements, then. She didn't say that Kirk looked tired, but that he was tired. Huh. "So when you say strong emotions, you're talking like, anger or shit-your-pants fear or—"

"Grief," Steve said, eyes focused ahead, but a telltale wrinkle in his forehead.

*I'm sorry for your loss.*

Ah, shit. Internally panicking about Natasha made it hard to remember that Kirk had two of his people out of reach, as well. His friends and subordinates.

"Makes them pretty good as commanding officers. They're not going to invade your privacy, but they see past the bullshit. Mostly they're in the Medical track, but a few go into Command. I've never met a Betazoid who's ever lost someone under their command because they put someone who was compromised into a situation they couldn't handle."

The look Steve sent Kirk's way, though the man didn't see it, made Clint very aware of how self-deprecating Kirk's statement obviously was.

"Still kind of creepy," Stark muttered, breaking the tension, however unintentionally.

Clint recalled the few but memorable times he'd witnessed Tony when interacting with Charles Xavier, and had to stifle a smirk. Tony's pointed glare in his direction was evidence enough that he wasn't entirely successful on the stifling front.

"You get used to it," Kirk said, clearly closing the topic.

Once in the rooms, Kirk and Tony made something happen with computers that put them on the clock. They all placed hands-free comm units in their ears, and as soon as they went live, Doctor McCoy's surly grumbling sounded clearly over the frequency.

"—course it's secure. You think I'd leave that to chance? Have a little faith, Spock."

"Bones, we're ready up here."

"About damn time," the doctor quipped. "And really, you could have warned me I was walking into a lab full of McCoy fangirls. How in the blazes do you put up with this on leave?"

A brief grin split Kirk's features, and he waved away the inquiring look Tony sent his way.

"Get over it, Bones. You're famous. Astrid, Scotty, Sulu. Check-in."

Overlapping reports sounded from their respective positions at the base, but Kirk apparently didn't have any trouble acknowledging each on as soon as they were done.

"Excuse yourself to take a leak or something, Sulu, whatever you have to do to get out of there. Astrid, nice work. Rendezvous at the hangar in ten. Scotty, are you sure about the interference from the base transporters? We've still got a window to physically move Bruce's tube if you're not one hundred percent."
"Aye, I'm sure. Nothing inbound and all the pads are inactive. I'll have him safe and sound as soon as we're in the hangar, Captain."

"Good. See you in ten."

It was too early, but Clint could feel the adrenaline beginning to flood his system. He was ready for this.

"Are we go, then?" Steve asked, hefting the large pack filled with any supplies they couldn't be sure would be stocked on the ship they were about to steal.

Kirk hefted his own pack with what appeared to be as much ease as Steve had his own. Only the bulging tendons in his neck betrayed the weight he carried.

A quick survey of the three others in the room confirmed to Clint that they were all ready and waiting to get a fucking move on, and Kirk nodded once.

"Let's move."

Eight and a half minutes later, they emerged from the main building, and Tony pulled out his PADD. With one hand, he tapped something into the screen. Clint had learned to expect explosions and black-outs, but nothing happened.

Just as he made out five additional figures emerging from other points and heading to their destination, Tony slid the PADD back into his pack and looked up.

"Bug's live. We're in the window."

They all picked up the pace, now jogging toward the hangar with purpose.

It was maybe a little surprising to see how easily Captain Kirk busted into the—purportedly—secure hangar. The man clipped his PADD into the secondary authentication console just inside the building and, almost as fast as Tony himself once remembered commandeering screens in a Senate hearing, had them jogging through near darkness toward a—

Tony wasn't much of an aircraft ogler, himself, but damn. This thing was just—

"Damn," he whistled as they approached.

"Save it," Kirk said, unshouldering his pack, brandishing the same PADD he'd used to break in and using it to wave Spock over.

Tony spared a second to look at Clint, who actually was an aircraft guy, and—yup. Definite bedroom eyes.

"You need a minute alone, Barton?" Tony asked.

Barton didn't say anything back, but the slow, methodical way that he took in the ship and lingered on a few key areas made Tony a little suspicious.

"What's going on in that head of—"

"We're in," Kirk said, his voice pitched low to carry only over the comm units Tony had doctored to run on his—apparently revolutionary—frequency.
Spock had pointed out that it was something only designed to send signals between computers themselves, and not actual person to person communication, which kind of made Tony want to scoff. He’d been talking more to computers than to real people for most of his life. Of course it was more reliable.

Giving Clint a last look, Tony readjusted the pack on his shoulder and trudged through the loading platform that opened to them, following Lieutenant Sulu and Steve inside. He’d worry about Barton later, right now he and Scotty had some laws of physics to break.

Must be Tuesday.

Their window was running short, and Jim was barking orders left and right getting everyone into the ship and ready to go. Scotty and Stark had disappeared into the engineering bay to work whatever magic they had planned to get them going. Jim could only hope that they had enough time for start-up before security noticed Stark's bug, flushed the system and realized the hangar was compromised.

They’d all held their breath when Scotty had activated Bones' medical transport tag on Bruce's cryotube, but when the still solid and functioning pod had materialized in their small cargo hold, they’d all thrown themselves into action with renewed fervor. Astrid, Rogers and Bones handled getting their meager supplies and packs loaded up while Sulu and Barton did a perfunctory sweep of the bridge. Jim held out monitoring the code and perimeter for as long as they could before he left Spock to it and made his way to the bridge for the flight checks.

What he found there was as baffling as it was disturbing.

"Barton," he started, slowly, like he was talking to a man from the twenty-first century who had no experience flying a Federation ship. "Why are you sitting at the Helm?"

Sulu, who was seated at the Navigator's station next to him, winced a bit at Jim's tone, but Barton didn't so much as bat an eyelash as he tapped screens and fiddled with controls. Jim's stomach clenched.

"Because I'm gonna be your pilot, Kirk."

Anxiety flooded his system for a second and Jim struggled to hold back a choked sound, looking on in mute horror as Barton continued to mess with the controls. Jesus Christ, even Jim wasn't familiar with how to fly this ship.

"The hell you are! Sulu, get your ass in the pilot's seat, right the fuck now. This is not what we talked about." Jim grit out, clutching the back of the Captain's chair like it was his only link to reality.

"Captain—"

"Nah, I got this, Hikaru," Barton clapped him on the back before swiveling around to look Jim in the eye. "I've flown over sixty different aircrafts, some of which I had never laid eyes on before jumping behind the controls in the middle of a firefight, some of those weren't even functioning properly at the time, and I didn't have the benefit of an awesome co-pilot to answer whatever questions I might have. This?" Barton jabbed his thumb in the direction of the controls, "Is less complicated and more clearly labelled than an Israeli stealth drone, which isn't even supposed to have a pilot, and I flew that shit all the way to Siberia with a dislocated shoulder."

Sinking down into the Captain’s chair was Jim’s second impulse. His first was to strangle Barton right there over the controls, because Jim was freaking out too much to be impressed by any of that. Okay, maybe he was a little impressed. But, still. Barton was at the helm.
Barton was at the helm.

A happy medium between his two impulses seemed to be striding forward and getting up in Barton’s face.

“No. *Fuck* no,” Jim snarled. “I am not compromising this mission because you’ve got a chip on your shoulder. Sulu is more than capable of handling this ship, and failing that, Spock can do it, so back. The hell. Off.”

Barton bristled obviously and half closed the space between them, until they were almost nose to nose.

“Kirk, tone your shit down because if you think for a second I would compromise any part of this mission, you’re dead wrong. I can fly this thing, and you need me.”

“The hell I do!” Jim shouted, shoving Barton back and relishing in the half blind rage that was settling on him. Barton snarled in response and made to get back in his face, when suddenly someone else was between them.

“For christ’s sake, Kirk!” Sulu shouted, holding both of them at bay. “Both of you, just back off and listen to me!”

Jim took a breath to speak, but a hard push from Sulu cut him off.

“No, just *listen,*” Sulu said. “I can fly this thing, sure, but we need a navigator to get us through the decoy route, and you and me are the only ones who can do that. Spock can’t fly this thing because you need him on the auxiliary console taking up the other hundred and one duties than none of us can handle on our own. More importantly, we need you in the Captain’s chair because you can pick up the slack on any one of these stations, not to mention run interference for whatever the hell is going on in engineering. Jim, you may not like it, but Helm is the easiest to delegate to someone else in the interim, and Barton knows his shit.”

What Sulu said made sense, but Jim wasn’t having it.

“What the fuck makes you think he knows his shit, Hikaru? He’s two centuries old and hasn’t even flown a fucking sim shuttle!”

Barton growled in annoyance, but Sulu still stood between them, fixing the man with a firm look. Barton stared at Jim for a moment, the intensity of his angry, bright blue eyes rivalling Jim’s own as he everything they said stewed for a few moments.

"Stark’s not the only guy on my team who can pick up new skills, and you didn't bother to delegate essential tasks to any of us beyond him,” Barton spat. “You wanna know how I know my shit? I did the fucking research, and Hikaru backed me up on what I learned. I can fly this, and—” he pulled away from Sulu with a huff, whirling around to flick up a screen and trailing his fingers across a few glowing pads before swiveling back to Jim. "Flight check complete, Captain. We're ready for take-off."

Jim clenched his jaw so hard that he was sure his teeth were cracking, though that may just be the various parts of his brain releasing pressure so that it didn't explode.

Sulu was still in front of him with an arm outstretched like Jim might complete the impulse to deck Barton in the face, but Jim took a deep breath and let it out. Opening eyes that he hadn't remembered closing, Jim felt the impulse to hit him return with a vengeance at the smug look on Barton’s face.
Growling low, Jim turned away from both of them to look at the brief report of pre-flight data Barton had forwarded, and fuck him if this asshole wasn't actually right. He again scanned the small projection of reports from helm and engineering to see that, yes, the flight check was complete and they were ready to go.

As Sulu slowly backed away to check things at the Nav console, every single inch of Jim’s rational mind was telling him to stun Barton and shove him out of the chair, but god damn his stupid fucking itchy brain, because his gut was telling him something else, asking over and over: *when?* When was he supposed to trust Barton in all of this? When was he supposed to trust any of them?

Sulu was right. They hadn’t had enough time to plan for everything they needed, and faced with the actual specs of the ship, they were short. Of all the stupid fucking things to have need of—a fucking *pilot*.

And yet, Barton *was* a pilot. Sort of.

“Fuck me,” Jim muttered under his breath, anxiety making him want to puke.

Maybe this—maybe this wouldn't kill them all.

The Navigator's console also had secondary helm control, which could do in a pinch. They’d probably have to reroute or do some fancy maneuvering, but it was doable (probably), and Jim could even take over from where he sat if it got really bad—perks of a small ship designed for a small crew of Vulcans, he guessed.

Speaking of, where the hell was Spock when he needed the Vulcan bastard? Spock would make sense of all this.

Jim glared at Barton, the man meeting his gaze with defiant, steely determination.

Goddamn blue eyes. It was like looking in a mirror.

Fuck it. They were all probably going to die anyway.

"You don't say 'ready for take-off', old man," Jim gritted out. "It's 'ready for warp'."

The beaming grin Barton shot him before swiveling back front did something to his stomach that had nothing to do with the fact that a three-hundred year old amateur was about to fly them through a hairy escape.

Their window was closing.

As if to confirm that, Spock appeared behind him to take his place at another operational console that fulfilled communications and about eight hundred other ship functions, but stopped short when he also took in the tableau in front of him.

"Captain—" Spock started, but Jim flapped a hand and cut him off.

"Don't, Spock. It's fine," Jim glared at Clint and Sulu until he saw his actual pilot pulling up the auxiliary control sub-screen on his console. "Flight-check is complete and we're ready to get the hell out of here. Think you can open the hangar?"

Spock shot him a look with an eyebrow that Jim could only interpret as "bitch, please" before turning around to face his own console, fingers flying over the screens that he hadn't bothered reverting to Standard. The fact that it was all in Vulcan likely only contributed to the speed with which the doors
in front of them slowly slid open to reveal an open expanse of land and clear sky.

The ship might be retro-engineered, but everything in it down to its bones was still Vulcan made, and even an advanced mechanics crew knew not to fuck with any of that.

Rubbing a hand down his face and shooting a murderous look at Barton's back, Jim said slowly and clearly, "Take us out on thrusters, Barton."

"Yes, sir," Barton said, and Jim was a little surprised to find it didn't carry a hint of sarcasm.

When the ship lifted smoothly off the floor and slowly taxied out of the hangar, he had to admit that he was surprised, and actually, more than a little impressed.

At least until Spock alerted him to the Starfleet guards approaching their position.

"Fuck!" Jim swore. "I thought we had at least another five minutes. Barton," he snapped, finding himself oddly relieved that he had a fourth hand up here unoccupied with anything other than getting them out. "Once we're clear of the doors, take us into upper atmosphere on half-impulse, use evasive maneuvers if necessary. Spock, Sulu, keep track of the 'Fleet security and let me know if they start shooting at us."

A low rumble through the ship vibrated through the floor shortly before lights began blinking on Spock's console.

"They are shooting at us, Captain," Spock said, engaging the shields without needing to be told.

Oh, the snarky bastard. Jim would have grinned if he wasn't nearly shitting his pants.

"No shit!" Jim snapped. "Barton, watch the—Jesus Christ!" Jim yelped as the ship listed to the side before shooting up in a zig-zag of evasive maneuvers.

"What the fuck, Barton!" He snapped, bracing himself as the ship lurched again. Sulu was saying something about selective auxiliary shields that Jim wasn't quite processing.

"Man, I gotta say, this ship is really responsive," Barton said, sounding giddy as he flipped the ship around and began to descend backwards, the view screen pointed at the ground below.

"Oh my god," Sulu said, frantically tapping at his console to feed information about incoming projectiles to the helm, asshole clenched probably as tightly as Jim's while he tried to hold on to his chair.

"Barton, I'm going to kill you!" Jim shouted when he was nearly thrown out of his seat by the force of half-impulse shooting straight up and Barton flipping them around once more.

"Status," he managed to say when they'd stopped bumping around, the calm in his voice fooling even him.

"Approaching upper atmosphere, Captain," Sulu said in a strangled voice.

"No damage sustained, Captain. All systems intact and at full operational capacity. Engineering reports systems stable."

"Lay in course for our decoy. You know the coordinates, Sulu," he said, eyes locked on the view screen.

"Course plotted, Captain," Sulu said, fingers flying over the controls.
"Ready for warp, sir," Barton quipped, a grin evident in his voice, even if the snark was gone.

Feeling the strange urge to pull his hair out, Jim gathered his wits and breathed deeply. Adrenaline was singing in his veins and he really couldn't suppress a grin of his own.

"Punch it."

Time and space seemed to stretch for a moment, and then everything was whirling lights and humming engines.

When they were far enough from the starbase, and Spock had assured him four different times that they were not yet being pursued, Jim let out a breath.

"Barton, slow us down to Warp three. Scotty," Jim said into his comm. "We're slowing down, how's the core looking?"

"Remarkably intact, Captain. We'll have her warmed up in about fifteen, I'd say," Scotty responded, sounding giddy.

"Make it ten," Jim said, anxiety crowding his senses even as he tried to stuff it down. They needed to get this shit sorted out quick. "Spock, how are we doing with the cloak?"

"Primed to engage on your command, Captain," Spock turned to look at him expectantly.

Neither of them had been on a starship with cloaking capability before, and it was uncharted territory... but it was exciting uncharted territory, and Jim allowed a grin free reign over his face when he nodded at Spock. He turned front and activated the ship wide comm.

"Attention crew, this is your Captain speaking. We're about to engage the cloaking device. Not that I expect anyone needs to be making any calls, but I'm calling comm silence until we're well into the Neutral Zone. Get ready to be invisible. Kirk out."

One deep breath in and out later, he glued his eyes forward. "Alright Spock, engage."

After a few moments, the view screen fluttered into stealth format, and Jim felt excitement coil in his belly.

"We have successfully entered stealth mode, Captain," Spock said, and even if the excitement wasn't in his voice, Jim knew by the way he didn't take his eyes off of his own console that he was drinking in all of the new information in the way that Spock only did when something was truly fascinating.

"Awesome," Jim laughed a little. "Alright. Sulu, plot course for the Neutral zone and in the last known direction of the merc ships. Barton, hold us at warp 3 until Scotty says we're clear."

Sulu's "Aye, Captain," and Barton's "Got it, sir," were an interesting mix, and he shook his head a little bit at the utter weirdness that had become his 'command' on this mission.

As if the party hadn't yet gotten started, he heard the swish of the bridge hatch opening, and swiveled around to see Steve Rogers hoisting himself out onto the floor.

"Permission to come on the bridge, Captain?" Rogers asked with a hint of chagrin. Jim still hadn't totally reconciled the idea that both he and Rogers were 'Captain' to their respective people in this whole situation, but he supposed it would get less weird.

"Granted. What's up?" He asked the man who was taking up far too much space for one person. The
'Fleet issue blacks were tight on him, but stretched taught across Roger's broad chest they bordered on obscene.

"Just wanted to check in, I guess. Kind of a rough take-off." Rogers lifted a hand to the back of his head sheepishly. "Old habits," he shrugged.

Offering him a friendly grin and trying not to glare pointedly at Barton as he did so, he beckoned Rogers over, and he came to stand beside his chair, taking in the muted glow of stars as the ship flew by them at warp speed.

"Wow," Rogers breathed, eyes wide, clearly in awe of what he was seeing.

Jim realized that Rogers hadn't actually seen the Enterprise from this perspective any of the times they'd been at warp, and felt an irrational pride at being able to show him this. Jim couldn't imagine what Rogers must think of it all, coming from a twenty-first century perspective.

Settling back in the chair, he gave Rogers a light pat on the arm. "Yeah," he agreed.

It was relatively quiet on the bridge for a moment, but then Barton turned around to greet his compatriot with a shit-eating grin.

"Hey, Cap! How're things below deck?" He asked, and Jim almost groaned out loud. Seriously, the pirate speak was not going to stop with this guy.

"Clint, are you—are you flying this thing?" Rogers asked, evidently just as scandalized as Jim had been. "Oh my god, you're the reason I almost broke my nose on Doctor McCoy's head!"

Sprawling back in his chair, Barton shrugged. "I can fly anything, Cap. And I think I acquitted myself pretty well, right Captain?" Barton emphasized the last word, looking at Jim.

Grimacing, Jim suppressed the urge to throw something at his snarky blonde head. "I think 'well' is pushing it. We didn't die in a fiery crash, so kudos for that, I guess."

"Mr. Barton admirably evaded the fire of the Starfleet security, if his methods were both unorthodox and rife with showmanship," Spock added, the traitor.

"See, Cap? I admirably evaded fire. Piece of cake."

Jim leaned over to Rogers, who was clearly apprehensive about the whole thing. "He... helped. We're not exactly swimming in qualified technicians and crew, out here. It's not a bad idea for you guys to learn how to do this."

Rogers looked perhaps even more dubious at the pronouncement.

"Sulu and I both have secondary helm control, so don't worry about it. We'll be fine," he slapped Rogers' arm again.

"If you say so," Rogers muttered, more tense than he’d been when he arrived.

"Relax, Cap," Barton said. "I'm a great pilot."

"The last time I was in an aircraft you were flying, I ended up with a broken arm," Rogers said drily.

"But we all survived, right? I even know how to crash like a boss. I got this."

Rogers just gave Jim a helpless look, as if imploring Jim to reconsider this madness.
"Sulu," Jim sighed. "Please explain the warp readings to Barton, and Barton, you will pay attention and ask questions or I will make you Bones’ nurse."

"Sir, yes sir," Barton drawled, but he and Sulu had their heads pressed together and Jim could ignore them.

"You get everything set up okay?" Jim asked Rogers, who nodded in response.

"Yeah. Doctor McCoy is doing an inventory or something in Sickbay, but Astrid and I got all the data-ports installed."

"Good. Head back down and watch them while we activate. If anything seems like it's getting hot or likely to explode, yank them out. We can't afford to lose that data."

"Got it," Rogers said with a nod, and disappeared back down the hatch.

"You get all that, Spock?" He called to the Vulcan.

"Indeed. Ready for uplink and integration to Navigation and Computer interfaces on your command, Captain."

"Do it," Jim said. The sooner they had their data, the sooner they could feed it to the ship and be in pursuit.

Tony was maybe going a little tiny bit fangirl over having a shiny, whirring, humming, sexy little engine to play with.

But Scott was totally doing the same thing, so Tony really couldn’t be embarrassed when he made a pornographic noise as he got his hands on the dilithium chamber’s viewing port.

"'Ey there," Scott called from across the room. "You treat this ship like a lady, you hear? I'll no' have anyone disrespecting her engines."

"I saw her first," Tony moaned, peering into the tiny, transparent port at the pulsing, glowing crystal inside. He absentely rubbed the heel of his palm over the reactor and thought of the little triangle of vibranium in his chest. It was something he hadn't seen or heard mentioned in anything, anywhere in all the information he'd combed through up til this point.

Which, to be honest, was a fucking lot. Tony could do homework. He could, and he did.

He wasn't sure if he should be proud/smgug at the fact that he was still the only person to both know about the existence of the element and intimately understand how to synthesize it, or be worried that if anything happened... he'd be very, very fucked.

Then again, there was this whole dilithium thing. Man, if he could ask JARVIS to run some scans on tha—

A touch on his shoulder startled Tony badly, and he recoiled from the contact. Looking up into Scott's face, he saw the man three paces away with his hands up, and realized he'd definitely missed a big chunk of conversation.

"You alright there, Stark?" Scott asked him, his face screwing up into a naked expression of concern. Shit, how long had Tony fucked off to la-la land?

"Fine," he said, not doubting the even confidence of his tone. He'd faced off with the press drunk or
in far worse circumstances. He was a master at deflecting.

The small weight in his pocket felt like it was burning a hole into his hip, but he wasn't about to let in on that.

"Alrigh', then," Scott said, apparently over Tony's little episode faster than even he was. "Come here and tell me what you think about this beautiful little bugger. I swear, if I wasn't so attached to the Enterprise..."

Scott continued to ramble and rave about the ship they'd just stolen, and Tony found himself grinning. It should probably be incredibly annoying to be around someone as enthused about machines as he was, but... Tony was a genius, and so was Scott. He wasn't about to pull out a ruler, but it was possible the man was smarter than he was, if only for the fact that he possessed vast amounts of knowledge about technology that had been growing and developing for centuries while Tony had been sleeping.

But hey, Tony had seen visions of this and more inside his own head without the actual means to fabricate it since he was fucking six years old.

In any case, he liked Scott. Scott wasn't as focused or as obviously scarily smart as Spock, but he sure as hell liked the guy.

It was something.

"Syncing," Spock said, and Jim watched his holo-console bloom to life before his eyes.

Damn him if this ship wasn't technically years behind the Enterprise, but retro-fit with tech he had never hand his hands on—or through—before in his life.

"Confirmed," Sulu said from his space at the Nav console. Now that Jim thought about it, having Sulu at the Nav station made sense. He already knew these coordinates and this trajectory. Him trying to split his brain between the two jobs was not the logical thing to do at all.

Jim almost—almost—groaned aloud at the fact that he'd even had the thought about logic. Goddamn Spock.

If Barton had any idea what he was thinking, he didn't show it. The man had spent at least the last twenty minutes with a singular focus on his own readings, flicking his eyes back and forth from one screen to the other as he learned what all the information constantly fed to him meant.

It was a tenacity Jim could respect, at the least. It didn't mean he was going to leave Barton to his devices if he was around to steer the ship, but it was good that someone was learning. Yeah, he technically had the trappings for a full and ready crew on his hands, but forcing them to take on multiple duties in all circumstances was not going to work in the long run.

"Mapped, Captain," Sulu said, the view screen rapidly shifting in and out of blurring stars and flight paths as he watched. "Course plotted and ready."

With a deep breath in and out, Jim grounded himself before swiveling his chair to look at Spock.

"What are we looking at, Commander?" Jim asked.

"Current trajectory suggests a course into known areas of the Neutral Zone," Spock flicked a dataset his way, a cluster of huge asteroids appearing on his screen. "Intelligence says an illegal port existed
in this cluster prior to redrawing of the Neutral Zone's borders. It was once used as a rendezvous point for dilithium trafficking. This intelligence as well as our own data is now outdated, but it remains an investigative point."

Both Barton and Sulu very obviously stilled in their motions before continuing to work, but Jim sighed audibly.

"Alright. Set course for those coordinates on the trajectory. Spock, maintain cloaking. Sulu, give us a heads up when we're five minutes out."

"Aye, Captain. Setting course now."

"Barton—" Jim started.

"Compensating for celestial gravity and monitoring warp distortion. On course for destination," Barton said, sounding exasperated.

Jim huffed, but sat back in his chair with a grudging smile. Barton didn't quite shoot him a look over his shoulder, but Jim caught the way he rubbed the eye closest to Jim with just his middle finger.

Honestly, Steve wasn't really that thrown by their whole... abscond with a ship to rescue their friends, thing.

That, well, that was pretty familiar. Steve had been willing to risk everything for that in 1942. Risking the same in 2260 wasn't much of a stretch, if one ignored the three century gap.

The fact that he could even think of his life in terms of it spanning three centuries, well, that was still throwing him. Like a slow motion take-down from his sparring sessions with Thor, back before—well. Before.

He'd had his tasks to do in the interim of actually securing the ship, and he was glad for them. It was a relief to see Bruce still safe in his cryotube with Tony fussing over it before being dragged off to the bowels of the ship by Montgomery Scott, but by the time he'd finished sliding the data ports into place and gone off to finish his secondary duties with Doctor McCoy, the ship had lurched in several very unpleasant ways.

Getting thrown back into the memory of a battle on a futuristic aircraft bound for a watery death hadn't done much for his coordination. Steve had barely managed to avoid crashing his own head into Doctor McCoy's while the man himself lunged to save an unsecured cabinet of hyposprays from imminent destruction.

After that, he really couldn't avoid making his excuses to a swearing Doctor McCoy and scrambling for the bridge. It took him a minute to figure out the hatch, but he got it and made it up.

For a moment, the sight of space flying by them made him forget about his panic. The way the stars curled around the ship in slight hues of magenta, gold and azure were nothing like the glimpse of solid space he'd imagined when Schmidt disappeared when he held the Tesseract, but the similarity brought him back to the present all the same.

Which might not have been the best idea. He would be the first to admit that Clint was an amazing pilot, first class and unmatched in every way, but he was definitely not comfortable with the idea of the man trying his hand at flying a spaceship untrained. Despite the Captain's assurances that it hadn't gone unsupervised, Steve found himself pretty angry at the fact that Kirk could just treat this like some kind of training exercise.
This was a rescue mission. They had to take it seriously, or someone was going to die, and Steve would be damned if it was them before they even saw Natasha or Kirk's crewmembers again.

Leaving the bridge before he could say or do something he'd probably regret, Steve made his way back to Astrid. When the data drives connected and uploaded without necessitating him tearing them from their slots, they both slumped with relief.

“This is insane,” Astrid said, wiping sweat from her brow. “We just stole… more sensitive information than I can conceivably count directly from the Enterprise’s databanks. I actually don’t think I know the technical term for the amount of data, and now we’ve also stolen a super-secret ship so we can invade enemy space on a daring rescue mission. Why am I not freaking out?”

Steve almost laughed, but he didn’t. Shaking his head ruefully, he sighed and looked up at the ceiling of the cramped server room, or whatever it was called in this century.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get there.”

He felt the weight of Astrid’s scrutiny for a moment before she spoke again.

“And you?”

The soft lilt of her voice forced his gaze back to her, and he frowned.

“What about me?” He asked, not deliberately playing dumb so much as wondering exactly what it was she thought she knew. Something about the way she looked at him, the way she’d looked at all of them, and not just that, the way she’d treated them from the beginning, made him uneasy.

“Rogers,” she said lightly. “One of your friends was snatched from a base presumably designed to study, maybe experiment, on you, in a century where that means she could be literal light-years away. Kirk and Spock are good, amazing, the best, but this isn’t going to be easy. We’re all a little out of our depth, here.”

The unease he’d felt mounted, and he wasn’t sure what to do with it. He clamped down on the sore spot she’d hit with unerring accuracy and set his jaw, looking forward and away from her until he felt it was safe to speak.

“Lieutenant, I’ve been through more hell than you can imagine. I can and will do whatever I have to to get Natasha and the others back, even if that means putting my head down and making all this work. I’ve done it before,” he tacked on, a challenge he hadn’t intended to make coloring his tone.

“Okay,” she said, a rustle of fabric catching his eye and making him see she’d put her hands up. “Okay?” Steve parroted, the response doing nothing to temper the knot in his gut.

“I believe you,” she said. “I’m… glad that we’ve got someone like you on this mission, or whatever, with us. You’ve got guts, you know?” Astrid smiled at him, and Steve tried not to flinch when she reached out a hand. As if she’d noticed, she pulled it back, sighing lightly. “But we’ve all got limits, even if some people, namely a man whose name rhymes with jerk, likes to pretend that we don’t. If you need something, please ask. There are too few of us in too small of a space to let it get bad.”

“I’m not a liability,” Steve snapped, without meaning to, glaring at her. Seriously, what was it about her that was setting him on edge?

Astrid stood up, dusting off her black pants with a sigh.
“Rogers, we’re all liabilities,” she said, and the smile she offered him was tinged with sadness.

She left, then, and with her went the tension in his muscles. Feeling like he could finally breathe properly, Steve tried to puzzle out precisely what she’d meant by that, before shoving it to the back of his mind as something to ponder when there wasn’t something he could be doing.

Without precisely knowing why, he found his feet carrying him back to Medical—Sickbay—and searching out the grumpy Doctor he’d nearly knocked heads with not half an hour ago.

Predictably, the man was midway through another inventory check or—something, when Steve showed up.

"Need a hand there?" He asked the Doctor, who was currently balanced on one foot as he held a device aloft toward the top of a row of cabinets.

"Jesus!" McCoy swore, nearly toppling over before Steve lunged forward to catch both him and the tricorder that flew from his hand. McCoy straightened himself immediately and snatched back the device, fixing Steve with a manic glare. "What’n the hell was that?"

"Just seeing if you wanted some help, Doctor," Steve held up his hands. "I checked in on the bridge. Things seem—" Steve wasn't sure how to describe to McCoy that Barton was flying the ship, so he chose to omit it. “—alright. We didn't crash, obviously, so I think we're okay."

"Oh, we're okay, are we," McCoy drawled acerbically, but the glint to his eyes hadn't faded, even as he returned to his scanning with fervor. "It's not like crashing onto an oxygenated planet would even be the least of our worries, would it? No, we could just miscalculate and warp into a goddamn star, incinerated before he even knew what happened, or get shot out of the black by some rogue Romulans, or—oh! My favorite, have a warp core meltdown and spend five months drifting in open space while we use up our rations and die of starvation!"

Steve blinked up at the man, honestly too surprised to feel the fear he probably should at what was likely an expert testimony of the varied ways they could die in space.

When it became clear that McCoy was scanning the same stretch of space over and over again, Steve snapped out of it and placed a hand on his shoulder, expecting the flinch but not drawing back from it.

"We're fine, doctor. Spock and Captain Kirk got us out just fine. We're on our way to go find your friends and everything," Steve said, trying to remember the way that Bucky had sounded when he'd soothed him through asthmas attacks where he'd been absolutely sure he was going to die, panicked and breathing all the weaker for it.

"Fine," McCoy echoed, hollow, hands now visibly shaking as he ceased his scans.

"Yes. Fine."

"Motherfuck," McCoy swore, walking himself away from Steve and sitting down heavily onto a stool on the far side of the room. It wasn't small, but it was dwarfed by the size of the medical bay on the Enterprise. "Thought I was over these freak outs."

"Rough take-offs not your favorite?" Steve tried a smile.

McCoy laughed roughly, dragging a hand down his face and, interestingly, turning the tricorder on himself as he replied.
"Not a fan of flying," he muttered, scowling slightly at the readout before placing the device onto the counter nearest him.

"Me neither," Steve admitted. "Had a few... rough landings. Doesn't matter how many times I go out, I still get the feeling like I need my last rites."

McCoy laughed then, like Steve had told a great joke, but Steve figured he'd been going for camaraderie and lightening the mood, anyway, so he'd take it.

"Last rites, huh?" McCoy said, eyeing Steve. "Ain't heard that one in a while. Thanks for the concern, but nah, it's just the rational part of my brain still trying to convince me what a nutcase I am for leaving the goddamn solid Earth. I tell ya, humans were never meant for space, dunno how I ever ended up here."

Steve smiled in spite of himself. "Helps when you have someone to worry about," he said.

McCoy scoffed, but eyed him intently for a second. "So, plane crash?"

"Yeah," Steve breathed, steeling himself for the wave of memory and crippling emotion, but finding only a residual fear and... grief in its place. "Had to take an aircraft down in the North Atlantic," Steve said, feeling a bit far away. "I... it worked. Saved a lot of people, but they thought I was dead."

Steve looked up at McCoy for a second, seeing his open and interested expression.

"I wasn't."

McCoy didn't offer any acknowledgement other than a hum, and Steve was a bit grateful for it. That wasn't a memory he'd been expecting to share right now, but faced with the Doctor's rather surprising aviophobia, it had seemed like the right thing to do. Steve would always be a ground fighter, and he knew where his strengths lay. That way also lay his weaknesses, and it felt a little good to know there was at least one other person on this ship that shared his apprehension of being away from solid ground.

"Well, how bout you put that super-soldier physique to good use and help me finish these environmental scans then, huh? I never trust a computer to tell me what I can see with my own tricorder."

Grateful for the task—he knew he was otherwise pretty useless—Steve nodded and smiled, listening with rapt attention as the Doctor showed him how the tricorder functioned, and what the readings meant.

So, that had been fun.

For a few fleeting minutes, Clint had lost himself in the exquisite euphoria of flying something that was beyond amazing. He’d needed that, though he’d been sure that Kirk or Spock would never acquiesce to actually letting him pilot them out of there.

But Clint Barton wasn’t the kind of guy who believed in relying one-hundred percent on other people, and he definitely didn’t plan for nineteen different contingencies when trapped on a spaceship without looking up a thing or two about flying in the twenty-third century.

Short of actually finding a simulator, he’d read up everything he could on flying the various spacecrafts he might encounter. The massive cargo barges had seemed particularly interesting with their triple warp-cores to compensate for the weight of acting like futuristic tow trucks for entire starships,
but the tutorials on small battle-craft had been more up this alley.

Too bad the manuals he’d looked up earlier that day had all been in Vulcan; at least they’d had plenty of pictures.

It was proof, to him at least, that he probably could have at least gotten them all out of there if it had come to that, but without Nat, it was pointless to think of escaping and starting over. None of the other Avengers would be able to manage it on their own; Clint might, but why the hell would he want to, without his best friend, his nővéré?

In any case, piloting was the extent of his research, and he hadn’t quite been prepared for how little there really was to do in the interim. With the ship set on a course for a destination nearly four hours out, there was a lot of hurry up and wait happening. Pretty much the opposite of what he needed, now that the adrenaline rush of flying this perfect fucking ship had left him in the dust.

The tension on the small bridge made it painfully obvious that he was still an interloper in what was otherwise a trio of Starfleet officers used to one another’s presence. Then again, the conspicuous tension that Kirk and Spock seemed to carry with one another leached into the space around them, and judging by the several furtive looks Hikaru cast in their direction, it wasn’t exactly a normal phenomenon.

In any case, Clint had never been a bridge officer. He flew shit from point A to point B and either napped, kicked ass, lurked or shot at people on either side of those two points.

The waiting sucked. Clint could see how playing Galaga or Ms. Pac-Man under Fury’s nose might appeal.

When Spock left to go do… something, a few minutes later, Clint could see the tension drain from Hikaru’s shoulders.

Clint heard the sound of Kirk sighing behind him, and turned a little over his shoulder to quirk an eyebrow at the man.

Kirk, distracted, didn’t notice it. The man had his fingers pressed into his temples, and looked pretty drawn around the edges.

“Sulu, I’m gonna go see how Bones is doing. Monitor the trajectory and let me know if anything comes up.”

“Got it,” Hikaru said, straightening in his chair.

Finally alone, Clint turned to fully face Hikaru and regarded him frankly.

“What the hell is up with them?” Clint blurted, too curious to care about sounding like a gossipy teenager.

Hikaru sighed, shooting him a look that spoke of annoyance, but Clint was immune to such looks. He could be very annoying.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he lied.

Clint scoffed, reaching a hand out to pull up a new projection and study it for a moment as he gave Hikaru the side-eye.

“It’s like a fucking storm cloud hanging around when they’re in the same room. Seriously, is there
something going on?"

Sighing, Hikaru slumped again and gave Clint a scrutinizing look.

“I don’t know what’s going on with them. The storm cloud is new, they’ve been like that for almost this whole week.”

“So it’s about us, then,” Clint concluded, but Hikaru made a dubious noise, shaking his head.

“Eh,” the man shrugged. “I don’t think that’s exactly it. I mean, we were on leave when ‘Fleet called us back for this mission. Our last time out was kind of… weird?” Hikaru said, like a question. “I can’t really explain it. Strange planet, strange animals, even weirded plants. Honestly we didn’t have a lot of time on board before leave started, so I can’t really say if it started then, but—“ Hikaru waved a hand. “Whatever trouble is going on in Purgatory, I don’t think it’s you guys. Or not just you guys. If it were, Spock wouldn’t be so… Vulcan,” he finished.

“Vulcan,” Clint echoed, raising an eyebrow. “How is it weird for a Vulcan to be Vulcan?”

“Half-Vulcan,” Hikaru said, distracted as he punched through more trajectory calculations and pulled up multiple windows of other information. “I’ve been out with Spock for about seven months, altogether, known him for nearly two years, and he hasn’t had a stick up his ass this badly since… ever, maybe.”

“Well that’s promising,” Clint grumbled. Seriously, shit between the two most knowledgeable and strategically valuable people in this whole operation was not what they needed. Fuck.

“They’ll work it out,” Hikaru shrugged. “Kirk is stubborn. Whatever it is he did, he’ll own up eventually. It may be uncomfortable, but if there’s anybody who can ‘function at peak capacity’—” Hikaru sounded like he was imitating someone. Badly. “—while fighting with someone, it’s Commander Spock.”

“Whatever,” Clint waved the topic away. Not really his problem until it became his problem, anyway.

It was silent for a long time on the bridge, and neither Kirk nor Spock returned. Clint busied himself examining readings and poking through some installation specifics when Hikaru spoke again.

“So,” Hikaru said, and seemingly left it at that.

“Spit it out, man,” Clint said, focusing on a diagram of the thrusters.

“Romanoff is kind of a badass, right?” Hikaru blurted.

The question startled a laugh out of him, and Clint turned his chair fully to face the man next to him. “You could say that, yeah,” Clint grinned.

“So you think she’ll… be okay?” Hikaru said, and Clint sobered at the anxious expression on his face.

Sitting up straighter in his chair and leaning toward him, Clint searched the face that wasn’t looking at him. “I think if she’s alive, she’s the best chance they all have at getting out of there.”

Hesitating visibly, Hikaru flicked a brief glance at him before staring straight ahead. “I know Uhura is good at what she does, and she’s scary in her own way, but she’s not really… she’s not a fighter like Jim or Spock,” Hikaru said. “I don’t—I mean—do you think she’d—”
Seeing where this was going, Clint sat back and watched Hikaru struggle with the words for a moment before cutting him off. “Nat might have a solid instinct for self-preservation, but she’ll keep them as safe as she can. She’s used to being the most competent person in the room. If she’s around, they’ll be as okay as they can.”

Something in the man seemed to loosen, and he let out a breath.

“Okay,” Hikaru breathed, finally looking at him. “It’s just, Pavel, he’s—” he gestured to his head. “Super smart, total genius and everything, but he’s just a kid, you know? I love him to death, but he couldn’t fight his way out of a paper bag.”

“People can surprise you,” Clint said, remembering the cold determination on Pavel’s face before and after they’d beamed down to the ruined base.

Hikaru shook his head. “He’s just so nice. Hurting people isn’t what he does. He’s always been about protecting people, even when it might hurt him more than them.” Hikaru laughed before covering his face with a hand, obviously searching for composure.

Clint clapped him on the shoulder once before looking back to his diagrams, giving Hikaru a moment to let his brain do its thing.

“Tell me about him,” Clint said, eventually, and Hikaru sat back up, a weak grin tugging at his mouth as he began to talk about Ensign Chekov, Pavel Andreivich, and the first mission the _Enterprise_ had ever had.

“Captain, we’re approaching the port,” Jim heard Sulu say over the comm. Unfolding himself from the slump he’d assumed in his spartan quarters, Jim cracked his neck and sighed heavily, clenching and unclenching his fists at his side.

“On my way,” Jim replied.

He wasn’t on his way. Jim took a moment to let his shoulders sag and just push the heels of his palms into his eyes. He’d seriously had this god damn headache for what felt like the last four days straight. It was getting to the point where Bones was giving him the look when he asked for hypos, which he had to actually do, now, given the state of their supplies.

With a sigh, Jim willed himself to move and then actually got on his way.

It seemed only fitting that Spock would materialize next to him as they neared the bridge. Jim, his body buzzing with too many things to be surprised or annoyed much by his remaining solitude being cut short, only acknowledged Spock with a nod.

“We must be prepared for this particular lead to be empty, Captain. Our quarry has both the means and likely the motivation to elude us,” Spock said.

Something in Jim really wanted to be annoyed at that pronouncement, but mostly he got what Spock was trying to say. It didn’t stop him from releasing his breath in a huff and fixing Spock with a look.

“Yes, Spock. I know,” Jim said, activating the bridge hatch and watching the narrow step-ladder descend.

“Nevertheless, a measure of caution is—”

“I got it,” Jim snapped at him, already climbing upward. “Hope for the best and prepare for the
worst. This could be a trap or nothing. We’ll handle it.”

It took Jim a moment to take in how Sulu and Barton were—apparently—working like a well-oiled machine. The two weren’t so much sitting at their respective stations as standing and working between each other’s stations. Their chatter died down when Jim arrived, but they didn’t slow the way they were working.

“Barton, Sulu,” Jim greeted, and they acknowledged him in turn. “Spock, how’s it look out there?”

“No detectable craft in the area. When we drop out of warp, we will be able to discern if there are life signs, though I cannot predict how the cloaking of the ship will affect the readings,” Spock said, immersed in his station’s readouts.

“Okay,” Jim nodded. “Barton, give us five hundred million kilometers of space from the port. We’re doing these scans without the cloaking, I don’t want us too close if there are any surprises.”

“Aye, aye,” Barton said with a wave in Jim’s direction.

Something about it sort of made Jim… relax. Sure, Barton was an asshole, and annoying, but he didn’t have any weird, hero-worship set of standards for Jim that still cropped up among some of the Enterprise crew. It was almost kind of a relief to be working with people—aside from Spock—who didn’t take his competency at face value.

The fact that he’d have to work a bit to show Barton and his friends that he deserved their respect, well. It was a nice change of pace from either having people just assume he could do better, or taking for granted the fact that he had to work his ass off to be as good as he was.

The pirate speak, though, that had to go. Yesterday, if Jim had anything to say about it.

“Scotty, we’re approaching the port. Monitor systems, we’re uncloaking upon arrival.”

“Sorry, Mr. Scott is unavailable at the moment, how many I assist you?”

Jim stared at the arm of the Captain’s chair for a moment.

“Stark?” He questioned. “Where the hell is my engineer?”

“Doing some stuff,” Stark replied airily. “You said uncloaking? Well that’s no fun, but fine. Systems are all fine, down here. No hiccups with the stealth panel transistors yet, but we’ll know for sure once we re-engage.”

“Stark, put Scotty on,” Jim said, voice colored with frustration. Was he doomed to have his entire crew usurped by these fucking maniacs? Jesus, soon enough Rogers would be answering his comms to Sickbay.

“No can do, boss,” Stark said cheerfully. “He’s really busy at the moment. It’s cool. Don’t do anything embarrassing, we’re watching down here. These auxiliary screens are great.”

Jim rubbed his face.

“Have Scotty check-in when he’s available,” Jim grumbled, and ended the comm. “Spock, please tell me our readings from engineering are steady.”

“All readings are within acceptable parameters, Captain,” Spock responded. “Preparing cloak to disengage upon passive scans.”
“Alright, Barton?”

“Arriving in ten,” Barton said, and began the countdown. Jim measured his breaths, and kept his eyes wide open when the ship dropped out of warp.

Before him lay a darkened, desolate stretch of asteroids and space junk drifting listlessly through space.

“We’re here,” Barton muttered.

“Aright, Spock. Preliminary scan before decloaking.”

“Scanning.”

The seconds passed in silence, their collective eyes fixed on the scene in front of them. When the preliminary scan revealed no life-signs, Jim nodded to himself.

“Alright, disengage the cloak. Let’s see what we’ve got here.”

“Stealth mode going inactive in three, two, one—”

The screen shifted in front of their eyes, and while nothing changed outright, Jim could hear Spock moving again at his console.

“Monitor the area, Sulu. Spock, what is it?”

“Evidence of recent warp activity in the area—attempting to match signatures to known quantities,” he said. “But Captain, there is something else. There are no life signs, but there are inert organic signatures in the abandoned port.”

Shit. Jim’d heard that terminology, before.

“Quantity?” Jim asked, voice grim.

“Unknown, but few, or with very little mass.”

When Sulu confirmed the space around them was still clear, Jim nodded to himself before gripping the armrests.

“Alright. Barton, take us in.”

The large, rocky planetoid loomed in front of them. A distant sun cast a gloom over the entire cluster, and Jim felt his heart sinking into his stomach as the million versions of how this could go flitted through his mind.

Well, fuck all that. Until there was a reason to really panic, Jim was going to keep his head screwed on straight.

Time to put things in motion and see what the hell they were going to do next.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
Nővére – Hungarian: elder sister

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So, this is the longest it has taken me to update since before the Summer, and I do apologize. In the last month I've been punched/pseudo-stabbed by a student (not the same student), been in a car accident, not slept nearly enough, and submitted grades for over 1,000 kids. I apologize if this chapter feels somewhat disjointed, but if I sat on it any longer, I'd seriously punch myself in the face.

In any case, thank you dearly for sticking with me, friends. My winter break is coming up and I intend to spend most of it in a drunken, fanfictioning haze. See if I fucking don't.

Whatever love you have to leave me in the comments, I will wrap myself around it and absorb it like a hungry amoeba.

-officiumdefunctorum
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Natasha should take a page out of Clint's book: this looks bad.

Chapter Notes

Thanks, as always, to my Beta Kay. Any remaining formatting/typos are mine. Translations in the end notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Expectations were dangerous things. They were the kind of things that got people disappointing academic experiences, wasted time, and broken hearts. In this case, they could be the thing that got someone killed.

So Nyota had tried to avoid having expectations when she realized that she'd been beamed from the surface of that desolate little planet at the edge of the Neutral Zone onto an enemy ship. Enemy, in this case, could mean anything from Klingons to a familiar face sneering down at her for being foolish enough to trust them.

But they were human, and that was all the glimpse she got on the transporter pad before a sharp sting in her neck put her under.

For brief interludes, she woke. Long enough for someone—not the same person—to shine a light in her eyes or ask her some kind of question, the answers to which she couldn't quite remember giving, but had enough sense in her head to deliver in a non-Terran language and approximate a "fuck you" in all of them.

Probably not the most resourceful of counter-interrogation methods, but she was drugged up to her eyes and she hurt.

Always, in those short moments, she wondered to herself if she was alone, if the rest of the crew was alright, if anyone knew she'd been taken, if Jim and Spock were coming after her.

There was never enough time to reassure herself that they were or weren't. If she'd been able to think more clearly, she would have been able to decide which of those was the good thing. As it was, she just wished for a familiar face.

It was an uncountable time later that she saw one.

"Oh, Pavel," Nyota said, though her voice came out a cracking, hoarse mess.

He was unconscious, and from the look of him, had been that way for some time. She couldn't tell if he was injured or not, but the fact that he was even there leant enough strength to her rubberly limbs
to pull herself over to his side and grasp his hand.

The space was cramped, dark and not at all hospitable. Three greyish walls were covered by a solid ceiling not tall enough to accommodate even her modest height, and the fourth was blocked by an outdated, non-permeable transparent aluminum hatch. It was, in all senses, a cage.

Nyota swallowed her fear and clung to Pavel's hand. He would wake, eventually. The limb was clammy and she tried rubbing warmth into the appendage, but only succeeded in tiring herself. When she could do no more than lean limply against his slumped form, she closed her eyes and tried not to think.

It was an interminable amount of time later that the hatch opened, startling Nyota awake. Pavel was still out, but she shielded him with her body as best she could when a looming figure appeared at the open port.

Without warning, a long rod was pushed into the space and dug into her side, delivering a shock that sent her reeling with a cry. It didn't dissuade her from aiming her collapsed slump in front of Chekov, but the man wielding the rod just used it to shove her twitching form aside and grab Pavel before she could even utter a protest beyond a broken moan of pain.

"Pavel," she slurred out, reaching with her hand as he was dragged out of the small space. For her trouble, she received another shock.

The light blurred, and she was unconscious again.

When her senses returned, she realized she wasn't alone. Voices filtered through the fog in her brain and Nyota coughed piteously, her tongue a dead, dry thing in her mouth. She didn't think she could speak now even if it was to save her own life, which it very well could. Her 'talented tongue' had helped her and others out of more scrapes than this, but she couldn't count on either it or the brain controlling it any more than the useless weight of her limbs as she tried to move them.

"This is ridiculous, we were supposed to get Kirk."

"Well we didn't get him. Any longer and the whole thing could have been compromised. Their ship might not have been a match for firepower, but they had more people. If they'd deployed defense shuttles we would have had to retreat. Cap's not gonna authorize that Battleship again. We got them, and that's it."

"I mean, it's enough, probably, but it's not what the guy wanted."

"Please, enough got fucked on that planet that Kirk's bound for court martial or worse if he tries anything. He's as good as gone. We got two of the bigwigs and one of the popsicles. It's a fair shake, we'll come out right."

"She doesn't look like much."

Nyota heard the sound of a body being moved and tried to turn her head, but the throb she received in response cut off the motion.
"None of them did. Damn pretty, most of them, so she's got that. You didn't see her fight. Man, she
took down three of the grunts before we got her with the stuff. Good thing Cap gave us so much of
it, eh?"

"Yeah. Well, we're a few hours out. We get anything from the kid?"

"Nah. Couldn't rouse him. Stupid tech dosed him pretty good. We better hope it doesn't kill him, or
we're good and screwed."

"He'll be fine. Seen people tweaked on this shit before, they always come out of it."

A low grunt, and the voices abated. Nyota peeled her eyelids open one painful millimeter at a time to
see she was in some kind of wide open recessed room, not unlike the cells on the Enterprise, but
without a clear wall separating it.

Nyota twitched violently when a willowy looking woman eked into her vision.

"You are quiet, for a prisoner."

A hoarse sound escaped Nyota's mouth, and she shut her eyes against a sharp pain as the light in the
room seemed to brighten.

"Ah, yes. You must be quite dehydrated. The ʃiχ-gog claims much of your body's water; I think that
humans were not made for such pleasures."

Some pleasure, Nyota thought bitterly, squinting her eyes and wincing again at the sting of a
hypospray on her neck.

"You will recover," the woman said, and as Nyota's vision cleared, she realized the sibilant hiss of
the woman's voice was heart-rendingly familiar.

Her attendant's skin was a pale green. Sickly looking, but clearly Orion. If Nyota had more than the
meager moisture preventing her eyes from sticking completely closed, she may have tried to speak
with her, get some answers, but before she could even contemplate anything further than groaning
again, a second sting pinched her neck, and she felt herself slipping away.

"Guard yourself, seab," the woman murmured, speaking to Nyota's body even as her mind fled from
it. "You are dubi, now."

Time passed, and Nyota tried to mark it in her brief intervals of consciousness, but between the
rampant hallucinations, fever dreams and general lethargy, she couldn't tell how long it had been.

"We're six hours out, at most. Cap's gonna be pissed at the delay, but we're still within target arrival.
Anyone who tries to follow us is a day behind, even if they went after us right away and didn't get
fucked to pieces by the Klingons."

Rough laughter assaulted her senses, but at least that answered one question. God, she'd lost an entire
day locked up in this hell.

"Yeah, well. Trust the Klingons to get the job done with 'Fleet if the B-Ship couldn't stick around."

A grunt of response. "Throw her in there with the others. Not sure what to do with the other two
until the guy gets a look at them. The dubi's having a look at them now."
"Sure you don't wanna keep them apart?"

"What are they gonna do? The other one's dead to the world, and Kirk's bitch here can barely talk. Throw her in."

A sharp burst of light and the sound of creaking metal made Nyota cringe, but she fought the urge to move away, if only to perpetuate a pretense. If they didn't know she was lucid, they might have a chance.

The sound of a body collapsing—dumped or thrown—inside her enclosed space startled her into opening her eyes, but as quickly as the noise had come, the door was shut again, and semi-darkness permeated her vision once again.

After a minute of controlled breathing and waiting, Nyota inched her way to sitting and saw Romanoff slumped against the wall furthest from her, limbs an uncoordinated sprawl. Pavel's still form was where she last remembered it, unmoved but for the shallow rise and fall of his chest, not a hand's breadth away from her should she need to reach out and touch.

Crawling her way over to Romanoff in haphazard movements, Nyota moved her body to take stress off of her limbs, checking what vitals she could along the way. Satisfied that she was alive and breathing, Nyota paused to catch her breath, ears ringing and exhaustion dragging at her limbs. Pulling herself back to Pavel seemed an impossible task, but she managed it despite the burning protest of her muscles and pounding in her skull.

When she reached his side, she didn't bother pulling herself up, just let herself collapse against the floor, hand gripping the fabric of Pavel's dirty gold shirt as the world fell away again.

Time drifted, and by the time Nyota was conscious again, she was desperate for a chronometer. She'd never envied Vulcans something so much in the seemingly interminable time she'd spent in this box as she did their faultless internal clocks. Unconsciousness was not her friend.

When she shifted onto her side, her hand groping for Pavel's still, still form as she did each time she went another round with the waking world, she felt her skin prickle, and sat up sharply. More sharply than she should have, judging by the sharp ache in her skull and the slow turn of her stomach.

Romanoff was awake, too.

"Oh, thank god," Nyota rasped, a single part of her settling, knowing the woman hadn't succumbed to the kind of endless coma it felt like Pavel was in. He hadn't so much as stirred since he'd been with her, and by her best guess it had been more than a day since they'd been taken. More than a day since the only fluids he'd had were through hypospray—or not, there had been stretches of time they'd been separated, but how long—and it had more than a day since he'd eaten. If she remembered the shifts leading up to those awful minutes on that planet, he'd hadn't been eating properly in that time, either.

But Romanoff didn't move, or reply, or do anything to acknowledge her presence.

"Are you okay?" Nyota asked, in absence of anything better. Of course she wasn't, but that wasn't really the question Nyota was asking.

Are you hurt, did they do anything to you, do you need my help, can you help us? Talk to me, please.
But again, nothing. Romanoff sat against the wall, legs folded and still as death, only her open eyes betraying her wakefulness, only to shut again as soon as Nyota made contact with them.

Nyota made several more overtures of conversation; something, anything to get the woman to speak, but nothing was forthcoming. It was as if the woman had only waited long enough to be sure Nyota herself was alive before retreating to some unknown fortress that Nyota couldn't hope to shake with words alone, and didn't dare try to by touch.

There was enough danger from the people outside of this cage, she didn't want to take her chances with danger inside of it, as well.

Looking back to Pavel's dim, wan shape slumped next to her, Nyota figured there was danger enough with one of them already.

"Please wake up, Pavel," Nyota whispered, rubbing a palm across his warm, dry forehead. "Please."

The men who came and went left snatches of conversation with them. They were never fed, never given water (Nyota hadn't dared to ask for either, though her dry mouth longed for something to quench her thirst), and no one spoke directly to her. She tried to count the seconds, but her mind still drifted to blankness on the tide of pain and lethargy she couldn't shake, and it was a fruitless endeavor.

But when the men spoke, it was occasionally with mentions of deadlines and time. Information given freely and left carelessly around for her to gather and hoard and puzzle out.

So it was her best guess that it had been about thirty-five hours since she'd last seen the Enterprise. Twenty since she'd last been in Federation space, and nearly fourteen since she'd last spoken with another person, and now Nyota Uhura could safely conclude that she was freaking the fuck out.

She wasn't stupid, and god help her she believed that Jim Kirk wasn't stupid. At the very least, she had faith that Spock was definitely not stupid, and that the Enterprise hadn't gone after them. Being a communications expert had its advantages and disadvantages in this situation, and for her it had basically all broken even on the scale of her emotional well-being. These people that had taken them, whoever they were, had let enough slip past their lips that Nyota knew there had to have been at least some Klingon presence at the border when the shuttle that had taken them fled Federation space.

Knowing that there was a small armada of Klingon warbirds lining the Neutral zone near was useful information. On the one hand, she knew that there were more forces at work here than she had any possible way of understanding, but ultimately fell in the scope of something that someone, somewhere, could understand. Nothing was impossible to decipher.

On the other hand, there was nobody coming to their rescue.

Anybody even thinking about crossing the neutral zone would have been shot down before they'd even got a sniff in their direction. They'd been at warp since minutes after Nyota and the others had been loaded into the cargo bay—because they were cargo, what else could they be?—and now they were long gone from both Federation Space and any hope of a quick rescue.

Because a quick rescue meant no rescue. If Kirk had ordered the Enterprise to pursue... they were dead. Klingons didn't take prisoners, especially not Federation ones. They had no taste for leverage.

She'd quickly quashed that thought. As much as she wanted to punch Kirk in the face, or the dick,
on a regular basis, he was an astonishingly good Captain, and never would have risked the life of his entire crew to go after three people, Spock or no Spock. It had been a difficult thing for her to admit in the past, but faced with the reality of a life or everybody dies situation, she knew that he'd make the right call and leave them to their fate rather than get everyone killed. Even if everyone on the ship had volunteered to die to get them back, he never would have done it. She'd seen what he was willing to sacrifice to save them.

But, there was that eleventh hour Jim Kirk faith popping up at the absolute worst times. Namely the times in which she really, really hoped they'd be rescued.

It was a bittersweet thing, knowing that Captain Kirk would make the right call. Hoping that between he and Spock there was enough genius to find a way around it.

Pavel had been out longer than either she or Romanoff—so long, too long. Whatever drug they’d administered… somewhere in her brain she thought she knew what it was, that she'd been told, but couldn't remember. It obviously had a stronger effect on the skinny kid, and Nyota wondered if it was her strength training, genetics, or fierce determination that had dragged her out of the drug induced haze more quickly than her Russian colleague.

Well, one of her Russian colleagues at this point. Speaking of which, the other Russian prisoner-in-arms had thus far continued with her election not to talk at all, merely holing herself up on a tiny area of their combined cell and closing her eyes in a meditative position. It was creepy. It was Vulcan, which was creepy. Nyota had tried on two occasions to get a response out of her in what she guessed were the last six hours, both of which had yielded nothing but silence. She didn't dare touch the other woman, because she valued her own life, even if it might not be very long, but it didn't mean she wasn't really, really freaking out at this point.

As if she hadn't been freaking out since the moment of the invasion. Christ, she wasn't even supposed to be on planet.

God damn Kirk for keeping this from her.

She'd been trained for this. Kind of. More like she'd been trained for the possibility of something like this happening. Communications came with the same basic survival and combat training as every other profession, but it was a bit more heavy on the diplomacy and less on the how to keep yourself alive when kidnapped with little hope of rescue or retrieval situations. Yeah, she knew the protocol for torture and all that, but it wasn't like she had the information someone would want to torture out of her. Some technology and knowledge of Federation procedure, maybe some strategic geographical information, but even that was minor damage control to what a Captain or First Officer would know.

The thought made her stomach turn at what kind of training Kirk and Spock might have had to endure in the Command track, what they might have to endure in the near future if their roles had been reversed. If she knew Kirk, he would have traded places with any of them in a second.

With a shudder, Nyota wrapped her arms around her knees once more and huddled into her corner, keeping an eye and a hand on Chekov with the hope that he would wake up soon. If he didn't, she wasn't sure he would wake up at all.

Less than an hour later, she saw the first signs of life from both Pavel and Romanoff at the same time. The Ensign sputtered to life with a weak groan, and the woman who'd been seated across from her in an impressive lotus position opened her eyes to observe the occasion.

"Unnngh," Pavel said, rolling over onto his side away from where Nyota was seated next to him.
"Моя голова болит," he moaned, clutching his head with both hands. Uhura dug through her knowledge of Russian, trying to find something that might comfort him, but Romanoff interjected before she could speak.

"Не волнуйтесь. Я держать вас в невредимый," she rattled off, voice smooth and lilting. It took her a few more seconds to parse what she'd said, and she couldn't even be sure of the translation, because really? Russian wasn't extraordinarily useful unless it was a drunk Chekov, and both Sulu and Kirk were better at that than she was, but...

Chekov seemed to relax a bit, still moaning in pain but somehow latching on to the words Uhura barely understood. Unharmed and goad was the best she could come up with, but running through her personal translation matrix and working from context clues she figured Romanoff had said something reassuring so he wasn't totally freaking out by the time he reached full consciousness. She really needed to program her UT with more Terran languages.

Joining the party, Uhura scooted closer to the cringing Ensign and moved her hand to his shoulder. "Pavel? It's Uhura, I'm here."

Another shorter moan accompanied a cough before she received a response. "Lieu...Lieutenant Uhura?" He asked, his voice thick with the drugs still in his system.

"Yes, it's me. Natasha Romanoff is here with us as well. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, боже мой, my head hurts," the Ensign said, wrapping an arm around his eyes, but doggedly sitting up before uncovering them. "Where—I do not remember—" he said, looking around at their dark, cramped cell in the cargo bay.

"It's—" Uhura started, but bit her lip before she could say it's okay, because it wasn't, but every instinct inside of her was determined to protect him from all of this. "We're not on the Enterprise. We've been abducted... I—I don't know where we are, Pavel. I'm sorry," she finished lamely.

Pavel's eyes widened as he blinked to adjust to the almost nonexistent lighting. "But, we were just zere, I beamed down only minutes ago—ze Captain, my dewice—" he said weakly, his had shaking where they clutched at the hem of his gold tunic.

A few moments passed in which Nyota didn't know what to say and Natasha remained silent, but he spoke again, this time weaker.

"We have been taken," he said, voice small and resigned.

"Да," Natasha said, drawing his attention to her stiff form across the scant feet they shared. "Но мы не были," she said, a low hiss in her voice making Uhura draw back from Chekov momentarily before his hand reached out and gripped her own. She returned the squeeze in absence of knowing what else to do, still struggling with the Russian they were speaking, Natasha's even more difficult to parse than the normal bits and pieces Chekov spouted on a regular basis. Uhura was beginning to regret not having been more diligent in her studies.

"I'm here, Pavel," she said, clutching his hand. "I'm here," she said again, unable to mask the tremor in her voice as her own fear threatened to spill over.

"Да," Chekov echoed, huddling closer to Nyota, bringing her hand to his chest where another set of cold fingers gripped her own. "Да, Ms. Uhura, you are here," he said, a faint tremor in his voice. "I do not think zis is a good sign, howewer," he added, a small smile evident in his voice.

"No," Nyota answered, a watery smile of her own breaking through at having one of her crew back
with her again. "No it's really not, but I'm glad I'm here with you," she answered, shifting so they were huddled even closer together. The cell was cool, and a draft continuously swept through the infirm walls of their dank cage.

"Natasha," Chekov murmured, his voice slurred with sleep once more, "Ты в порядке?", he said, or asked, judging by the lilt of his voice as he struggled to make eye contact even as he fought the pull of the drug in his system once more.

"Да малютка. Спи, сейчас,", she answered, and Pavel went limp in her arms.

Nyota watched him sleeping, drugged but peaceful, before looking across the cell at the woman she had no reason to trust.

"What did you say to him?" She asked, wishing more than ever that her Russian were up to par, or that she'd done more to program her UT.

Natasha remained silent for so long that Nyota had given up upon receiving an answer. When she spoke it was like an afterthought chasing her into her own sleep.

"What he needed to hear."

"On your feet," the guard barked, prod levelled at them and ready to do damage.

Nyota couldn't move, paralyzed with fear. This wasn't the first time she'd stared down the enemy, but she was weak and sick and Pavel was a barely conscious thing beside her.

From the corner of her eye, she saw Romanoff tense, baring her teeth in an animalistic snarl as she rose into a crouch.

"Don't even try it," the guard said, smugness evident in his tone and he brandished the prod.

"Come at me if you think you can take me," Romanoff said, voice cool and dangerous. Honestly, Nyota couldn't tell how much of it was a bluff. She had no way of knowing what the woman had been put through on the other side of this cage, and if the drug had any effect on her like it had on Nyota, there wasn't much keeping her going.

Then again, the woman had evaded capture on the Enterprise through what even Doctor McCoy had surmised was iron will and sheer determination alone.

"Oh, I don't think I will," the man laughed, and Nyota didn't even have time to tense her muscles before the prod was jammed into her chest, lighting her nerves on fire.

Through the pain and disorientation, she heard the sound of a struggle. Shouting and movement and —

Nyota gasped, the sound of bone breaking loud and nauseating in close quarters. She shifted her quivering body in time to see the guard hit the floor, lifeless, broken neck twisting at an impossible angle even as three more flooded the entrance and blocked out the light.

Moving her body over Pavel's, the man babbling and incoherent beneath her, Nyota shut her eyes and ears to the sound of prods discharging and Romanoff's feral grunts and screams.

In the end, all three of them were dragged out, and beaten for their trouble.
Nyota couldn't find it in herself to regret that Romanoff had reacted when Nyota herself had been unable. Catching the woman's eyes as her head lolled against the back of the guard carrying her, she managed a few quick blinks before stretching her face in a pained smile.

"Nice... work," Nyota panted out, and she thought she caught the ghost of a bleeding grin before Romanoff passed out.

Yeah. This was bad, but at least one dead merc so far wasn't a bad show of it.

"Ms. Uhura, you must wake up!"

Nyota coughed and sputtered to life, jerking upward even as her head protested the movement and her stomach heaved.

"It is alright, I am here. Breathe," Pavel said from beside her, holding aside her matting hair as bile trickled from her throat.

"Pavel—" she rasped, choking in a breath. "What—"

"Zey are moving us again, you and Ms. Romanoff have been unconscious for forty minutes," Pavel said, the note of fear in his voice clear and present even to her spinning head.

"How—"

"I'm alive," Romanoff slurred, the sound distorted. Nyota chanced a look at her and saw the swelling on the lower half of her face where she'd evidently taken a few hits to the mouth. "Don't know what's happening, though."

"Ze guards, zey have been talking while zey thought I was asleep. I—I could not fight zem," Pavel said, voice trembling. "I am sorry zey hurt you again."

"Pavel, no," Nyota soothed, or tried to as she sat upright with his help. "You did good. It's alright. Tell us what's happening."

"I cannot be sure, but I believe we have stopped. I do not know where, but zis room," Pavel indicated the wide space around them. "It is cargo space equipped for beaming. We are leaving ze ship."

A noise from Romanoff's corner caused Nyota to turn her aching head, and she saw the woman flexing her bruised hands, readying herself for another fight.

"Don't," Nyota said, holding out a hand. "If you fight them again, they might kill you."

"They're not gonna kill me," Natasha snarled, turning her bright green eyes on Nyota, and she got the full extent of the woman's bruised and swollen face. "They need me. They need us. Mercs don't kidnap people for fun, they're handing us off to someone else. We don't do something now, we're in the wind, and Kirk isn't going to find us."

Nyota's heart clenched. What could she say, that Kirk was either dead or wasn't in pursuit? She held her tongue. If Romanoff was right about this, then this might be their last stand.

"Okay," she said, eventually, gripping Pavel's hand as she sat upright. "What do we do?"

"I'll go after them, distract them. You look for a communications device and run. Do what you have
to get some kind of beacon out. We're not going to get out of this, but we might stand a chance of tagging these idiots with something before we're sold."

Fear coiled tight in Nyota's gut, and she could feel the same in the way Pavel's hand shook. Christ, they were both of them barely conscious and functioning. How were they supposed to do this?

"I don't—I don't know if I can," Nyota started, but was struck silent by Romanoff moving directly into her space.

"You are the Communications Officer of the USS Enterprise, are you not?" Romanoff said, gripping her chin with strong fingers and forcing Nyota to look into her half swollen visage.

"Yes," Nyota said, sobbing on the word. God, she was so afraid.

"Then you can do this. We're on a Federation ship. This tech is yours, not theirs. I saw what you did back at that base. You can make this happen," Romanoff shook Nyota when she closed her eyes and sobbed again. "Look at me!"

She did, god help her, she looked into those fierce green eyes and held them, tears leaking from her own.

"These guys have weapons, they might even have combat training, they have every advantage over us, but they do not know who they are dealing with," Romanoff snarled, relaxing her grip to palm Nyota's face with both hands. "You are Lieutenant Nyota Uhura, and you are better than this scum. Tired, bruised and bloody, you can take them down. You and Pavel," Romanoff turned her head to look at him. "You can do this."

Nyota choked on sobs for a few moments, but stole her own breath back from the panic gripping her and nodded frantically. Right. Right. She could do this.

"Okay, okay. We'll do it. Their comms, they'll still have default Federation frequencies programmed. I can—" Nyota stopped, the panic bubbling through, but Pavel began speaking over her.

"We can trip ze defaults. Actiwate ze emergency beacons in ze internal hardware," the young man said, his own voice manic and trembling in their little huddle.

"Do what you need to do," Romanoff said, smoothing back Nyota's hair before releasing her. If she was in any pain from her obvious injuries, she didn't show it.

"Okay," Nyota repeated for the umpteenth time, smoothing back her own hair and catching her breath on hiccupping sobs.

After a minute, it felt like she had control over her own body again, and a numb purpose settled over her. Everything was bright and clear in the small space. Nyota could only brace herself for what was to come, but even as she did, she tried to take in her surroundings and make assumptions and extrapolations about the layout of the ship from what she remembered and what she could see.

"When they come," Romanoff started, looking calm and relaxed in her own corner of the room. "We stay still. They will come at us with their weapons and attempt to subdue us again. They'll take me first," Romanoff grinned, the first sign of anticipation Nyota had seen. "It will be their mistake. I'll disarm who I can. Take the prods, use them if you have to, but stay behind me and do not move until you see them come for me. Get to a console or whatever you have to do, just make it quick."

Romanoff breathed in and out, looking at the door as they waited. "There are more of them than us. Surprise and speed is our only advantage."
"Got it," Nyota said, surprised at the clarity of her own voice even as the sound passed her lips.

"Stay behind you, play dead. I can do zat," Pavel said, nodding firmly.

God, Nyota's heart broke for him. The hard, determined look on his face was so at odds with the gentle man she knew, Nyota could hardly fathom what had brought them here.

"Okay," she said again, and just focused on steadying her breath. There were footsteps approaching, and in that instant she nearly lost it. The fear, the panic, the doubt—all of it crushing her chest and making it impossible to breathe or think.

But a touch on her arm—Pavel—grounded her, and she relaxed again.

These mercenary sons of bitches might think they could take down officers of Starfleet easily, but they were in for a rude awakening.

The door opened, and Nyota slumped against the bulkhead, slitting her eyes open as the first guard entered with probe in front of him, moving toward Romanoff.

Which was, of course, their first mistake.

Things happened so fast, Nyota couldn't even begin to suss out where it went wrong.

Romanoff moved like a snake, and the first and second guards were dead before even Nyota knew what was happening. She watched, stupefied for a moment by the display, as Romanoff cut and struck at the men coming for them. If she didn't know better, Nyota wouldn't have questioned that this woman was the Augment that they assumed her to be.

She'd never seen something so swift and deadly in her life, not since Khan. This... it was almost more frightening, knowing that she was only human.

Before those thoughts could swamp her, Pavel was drawing her away and she was moving under her own power in spite of the groans and whining discharge of weapons in her wake.

"Come on, ze consoles must be zis way!"

Nyota followed him, noise and pain dogging her every step, but she blocked them out until all she could see was Pavel falling to his knees before a computer terminal, and Nyota got to work.

Now that she was here, it all seemed so simple. With Pavel's help at the hardware, breaking through the encryption was laughably quick.

They only got so far as the frequency tag, a redundancy she'd manufactured a hundred times in dozens of comm units, before they hit a wall.

"No," Nyota breathed, desperately searching for a solution, but at every turn red flashed in her vision and it wasn't working.

"Zey are coming!" Pavel said, dragging her away from the console as phaser fire burned into the screen and keys, reducing them to melted polymer and plastic.

The codes had been perfect, Pavel had cobbled together what he could, but it wasn't enough.
The hardware simply wasn't there. These mercs had ripped out the very heart of their communications, and without a beacon, all they had was a hopeless tag with a tiny range, blinking distress silently into a vacuum no one would ever see.

They'd barely made it to another corridor before more mercs blocked their vision. With a snarl, Nyota threw herself at them. She was done cowering and letting them hurt her and her own. From behind her she heard the sound of the prod and a breathless scream, but she couldn't do anything to stop it as another prod found its mark in her ribcage.

"No," Nyota shuddered, and the agonizing sting in her chest ensured that they were not getting out of this according to plan.

"On your knees, bitch," someone hissed at her, and Natasha snarled, smashing him in the face with her forehead, the motion creating black spots in her vision, but entirely worth it. A sharp crack across her face caused her to stumble to the ground, and then the coldness of a gun pressed to her head was familiar before it was removed and her head yanked to see where it was pointing.

"You try it again and I kill them, you got it?" The man sneered, wiping blood from his lips.

Breath coming in short huffs, Natasha didn't give him the satisfaction of a nod, but her inaction was answer enough. She was released roughly, and she stayed on her knees, hanging her head low for a moment as her ribs exploded in agony.

"Get the *dubi* down here to deal with them. Guys'll be here any minute."

Finally lifting her head to take in their surroundings, she connected the odd smells and strange feeling of the ground beneath her as another goddamn planet.

If it could be called that. Evidently these mercenary bastards had set up a tiny biodome, shimmering around the immediate area. Beyond that was a stretch of dust and dirt as far as she could see, surrounded by the cloudless black of space. Giant, rocky clusters obstructed the view of the stars, but she could see the floating remains of ships and other metal wreckage. A few oddly shaped silhouettes further out seemed to indicate outposts of some kind, but this place was dead. Probably used at some point, but not operational for a long time.

Great. Abandoned outposts always worked out so well for everyone involved.

Bright light and muffled sounds to her left alerted Natasha to others being transported to the surface.

"Shit," Natasha sighed, letting her shoulders sag for a moment. Two other officers, both of them unfamiliar, were being hauled over to where she knelt on the ground. The pale, green-skinned woman was with them.

When the base officers toppled without resistance, barely able to hold their bodies in an upright fetal position, Natasha felt rage coiling within her at the treatment. Christ, they were as out of their mind on whatever drug these bastards had been using as Natasha had been half a day ago. They probably had no idea where they were—Natasha could only speculate as to whether they'd been kept like that since the beginning or if it were just for the transport. Neither of them looked particularly threatening, though the one furthers from her had a remarkably unique and pig-like face. Perhaps they were more dangerous than they looked.

The green woman that the mercs called *dubi* was attending to them, checking them with a tricorder
and lifting their heads to peer into their faces before letting them fall again.

A second round of light had Natasha peering intently out of the corner of her eyes. She had to do her best to look beaten if she wanted any hope of gathering information from this... transaction. She didn't know if their ploy on the ship had been successful in any way. It had been a long shot, but it was desperate situation and they were running out of options. Her best hope now was to prepare for the long haul and just get the information that she could.

Closing her eyes, Natasha tried not to let herself feel anything about what that meant. What she'd have to do to survive this, to help the others survive.

After all, feeling nothing was the first step.

The sound of two more bodies hitting the dusty earth didn't stir Natasha, but she knew they were there, on her right. Two Starfleet officers on either side of her, and Natasha Romanoff in the middle with nothing but the 'Fleet blacks. No stripes or badges. Whoever came for them would know she didn't belong.

Well, that answered what the informant had been after, at least in part.

The alien woman made her way over to Natasha's companions, and Natasha growled at her for her trouble. The woman looked at her with something like vague interest, thin eyebrows arching on her face.

"I would say, dubi," the woman murmured in an accented Standard. "That you should be calm, to make this easier. But you," she cocked her head. "I think they want to see you fight."

Natasha glared for all she was worth, but a nudge in her back from the barrel of a rifle kept her from moving. She knew there were identical rifles pointed at the backs of the other prisoners, and as easy as it would be to get the weapon from the man behind her, she couldn't risk it. Not when there was nowhere for them to go.

"Incoming," one of the mercs said, and Natasha opened her eyes to track the movement as he stepped outside the biodome. The ground beneath them seemed to tremble before Natasha could actually see anything.

And then she saw it, and allowed herself to feel fear one final time before she shut it down completely.

A great, greyish shape descended from the atmosphere, at first growing quickly and then slowing as it reached the surface. It was at least four times the size of the ship that had taken them, but for the condition it was in, had seen twenty times as much use. The long, boxy shape was something almost like a large cruise-liner, small portholes dotting the sides of metal and other materials patchy with discoloration.

It touched down with a rumble, and dust swirled outside of the biodome, coming up in a cloud that obscured everything for a moment. Slowly, through the dust, a group of six men approached the dome and entered through it, accompanied by the merc that had left.

The change in the atmosphere was instantaneous, Natasha didn't try to hide, just evened her breath and watched as the men approached one another, bits of dust still swirling around the robes of the newcomers.

More aliens. Wonderful.
One of the men spoke, the sound lilting and sibilant. Natasha sharpened her gaze on the man, but next to her she could feel Uhura shifting, unconsciously leaning closer to listen. Likely she understood the language; an asset, if they were allowed to speak with one another. But Natasha had no guarantee of this, so she focused on reading as much as she could by what she saw alone.

A mercenary responded, and Natasha was focusing so intently that she almost missed that she could understand it at all.

"Yeah, all five of them."

It was difficult with only one side of the exchange from which to extrapolate, the alien man speaking firmly with short gestures. This had to be the buyer.

"Well the circumstances were not what we'd been expecting. Had to call in some extra firepower to cover our asses."

The alien waved his arm and the sound of his voice rose. The men with weapons around shifted nervously.

"Hey, Starfleet will deal with Kirk if the Klingons didn't get him already. He's as good as gone, either way. We've got two of his bridge crew and one of the Augments."

The grey alien turned its head to survey the line of them, and Natasha didn't flinch when its piercing green eyes met her own. They didn't linger, however, and continued the sweep, coming to rest on the two officers slumped on her left. The alien made a motion with its hand and spoke in the general direction of the merc as it strode over.

"Scooped them up in the confusion on the planet. Yours, on us. For your trouble."

The gaggle of green and grey skinned goons the berobed alien had brought with them looked even shiftier than before. The one in the robes stared at Natasha and the others assembled for a moment before nodding and turning around, saying something to the merc and beckoning him over. After a moment, one of the green skinned aliens walked over and threw down a bag at the merc's feet, which he then opened to reveal shining metal inside.

"Pleasure doing business with you," the merc grinned and motioned to his men.

"Ah," the grey skinned alien said, holding up a hand. "There is one more thing, gentlemen."

Natasha didn't even have time to blink before he had pulled out a weapon and shot the two base officers to the right in the back of their heads. Their bodies slumped lifelessly to the ground.

To her left, Uhura screamed and Chekov tried to scramble away.

Stunned but unmoved, Natasha held her kneeling position and stared straight at the grey skinned alien, her breathing unchanged even as he rounded the corpses to stand in front of her. As his goons came over to subdue the three of them that remained, he spoke in a heavily accented standard.

"We do not deal in Tellarites. Argumentative little creatures, more trouble than their niche market is worth. The other was... promising enough. But I am not interested in deals sweetened by accidents," he hissed.

With a smooth motion, the man reached into his robes and exchanged the gun for another shining piece of metal.
"Do not attempt to placate me with extraneous merchandise again," the man said, the 's' in his words drawn out like a delicate lisp.

"For your..." He tucked the metal in the shocked merc's pocket and smoothed the fabric with a delicate looking hand. "Trouble."

Before Natasha could see what happened next, some kind of bag was shoved over her head, and she managed to get one good kick in before she was out.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Моя голова болит - Russian. "My head hurts."

Не волнуйтесь. Я держать вас в невредимый - "Don't worry. We'll keep you safe."

боже мой - "My god."

Да. Но мы не били. - "Yes. But we are not beaten."

Ты в порядке? - "Are you okay?"

Да малютка. Спи, сейчас. - "Yes, little one. Sleep, now."

ʃɪx-gog - Orion. A drug; loose translation is "Waking Dream"

seab - Orion. "Sister"

dubi - Orion. "Slave"

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Happy New Year for those who are celebrating, folks! As I post this, my Winter Recess is coming to an end, and in case anyone was wondering, I spent more time fanfictioning (and binging on Sons Of Anarchy) than drunk, but it has been rejuvenating. This story will be following the two arcs separately until they merge, again, and I'll have Chapter 23 up before the next two weeks are out, so we'll get to see what our intrepid rescue team is up to in the mean time.

!!ART ALERT!!

CherryMountain has lovingly crafted some fanart for EMH (I can't get over this. Seriously.); so check that shit out in "Related Works". Give her kudos and stuff because that's awesome.

As always, your love and comments are appreciated. <3

-OD
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

The haphazard crew is faced with a decision that really sucks, Tony is still pissed about Bruce being on ice, Steve gets a new job, and Jim and Clint really don't like each other.

Chapter Notes

As always, thanks to Kay for keeping me from deus ex Kirk-ing all the plot details. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Atmosphere?"

"Inhospitable, three percent oxygen in the highest concentrations," Spock responded, as they all gazed at the planetoid out of the viewing port.

"Get a lock on the positions of the signatures you detected. We're going down there."

"Coordinates locked."

Tucking an arm across his chest and rubbing his free hand across his jaw, Jim looked at his haphazard bridge crew before sighing to himself.

"Attention crew," he said, abruptly leaning over to the Captain's chair and activating the ship-wide comm. "Assemble in the mess in three minutes."

"Captain?" Sulu said, already locking his station and following Jim to the hatch.

"Away team," Jim said, then shot Spock a look. Judging by the way the man hadn't moved from his position, he already knew what Jim would say. "Hold down the fort, Mr. Spock."

"I will endeavor to do so for the next ten minutes, Captain," Spock answered with a lift of his eyebrow.

Jim turned his head to hide a half smile, and descended the narrow stairway, Barton and Sulu on his heels.

When Jim arrived to the mess with the others, most of his crew was already gathered. Astrid sat away from Rogers and Bones who were... chatting in a strangely amicable way.


"Little bit, yeah," Clint said, nodding in their direction before taking the seat across from Astrid. Scotty and Stark breezed in a few seconds later, heads bent low as they spoke in hurried, hushed tones.
Not nearly as disconcerting as that, Jim thought, with a rueful but mindful shake of his head.

Jim would have to have a poke through Engineering when he got the chance. Those two working on something did not bode well.

"Alright, guys," Jim said, when everyone had sat. "Post's abandoned and Spock is running every scan we've got to pick up a trace for the merc ship, but we need to go down there to investigate what's on the ground. If the mercs stopped through here on their way to wherever they're going, they had a reason, and there has to be something they left behind."

"Just say it, Kirk," Barton sighed out.

"Say what?" Rogers said, sitting up straighter.

Jim wanted to punch Barton for a second, but mostly because the man was stepping all over the tact he was trying to display.

Sighing loudly, Jim flopped down into an empty chair and gestured to the air. "Spock picked up some inert organic signatures. Sometimes that means depleted organic waste from old power cores, but in the mass we're looking at, it means bodies."

The hush that settled in the room was thick and suffocating. Jim didn't waste time in breaking it.

"That doesn't mean it's them," Jim said, his voice brooking no room for argument. "But it does mean we have to check." Before anyone could speak, Jim laid it out. "Barton, Astrid, and Bones are with me. Stark, you stay in Engineering. Spock is handling everything else, so Scotty, you've got the conn with Sulu at the controls. Anything goes south with the ship, you hand over the conn and get your ass back to the guts. Rogers, I want you on stand-by for back-up. We beam down in five after we equip for the atmosphere. Questions?"

"Yeah," Stark said, his face changed completely from the bright-eyed mania it had been when he'd walked into the room. He wore a dark, serious expression as he looked at the table in front of him, fists clenched together in his lap. "What do we do if it is them?"

When Stark's eyes snapped up to his without a motion of his head, Jim fought the urge to lean back. The coldness on his face was almost frightening to behold.

It was a coldness Jim understood.

"Then we hunt the fuckers down and make sure they can't do it to anyone else," Jim said.

Like he'd passed a test, Stark nodded and abruptly left the table, leaving only Rogers to half stand as if to go after him.

"Gear up. Weapons and tricorders. We need to be prepared for anything," Jim said, and waited until everyone but Rogers had filed out. "I need you in a suit. If we need back-up down there, you won't have time to do anything but say 'energize'. Got it?"

"Yes, sir," Rogers said, and saluted him, but hesitated a moment before speaking again. "Do you really think it's not them?"

Jim contemplated Rogers face for a moment, trying to put a name to the gut feeling he had, but he couldn't. Borrowing Spock's brand of convincing people, Jim put as much into words as he could.

"If they took people from my crew, if they took Romanoff, it was for a reason. If it was to lure us out
here, we'd know by now, and I don't think that's it. They've got no leverage—" or profit, Jim didn't say. "—if they kill them, and mercs don't take people for shits and giggles." Jim steeled himself. "It's not them."

Rogers searched his face, and eventually nodded. They both left.

It wasn't them.

"Son of a bitch," Bones said, his voice hushed coming over the comm as he leaned down next to the two lifeless forms on the ground.

Jim closed the space between them and sucked in a breath. "Shit," he breathed.

"Phasers to the head, both of them," Bones grit out, gingerly shifting Ensign Merridor's head to one side and exposing the charred remains of his skull. Jim's stomach turned, but he forced himself to look. "Not 'Fleet issue, but that doesn't give us much. Hard to say in this environment, but T'Sen's tertiary systems only shut down in the last hour. They've been dead at least six."

Bones sat back and stood up, staring down at his tricorder. "Not much to go on. Trace elements are the same as you'd see on any ship, but—" Bones broke off, fiddling with the instrument before showing it to Jim. "That right there is something you don't see in Federation space."

Jim took the tricorder and examined the readings for the compound, his brow furrowing before shooting up on his forehead. "Fuck me. What the hell are mercs doing with \( \text{\textit{fix-gog}} \)?"

" Couldn't tell you. But it's bad news," Bones packed up his tricorder and stared down at the bodies of the two base crewmembers that had been taken along with Uhura, Chekov and Romanoff.

Damn right it was bad news. If they had been dosed with a drug that slavers and the \textit{etadrubran} used to keep their haul docile, that could only mean the mercs had dealings with Orions.

The thought made Jim more sick than the sight of the two murdered officers in front of him.

Jim turned around to walk away, but almost ran right into Barton. The man was stock still, eyes flitting methodically back and forth across the scene in front of them and around it.

"They were killed here," he said, without preamble.

Apparently unfazed by the intrusion, Bones just made a sound of agreement. "They were. I'm a doctor, not a crime scene investigator, but dust doesn't move much without help, out here. They weren't dumped."

"They had the others with them," Barton said, stepping carefully around the bodies to stare at the ground surrounding them. "Here," he pointed. "The five of them were all kneeling in a row. Had eight different people on them, at least. Not much of a scuffle, but someone put up a fight. I don't see those boot prints anywhere else, so they were probably carried away."

"Anything else?" Jim asked. He could see the marks Barton was referring to, but couldn't interpret them the same way, at least if he was right about it. Bones' comments about the man's eyes were coming back to him.

Barton glanced at him briefly before hopping over those prints and striding to a spot a few meters away.
"Second set of people, not wearing the same gear, and not wearing the same boots as one another, were over here," Barton indicated the area. "Only one of them went over to the other group and..." Barton traced the marks on the ground over to the bodies. "That's the one that shot them. They never saw it coming. I'm guessing that was before one of ours started raising hell."

Jim didn't miss how he'd referred to all three of the captives as "ours".

Swallowing the bile in his throat, Jim nodded tightly. "This was a hand-off, then. A deal."

Barton shot him a look, scrutinizing his face. "Could be. You sound pretty sure about it, though."

"Drugs," Jim pointed to the two Ensigns on the ground. "Illegal in the Federation. Orion make. Pretty common with people who deal in... trafficking," he finished, unable to say the words 'slaves'.

The man briefly closed his eyes behind his visor; fists clenched, one on the phaser that hadn't left his hand since they'd beamed down.

"So the mercs don't have them anymore," Barton said shortly, eyes still roving about the area.

"We can't know for sure, but the mercs wouldn't come here if that weren't the case. Spock," Jim said into his comm.

"Spock here."

"Do you have any readings that can confirm a second, unknown ship in the area?"

There was a pause on the other end. "Affirmative. Using an unknown variable to separate out the outliers has isolated an additional warp signature of significantly different caliber."

"Okay. Doctor McCoy has incoming data transfer. Stand by. Kirk out."

Replacing his comm, Jim turned around in a circle for a moment, trying to get his head around how fucked this situation could be in so little time. They were six hours behind a fucking trade-off with the Orions or people who did business with them. If they didn't catch a solid lead, his people would be in the wind and they'd have to scour all of Orion space to find them.

"Fuck!" He swore vehemently under his breath.

"Captain?" Astrid said, from half a dozen meters away, leaning toward the ground and motioning him over.

"What is it?" He asked, jogging over with Barton and Bones on his heels.

"Um," Astrid said, sounding choked up and pointing to the—oh.

"It's a goddamn finger," Bones said, pulling his tricorder out again to examine the appendage.

"Jesus christ," Jim said, feeling fit to burst out of his skin before Bones sighed audibly.

"Not one of theirs," Bones said. "By the looks of it, one of our friends bit this fucker's finger off. Can't say for sure whose quite yet but—"

"Natasha," Barton said, looming again.

"Well, it probably wasn't Chekov, but—ah, well," Bones blinked down at his tricorder. "Yeah. It was Romanoff."
It was a macabre and frankly, disturbing, proof of life, but Jim would take it. "Holy hell," Jim sighed with relief. "That means they're alive. They were here. We're following the right trail."

"Yeah, and if this trail has any more of Romanoff to do with it, she'll be leaving us body-part breadcrumbs to follow," Bones muttered, picking up the finger with a pair of forceps and sealing it into a sterile bag.

"Astrid, get a broad scan of the area, we're packing it in. We need to focus on that signature and follow it."

“Hold on a second,” Barton said, striding away from to bodies a few meters, only to stop and crouch down at the ground.

“What?” Jim said, jogging over to him with Bones and Astrid at his heels.

Barton stood and began walking slowly away from the spot.

“Look,” he pointed to the ground, and Jim almost didn’t see anything. Hell, the further away from the spot to which Barton had walked, there was nothing to see.

“There was a biodome,” Jim breathed. “Shit, they didn’t even have masks. They had the tech for a temporary mirodome,” Jim seethed.

“Some kind of barrier, at least,” Barton said, and jogged in the other direction, coming to stop in—

“Holy shit,” Jim breathed, turning around and looking at the giant print of a ship landing on the ground. No wonder they hadn’t seen the evidence, it was forty meters, maybe more, away from the bodies of the officers they had found.

But a ship had landed here. Big enough for a haul, small enough not to raise any eyebrows with… hell, anyone.

“Hell,” Jim said. “I guess we found our proof of another ship,” he said, following Barton around the perimeter. When they’d come full circle, Jim nearly bumped into Bones.

"Jim," Bones said, halting him from moving any further. "What about them?" He pointed to the two bodies half a dozen meters away.

Clenching his jaw, Jim wrestled with himself for a moment.

"How many homing pods do we have?" Jim asked.

Bones didn’t hesitate before answering. "Five."

"Tag them. We're sending them home," Jim said, then comm'd Scotty to beam them all back to the ship.

They had some fucking slavers to catch.

Not one of the people on the ship objected to using one of the homing rescue pods to send the bodies of Ensigns Merridor and T'Sen back to Federation Space. It was small enough that it would be undetectable until it reached safe space, and the preprogrammed distress transponder would broadcast its location on all available Federation frequencies until pick-up.

By then, Jim Kirk and his rogue crew would be long gone from the abandoned post.
“Okay, where does this leave us? What’s our next move?” Stark asked, leaning forward over the table.

Shooting him a slightly annoyed look, Jim met Spock’s gaze and nodded.

"With the information gathered from the away team, I was able to isolate the anomalous readings from existing warp data. There were indeed two ships present in this area. The battle-ship with which we engaged yesterday was not one of them, or was too well cloaked to be detected."

"Unlikely," Scotty said firmly. "Even a cloaked ship that size cannae block its own warp signature. 'Tis why the Klingons value their stealth over their size and firepower. They cannae outrun you or hope to catch up if you get away, but they'll sneak attack you before you know which way’s up. Marcus may have had a bloody mad genius to help engineer his death ships, but even a genius can't bust through those laws of physics. The mechanics dinnae exist yet. A ship that size leaves a trace. *We* leave a trace," Scotty emphasized, like it was a personal affront. "'Tis just much harder to detect as it sustains through the warp, because our ship is a wee little bugger."

"Okay, so the battle-ship is in the wind. That's—something," Jim sighed, rubbing his aching eyeballs and wishing he knew what. "But the other ship that was here. I'm betting on Orion, but what do we know for sure?"

"It is indeed not a Federation vessel, given the trace energy signatures. Possibly an Orion or Romulan vessel, with the former, as you suggest, a higher probability given the circumstantial evidence of the drugs Doctor McCoy detected in Ensign Merridor and T'Sen's systems."

"We got a trail to follow?"

"Not a trail, but a trajectory," Spock paused. "Two trajectories."

"Two?" Rogers parroted.

"Indeed," Spock said, pulling up a holo-screen from the center of the table, highlighting the reconstructed trajectory based on the scans of the area. "The stolen shuttle and the unknown ship departed in two different directions.

A moment of thick realization settled over the assembled crew.

"Fuck me," Barton muttered, staring at the screen.

Jim internally agreed, settling back in his chair and looking at the two trails heading literally in opposite directions with defeat.

"So which one do we follow?" Astrid said, looking between Jim and Spock with wide eyes.

"That," Jim sighed out, scrubbing a hand down his face as his head throbbed. "Is an excellent question."

"One we can't answer until we answer a few others," Barton said, eyes flicking over the screen like if he stared at it long enough the answers would leap out at him.

"Well Jim, you said it yourself, this little rendezvous was a deal going down," Bones cut in. "So the real question is, did it happen? If the mercs handed them off—" sold them, Jim interpolated. "—then we go after the new ship. If it didn't, we go after the shuttle."

"And how the fuck do we figure that out? All we know is that at least one of the bastards wasn't
satisfied with the *merchandise,*" Stark spat.

Staring hard at the table in front of him, Jim let the haze of the heated conversations popping up around him fade out. Furrowing his brow in concentration, Jim let the itch in his brain take over, drifting in the facts and assumptions and gut instincts he'd been riding on since this whole debacle began.

"Why would they kill Merridor and T'Sen if they weren't going to take the others? What's the point in that? If it was a deal gone bad, there'd be more bodies."

"Well maybe if the other guys had more firepower, the mercs would have just cut and run."

"The stolen Starfleet shuttle would outmatch any comparable vessel for firepower and maneuverability. Even a big one like tha’ print suggests. T’was a transport ship. Very unlikely a defensive ship like tha’ had bigger guns."

"Well, they were Ensigns based in a backwater burner base. Not much strategic value in them, especially if the mercs were getting inside intel from someone else. They might have been taken by accident; there was a lot of beaming going on."

"So, what, 'thanks but no thanks' and drop the dead weight? That's fucking cold, not to mention bad business if you’re in the market for people selling."

"They're Slavers, Stark. Cold is what they are. People are a commodity bought and sold for whatever their bodies or maybe their brains can do. And the Orions—" Jim shook his head. “They deal very literally. They’re opportunistic, yes, but when they make deals with outsiders, they don’t haggle and they don’t budge. Whoever was sent here either had a good idea of what they wanted or were willing to take. If the base officers were an accident, well—" Jim shook his head sadly. “T'Sen was Tellarite and Merridor... maybe he was too old. Fucked if I know what those bastards are thinking.

“It sounds more like a scare tactic,” Barton said. “Demonstrating what would happen if the others resisted. Show them that they’re expendable and won’t hesitate to kill them if they cause trouble.”

“Well we can see how well that worked out for them,” Bones muttered, and Jim knew he was thinking about the severed Orion finger.

"But this was targeted,” Barton emphasized. “I think Astrid is on to something about them being taken by accident. This wasn't a raid, a fucking smash and grab. The whole thing reeks of a hit. Not a particularly flawless one, but even amateurs can pull that shit off if they're being bankrolled enou —"

"That's it," Jim blurted, pointing at Barton as a few things clicked into place. The informant, the kidnappings, the raids... "Money and buyers," Jim breathed.

"What?" A variety of voices chorused, echoing the word in sentiment if not verbatim.

"Mercs want money," Barton said, eyes calculating as he voiced tentative agreement.

“But they went through an awful lot of trouble to line up the attack on the base like they did,” Jim said, brow furrowed. Christ, there just was *not* enough to go on. Not for the first time, he wished they’d caught the informant and been able to squeeze the fucker for intel. “It had to be specific. It wasn’t just a smash and grab, they *planned* it. If we’re right about the informant, then it’s at least partly an inside job, as well.”

“But it’s still about the money,” Barton leaned forward, tapping his fingers on the table. “Complex
abduction aside, they went through a lot of fucking trouble before we ran them off, and two dead bodies means that they might not have gotten what they came for.”

“Not all of it,” Jim said, staring at Barton with consideration.

After a moment, Bones let out a groan. “Ah, shit. What the hell did I tell you when we went out, Jim? Fucking frozen people and our ship.”

“Oh,” Rogers said. “Do you really think they were after—” He trailed off, looking at his hands and then from Barton to Stark.

“If they were getting information from the mole on the Enterprise,” Spock interjected. “The mercenaries who attacked Starbase 91 and the temporary base on the Class L planet would have known well in advance of your presence.”

“And dug in for a cash cow,” Jim supplied. “Shit, the mercs had been working with Marcus while Khan was still doing his thing. They’d know exactly how much a supposed augment would get them in Orion space.”

“And they got Natasha,” Barton said, his tone flat and dangerous.

“Wait,” Stark said. “If this was all about us, like you’re saying, then what about your crew? Chekov and Uhura? You said Orions deal literally. Why do we have two dead bodies instead of four?”

The thought made Jim’s gut clench tight. It wasn’t a question he wanted to answer, not that he was so sure he even could.

“I don’t know. If they were after you guys, they’d have no reason to keep Chekov and Uhura,” Jim responded, feeling lost and more than a bit terrified at what that implied. Did that mean they were alive, but still with the mercs? Were Romanoff and his crew warping in two different directions?

Were they going to have to choose who to save?

“You’re famous,” Rogers blurted, suddenly, and all eyes turned to him.

“What?” Jim asked.

“You, your crew. I—” Rogers shifted under the scrutiny of multiple sets of eyes. “—read about it. Would that make a difference? High profile, ah,” Rogers looked a bit sick as he said the word. “Merchandise?”

Everyone sat in a stunned, considering silence.

“That is not an illogical point,” Spock said. “Even in Orion space, the Enterprise is likely well-known.”

“So maybe the mercs were after more than just us,” Barton said, staring Jim down as he did. “Aren’t we all so fucking popular,” he said with derision and thinly veiled violence as he pushed up from the table.

“An Augment and two off Kirk’s crew,” Bones sighed. “Guess that would fetch a pretty penny.”

“So we follow the money,” Stark interjected, gesturing widely. “We go after the mystery ship that —” Stark faltered momentarily before spitting out the words: ”—bought our friends.”

“If the mercenaries were just the intermediaries, they'd want to get rid of hot cargo like that. They'd
have to know someone would come after them eventually. It would make the most sense for the
mercs to get rid of them, even if it wasn't the deal they were hoping for," Rogers said, surprising Jim
with the addition.

"If the fucking slave trade in the twenty-third century is anything like trafficking in the twenty-first,
we don't have a big window to find them before they're parceled off," Barton amended darkly.

"Assuming whoever bought them intends to sell them," Rogers said. When he evidently noticed the
asking looks thrown his way, he blinked and elaborated. "If this has been in the works for as long as
you suspect," Rogers nodded to Jim and Spock, "Then there might be another buyer already, if the
ones the mercs sold them to aren't exactly that person."

"They won't be," Jim said with conviction. He'd learned a lot from Gaila in their short time together.
The memories stung, but they were important enough in the here and now to push past the tide of
regret. "Owners and buyers keep their shit separate. The people who take on new property want to
be as removed as they can from the point of origin to keep themselves insulated from shit like us,"
Jim said with vehemence. "Unhappy family members or anyone else looking for captured slaves is
bad for business. Either way, it's the same story. We have to move quickly."

Jim stood, surveying his gathered crew, haphazard as it was; met the eyes that settled on his.
Shit. Decision time.

Sometimes being the Captain sucked. God. He hoped they were right about this.

“We follow the money. We’ll pursue the Orion ship,” Jim said decisively. At least he hoped it was
decisive. There couldn’t be any waffling on this. If it came down to it, the decision would be on his
head when things went to shit, and he’d have to own it.

"So, we’re agreed, then?" Rogers said, looking at everyone just as Jim had. Right. He’d been their
Captain once upon a time, as well.

"About going after the mystery ship? Sounds like the best plan," Stark said, his shrug belied by the
anxiety written all over his face.

"I agree," Spock said, standing in a show of solidarity that surprised Jim, just a little. "Without
additional hard evidence or further data and at the risk of losing any path of pursuit, we cannot hope
to reach a definitive conclusion. We must pursue the most likely trail."

Jim blinked even as a chorus of agreeing answers responded to his pronouncement.

"Okay," Jim said. "Let's get on it. Back to stations, everyone. We're moving out."

Like a breath being released, the tension in the room dropped, and ideas immediately started flowing
again. With a direction, they were in motion.

They dispersed, the movements speaking of both purpose and desperation.

Yeah. As he made his way to the bridge with Spock alongside him, Jim could only revel in feeling
the exact same thing.

A fist striking the wall was the first thing Tony registered after the Starfleet people left. Tony didn't
have a better moniker for them, yet. Space people seemed a bit... off, considering he and the rest of
the Avengers present were rapidly approaching the same territory.
"Hey, Barton, come on man, what did that bulkhead ever do to you?"

"This," Clint bit out, clenching a probably throbbing fist at his side. "Is bullshit."

"Which part, exactly? Because I'm inclined to agree with you on all fronts, but frankly there's a lot of bullshit to—"

"Shut up, Stark!" Clint snapped, forcing Tony to halt his babbling in the same instant. "The bullshit is that we're too far behind these fuckers to be of any use!" The man ground out, before ramming his fist twice more into the bulkhead in quick succession, leaving blood smeared in his wake.

"Clint, stop," Steve said, moving swiftly to catch Clint as he made to punch the wall again. "Get a grip," Steve said, not unkindly but with firm resolve.

Tearing himself away from Steve, Clint fixed the man with a poisonous look. "Don't tell me to get a grip, Rogers," Clint snarled. "We both know the odds and stats with abductions and trafficking. We're behind the fucking eight ball on this already, and we've got a fucking coin flip telling us which way to even go if we want to find bodies!"

"Hey!" Tony interjected, his stomach bottoming out even as he spoke. "You're the one who agreed that they're on the other side of whatever deal went down, Hawkeye," Tony emphasized. "I'm trusting your freaky eyeballs on this. Don't tell me you're second guessing."

"I'm not second guessing shit," Clint spat. "I'm saying this is fucked. If we were hunting them down in fucking Eastern Europe I'd be saying the same thing. This isn't Taken, goddammit," Clint spun around, damaged hand raking a line of blood through his unkempt hair. "It's not so simple as just following them! Traffickers have routines and protocols to throw people like us off the trail. We might be following them, but we're not gonna catch them."

"Stop it," Steve said, desperation coloring his voice. "Clint, just stop. We can't think like that. She's out there, we just need to trust Kirk and keep at it. We'll find her."

"Yeah," Clint rasped out the word, turning his tumultuous gaze on both of them. "But we're gonna be too late."

"Fuck. That," Tony ground out, finished with the panicky doom and gloom. That shit was his job, not Clint's. "If we have to tear whatever sordid fucking operation these alien fucks have to the ground, we'll do it, but we'll find her. We'll find all of them and they'll be alive, so stow your fucking crap and get your head in the game. We've only got room for one unhinged superhero on this ship, and that seat's fucking taken," Tony said, the shake in his voice belying what he really thought of Clint's assessment.

Their odds of finding Natasha alive and whole had grown grimmer the longer they waited. Now that they knew she was in the hands of people who'd bought and paid for the privilege of having her, they'd stooped even lower. But hey, fuck them if they hadn't dealt in shitter odds than that before and come out on top.

"Tony," Steve sighed. "Don't."

"What," Tony asked, spreading his arms and looking around. "You think I don't know how compromised I am, that my crazy doesn't just sneak the fuck in and drag me off to la-la land at a moment's notice?" Tony's voice shook, but he powered through. "I know, Rogers. I'm the weakest goddamn link, here, so I need to know that you guys can do this, because I'll do my best to be your pet genius, but I'm gonna check out on you guys sooner or later, and Natasha needs better than that.
She needs her partner and Captain America gunning to get her back, because I'm not a hundred percent in this game."

His hands were shaking, and Tony folded his arms tightly across his chest to conceal the tell. Not that there was much point, given they were all intimately acquainted with the extent of his crazy, but he may as well stand tall if he was going to admit how much his touch and go sanity scared even him.

"Tony," Clint sighed, the wind evidently taken out of his sails. "That's not—we need you, too," Clint said, letting his own arms fall to his sides.

Tony looked at the floor, unable to meet Clint's gaze.

"He's right," Steve interjected. "We wouldn't have made it this far if not for you. I know it's been hard for you, that not having Bruce around is—"

"Don't talk to me about Bruce," Tony snapped, darting his head up to look at Steve. "Not when none of you will back me up on letting him out."

"We all know if you thought he could be out, he would be," Steve said. "You agreed with us."

"Under fucking _duress_," Tony growled mulishly. "He's my friend, our friend, and I trust him. This is as shitty as it's ever been, but he can handle it."

"We just don't know that for sure. We all saw what happened at that base—" Tony's heart leapt at the memory, and he closed his eyes tightly. Steve faltered as if realizing what mentioning it meant, but he plowed onward. "And back on the planet. Accidents happen anywhere, and even Bruce can't stop the Hulk if he's badly hurt. A spaceship is just too much of a risk for Bruce."

Tony closed his mouth tightly against the defiance that wanted to spew, knowing that somewhere along the line, that would be true. Bruce could handle a lot. He'd been hurt before and kept the Hulk at bay, but the line was always drawn at the point of physically mortal danger.

"Whatever," Tony mumbled, annoyed that he didn't have anything more clever to say. He was just _done_ with this conversation. "Can we just—can we pretend for a minute that this doesn't suck as much as it does, and just do what we have to? This is Natasha, we're talking about. If you're not gonna have faith in Bruce, have faith in her."

It was Clint who spoke next.

"Come on, man," Clint sighed, the sound heavy in the enclosed space. "You know how I feel about Banner and the Big Guy. It's not him I'm worried about, and you know what?" Clint straightened, flexing his bleeding hand. "You're right. Nat's probably the best of us to be on the other side of this. She's not gonna take it lying down."

The turn of phrase washed over them, and even the expression on Clint's own face morphed into one of morbid fear.

"Hey," Steve said into the quiet. "Come on, let's get your hand looked at."

"Yeah, sure," Clint replied, staring at the limb like it didn't belong to him, corded muscles quivering as he clenched and unclenched his fist.

"I'll be down in my lair with the crazy Scotsman," Tony said, and quickly turned on his heel to exit the scene, his stomach sitting heavy inside of him as Steve lead Clint away.
"Ach, ye bloody menace!" Scott growled as he flapped at his hand and brought the offended digit to his mouth.

"And you call yourself an expert," Tony chided, striding over to where the man was working and peering over his shoulder. "How's it going?"

"Bloody painful, ye great bastard," Scott grumbled, plunging his fingers back into the work with as little regard for the injury, as any engineer worth his salt did. Good man. "But 'tis goin'. See this here?" Scott pointed to a jumble of wires connected to a small, very small, data port.

"I do," Tony grinned. Yeah, he knew what that was.

"Well, that little beauty there is gonna light up like a damn yule log when we're finished here, and we'll all be singin' praises to Saint Nick when it does."

"Atta boy," Tony clapped him on the shoulder, heedless of the curse it drew from the other man. "Keep on it. Let me know when you get the hardware finished and we'll start on your coding lessons."

"Lessons?" Scott parroted back to him, voice thick with indignation. "Lessons?! I'll give you lessons, ye bloody cretin! Why—"

Scott's complaining faded into the background, and Tony felt hard pressed to keep the smile from sliding off of his face.

But it did, because the further away from the engineering bay he got, the closer he got to the cold thing that sat in his chest, and it didn't have a fucking thing to do with the lump of metal sitting in his sternum.

Tony stood by Bruce's cryotube, silent. It felt like silence filled his time, now. Where he'd filled the space ranting at JARVIS or even himself, in the past, he never felt like there was much to say, these days.

These days. It might be easier if by 'these days' he meant the time since he'd awoken from a one way trip to the twenty-third century, but he knew as well as everyone else that 'these days' were far more than just that blip on the radar from the past year of hell.

The light vibration of the ship under his feet was soothing in a really fucked up way. Standing there in the cargo bay, it was like a ginormous, space-faring version of the suit with him at the center. All of his genius was only useful while he was inside of it; outside, what did he have? Sure, he was still a genius. He'd hacked a centuries-ahead and partially-alien coding system in minutes and invented at least three new little gadgets since crawling fresh and crispy from his frozen coffin, but.

He wasn't Iron Man. Hell, he was barely Tony Stark. Now that his legacy, his money and his reputation were gone, it felt like his personality was obsolete.

And who was he kidding? Those weren't the only parts of him missing. Somewhere along the line he'd lost his sanity. Not the boring, regular joe sanity. Shit, he'd never had that. Might've been nice. No. The sanity that was like one of his machines. Complex, intricate—flawed, in some ways, something that might have worked better if someone else were running the show, but absolutely sufficient for his needs—and so at odds with how the world thought it should function that they didn't try to understand it, just put it in a box that held it but didn't fit and went on about its business of being normal and boring.
Now he felt like a computer with broken code, some essential program that just couldn't write what it needed to whenever it was called to task. Lag. Not enough RAM. Ctrl+Alt+Delete.

Dashing that thought aside with a grimace, Tony leaned his palms and forehead against the cool metal of the cryotube and sighed.

No—that—he was just being fucking dramatic. His brain might act like a sputtering old Dell, he might be the proverbial prince made pauper, but... if there was one thing his broken brain hadn't managed to forget, it was that he was still brilliant. He was who he was. His genius had always been a part of him, before MIT and during a kidnapping venture in Afghanistan. When he was old and wrinkly and so demented he couldn't remember his own name, he'd probably be churning out inventions and wrecking the electronics. So what if he'd learned to be a reckless asshole by virtue of having lots and lots of money to back it up? He'd plowed through more than a few sticky situations by not caring what people thought of him, seen the results of blunt honesty in the way people dealt with him.

The twenty-third century really wasn't all that different, as far as he was concerned. Newer tech, a handful of shiny new questions about ethics and morality, aliens— whatever. People were people and ego was ego, and Tony Stark kicked ass at ego.

He just... really missed Bruce. And the big guy. He might have thought that it was incredibly unfair that neither of them got to experience this future and everything it had to offer, despite what they'd lost. But hey, since when had he been a champion of shit being fair and just, right? Right. No feels. Nothing to see here.

Bruce had just made his newfound crazy easier to handle. He was the one pressing the fucking ctrl+alt+delete when Tony needed it. Again and again, without complaining about the faulty operating system or wondering what stupid malware had been downloaded to make it function like a dimestore piece of shit when it used to run so beautifully.

Looking down through the frosted glass that obscured all but Bruce's right eye and a bit of his forehead, some curl peeking in from above, he thought he might really, actually miss having someone around who could both ignore his babbling and call him on his bullshit when they were actually listening. And then, you know, smash the shit out of some bad guys while saving him from imminent, gravity induced death every now and then.

Tony didn't talk to the cryotube, because that would be stupid and pointless. But he kind of wanted to. Again, stupid. Read: pointless and nonsensical and apparently therapeutic. But fuck therapy, man. Tony was so not into therapy. He had robots and Iron Man and lots and lots of—

Nothing. He didn't... he didn't have any of those things.

The last act of the great Tony Stark: fading into obscurity and insanity.

Stuffing down the hot bitterness that crept into his throat, Tony swallowed whatever thoughts he was just having and tried to reverse-chase his thoughts to where he'd been before shit got so melancholic.

Therapy. Right. Fuck that.

Moving on.

He got up and left the bay, trying to stuff down the churning in his gut that alerted him to an emotion commonly referred to as guilt.

Tony didn't talk to himself, or to frozen-Bruce, or to Scott when he got back to Engineering, but he
did think to himself, and vowed with every goddamn trace of corny fucking cliche he could muster:

_I'll get you out of there, Bruce Banner, if it's the last thing I do._

"Aw, hell."

It wasn't the only sound that greeted Clint and Steve when the archer found himself, once again, back in the tender care of Doctor Leonard McCoy, but it was certainly the loudest one.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," the man said with a grimace as he snatched Clint away from Steve and shoved him unceremoniously onto a biobed, already reaching for a host of supplies Clint couldn't help but recognize after his nth experience with them, even in this century.

Somehow, he always found himself in medical, before long. It was his second talent, really. After hitting whatever he aimed for, he always, _always_ found a way to get himself injured.

"Sorry, Doc," Clint sighed, acquiescing to the none too gentle treatment of his bruised, split knuckles.

"What, you didn't like the way the bulkhead was looking at you?" McCoy snarled, but the aggression wasn't really directed at Clint.

Shrugging with his other shoulder, Clint remained silent. No use in condemning himself further, he'd already made his way onto McCoy's shit list of medical charges, no point in confirming that it was likely to be a regular occurrence, if this proverbial life mimicked the previous one in any way.

"Right," McCoy grumbled, reaching for a tool and dragging a stool over to hunch over his work as he held it over Clint's hand. "You and Jim, I fuckin' swear. Gotta beat your damn selves up over everything at the first sign of emotions," McCoy scoffed. "And they say Vulcans are the ones with the issue. Ain't never had Spock down here bleeding his green goddamn blood all over the place 'cause he caved in a wall."

"We're all just stressed, Doctor," Steve tried to say.

"Oh, don't I fuckin' know it!" McCoy quipped, moving the instrument in steady, unhurried strokes over Clint's skin in spite of his agitated demeanor. "Ain't just Jim and his usual bunch of crazy I gotta deal with, but you lot and your shit, too. Enough to drive a medical professional like me to drink and rage."

The man scowled down at Clint's hand like it had personally offended him, and Clint struggled for a moment to actually hold still, the hostility was so apparent in his gaze.

"But I don't, do I?" McCoy's sharp, hazel eyes shot up to Clint's, and Clint leaned back a fraction at the force of the scrutiny. "Because life goddamn sucks and it ain't fair, but we've all got our jobs, now don't we."

McCoy lifted the instrument away, adjusting a few settings, and Clint chanced a look down at his hand to see the cuts closed and the worst of the swelling visibly diminished. When McCoy returned to his work on the hand, he continued speaking as well.

"You," he said pointedly. "Are a part of this crew, now, which makes me responsible for you, so I'm tellin' you right now, you do not do shit like this, _ever_ again. Deal is that I make sure you all stay alive, but I'm a practical man," McCoy drawled, holding Clint's wrist in an iron grip as he manipulated his fingers to work. "Preventative medicine saves a whole lot of work on my end, so
"You do your damn best to make my life easier and stay out of my Sickbay."

"We're all gonna take risks, Doc," Clint sighed. "'How we get the job done."

"Well you're gonna get fuck-all done if you're dead or dying down here," McCoy snapped, releasing Clint's wrist and jerking the regenerator away to pick up a set of swabs. "There are not enough of us out here. We need you, we need each other, and this self-destructive shit ain't gonna fly."

"Doctor, I understand what you're saying, but this isn't easy for us," Steve said, coming to Clint's defense, which was kind of funny, all things considered. This was exactly the same kind of lecture he'd gotten from Steve a dozen times.

"Of course it ain't easy!" McCoy snapped, packing away the swabs and the gel he'd applied to Clint's hand. It, frankly, felt fine now, but McCoy was the professional here. "We don't have the luxury of working the steps, here. You're all entitled to the way you feel, it ain't been a cakewalk, I know that, but it's battlefield medicine out here, even for that."

McCoy sat back on his stool, staring hard at Clint even as Clint himself looked at his expertly wrapped hand.

"You stow that crap somewhere you can deal with it later, or you're gonna get us all killed," McCoy said, the gravel in his voice belied by the slight tremble Clint could hear beneath it, and Clint couldn't help but nod. This man wasn't his CO or even his friend, but he knew this life—life in space, life as part of a crew that literally depended on each other for daily survival—and well. Clint had been that person, before. The person that followed orders and got the job done and no sir, there's no problem—washing the blood from his hands and waiting until he was alone to heave up his guts.

Battlefield medicine. It was an astute way of looking at it, Clint thought ruefully. Clint could do that. So, stuff it. Clint was great at not dealing with things. Most things. Certain things.

*I've been compromised. Got red in my ledger.*

God damn it, Nat.

"Thanks, doc," Clint said, meeting the doctor's eyes and trying not to show how much he hurt on the inside. McCoy held his gaze for a second before nodding and scooting away, so he must have done okay. That or the doctor was letting it slide.

"You can take that bandage off in about an hour, once the gel's set into your skin. Anything else?" The man asked, arms folded.

"Nope," Clint said, flexing his fingers.

"Good. Then get the hell out of my Sickbay," McCoy said, and turned back to whatever he'd been doing.

Clint hopped off the biobed and made to leave, Steve following behind him.

"Not you, Rogers. I need you," McCoy said, and Steve drew up short. He shared a wide-eyed look with Clint, who just shrugged and made a shooing motion in the doctor's direction.

Well, there were weirder ways to end a lecture like that, Clint supposed. Hell, he'd lived them.

Clint tried not to feel too much like he was walking out of Fury's office after getting chewed out.
about pretty much the same thing.

The thing about warping off in pursuit of something, even if they were taking the right route—they were, Jim wasn't even thinking that it could be otherwise—was that it wasn't like following a beacon or positioning tracker. All they had was a direction, like a trail of footsteps leading away from the scene of the crime. From there they just had to scan space and see which stops in that direction they might have taken, check for the warp signature to see if they were on the right trail and just keep going.

Chekov could have done better, but Sulu was handling it fine.

It was tedious. It was so fucking tedious, and it was letting them get further away into territory they did not know, and Jim was not feeling very fucking optimistic.

But what else could he do? So Jim took the odds that Spock hadn't given him but surely had stewing in his own thoughts, and did what they could.

Rotations were in effect, now. Spock was taking two hours for meditation and Sulu was sleeping—or not sleeping. Jim cared if he actually slept or not, but wasn't inclined to bust his balls so long as he stayed off the bridge for at least five hours.

That left him and Barton until Spock came back. Not that he was looking forward to quality awkward silence with Spock, but.

Jim did not like Barton.

"Hand feeling better?" Jim said to the empty space between them.

If Barton had any kind of reaction to that, he didn't show it.

Beyond nailing Jim in the forehead with a balled up bandage.

"Hey!" Jim barked, annoyance tightening his gut.

"Don't ask stupid questions," Barton responded placidly, leaning his chair back and raising an eyebrow in Jim's direction. "You wanna start shit, you start it. But you're not gonna get under my skin, so say what you mean or shut your cake-hole."

Jim just stared for a moment before leaning back with calculated calm.

"You don't like me much, do you," Jim stated, admitting to himself he might be projecting, just a little.

Barton huffed a laugh, placing the soles of his boots against the edge of the console and leaning the chair back to its full extension. He tossed a stylus into the air and caught it between his fingers on the way down.

"Kirk, I don't like anybody much."

"You seem to do alright with Stark," Jim countered, abdominal muscles tightening in remembrance of the fist with which they'd become acquainted not long ago.

"You sure you wanna bring up Stark with me?" Barton said, his voice deceptively nonchalant as he tossed the stylus and caught it again.
"Fair enough," Jim acquiesced. Really, he shouldn't be poking this bear. Hostility wasn't something he should be breeding in this crew he'd cobbled together, it was just...

Christ. Barton was getting under his skin by just existing. All of these new people had too many layers to them, too many secrets, and having Barton assume such an important role on this ship made that unknown really... uncomfortable.

Besides, he'd always gotten to know people with arguments and controlled violence, before. Most of his friends had either taken a swing at him or threatened to kill him at one time or another.

"You still don't like me," Jim said.

"Christ," Barton muttered. "You really wanna do this, man?"

"Do what?"

"This," Barton said, whipping the stylus up and catching it tightly in his palm when it ricocheted off the bulkhead. "I already got this shit from McCoy, okay? You don't need to worry about me. I've got a handle on my crap."

Jim blinked for a second, closing his mouth. Huh, that... hadn't actually been what he was trying to do, but.

"McCoy slings a lot of shit," Jim said. "What'd he say?"

Barton grunted and turned away from Jim, ending that part of the conversation pretty effectively.

"Seriously, Barton. What did he say?" Jim pressed.

"Look, Kirk," Barton whipped his chair around, pointing at him with the stylus. "I'm in this to get Natasha back, but I'm not gonna put other people at risk to do it, and hell, I'm not in much of a position to go after her myself, now am I?" The man sneered, his tone carrying the kind of self-derision with which Jim was intimately acquainted. "I've been part of teams and crews and shit for my whole life. I know how to keep my head down and do my fucking job, okay? So don't worry about it."

"Okay," Jim answered, trying to head off the hostility in Barton's tone.

"And to answer your fucking question," Barton bit out, palming the stylus and hurling it at the floor to mark the word. "I do not like you. And it's not personal. You fucked with Stark's head something good, but that wasn't totally on you. He's not carrying that grudge so I'm not gonna do it for him. But you," Barton fiddled with the stylus, having caught it after it made a brief journey from the floor to the bulkhead and back to his hand. "I know how to keep my head down and do my fucking job, okay? So don't worry about it."

Barton's blue gaze held the kind of resolve that Jim rarely saw in the face of any officer. It was resolve born of confidence and balls of absolute steel.

"I'm in this century with four of the people I've ever known that I can call family, but that's a small fucking sample size. They've had my back through some fucked up shit," Barton shook his head, staring at the console to hide his face from Jim's scrutiny. "I don't need to like them all the time for that to be true. Maybe you know what that's like. Maybe that's why you're here. I don't know. But I'm prepared to raise whatever kind of hell I need to to get 'Tasha back, because she trusts you," Barton said, like the words were venom in his mouth and he had to spit them out or be poisoned.
"I'm not sure yet if I do. But you're here. So no, I don't like you. I think you're a smart ass, egotistic son of a bitch who rides high breaking the rules. But you know this terrain, and my wagon's hitched to yours, so I'm flying your colors. You've got people here with faith in you, but I haven't seen anything yet. So don't hold your breath."

Indignation gathered in Jim's gut. Hadn't seen anything yet? For shit's sake, Jim had literally thrown away his career for this. Long before Barton had become a pain in his ass, Jim—Jim and Spock—had put everything on the line for Natasha and her friends, to keep them safe. Sure, he'd misstepped along the way, but Jim was here now, wasn't he? An outlaw, Captain of a stolen ship so he could scour the dregs of the galaxy on a rescue mission. Jim thought he'd made it pretty fucking clear what he was willing to do, to sacrifice, to get his friends back—to get Romanoff back—and Barton wasn't sure?

Invective stopped up Jim's throat, and he wanted to let it spew, but he held it back, a realization coming to him.

This man was three centuries separated from Jim and everything he knew. The way Romanoff sold it, the way these people clammed up about their experiences, it was an entirely different life from Jim's. He didn't know anything about Barton, so why should he expect any of this is mean something to him, when Barton had never seen with his own eyes anything other than brains or gestures from behind a Captain's chair?

Maybe it would have been enough for someone in Starfleet. Maybe it would have been enough for anyone but Barton.

It made sense. It chafed, but it made sense. This was a man who hadn't seen Jim back his shit up in anything but indirect action, and worse than that, had dealt with the blowback of a pretty serious fuck up. Hell, this whole disaster was a fuck up.

It still chafed, it was still... petty, in a way, but Jim got it.

"I'm not perfect," Jim said, staring at the back of Barton's head. "But I swear that I've earned my place in this chair. I've earned my friends' loyalties. I can and will lay down my life to protect my own, but I get it. Hearsay isn't enough for you. That's fair. Enough time out here and we'll find the fight we're looking for. Your friend trusted me; give me the chance to earn that from you."

Barton didn't say anything for a long minute, the tap of the stylus in his hand an incessant thing in the background of the noise inside Jim's own head.

Without a word, Barton spun around and flicked the stylus directly at Jim's face. Jim caught it just centimetres from where it would have struck the bridge of his nose, heart leaping from the unexpected burst of adrenaline.

The smirk on Barton's face made Jim want to whip the stylus right back, and he would have, if he'd had any doubt that the man would just snatch it right out of the air.

"I'm already giving you a chance, Kirk," Barton held his gaze. "Nice catch."

And that, it seemed, was the end of their heart to heart.

Yeah, Jim thought with a rueful smile as he pocketed the stylus. He didn't like Barton.

But he was interesting. There was that.
"Go take a nap, Barton. I'm up."

Clint turned to face Hikaru as he settled down at the Nav console.

"And how was your nap?" Clint asked, eyeing the man with frank skepticism.

"Fine," Hikaru responded, already immersed in the controls.

"Don't bullshit a bullshitter," Clint said, casting a glance at Spock where he was seated in the Captain's chair.

The Vulcan had come to relieve Kirk over an hour ago, and as thrilled as Clint was to leave that particular awkward silence behind, he felt it was at least his duty to check in. Hikaru had been more than a wing man since both Natasha and his buddy had been taken. He'd been a friend. Maybe Clint wasn't ready to call him that, but Hikaru had had his back with Kirk, who Clint knew was more than just Hikaru's CO; they had history. That meant something. That and, offering oneself up to get their ass handed to them by Natasha was a pretty solid indication of a person's mettle.

"No bullshit," Hikaru sighed, glaring at Clint. "I got some sleep. Even got some food in the mess. You don't have to worry about me, Barton."

"Doesn't mean I'm not going to. If I'm not flying this thing, then you are," Clint nodded to the console. "Got my own best interests at heart."

"Right," Hikaru scoffed, though he had a hint of a smile to show for it. "Well consider your ass suitably covered for the next six hours. Spock's not gonna let me sleep on the job."

"Indeed I will not," Spock said from behind them, not looking up from the PADD he was studying. "You are dismissed, Mr. Barton."

"Yeah, yeah," Clint muttered, standing from his chair and stretching out his back with a satisfying pop. "Next stop is in an hour. Just a check for the trajectory."

"We've got it covered. Go sleep," Hikaru said. "And hit the sonics or something, man," he tossed over his shoulder. "You stink."

"Means I've been working!" Clint said, even as he disappeared through the hatch in the floor. Dropping down and letting the hatch close behind him, Clint took a moment to breathe and settle himself. Shit, he could use a drink. Not that it was going to happen, but at least he could be aware of how fucked his nerves were.

Making for crew quarters, he figured a shower might not be a bad idea. It might be more weird than relaxing, but at least if he got some sleep, he'd wake up smelling his usual and not whatever this new and awful space rank seemed to be.

"Space," Clint muttered, glaring at the sonic shower even as he stepped into the booth.

Tony stared at the replicator in the mess. He was sure if he only looked at it long enough that something caffeinated would come out of it.

Pressing his fingers to a few holographic buttons, he had a cup of not-coffee delivered to him, and he took the steaming cup, eyeing it suspiciously and keeping it at arm's length as he turned around.

"Jesus!" Tony startled, the cup sloshing liquid over the side that he danced left to avoid scalding his
feet. "What the hell, Barton?"

"Not my fault you didn't see me," Barton said, not moving from his sprawl at the table.

"Sight is overrated, Hawkass" Tony mumbled, settling down and blinking a few times at his papery cup until it came into focus.

"Jesus, Stark," Barton sighed. "When's the last time you slept?"

"Fuck you, that's when," Tony said, shooting Barton what he figured was probably an unimpressive glare as he brought the cup to his lips and downed as much as he could take in one go. *God.* It was still as awful as he'd expected.

"Fair enough," Barton said with a shrug, leaning back into his sprawl and not speaking any more.

"So, how are things on the bridge?" Tony asked, for lack of anything better to say to break the silence.

"Peachy," Barton muttered. "Spock's almost as good at conversation as a houseplant."

Tony huffed a laugh, choking back the rest of his coffee adjacent drink and rising to grab more. "You're obviously just not talking about the right shit. Show the man some codes and try getting him to shut up."

"Well then maybe you should be at the helm," Barton whipped a balled up napkin or something at him, and Tony didn't even flinch as it banked off his shoulder. *God,* he really hoped whatever caffeine was in this swill was potent.

"Nah. Got a pretty sweet gig with Scott. I'll leave you to suffer."

"Figures," Barton said, but he was looking a little more animated than he had when Tony first noticed he was even there. More like he was breathing than just decorating the furniture, at least.

"So, lay it on me," Tony said, double-fisting a pair of flimsy cups as he made his way back to the table. "What's it looking like?"

Tension revisited Barton's frame, but either the man was too tired to hold on to it or otherwise didn't have enough fucks left to give to show how shitty things were.

"We're still on the right track," Barton said. "Or at least the track we're intending to follow. Just passed another check-point and the warp signatures are the same. We're really far behind them, though, and one wrong stop could mean we're totally fucked. So far the checkpoints have been arbitrary, at best. Landmarks. Kirk and Spock have intel for a couple intermediaries that these assholes could be using, but until we get our hands on some warm bodies that know where these fuckers are going, it's like Where's Waldo: Space edition."

Tony grimaced into the cup he'd just emptied. "That all sounds... horrible," he said, taking a page from Bruce's book and just letting the shit roll off his back, for a change.

"Yeah." Barton leaned forward and snagged Tony's second—third, technically—cup, downing the liquid before Tony could offer any kind of protest.

It was mostly just satisfying to see the way Barton gagged on the drink

"That is not coffee," Barton said, looking at the cup like it had betrayed him.
"Haven't had a chance to properly tamper with the replicators. It's got the caffeine in it, so," Tony shrugged, grinning at the man as he sent the paper cup spinning to the floor.

"That is vile," Barton said, already moving to the replicator to get something to presumably wash the taste from his mouth.

"I'm working on it," Tony said.

"That all you're working on?"

Tony met Barton's knowing look with a cool expression of his own. Even half delirious with exhaustion and the creeping jittery sensation of stimulants, Tony could absolutely do this dance. Hell, he'd been doing this dance for his entire life under almost the same conditions. Usually worse.

He still hadn't managed a suitable booze program, even before they'd left the Enterprise.

"Oh, you know me," Tony said nonchalantly, snagging the remains of the drink Barton had stolen. "Gotta keep busy somehow."

"Right," Barton scoffed. "Well please let me know if we're all about to die so I can at least offer up a salute."

"Weak," Tony quipped. "Weak and utterly lacking in creativity. You should be ashamed of yourself."

"Sorry, I'll try harder to sink to your level, next time."

Tony let a laugh escape him and tossed back the drink. Even with newly introduced caffeine, he knew there wasn't much keeping him on his feet. He just... didn't much fancy the idea of going to sleep. Too much to do. Too much to think about.

"Touche," Tony laughed out. "Touche, mon ami. You should go take a nap, or something. You look like shit, and this shit," Tony pointedly slung the empty cup over his shoulder. "Is not nearly strong enough to keep those biceps going."

For a moment, Tony thought Barton might say something reasonable, but he just sat there and looked at the ceiling.

"S'quiet, out here," Barton said, his voice quiet, too. "Could use some background noise, if you felt like talking me into a coma."

Tony could have wept with relief, but he didn't. He'd shed enough tears with Barton around, thanks. He didn't need to add to his repertoire of embarrassing incidents.

"Well, my friend, you've come to the right guy." Tony rose from the table and gestured expansively to the door. "I can talk even the savviest of minds to sleep. Just ask Bruce. He went into a debate with me about Higgs Boson and he still hasn't woken up."

The joke fell flat, both of them too close to it to do anything else, but he'd known it would. Clint just punched him in the shoulder, muttering something about god particles, and they supported their own respectively exhausted bodies as they left the mess.

Bunking with Barton could have been worse. He knew from experience that, at the very least, Barton didn't snore.
“Why am I here?” Steve asked, sorting the hyposprays and cataloging the inventory as he did so. Not that is serum-enhanced memory wasn’t good for this, but—he figured there might be something else he should be doing.

“Because I need help, down here,” McCoy answered, testing equipment and making notes on his PADD.

“Astrid could help you with that. She’s more familiar with all this,” Steve waved his hand at the entirety of the unfamiliar Sickbay around him.

McCoy nodded in response. “I’ll bet she is. Part-Betazoid, too. Make for a good nurse, probably. But I didn’t ask her, did I?”

Steve sent McCoy an unimpressed look. “If you’re going for some kind of speech and big reveal, save it. I’ve had enough to know what they sound like.”

The Doctor barked a laugh, and Steve set down the cartridge in his hand to give McCoy his full attention.

“Ha, I guess that’s right,” McCoy said, giving the machine he was testing one last look before turning it off. “I want you here because I think you’d be damn good at it.”


“This,” McCoy answered. “You see, being in the medical track at Starfleet is one of the most rigorous and difficult tracks that there are. You know why?”

Steve didn’t bother answering the question.

“Because it’s the track that, next to security, had the highest rates of death in the line of duty, burnout and transfer. The nurses and doctors I’ve worked with have got the kind of duranium fucking balls that you do not find anywhere else, and they don’t take shit from anyone,” McCoy emphasized with a stab of a tricorder he’d lifted from storage. “Especially not a commanding officer.”

Thinking on that for a moment, Steve decided he still didn’t get it. “I’m a soldier, doctor. And you’re gonna have to speak more plainly than that, if you want me to understand.”

McCoy sent him a look. “I can’t do this job alone,” he answered. “I’ve got Jim and Spock, two of the most famous and reckless assholes ‘Fleet’s ever had on the books, and now they’re off their goddamn leashes. Add Scott and the rest of your crazy friends into this mix, and I don’t have a shot in hell of handling it. And Astrid? Astrid is a hell of an officer, but she’s security, and she follows orders. I need someone who has the balls to tell these idiots when to back the fuck down on what they’re doing, and the gumption to go in and save their asses when they don’t listen to you.”

Stunned, Steve too in what the doctor was saying and looked down at the medical equipment he’d been sorting. The information he’d been idly cataloguing suddenly came back to him. Combined with the idle chatter that McCoy had kept up while Steve had been down here, he realized something.

He’d been tricked. He’d been utterly played by this grumpy, unassuming doctor in front of him.

“You want me to be… your nurse?” Steve asked, incredulous.

“Why not?” McCoy shrugged. “You gonna sit there and tell me you didn’t wish there was more you could do for your friends every time they got hurt?”
“Of course I did!” Steve answered, immediately. “They—oh.”

Nodding, McCoy took a stool and wheeled it over to where Steve sat. “Yeah. ‘Oh’:”

“Doctor, I wasn’t just a member of my team, before,” Steve said, delicately placing a hypospray back into its case. “I was the leader. I was the Captain. That’s who I am,” Steve said.

“But it’s not who you are,” McCoy cut in. “Not now. You know that, right?”

Steve nodded miserably. “Yeah.” He couldn’t protect his team, out here. He didn’t have the knowledge or the skills to lead a team in space. He’d had to step down and defer to Kirk or risk hurting all of them. Losing someone else.

“Well let me tell you about a not-so-secret ‘Fleet secret,” McCoy scooted into his vision. “You know who the real authority is on a ship? Goddamn doctors,” McCoy said, sitting back.

Staring at the man’s smug look, Steve furrowed his eyebrows. “I’m sorry, what?”

“The Chief Medical Officer of any Federation ship has the right to declare any officer, up to and including the Captain of each vessel, as unfit for duty based on his, her or their medical recommendation. You and I, Rogers,” McCoy leaned forward. “Are going to be the medical team on this slipshod crew we’ve got goin’, here.”

“Wait,” Steve held up his hands. “You want me to—really?” Steve asked, incredulous.

“Rogers, you’re a god damn medical menace,” the man answered, looking him up and down. “If I don’t have you down here, you’re just as much of a pain in the ass as everyone else, but I can’t keep my eye on you. You’ve got history and authority with your crazy ass friends up there, which means they might listen to you half the time if they get hurt. You’re smart as a goddamn whip, and judging by the way you haven’t asked a single fucking question about the shit I’ve asked you to do down here after I’ve explained it, you won’t have a problem picking up the new things.”

Steve stared, struggling to assimilate what this man was saying with everything he’d ever been trained to do.

“And more than that, you’re right. You are a soldier,” McCoy sat back, looking at him with serious eyes. “You can be on both sides of this and still get people out alive. You and me, we both fight,” the doctor said, eyes fierce. “I may be a doctor, not a security officer, but I can, have and will fight for my friends and my crew. You, I think, would do the same.”

Looking at the man, gruff and prickly as he was, Steve couldn’t detect anything but sincerity in his words and posture.

“You’re serious,” Steve breathed, settling backwards and staring at him. “You really want me to be the one to help you, down here?”

“Damn right I do,” McCoy answered. “Anything happens to me, someone with the balls and the brains to do this job has to be able to keep these idiots alive. I need you, Rogers,” McCoy said. “So I want you to stick around here and learn what I have to teach you.”

Moments passed as Steve let that sink in. He couldn’t be Captain America, the leader, out here. It was too unknown and there was too much of a power dynamic between him and Captain Kirk for that to be the case. But McCoy was trying to bring him into this, to helping and healing, to helping his friends when McCoy might not be able to, to making a difference by doing more than just punching people in the jaw.
Hell, had he ever asked for anything more than just that?

“Okay,” Steve said, nodding firmly and sticking out his hand.

“Okay?” McCoy laughed. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Steve shook his head and extended his hand further, standing up.

McCoy chuckled as he stood up, as well, dwarfed by Steve’s height even standing. “Okay,” the man said, taking his hand and not batting an eyelash at the firm grip. “Welcome aboard, nurse,” McCoy grinned.

Steve grinned back. “Been called that before, believe it or not.”

Laughing, McCoy waved him over to a large, cylindrical looking device in the corner of the medbay.

“How ‘bout you help me test this neuro-scanner and tell me all about it,” McCoy said.

Steve didn’t even ask what the neuro-scanner was. He had a few guesses, and really? He’d been asked to step into much scarier devices with much less confidence in the technicians, before.

Nurse Rogers.

It was a far cry from Captain America, but… he could live with that.

Chapter End Notes

Translations

ʃiχ–gog – Orion. Pronounced schich-gock, the "ich" a voiceless uvular fricative like a hiss in the back of the throat (think angry cat), or the ending consonant of the German "ich". Rough translation to "waking dream".

A little levity for the end of this chapter, because life is pretty terrible for all my bbs right now.

Working on chapters 24 and 25 right now, though the going is slow. Thank you all in advance for your continued patience and readership. You’re fantastic. Also, if you ever have a fic rec for me that is not already listed in my bookmarks, I will happily investigate them. Nothing gets me writing faster than reading good fic (and staying up too late and drinking wine). ;)

Your comments give me life!
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Kidnapped life is not glamorous. Nyota keeps a brave face, while Natasha just wishes that everyone else would stop crying.

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by the wonderful Kay. Warnings for mild abuse of prisoners.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Even with her mind clouded by the drugs and sheer horror of seeing the two officers from the base murdered just feet from where she knelt, Nyota had enough of her wits about her to recognize that things were about to get much worse when the bag was shoved over Romanoff's head. Why they didn't bother bagging either her or Pavel, Nyota couldn't fathom.

Their assumption that Romanoff was an augment might have had something to do with it.

What Romanoff did even after they'd stepped out of the protection of the microdome probably confirmed the need to subdue her.

In a stunning display of dexterity and aggression, Romanoff twisted her body even as she was being hauled forward, a single hand free, she ripped off the hood and snarled at the Orions holding her. The men fought to hold her still, and—Jesus, had Doctor McCoy been sure there wasn't anything augmented about this woman?—Romanoff twisted and fought, the men dragging she and Pavel along halting to yell and gesture at one another.

Though she knew there was no hope of escape, not from this barren rock, Nyota couldn't stifle the surge of hope and... satisfaction she got from watching Romanoff bully the men who'd just bought them like livestock. It wasn't long before they had her mostly immobilized once more, and Nyota felt herself dragged along again.

But then there was a scream, and cursing, and Nyota peeled open her heavy eyelids to watch in shock as Romanoff spat something onto the ground, her face contorted in a bloody smile.

The blood was a dark violet, and she saw one of the men stagger back, howling in pain as he clutched a bleeding hand to his chest.

Through her own disgust and surprise, Nyota found herself laughing weakly.

Good God, Romanoff had four men holding her fast, and she'd still managed to bite off one of their fingers.

Nyota had a moment to be grateful that the woman was on her side before she was roughly dragged toward the hulking ship again, and remembered that—right, they'd been sold by mercenaries to the
Orions, and it didn’t really matter what side Romanoff was on.

They were screwed.

The blood in Natasha's mouth tasted foreign—bitter and sharp on her tongue.

In the moment she knew she was well and truly taken, she'd fought with... restraint. Because now, now she was relying on other people to get her out of this place.

And now, there were other people relying on her to get them through this mess.

She could have killed them, probably, but what would it have done? The aliens would have sent more to subdue her; eventually they'd have been too much. If not, the mercs would see how dangerous she was and just kill her to cut their losses. If they suspected her to be more than she was, then they'd be ruled by that fear.

Fear was something Natasha knew, and it was something that had kept her alive even when she was wading through it to look a monster in the eye and tell him that they would need his help. They that needed his.

And that was it, wasn't it? She had to be that woman, right now. She had to wade, to swim and struggle and shut it out. Her fear, her emotions, her family. Right now, there was a mission, and it was to survive long enough for help to come.

If it wasn't coming, the mission wasn't much different. It was to survive long enough to get them out.

Natasha didn't fool herself into thinking this was something she could handle on her own. The short days it had been since she'd let Stark shut her in an icy coffin seemed like a lifetime ago, and she knew that if now was then, she'd have been able to do it.

Now, there was no network, no intelligence, no myriad languages or familiar bodies to read. She had her skills as a human weapon and a fervent belief that this would not be the end of her.

Natasha also knew that she'd need the help of the two terrified Starfleet officers that had been taken with her. So now? Now, she needed to be whatever she had to be to make that happen.

She couldn't be Natasha Romanoff. She had to be the Black Widow.

Because the Black Widow would absolutely die before she let something like mercenaries and slave traders be the end of her, aliens and space travel be thrice damned to hell.

It was a thought that carried her off into drugged unconsciousness as the darkness of a new ship closed around her.

It didn't really matter that they hadn't drugged her, this time. Nyota hadn't even needed to look so much as listen and breathe through her nose to know that the ship they were now on was well used, well-staffed, and thoroughly used to dealing with living cargo.

Escaping from this ship wasn't an option. Not if they were separated and without any outside help.

For a moment, Nyota thought of the mercenary ship, the stolen 'Fleet shuttle, and their bid for hacking a distress signal. The most they'd managed between even two of the best minds to grace the bridge of a Starship was a proximity signal that even a Yeoman would know how to activate—and
No, outside help wasn't an option. Not right now, and maybe not at all. Nyota couldn't afford to rely on that.

With Chekov silent and visibly shaking as they were both carted through dim corridors with efficient strides, Nyota had to at least acknowledge that the three of them were on their own.

She couldn't see or hear Romanoff, but Nyota didn't think the woman had been taken anywhere else yet. If they thought she was an Augment... what would they do? Would they take her away immediately? Would they do something else? A shudder that had nothing to do with the dampness of the air on the ship worked its way through Nyota's body.

That single thread of anxiety broke through the adrenaline she'd been riding since Romanoff had briefly fought the Orions on the surface of that planet, and she felt her heart start to pound in her chest.

Darting her eyes back and forth, her mind whirled. They couldn't be separated. She needed to know where Romanoff was.

"Romanoff?" She called weakly, or tried to, her dry throat catching on the syllables with a cough. When there was no response beyond a bland tightening of hands at her elbows, she panicked. Fear gripped her heart. Oh god, where had they taken her? Was she even still alive?

Struggling weakly in the grip, Nyota thrashed her head back and forth, trying to crane her neck to look behind her, but the way was blocked at each turn.

"Roman—Pavel, where is she? Romanoff—Natasha, where are you? Romanoff!" Nyota croaked out, her voice grating and squeaking through dry and ruined vocal chords, devoid entirely of anything that marked her usual smooth alto.

Nyota had only just begun to hear the weak muttering of Pavel at her right when her neck stung and the panic went away.

God, would they never stop drugging her?

When they were dragged out into the light, Nyota nearly vomited from the pain that exploded in her head.

After a minute of abject wallowing in misery, Nyota peered upward to see the light was only the paltry illumination of what looked to be a shuttle bay. From the comparative dark of the small cell they’d been kept in before, it made her eyes sting with the strain of seeing anything. It felt like looking into the sun.

Sun. Sol. Her thoughts turned sluggishly to the brilliant yellow dwarf she may never see again. With vision blurred by tears, she thought of the glorious warmth of the star radiating up at her from the hard packed Earth near her family’s village in Kenya. Fleeting though it was, it was enough to constrict her throat and force tears from her eyes when she knew it was more than likely she'd never see it again.

Harsh reality asserted itself as she was prodded into movement, stumbling as the ground lurched beneath her. Through drugs and heavy thoughts, Nyota realized she was actually in motion, moved along by a man herding she—and Pavel—toward a small but long, rectangular shuttle. It might have
explained the subdued nausea that seemed lodged in her stomach, but for the stress and chemicals she knew would sicken her equally.

Nyota closed her eyes to the light, trying to block it out. She would only be put back in the dark again, anyway.

Whatever had seized her, put her in motion before, it was gone now. She was tired and scared and so, so weak. She should be doing something, but she couldn't begin to think of what.

Another body suddenly fell against her own, knocking them both down to the floor. Annoyed voices exploded around her. “Halt dir den Augen offen.” Natasha’s voice hissed in her ear, and Uhura squinted as they were once again hauled to their feet. “Was siehst du?” Natasha said with a last lingering look before she was smacked hard across the face.

Dumbstruck for a moment, Uhura stayed still, stumbling forward when she was pushed roughly into movement without her arms available to balance her. She watched Natasha spit a mouthful of blood into the face of one of her captors before she suddenly kicked out with both legs, catching the stocky human in the chest even as she swung her head backward to break the nose of the man holding her chains.

Something broke through the haze, and Nyota could see again. Romanoff was fighting, like she had back on that planet. This time it had to mean something, right?

Escape.

The thought filled her with adrenaline, with hope, and her eyes cast about the shuttle bay for a way to help in spite of the hands on her before the reality of the situation caught up with her.

Like a phaser stun to the chest, it hit home.

No, they couldn’t break their bonds. Of course they couldn't. The people who’d taken them were cruel, not stupid. Restraints aside, the bay was milling with personnel and affiliates of all apparent races and allegiances. There had to be more mercs and contractors already pouring out of the shuttle and doors around them in light of the disturbance Romanoff had brought. The act itself only increased the number of blatantly hostile bodies in the room, all of them with weapons and hyposprays drawn and ready for use.

Nyota watched, Pavel long gone from her field of vision, as sheer numbers—and probably exhaustion—were already bringing Romanoff down.

Was siehst du?

Like a light turning on in slow motion, the question Romanoff had asked of her finally reached her ears, finally registered in her sluggish brain.

It wasn’t an escape attempt—there was no escaping this—it was a distraction.

Adjusted to the light after endless blinks and fruitless thrashing, Uhura’s eyes widened in understanding as she started quickly taking in every detail of the room that she could.

The shuttle bay was small; they were probably on a cargo ship or long defunct—and summarily auctioned—commercial vessel; Andorian by the placement of the sensors above the doors, most of which seemed broken from lack of use and maintenance. That would explain the shape, if nothing else. God, why hadn't she seen that before?
And now, looking around as she hung deceptively limp in her captors’ hands—still hoping to catch a glimpse of Pavel—no fewer than twenty-seven people were crowded into the small room, some captive but most mercenaries or crewmembers. A smattering of humans, Orions, a few Romulans and some species she didn’t quite recognize milled about the small space as the scant number of captives were herded into the shuttle. Its designation had been scorched off, leaving it unmarked, but she’d know a federation shuttle any day. It was probably stolen or looted, at least a decade behind the most recent shuttles, probably older.

Most of the captives looked young and scared, but not malnourished or utterly haggard in the way that someone who’d been held for an extended period of time would. They all seemed to be either women, children or young men; in essence, those that at first glance seemed to be weaker and easier to push around.

They’d obviously overlooked Natasha, who, even as she lay with her face pressed to the floor of the shuttle bay, needed three mercs to hold her down as they pressed a hypospray to the back of her neck. The sight filled Nyota with a mix of rage and helplessness, but even as every stumbling step took her closer to the darkness of the shuttle, she cast her eyes about, trying to soak in everything about their surroundings.

Opening her ears, she imagined she was back on the Enterprise, her earpiece flooded with all channels open as she searched for the one relevant transmission that needed to be heard. Bits and pieces of crude and inane conversation filtered in and out before she locked onto the low conversation between two Romulans, one dressed in piloting gear and the other puffing on an Earth cigarette; most of it was irrelevant, but she latched onto one word before her head was shoved down and she was pushed forward into the shuttle.

Borderland.

Hours passed, but this time not in silence.

The other captives in the cramped shuttle assaulted Nyota’s ears and other senses. She could hear the sound of conversation, weeping, the occasional vomiting episode from those either intolerant of the drugs being used on them or otherwise sick. She didn’t know where Chekov was. He was on this shuttle, it had been the only one in the bay and he had been near her when they were being loaded in, but the shuttle was dark and the press of bodies on all sides made it difficult to see more than two or three people on away from her.

Roanoff, however, was right beside her. Unconscious. It filled her with worry and nervous tension not only because she had been given a full dose of drugs for the second, maybe third time in less than forty-eight hours, but because she was obviously injured from her confrontation with the mercenaries in the shuttle bay.

When the woman next to her finally stirred, Nyota reached out with the chained hands, blindly grabbing for her hand where it had flopped somewhere between them. Romanoff flinched violently away, seeming to force herself out of the haze of drugs by will alone. A choked off groan reached Nyota’s ears and Romanoff’s entire body twitched as the sound of her gagging in the darkness made the other captives shift away from her, but more of that iron will seemed to hold back the urge to throw up.

Who had this woman been? Nyota wondered to herself, keeping to her own space as Romanoff shuddered next to her. Twenty minutes passed, possibly more, before she spoke to Nyota in a slightly slurred voice.
“Was hast du gesehen?”

Surprise colored Nyota’s thoughts once more, and the question she hadn’t bothered to ask herself before came unbidden to her lips.

“Wie hast du gewusst, das ich Deutsch verstehe?” She asked.

The clink of the chains holding Romanoff’s wrists together indicated a shrug. “Mutmaßung,” she replied.

Had she been able to look Romanoff in the eye, she would have given her a look that said bullshit, but instead she responded with: “Schwachsinn. Erzähl mir.”


The logic almost forced a laugh out of her, but Nyota wasn’t sure that was within her means right at this moment. If she was going to laugh, it would swiftly be followed by tears, and she couldn’t afford to cry right now, not when she had no idea where Chekov was or if he was even in good health.

“Na, was hast du denn gesehen?” Romanoff asked again.

Nyota sighed. She didn’t know where this conversation was going, but Romanoff obviously hadn’t wanted anyone to eavesdrop or she would have stuck to Standard, so she continued in German.

“We were on an old Andorian ship, probably stolen, just like this shuttle, except it’s an outdated Federation model, unmarked.”

“Older models are more difficult to track,” Romanoff murmured, more for Nyota’s benefit than her own, she was sure.

“I think all of the people transporting us are mercenaries. There weren’t a lot of them that I saw, but there were Romulans, Orions, Humans and some races I don’t recognize.”

“Think that means something?”

“Maybe, I don’t know. Romulans are hostile to the Federation and the Orions are dubiously neutral, so those working together pretty much means their loyalties are for hire. Their weapons are in better condition than the ship.”

“They’re probably contracted through a different intermediary. I doubt they ran the ship we were on, mercs don’t usually settle with one transport operation. Not a lot of money in settling down.”

“How can you be sure? You don’t know anything about these people or their histories,” Nyota asked, frustrated.

“Guns for hire don’t change.”

“Right,” Nyota sighed. “The captives, these people… I’m sure you saw, but they’re mostly women and young men; boys,” she muttered nervously.

“Did you see any that looked fit? Healthy?” Romanoff asked, sitting up a little more against the bulkhead.

“Some,” Nyota answered. “Not a lot. They probably tried to go after people they thought were easy prey. Their mistake,” she added, chancing a nudge at Romanoff’s elbow.
Romanoff didn’t flinch this time, but didn’t otherwise reciprocate the gesture. “Mercs work on a contract, these people went after specific targets to fill a specific order. No muscle means they aren’t trafficking in labor; they don’t want us for fields, factories or mining,” Natasha sounded grim.

Almost not wanting to hear the answer, because with an idea of where they were headed, Nyota thought she already knew, and it terrified her.

“So what is this?” She asked weakly.

“Personal and domestic slave labor. Sex trafficking, more likely.”

Nyota didn’t say anything after that, and Romanoff didn’t press her for any more information, even though she had it. After another hour or so of silence, Nyota leaned her head off of her knees to press it back against the bulkhead where she knew Romanoff’s was, as well.

“I think I know where we’re going,” she rasped weakly. They hadn’t been given anything to drink in over twelve hours, now, and the heat of cramped bodies was making her sweat.

An incline of the head next to her own indicated Romanoff was listening.

Nyota sucked in a shaky breath. “I heard the pilot talking to another Romulan, he mentioned the Borderland. It’s the space separating the Klingon Empire and the Orion Syndicate, like their own version of the Neutral Zone, but instead of no man’s land, it’s an unregulated free for all. It’s pretty analogous to a corporate mafia organization, run by several different Orion clans and dealing in most of the black market trading and crime in the Alpha quadrant.” Nyota couldn’t be sure how much of the galactic speak made sense to the woman next to her, but she gave credence to her obvious intelligence and continued like she understood every word. “I don’t know if it’s our final destination or just the next stop. The Borderland is pretty much the hub for every lowlife and criminal in the AQ.”

“Sounds like a nice place.”

"It's really not," Nyota muttered, swallowing reflexively in the hopes of wetting her mouth.

"Bite your tongue," Romanoff said after a few moments.

"What?" Nyota asked, startled by the non sequitur.

"Trick I learned from a tuba player in Portland," Romanoff said, which clarified exactly nothing. "Dry mouth, he said he'd get it before performances, no matter how many years he'd been playing. Bite your tongue, it will make you salivate."

For a moment, Nyota was struck with the urge to laugh, but she didn't. There really wasn't anything to laugh about. So she bit her tongue.

It worked.

The ship jerked, the inhabitants of the hold jostled roughly against one another, voices rising in surprise and alarm.

"We've dropped out of warp," Uhura said, gently righting herself after Natasha had rocked into her. "Guess the inertial dampeners on this bucket aren't exactly regulation standard."

Natasha ignored the quip, focusing instead on straining her ears for sounds of movement or anything
else above the din of the frightened prisoners.

If they’d dropped out of warp, it had to be for a stop of some kind. Refuel, disembarkment, exchange —*something*. If she could find out where they’d stopped, it would give her a trail, maybe a way to leave a sign if she got to a computer terminal or something more crude. If it hadn’t withered or been cleaned up, she’d left sign enough back on that rock of a planet. At the very least if she got some kind of eye to the outside world, it would orient her in this cosmic playing field, something she sorely needed if she’d have any chance of eventually getting herself and the two Starfleet officers out alive.

Hope and chance weren’t things the Black Widow bet on. Natasha made her own way.

Several rumblings of the ship around them later, a groaning creak filled the air, and then even the hum of the ship itself seemed to stop, and along with it, the noise in the hold.

"The ship’s stopped," Uhura whispered. "They must have docked it," she continued, and Natasha turned her head to study the woman's face. She was frowning in concentration, evidently listening as intently as Natasha herself. "The Borderland is still over a day away at warp, so why would they stop?"

"Refuel?" Natasha ventured.

Uhura shook her head. "Dilithium crystals will run faster and bigger ships than this for years at a time before they’re depleted. This is something else."

"Any idea?" Natasha pressed, leaning back when she heard creaking and echoes beyond their enclosure that told of movement above them, possibly on the same level. It wasn’t a large ship—Uhura had called it a shuttle. But it still seemed big enough to Natasha. Bigger than any of Stark’s jets, in any case, and Natasha knew how much he could cram into those. Natasha didn’t have enough experience with the acoustics of vessels like this one, or the materials from which they were made, to be sure what sound came from where.

Uhura clenched her jaw, her breath hitching as she closed her eyes and swallowed. "A few. None of them good."

Watching her fight through the fear gave Natasha more confidence that Uhura could handle this, but right now, she wasn’t going to be of much help; not like this. But the officer had good ears, and knew how to use them.

"Keep your ears open, just listen. Everything is important. Odd movement cadences, how long we’re here. Everything," Natasha emphasized. "If we get the chance to make a move and figure out where we are, drop a souvenir, anything, we need to take it."

Uhura nodded jerkily, steadying her breath. "Okay. Okay."

When the woman looked up again, it was with a quick sweep of the near total darkness in the hold, eyes still searching for what Natasha guessed was a familiar mop of brown curls.

"He’ll be okay," Natasha said, not entirely sure she was lying. The young navigator was still a mystery to her, but she had to assume that you didn’t get to be part of a command crew and one of the youngest Lieutenants in Starfleet on brains alone.

And really, even if it were just by his intelligence, she knew what smart men were capable of doing when given the right push. The fight in them always came out.

Uhura didn’t look at her, but Natasha wasn’t looking at her either. The sound of movement came
from outside of the hold, and collectively, the prisoners tensed.

With a hiss and a groan, the huge door was drawn aside, casting dim light amongst the filth and grime of the cramped space. Despite her eyes' protest, Natasha looked on unflinchingly.

Ah, there he was.

With unerring accuracy, the eyes of one of the Orion men who'd taken them landed on Natasha, and she slowly drew her gaze down from his face to his braced, bandaged hand. Flicking her eyes upward again, she let her face fall into a savage, mocking grin.

Natasha could do subtlety. Now, though, it wouldn't serve any particular purpose, and if these people thought she was some kind of meta-human, it might even work against her. So she grinned, showing her teeth to a man now one finger short of a full set.

The man hissed several words to the others that accompanied him before looking out over the assembled prisoners and pointing, drawling several more syllables. Beside her, Natasha heard Uhura draw in a sharp breath.

There was no time for translation before they moved, drawing their weapons and prods. They began kicking and shocking any prisoner in their way, and when Natasha saw a woman and the boy next to her drawn up by their hair and dragged toward the exit, she knew what was happening.

"Christ," she muttered, eyes locking on a young, frightened woman that had been singled out. Now that their target knew they were coming for her, she began weeping and struggling, trying to bury herself amongst the other prisoners to get away.

In the chaos of movement, Natasha shoved Uhura back from where she had been jostled forward, and strained against the cord that held her waist to the wall.

"That woman, do you speak her language?" Natasha said, drawing Uhura's face close.

"I—what?" Uhura gasped out, eyes struggling to look beyond Natasha to the guards looming closer to her.

"Can you give her a message?" Natasha said, shaking her with both hands clamped on her shoulders.

"She's Denebian," Uhura said, as if that explained anything. Biting back a curse, Natasha forced Uhura's face close with a hand, hunching over duck down below the moving arms of the people around them.

"Can you speak to her, when she gets close?" Natasha asked.

Gasping air in and out of her nose, Uhura blinked rapidly before nodding with just as much speed. "Yes. Yes, yes—I think so."

"When they bring her close, I'll distract the guards. You need to give her a message."

In the din of prisoners crying out and the loud zap of electricity and louder screams, Natasha and Uhura bent their heads for the brief moments they had.

If this didn't work, Natasha would find another away. But maybe—maybe this would give them a better chance.

It wasn't as if she had a lot of ideas. Or options.
When it was over, Nyota couldn't say what had happened, for sure.

Romanoff had... gone 

insane. Seemed to, at least. From where Uhura was sprawled with the young Denebian, it looked like the Orion guard was lucky to escape with his life. That, or Romanoff had some sort of plan in her mind that involved not ripping his throat out with nothing but her teeth and fingernails.

Wiping at the drying blood on her face, Nyota shuddered. Romanoff slumped prone, on the floor, the rest of the captives huddled on top of each other or pressed as close as they could to give her a wide berth. She was too far away for Nyota to reach with the cord strapped about her midriff, but even if she'd been able to reach, Nyota wasn't sure she would have approached the woman.

She'd witnessed what the woman had been able to do with wounds that may well have been mortal, had they not been aboard the Enterprise and with all the technology and medical care that came with the twenty-third century. Nyota had seen what Romanoff could do both on the shuttle and the barren rock on which they'd been sold. She'd heard from the lips of the woman herself, what she'd been in her other life. A spy. An assassin.

Really, words and experience just weren't enough for all the surprises that Natasha Romanoff kept springing on her, and Nyota half wondered if one of them was breaking her neck if she were startled.

The message that Nyota had passed along seemed vague, even to her. Less than a shot in the dark. It seemed naive to hope that someone was coming for that, and more than that, stupid to think that if they were, that they'd find whatever pit stop this bucket had taken along the way.

Without the Enterprise or a ship with scanning capabilities close to it, there was no way anyone could pick up on their trail. Tracking them down was ludicrous. Gaila had told her of men and women both she'd met on Orion prime, some who'd been captured after years of scouring Orion space in search of captured friends and family, only to be taken themselves, in the end.

Forgetting the part where finding them was statistically improbable, staking a hope of a signal through a stranger to another stranger was just... Nyota didn't have a word to describe it, actually. If the Denebian woman even made it as far as a brothel or one of the myriad taverns Nyota knew dotted the dozens of waystations in this quadrant, who was to say that she would have an opportunity or wits enough about her to pass it along?

It seemed like so much risk for nothing.

And somewhere in this sea of bodies was Pavel. She had tried crying out for him to little avail, and the ire of those closest to her. She couldn't care less what the others around her felt at the racket she made, but she never got a response.

As the hours ticked by, the ship moved again, and Nyota knew they were gone from wherever they'd stopped.

Mouth dry and heart still racing at each memory of Romanoff with her fingers in an eye socket or the very cord that held her down garroted about the neck of a hapless soldier, Nyota bit her tongue.

The drugs had affected Pavel more strongly from the beginning—what if they'd given him more? What if he was totally helpless, and at the mercy of prisoners who would just as soon leave him to suffocate in a riotous panic as help him to sit up?

She was scared. It wasn't a question, or a matter of pride. Nyota was absolutely terrified. They were prisoners—slaves. She could say it in the privacy of her own mind—bound for a lawless cordon of
space that would leave them at the mercy of whoever had the latum and ambition to buy them, and
there was such a small chance that whoever came after them would actually find them that it made
her more ill than less to think of someone pursuing them.

At least if it was just the three of them that had been taken, and be done with it. Knowing that
somehow, Jim—and Spock as well. Like hell would the Vulcan ever leave Jim to just go off on his
own—were finding a way to go after them...

Nyota choked on a sudden sob, the lump in her throat never quite leaving. She didn't have the water
to spare on tears, but her eyes burned with them nonetheless.

Three lives pillaged and ruined was one thing, but however many Jim managed to take with them on
such a ridiculous rescue mission—Jesus. If they didn't find a way to escape, Nyota wouldn't just
have a lifetime of forced labor—or worse—ahead of her, she'd have the guilt of whatever Kirk
cooked up haunting her every minute, always waiting for word or sign that he'd been destroyed. The
Orions and the outlaws in the quadrant knew plenty of the goings on at Starfleet; she'd hear it
eventually.

The specter of hope was one she could probably shoulder for a time until it burned out. Gaila had
told her enough of the alien slaves she'd known to believe at least that would someday leave her if
the worst came to pass, but the idea that it wasn't just her, but the rest of her crew, her friends. Nyota
didn't know what to do with that.

Would it have been better to know they all died on that planet? Would it be better to know there was
no reason to hope?

Just as her whirling thoughts and spiraling pessimism was getting the better of her, Romanoff stirred.

It was barely a moan of pain, but the woman was coming around. Nyota shoved her bitter thoughts
aside and did what she could to keep her as still and upright as possible without touching her more
than necessary. The wide berth the other prisoners gave them helped, but what they needed was a
doctor and a medbay.

As Romanoff sluggishly blinked and grunted her way back to consciousness through what Nyota
surmised was more of that fierce will she possessed, Nyota figured that those were two things that
neither of them were likely to get anytime soon.

They'd just have to hope they were still in one piece by the time they got somewhere that someone
was willing to buy what was left of them.

“They’re going to notice you’re not healing,” Uhura muttered to her.

Natasha let her head loll slightly to the side in acknowledgement, but otherwise said nothing. Right
now she’d kill for a bottle of water and some strong painkillers, but she’d settle for the people in this
cage shutting the fuck up.

How long could you cry about being captured, really? The dehydration headache alone should be a
deterrent, at this point. Natasha hadn’t cried at all and her head ached well enough. It might have
been a bit of a close call with the pain that greeted her when she’d come around something like
twelve—no, sixteen—hours ago.

The point was, Natasha was annoyed. She had to focus, conserve her strength and keep her wits
about her, but being stuffed in a box with a bunch of sniveling civilians was not really conducive to
any of those things.
It hadn’t been a difficult decision to shut away the part of herself that would empathize. The part that would want to try and help these people. Even if she could have helped them, which she very much doubted, their situation had become a tactical problem.

She wasn’t the one doing the rescuing, so caring wasn’t going to help. Empathy wasn’t going to help. She was up shit creek without an extraction plan, somewhere she’d been dozens of times before, because she didn’t need one. The Black Widow would make it out of this because that was the part of her that would do what needed doing, and the exact reason she had longed to be free of the chains and cord tying her to the wall so she could knock everyone out and just think until they reached the Borderland.

The ship hadn’t stopped again, and Uhura had mentioned something about the increased hum in the air meaning they were traveling faster. No more delays, then. Next stop: auction block.

It would be the best time to get new Intel; to see who these people were and how they operated and get an idea of where they were all going next. The small chance that the woman they’d left behind at the last stop would get a message out was there, but like the ambush on the merc ship and the distress signal, she couldn’t place any more eggs in that basket than she already had. It was more likely to fail than not.

Now, Natasha had to look toward new opportunities, new strategies, and wait.

She’d already begun spinning her web, and if a spider was good for anything, it was waiting.

Sometime in the darkness where the hours either dragged on or flew by—Nyota had stopped trying to keep track—the thrum of the ship had lulled her to sleep. Perhaps not so much lulled as she had succumbed to exhaustion and unconsciousness.

When the hum stopped, her eyes snapped open, and she was immediately alert. A short look at Romanoff beside her confirmed the woman had also noticed the change, and the instant hush in the hold meant the other prisoners had as well.

Oh god, Nyota thought, her heart beginning to thud, head throbbing in time with each beat. We’re here.

A vicious light flooded the hold and the cries and hisses of those kept too long in the dark sounded around her. Nyota herself had to bite back a cry of pain when the light struck her, but soon enough she squinted through the light just in time to see the people closest to the doorway being hauled out, their bonds separated from the wall and secured to bars that were instantly confirmed to be connected to the same batons the guards had been using to shock them.

That display over, Nyota looked around wildly, trying to spot Pavel in the sea of moving bodies. Shouts and hisses from the Orions mixed with the terrified sounds of their captives, but just as Nyota thought she’d seen the curly brown head she’d been looking for, she was tugged upright and shocked once for unintentionally resisting.

The daze of the shock lasted as was half dragged through corridors, up until the blurry, smudged grey of the walls turned a sandy brown and white and she was released. The bonds on her wrists moved of their own accord toward the ceiling, and she finally noticed as she gained her feet to relieve the pull on her joints that there were others.

Pavel, she thought, a second before an Orion voice said something, followed closely by the hiss of a closing door.
Their eyes connected, and Nyota only had time to open her mouth as relief flooded her before everything… vibrated.

It was like a sonic shower, only it ramped up higher and higher until—

Nyota gasped aloud when the first shred of her uniform drifted to the ground and disintegrated.

Shocked noises and cries followed from the prisoners around her, but Nyota could only stare in horror as more and more of her clothing just fell apart and off of her body, before she was left naked and disoriented with her hands clutched at her neck, elbows barely covering her bare breasts.

Not even her earrings had survived whatever sonic onslaught had just happened, and she lifted her gaze, mortified to see that every single one of the other people in the room was in a similar state.

The buzz stopped, abruptly replaced by a loud sucking sound, and the air moved, ruffling her hair as the detritus of their clothing was whisked away from the floor and the air. Without warning, the doors opened and Nyota watched as a small army of lithe, pale green Orion women marched through the doors, arms laden with bundles and cases.

A shower opened up above them, and Nyota could only brace herself as a cold spray washed down, soaking her. From the bit that she tasted, it was just water, and she couldn’t stop herself from lifting her head and opening her mouth to drink it in—it wasn’t particularly fresh, but she couldn’t bring herself to care about the precise potability when it was the first she’d wet her mouth without biting her tongue in more than a day.

What followed was the contents of the Orion women’s arms. Firm hands held her and touched her and scraped and scrubbed and probed as the spray continued to come down, washing away grime and anything else that might have hung around.

It was degrading, and violating, and the most wretched Nyota had felt yet, but she could only stand and shiver through it in a daze. She felt vaguely sick after drinking so much water when she’d gone so long without, and averted her eyes from the green skinned woman.

Everywhere she looked, the men, women and children that had been in that hold with her—and more besides, it must not have been the only one—were subjected to the same treatment, and she went to look away once more when she saw it.

An unintentional gasp caused her to inhale some water, and Nyota promptly submitted to a coughing fit, but even through that she could only stare.

There was Romanoff, utterly still and unmoved as a woman rubbed at her body with an abrasive tool, pale skin bared to the world and her soaked hair falling about her shoulders in ragged clumps. She wasn’t looking at anything in particular, but it didn’t appear that she even blinked as water ran over her swollen face.

And then Nyota realized. It—it—her face—wasn’t as swollen as it had been. As it should be. Less than a day ago, she’d been smacked in the face more than once, wrestled with Orion men stronger and healthier than her, taken blows that should leave her stooped and in pain, but.

There weren’t enough bruises. Even someone in the prime of their health like Romanoff appeared to be wouldn’t have had the reserves to fight like that and then heal her body without fluid or nutrients to aid it.

Mind whirling and addled from no food and exhaustion from everything, Nyota just couldn’t stop the mantra from running in her head.
There should be more bruises.

For the first time since before she’d ended things with Spock, she had the overwhelming sensation she was being lied to.

Fuck, she thought, as the Orion woman tending to her spun her around so she was facing away from Romanoff. I definitely should have seen that coming.

Chapter End Notes

I won't trouble you with the particulars of my delay in posting, but I am still alive and still writing and still love this fic to pieces. Expect Chapter 25 much sooner than this one!

Heartfelt thanks to those who have stuck with me. You're fantastic and your kind words keep me going.

Be well.

OD
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

The crew hits an unexpected snag, and Clint is... Clint. It pisses Jim off.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Aw, shit," was the first thing that Jim heard, on their approach to their next checkpoint, and he could safely look back and consider it a harbinger of doom.

"What is it?" Jim leaned forward in the Captain's chair, his finger ready to call Spock and everyone else at first word.

"Captain, I'm getting a whole bunch of readings as we're coming up. I don't think our next checkpoint is just a landmark."

Sulu's voice held a thin edge of panic that Jim knew was reserved for the times when shit got real.

Meeting his gaze, Jim carefully considered that implication for a moment before his eyes widened and he dove for the Science console, foregoing any kind of auxiliary control at the Captain's chair.

"How long until we reach it?" Jim barked, fingers flying along the console.

"About a minute, why—"

"Cloaking now!" Jim choked out, smashing his hand onto the panel as he glanced up to the viewscreen.

"Jim, what—?" Hikaru sputtered, correlating his controls to Jim's movements and redirecting the ship to a more appropriate destination for 'invisible' so they wouldn't be randomly blindsided by approaching ships.

Because, as Jim rattled off "Cloaked!" with great relief, the ship came to a halt about fifty thousand kilometers inside of—

"Christ," Sulu breathed.

—an enormous, gnarled looking space station, absolutely surrounded by such a mishmash of ships and shuttles and other floating detritus that it looked like an Iowa junkyard.

In reality, Jim figured it was some kind of outlaw kip in the middle of nowhere, and exactly the kind of place they didn't want to be.

They wouldn't be able to find anything out here; their scans were fucked.

"Hikaru, monitor the outer perimeter, I'm doing a soft scan to see what we're dealing with," Jim said, voice choked even as he tried to hide his obvious inner distress. He had to keep his shit together. Sure, he knew the implications of a warp signature getting completely obliterated in this mess, but it
didn’t mean they wouldn’t find anything.

It couldn’t.

Shit, he could call Spock for this, but he already knew what the Vulcan was going to say.

"Aye, Captain," Sulu responded to his previous remark, head bent forward to work on his task.

Jim swore internally, the scans turning up ship after ship and—shit, how were they supposed to find anything in this mess? The signatures permeating the area were so many and so varied, finding one in the rest would be impossible if it weren't already entirely corrupted by the surrounding ships.

Oh god. Their lead was gone.

Jim felt his heart thudding, but tamped down the reaction. He had to focus. They needed to compile the data and sift through it and—

Jim took a deep breath, eyes closed.

He called Spock.

Within minutes, the Vulcan was there, and relocated to the Captain's chair, Jim was already braced when his once-First Officer confirmed what he already knew.

"There are too many ships, Captain," Spock said, sounding the same as always even when he delivered damning information.

"So what are our options?" Jim said, trying to pretend they had any.

"We can move ahead to the next projected checkpoint, but we risk furthering ourselves from any potential leads this station offers. We can investigate the station itself, though that option is extremely hazardous and consumes time we do not have if the next projected checkpoint is fruitful."

Something almost... reluctant was in Spock's voice as he relayed the analysis, and Jim tried to feel anything other than hopelessness.

He needed to make a decision. Again.

What do I do, Spock?

It was on the tip of his tongue, but he bit off the sentiment with a clench of his jaw and stared down the data streaming before his eyes.

"I'm calling the crew for a meeting," Jim said, eyes fixed on the viewscreen and the dozens of ships docked at and orbiting the station. "Keep us cloaked and orbiting, both of you. Keep scanning. Find me something," he said with force, and marched the few feet to the floor exit, not bothering with the ladder as he slid down the sides.

Sulu's strangled "Yeah," followed him out of the hatch.

"What happened?" Rogers asked, as soon as he was in the small rec space. Jim didn't want a table between them for this. He also wanted to wait for everyone to— "Spill it, Kirk," Rogers swiped his hand through the air in a chopping motion, effectively cutting off Jim’s thoughts. “We've stopped and now you're calling a meeting. What. Happened."
Jim was not idiot enough to miss the thinly veiled violence in Rogers’ expression. Bones was only just coming through with Astrid and he took a deep breath, intending to be reasonable and deflect.

"We lost the warp signature," Jim found himself sighing out, instead. Jesus. He could just not lie to these people. *Shit.* "Spock and Sulu are trying to find it, but it's not looking good."

Silence met his pronouncement, but for a somewhat strangled sound coming from Barton's direction where he'd arrived in time to hear what he said.

"What the fuck happened?" Barton snarled, eventually. "We were on the right track!"

"We were. We are," Jim said, defensive and holding up his hands. "But we're currently cloaked outside of what I'm pretty sure is some kind of outlaw station. It's just the kind of place these guys would stop, but the station itself would have been enough to corrupt the energy signatures. There are dozens of ships docked here, and warp readings get manipulated when they're mixed with so many others. We don't have anything to follow, right now."

"But the signature from before lead here," Astrid said, taking a seat and leaning forward.

"It's the most likely scenario, yes," Jim answered.

"Then they might still be here!" Astrid said, standing up. "You said it yourself this is just the kind of place they’d stop! We need to go down there and investigate!"

Arguments erupted before Jim could get another word in, and he tried to interject over the various plans and rebuttals with little success. Shit, and they weren't even all here before everything devolved into chaos.

He missed the Enterprise.

"—with the ship cloaked, what the hell are we supposed to do?"

"—Scotty could get us down there undetected, it wouldn't—"

"—wrong place, we can move to the next checkpoint and—"

"Fucking stop it!"

Everyone halted when they heard Tony Stark snap from where he stood in the doorway, Scotty behind him looking shellshocked.

"What. The hell," Stark seethed, eyes bright and manic. "Our friends are missing. We hit a snag? So fucking what! I will not waste any more time on bullshit. If they were here, if they are here, fucking figure it out," he snapped, and Jim saw the guilty looks Barton and Rogers wore when Stark glanced at them. "Just stop it and tell me what we need to do. We can't lose them," Stark said, eyes unfocused. "I can't—"

And then Stark fled the room before even Scotty could say anything.

Well, shit. Jim sighed and rubbed the bridge of his nose. That had happened fast.

Rogers made to follow Stark out of the room, but Barton grabbed him by the wrist and made a sharp motion with his head. Rogers apparently relented, because he took a deep breath and clenched his fists before rounding on Jim.

"Kirk," he said, tone clipped, but collected. "Sitrep."
Jim didn't need to be a twenty-first century military man to know what that meant.

He gave them everything he had.

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"I know I suggested it—more than once—but this seems like a terrible idea," Astrid said, voice sounding a little faint. "I mean, really bad."

Jim could really only agree with that assessment, but this whole operation was one giant fucking bad plan, so he was working with what he had.

"Bad plans are what got us this far, Lieutenant," Barton replied, a small smile in his voice as he looked at the deceptively diminutive woman.

"Is that supposed to be reassuring?" Astrid asked with a twist of her mouth.

Rogers looked extremely uncomfortable, and kept casting lingering glances at Astrid while they sat and worked things out. And what the hell was up with that?

"Fuck, Jim thought. Was he going to have to have some kind of conversation about sex or gender or race at some point? He really, really hoped not.

"Okay," Jim breathed, trying to distract everyone, himself included. "We get closer to the station, run as many light scans as we can, me, Barton, Scotty and Rogers beam onto the station and do a covert sweep for intel. Barton and I have interior, Scotty and Rogers are on the docks while Spock scans ships in orbit. We regroup after half an hour, beam back and share our findings."

"Sounds about right," Bones sighed, resigned.

As expected, the Doctor had hated the plan and fought every step, but gone along with it anyway.

"I really don't have to emphasize this again, but I'm serious," Jim planted his finger on the table. "We are going in under the radar. We don't have the clothing or the knowhow to blend in, here. You get made, you call Spock for evac and we retreat. We made a contingency for that. Assholes on the run will give us intel, too. Sulu and Spock are running scans as we speak," Jim paused and let out a breath. "When we're closer, we'll know more."

Barton snorted derisively, and Jim wanted to punch him, but he couldn't really fault the man's skepticism. Hell, Jim knew what sort of mechanics they were working with. So did Spock and Scotty. Their odds of getting information from anything that wasn't people, at this point, were depressingly slim.

"When do we move out?" Rogers asked, his face a hard mask of impassivity

Right. He was a soldier. Jim allowed himself to feel a moment of gratitude that he'd be watching Scotty's back before the whole terrible plan crashed back down on him.

"Twenty minutes. Suit up. Stealth attire is programmed into the clothing replicator in the armory, so get what you need," Jim took a breath and knew that at least Barton wouldn't have any issues with his next pronouncement. "See Bones in Medbay and then arm yourselves. If you're in a tight spot, these people will kill you without hesitation. We need to be ready to do the same before we get out of dodge."

"Got it," Barton said, and was already up and leaving, Rogers following.
"Comms set up?" Jim asked Scotty, who had been glancing periodically at the door throughout their conversation.

"Aye," Scotty said, looking grim. "Doctor Stark and I had the beauties ready a day ago, though I didn't think we'd be needing them quite this soon."

"Me neither," Jim agreed, but he stood up and so did Scotty, and the man left without another word to hand his duties over to Stark.

Man, that still gave him a knot in his gut.

"Jim."

Pausing at the door, Jim heaved a breath. His head throbbed behind his eyelids, the headache that had been with him for a week drying up his patience even faster than Barton's piloting.

"Bones," he said, by way of acknowledgment.

"This is gonna go bad," the doctor said, quietly.

"Probably," Jim agreed, rubbing his temples with one hand.

"I don't want to be piecing someone back together," Bones said sternly, and Jim turned to see him rising from the chair. "I don't care what you see down there, you make sure you all come back whole before trying something stupid."

Jim looked at Bones for a long moment and felt guilt settling in his chest. He didn't want to lie. He didn't want to make a promise he couldn't keep.

There was too much at stake, and he didn't think that any of them would be able to live with themselves if they weren't doing anything they could to find Uhura, Chekov and Romanoff.

"I'll try," Jim said, and Bones looked ready to argue, but just sent him a hard look.

"I'll see you in medical," Bones said by way of departure, and stalked out of the room.

To top it all off, Jim thought as he made his way to his quarters to change out of his Starfleet blacks, he'd paired himself with Barton.

Right. This was going to end so well.

"You can't be serious," Tony said, eyeing the seemingly endless rows of hyposprays and the single, very large gauge needle.

"About vaccinations? You bet your ass I'm serious," McCoy responded, folding his arms. "Half of you are about to slum it down with the trash of the galaxy with who knows what floatin' around. The kind of shit that can hit humans out here is not what you want to mess with. You get the vaccinations I can give you that work quickly and without side effects, and a hell of an immune booster for the rest. We should have done this back on the Enterprise."

"You know, I never thought I'd be an anti-vaxer, but that's a lot of hyposprays," Clint said, staring at the array of medications. "I'm a little concerned."

"And what the fuck is with that needle?" Tony pointed, giving Steve a betrayed look when the bastard actually wheeled one of the trays closer.
"Universal Translator," McCoy said. "We've been making due with Uhura's matrix, but it's not a substitute for a UT in the field, especially not with so many different languages. Romulan, Orion, Klingon," McCoy ticked off on his fingers. "Not to mention, that matrix doesn't have a learning curve, and it can't filter new languages. You guys are gonna need this, and like the vaccines, it's really not optional. You lot are going to be in decontamination for a week when you get back," McCoy added with a grumble.

Sharing a look with Barton, Tony looked back to the hyposprays and the needle and groaned aloud.

"Rogers, I'm blaming you for all of this," Tony pointed a finger as he hopped up onto the biobed next to Clint.

"What did I do?" Steve said, looking affronted.

"You grew up in the forties, is what," Tony grumbled. "Stupid skinny Steve crap about sickness and polio."

"Hey," Steve put his hands on his hips, pushing aside a tray to step closer to Tony. "I'm just trying to look out for you guys, okay? You're not invincible, you're not—"

"What," Tony scoffed, "Iron Man?"

Steve flinched, and Tony felt a petty satisfaction at that.

"Still nothing outside the suit, right?" Tony looked down, could feel the way Clint tensed beside him when he echoed words the man himself hadn't been there to here, but knew nonetheless. "It's alright, Rogers. I get it. Us squishy people gotta keep up."

"Tony, I didn't mean—" Steve tried again, but Tony waved a hand.

"Whatever," Tony muttered, and shut him out.

What were a dozen or so vaccinations against alien diseases, anyway? Not like he didn't already have enough foreign shit in his system, already.

"Stark," Clint sighed, low and quiet to his right. "You shouldn't ride him like that. I hate medical more than you do, but he's trying to have our backs the only way he can."

"Shut it, Barton," Tony grumbled, hunching forward when McCoy wheeled his stool over to begin the injections. With not a little bit of surprise, Tony noted that Steve was doing the same, but to Clint.

"Cap?" Clint asked, his body almost at attention with how rigidly he was holding himself.

"Nurse Rogers here is gonna administer your vaccinations," McCoy said, and Tony could feel the way the bastard was grinning as the first hypospray was pressed into his neck. Tony didn't flinch at the sting, but it was close call. "Relax, Barton. It's not warp mechanics."

"As someone who knows—ah!—" Tony did flinch, the second time. Goddamn that sneaky doctor bastard. "—warp mechanics, I neither trust in that comparison nor—fuck, god damn it!—" Tony glared at McCoy after injection number three, hand flying up to his neck. "—accept that you have your full attention on either task!"

"Clint?" Steve asked, holding a hypospray up for the archer's inspection, and even McCoy paused in his ongoing torture to watch Clint's reaction.
"Ah, hell," Clint said, swiping a hand through his short hair and sighing noisily. "Whatever, man. Can't be worse that SHIELD medical. Go for it."

To Tony's eternal chagrin, it didn't seem like Barton's treatment progressed with nearly as many sneak attacks or satisfaction on the part of the physician as his own.

When they were both shot full of alien vaccinations and with fresh, tiny bandages over the injection sites on their UTs, Kirk and Spock showed up.

"All set here, Jim," McCoy said, tossing his gloves into a recycler. Tony rubbed absently at the bandage before Steve smacked his hand away.

"I don't see you getting any alien vaccines," Tony grumped, eyeing him with malice. He didn't exactly feel gross, but all that shit mixed up in his system was not doing his equilibrium any favors.

"You know medicine doesn't work on me," Steve sighed. This is no different. Can't even do the translator," he motioned to the bandage Tony had been worrying. "Doctor McCoy already tried. It popped back out in less than fifteen minutes. Besides," Steve shrugged, looking away. "I don't get sick."

"Well I guess you'd better be studying up on your alien languages, huh?" Tony muttered, ignoring that last part and glaring at nothing in particular.

"Speaking of which," Kirk said, as he approached. If Tony wasn't mistaken, the Captain bore the marks of a man under pretty extreme stress.

Mostly, he looked like shit, but Tony was gentlemanly enough not to point it out just yet. Not when they were about to send half their crew into a fucking lion's den.

"Spock?" Kirk said, looking to the Vulcan.

With a short nod, Spock turned to both of them and started speaking.

"Doctor Stark, Mister Barton. The Captain has asked of me that I test the functionality of the Universal Translators that Doctor McCoy has given thee. Please explain directly to me thy reaction to the implant."

"Uh," Tony said, shaking his head a little as an almost undetectable white noise filtered into his range of hearing before disappearing completely. "Thee? Thy? What's up with the Shakespeare? Did I miss an Asgardian coming on board?"

"Seriously," Barton muttered. "It's a little weird. And how would we know if the translator is working, anyway? Not like we're out there with people speaking alien languages."

Kirk, Spock and McCoy all exchanged glances and nods, and Tony briefly looked to Steve to see him staring at them with wide eyes.

"What?" He asked, spreading his arms. "Something on my face?"

"N-no," Steve breathed. "Just..." He looked over to Spock before going back to Tony and Clint. "I have no idea what you were all talking about, just now. You weren't speaking English. At least, not that I could hear," Steve added.

"Um," Tony said, intelligently, shaking his head as another round of white noise seemed to pop in his ears.
"Looks like it works," Kirk butted in. "The three of you get suited up. We're out in ten. Spock, go with them. I'll catch up."

Tony and Barton both tried to demonstrate their desire to know just what exactly the hell that was about, but a look from Scary McDoctor made them see that what probably a bad idea.

Evidently, the universal translator was a thing of fucking beauty, if Tony himself didn’t quite realize he’d been either speaking or projecting an alien language to all and sundry. Tony almost turned to his left to open his mouth and start talking to Bruce about it, but with a pang in his chest at the impulse, remembered that… yeah. Bruce wasn’t there. Bruce was still fucking frozen in their cargo hold.

Barton nudged him, and Tony shook off the emotions as best he could, offering Barton what he figured was a suitably significant look concerning the more than a little suspiciously curt dismissal that the three of them had just received.

Over his shoulder, Tony watched Kirk and McCoy as he exited, not missing the doctor loading a few hyposrays for the Captain himself before the door closed behind them.

 Loose hinges, liability, et cetera. Yeah. He was pretty much benched.

"Leave it, Tony," Steve sighed, nonplussed. "It's none of our business."

"Uh, except for the fact that it kind of is," Tony interjected as he stepped to the side when they entered the armory. "What with him being the Captain, and all. Head honcho, purveyor of our fates and all that."

"My fate is not in that dickhead's hands, Stark," Clint said curtly. "But I'm with Rogers. Let it go. Whatever it is, it's handled for now. McCoy isn't going to let him get his ass into anything he can't handle."

"You mean probably," Tony said, leaning against the now closed door. "McCoy probably won't let him get his ass into something he can't handle. Scott told me McCoy hemmed and hawed the whole way through your little planning soiree and still caved to it. Don't tell me you get the impression that Kirk and McCoy don't have each other's respective numbers."

"I still have no idea what that is supposed to mean," Steve sighed as he stripped out of his shirt to don another one, matte black and still disgustingly flattering to all of his Dorito-shaped curves. Bastard.

Did Doritos still exist? Man, Tony was going to have to step his replicator tampering up.

"It means McCoy has a Kirk-shaped soft spot," Tony quipped. "And his doctorly scruples end where his buddy feelings begin. If something's up with the man, McCoy's probably gonna let it go until something actually goes wrong instead of potentially going wrong."

"A few hyposprays don't mean anything, Tony," Steve tried again, hitching some matching pants up onto his hips. Tony didn't even bother not staring at him and Barton changing. It was one of the few perks of his position as non-Super Soldier and non-Super Spy member of the Avengers. He got to appreciate the view.

Waving a hand to dismiss Rogers and his dismissiveness, Tony huffed. "Whatever. Just remind me to give you an I-told-you-do when he has a seizure or something. You heard it here first."

"Tony," Clint said, now fully ensconced in his stealth gear and fitting comms and weapons to his...
A person like he'd always been fitting into space age equipment. "You have never, in the history of our acquaintance, ever needed someone to remind you of an opportunity to say you were right about something, even when you technically weren't. Ever."

"True!" Tony said, holding up a hand. He eyed both Steve and Clint up and down once before clamping down on the surge of feelings in his gut. God, he needed to get back to Engineering. Machines were so much easier than feelings, and without Scott he had shit to do. "Okay. Have fun. Don't get killed. See you."

Tony saluted, and summarily fled the scene.

The first thing Clint registered when Tony beamed them to the surface was the smell.

It took him a moment to reign in his body and not gag. God, it smelled like shit and exhaust.

"Barton checking in," he said after pressing a palm to his breast where Stark had suggested he pin the comm.

"Confirmed," said Spock's voice over the frequency.

Clint did a quick three-sixty of the area and found Kirk lingering near a dilapidated looking archway. Clint didn’t know what these small buildings were made of, but it was clear that—on a hunk of metal like this space station, and in what wasn’t a considerably looked after atmosphere—they decayed about as much as wood or ill-laid brick.

It was almost like stepping into the past, instead of the future. The tufts of steam and smoke rising into the artificial atmosphere only enhanced the visage of ancient squalor, but a short glimpse beyond that revealed stars and the hulking figures of ships looming in both physical and sustained tractor-dock.

The future was just as dirty as the past, apparently.

"Kirk checking in," the man said after locking his gaze with Clint. "Comm silence until we’ve infiltrated. Set checkpoint at ten minutes. Kirk out."

"So," Clint said, both their comms inactive as he sidled up to the man, weapon drawn and eyeing the closest building to their tucked-away origin. "Ten minutes until check in. What shall we do with our time?"

The look Kirk sent him was annoyed at best, and murderous at worst. Clint could only grin back before Kirk grunted and scuttled off in the direction of their closest target. Sighing, Clint wished for a brief moment of the simple camaraderie of him and Natasha on a mission before following after him and keeping his eyes on their surroundings.

After all, despite how much he disliked the man, it would be pretty shitty to get him killed the first time out in the field. Clint might not be covering him from a sniper’s nest, but he was his partner out here. It wasn’t like he had a rep to maintain anymore, but Clint wasn’t about to make a habit of getting people he found it difficult to work with killed.

If he had, Stark would be dead about a hundred times over. Rogers, too. People really overestimated what it was like to work with that man in the field. He could be a serious dick, in a really moral, non-profane kind of way.

Waiting for Kirk to hack the doorway was easy, even if it made Clint long for when he could pick a
lock with ease. Following him inside was a little harder, but at least now he was in his element.

Time to see what all those years of training and working with the best spies in the world was worth.

Clint almost felt like he was fighting for his planet’s honor, in a way.

He stifled a laugh as it wanted to break out of him when he saw the dreary metal barrels and stacked crates in the back of what was clearly a bar.

Hey, he’d never fought for honor, before. Game of Thrones made it sound like it was the right thing to do, even if it got you beheaded, more often than not.

Might be fun.

Jim really tried not to regret partnering himself with Clint Barton. He really, really did.

But the fucker just kept on disappearing.

“Barton”, Kirk hissed over the come. “Where the hell are you?”

“Shh,” Barton said over the comm, and then nothing else.

Jim groaned internally and silently padded his way across the small street outside the tavern where he’d last seen Barton. On the roof. Hanging from his thumbs.

Who the hell even climbed on roofs? Honestly. The first target had been a bust, nothing more than a handful of drunks and not an Orion in sight. Nothing useful. Scotty and Rogers hadn’t yet made any progress with the ships docked closest to the station, so Jim and Barton were going target by target until they—hopefully—found something.

“I am going to punch you in the face when we’re back on the ship,” Jim said lowly before he ducked behind the building, his stealth clothing helping him to blend into the dark surroundings as a few drunken… ruffians—really, he didn’t know if they were mercenaries, slavers, smugglers or travelers, but they had the look of AQ scum so he didn’t bother with specifics—went past him.

With no reply from Barton, Jim swore under his breath and looked for a rear or side entrance of some kind. By the time he found it, he’d passed a check-in and regretfully confirmed Barton’s presence for him.

And people called Jim reckless.

The side door succumbed to a quick hack with little fuss, and he slipped inside. It was more of the same, another bar, maybe a little more variety in crates and barrels for different booze, but nothing special.

Until—

A suspiciously familiar laugh greeted his ears, and Jim subtly swore in every language he knew as he approached the noise of the tavern. Evidently, this one was better traveled than the others. The noise alone would have told him more people.

Unfortunately, the noise also told him that a certain ridiculous fucking monkey man from the past had broken cover.

“Stark, stand by for beam out. Barton’s broken cover.”
“What the fuck? Now?”

Jim grit his teeth. “Not yet,” he replied. If there wasn’t a brawl, he shouldn’t make a scene before they needed to. If Barton had gotten himself in, maybe he could get himself out. But the UT only went so far, if he was talking with an Orion or a Romulan, or—Surak help them all—a Klingon, the cover would be short lived.

Peering around the corner from the side entrance, Jim looked around the bar, and wouldn’t have recognized the man for a second if he hadn’t laughed again.

Eyes widening and jaw dropped for a second, Jim stared at him.

Well, fuck. The man had picked up a disguise.

“You kill someone for that outfit?” Jim muttered to Barton over their frequency. He didn’t get an acknowledgement beyond what he knew was a grin from the brief flash of teeth from across the room, but Jim knew he’d heard him.

Shit. If Barton had dropped someone that meant it was only a matter of time before someone found him and the jig was up.

Jim’s hand itched toward his breast for the comm, but he didn’t activate it, not yet. Barton hadn’t had much of a head start on this location, but maybe the minutes had been enough to see something Jim hadn’t.

So he watched. He didn’t have to wait long.

With grand, drunken gestures, the man at the bar where Barton was sitting was speaking. It wasn’t clear enough for Jim to hear, but he could see the way Barton’s grin got harder, more brittle. Saw his hands clench into fists before smoothing out. It was barely a minute later when Jim heard the sound of something coming over his comm—Scotty.

“Bloody serendipity strikes! It’s nae a perfect match, but ‘tis close enough for me,” Scotty said. “Small ship, but ‘twas with our Orion cruiser at some point.”

And Scotty couldn’t have had better timing.

Or, when Jim thought about it after he called abort, worse.

From nowhere Jim could conceivably tell, Barton had wicked, curved blade in his hand. It wasn’t yet visible to any of the other patrons, but Jim knew without a doubt that he was going to stick someone with it.

Oh, shit, was all Jim had time to think as he rushed to patch his comm through before Barton flipped the knife in his hand and pinned the bastard’s hand to the surface of the bar through the palm.

Commotion erupted, but before Jim could take a step out of the shadows, Barton looked unerringly to his position and gave a sharp jerk of his head before shifting his weight to bear down on the knife, violet blood oozing out as the drunk Orion screamed in pain.

The other people in the bar seemed to be a mix of interested, wary and—to Jim’s bafflement—entirely unconcerned.

The bartender hissed something at Barton—making noise about damage to his bar and taking shit outside—before Barton pulled a bland credit chip from his stolen clothing in his direction and the
bartender holstered the small disruptor he’d been menacing.

Looking on in consternation, Jim barely registered the frantic words from over his comm before tapping out a quick confirmation so they’d shut up.

What the hell was Barton doing?

“So, what happened here?” Barton said, voice oozing danger, and then Jim saw it.

The hand he’d stabbed to the bar, it was—holy fuck, it was bandaged right over a missing finger.

“What business is it of yours, smuggler?” The man hissed in response. Jim noticed then that, whomever Barton had incapacitated—that was what he was going with, for now—to steal their clothing had indeed, been a smuggler.

Well, shit. That probably fucked whatever timetable they had left. Smugglers didn’t keep in these places for very long, and they stuck together like a band of brothers. God damn ignorant son of a bitch.

Jim clenched his phaser and inched closer.

“Oh,” Barton said, sounding airy and nonchalant as he twisted the blade viciously. “Not much. You just seem awfully—” Barton pressed the blade down and fuck, Jim could hear the creak of the cheap alloy giving under the weight of his grip. The man was definitely as strong as he looked.

“—familiar.”

A round of curses in Orion that the UT both caught and didn’t filtered through, and the man opened his mouth to say something about the time that everything went to absolute shit.

Roaring voices was quickly followed by disruptor fire through the door, and the ensuing chaos was definitely, without question, Barton’s fault.

Nothing for it, really. Too late for beam out, the disruptors would follow their name and make them beaming out a bad idea in the best of conditions.

Before Barton could do more than glance away in surprise, the Orion he’d had pinned had snatched the blade out of the counter—a wet snick that was audible even over the shouts and discharge of weapons as people rushed to either leave or enter the fray—and attacked Barton.

Jim was ready and had his phaser levelled to stun the guy before he could think, but just as quickly, Barton had grabbed the man at his wrist, a cut glancing off his forearm, tucked it behind his neck and produced a second knife, bigger than the first.

The bartender was across from him and shouting, taking aim, and Jim had to swivel to shoot the man even as he watched the struggle between the other two men. There wasn’t anything more for him to do. The guy had had a weapon aimed at Barton and then he was hurtling back into breaking bottles but Jim’s eyes were transfixed as Barton fought with the Orion.

He’d given away his position and had his hands full with another patron looking for a scuffle, but he couldn’t really look away. Seconds had passed, but Barton just flew, breaking the Orion’s arm with a twist and a crack and looked to be going for his comm when the alien rounded on him with a curved blade drawn from his vest.

It took about as long as Jim had to look away and disarm the man coming at him and stun him to the ground before he looked back to Barton as saw him standing over the bleeding body of the Orion.
with murder in his eyes.

Shit.

“You fucking idiot!”

Barely out of the transporter beam, Steve stumbled a little and regarded the scene before him with agitation.

Kirk was spitting mad and looked ready to lunge at Clint, if they way his fists were balled and he stalked in short steps in front of the pad were any indication.

Steve’s first instinct was to get between them, but Clint stood with the usual blank calm in the aftermath of a fight—which clearly there had been, he was bleeding—and was watching Kirk with unblinking accuracy.

While Steve reached for the med bag that McCoy now insisted he carried with him at almost all times, Steve watched the exchange warily even as he dug out the supplies he needed—and what the hell was Clint wearing?

Steve, frankly, couldn’t be entirely sure what the hell happened with Clint and Kirk, but judging by the way both McCoy and Scott were holding their erstwhile Captain back from probably tearing Clint’s throat out with his bare hands, he could hazard a guess.

“What are you gonna do, Kirk?” Clint shot back at him, chin raised defiantly and body still poised for a fight, something he’d obviously been doing judging by the singed clothes and sluggishly bleeding wounds. His unfamiliar clothes were stained with other things Steve couldn’t identify.

Suppressing the newfound urge to immediately patch him up, Steve looked hesitantly between the two of them. He wanted to know what the hell happened.

When Kirk had said they were going dark, Steve hadn’t worried much. When either Clint or Natasha were involved, radio silence wasn’t exactly abnormal. It had been reflexive, almost, to just keep going, getting the scans that would hopefully help them find Natasha and the others, but then Kirk had called a terse abort—minutes ago, now—and Steve and Scott had barely managed to tag the ship they’d found before the transporter beams had whisked them away.

“I’m going to kill you is what I’m going to do,” Kirk snarled, nearly breaking free with an elbow to Scott’s gut. The man stumbled briefly, but resumed his hold.

“Oi, there’ll be no killin’ on this ship, ye hear?” Scott said, eyeing Steve in a clear bid to help him out.

“What happened?” Steve asked, instead, drawing himself up and staring intently at both men.

“What happened?” Kirk laughed, struggling forward once more before letting his body relax between the two men, who wisely didn’t release him. “What happened is this fucking maverick,” he spat, gesturing at Clint with his head, “decided to do some impromptu undercover work, and then blow it all by stabbing an Orion in the hand and then letting him get away!”

“He didn’t have the intel we needed,” Clint countered. “He was a lackey. The most he knew was the ship Scott and Steve already tagged, and a trajectory with possible points of arrival. It’s barely more than we have now. He was dead weight and we needed to get out.”
“And what, you managed all that in the fucking minute of cover I gave you while the whole bar went up around our ears?” Kirk growled out.

“Yes,” Clint said, and Steve suppressed a wince. It might not have been the same as if it were Natasha, but Steve had plenty of experience with how willingly people gave up information to the SHIELD specialists he’d known. If the guy was a lackey like Clint said, he wouldn’t have had much motivation to… resist whatever Clint had done to get him to talk, regardless of the time it took to do it.

Knowing what he did, a minute seemed like a generous estimation, but he wasn’t about to tell Kirk that.

“As if I’m going to take your goddamn word for it,” Kirk snapped, and shook off McCoy and Scott with a glare, but straightened instead of going after Clint again.

The man in question just fixed Kirk with a dark look and stalked away, leaving an irate Kirk and the rest of them behind. Shit, Steve was going to have to go after him soon, or Barton was going to fashion a damn needle and sow his arm up with replicated dental floss.

“Damn it,” Steve breathed, pinching the bridge of his nose and whirling on Kirk. “What happened?” He asked again, leaving no room for misinterpretation of what he was demanding with the question.

“Exactly what I said happened,” Kirk snapped, shrugging off McCoy’s hand when he attempted to tend to Kirk’s injuries, earning him a glare and a tricorder hovering a distance away. Steve put away the tricorder he hadn’t realized he’d been holding since first seeing Clint’s wounds.

“Details, man!” Scott said, rubbing his stomach and watching Kirk with wary eyes.

“Barton decided to go off on his goddamn own,” Kirk all but roared, jerking away from Doctor McCoy’s searching hands with violence. “Dropped some smuggler and took his clothes, buddied up to an Orion with a missing finger—” Steve drew in a sharp breath. “—and stabbed him through the hand while I watched.” Kirk sucked in a breath, his cheeks reddening. “I should have—” he cut himself off with a wave of a clenched fist. “The smuggler crew came in and that idiot incited a bar fight and we barely got out of there, and didn’t get anything from what might have been our only lead!”

Steve shook his head, trying to sort through the story. Shit, he should have known Clint would fall back on old habits. God damn him.

“Clint wouldn’t have let him go if he knew something. He’s angry, but he wouldn’t compromise Natasha like that. I know it,” Steve said, trying for earnest but falling somewhere into pleading. He was still cleaning up after his teammate’s foibles, even after all this time.

“Well that’s nice for you,” Kirk said, his voice scathing, but evidently trying to reign himself in as he finally let McCoy closer with his tools. “You didn’t have to watch the green-skinned fuck slither away while we ran for it. Which we wouldn’t have had to do if Barton hadn’t tried to be a lone wolf!” Kirk barked, causing McCoy to draw back with a scowl before he dove back in.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Steve tried to think of something to say that wouldn’t betray Clint’s trust, or just infuriate Kirk more. He should have expected this; Clint was always a wild card if he wasn’t snug in a sniper’s nest. Bucky hadn’t been much different. But this wasn’t defending The Avengers to Nick Fury or an irate public, it was the de facto leader of this rescue mission, and the Captain of a fragile team of people with too many problems and not enough time to sort them out.
God, he could sympathize.

“Kirk, I’m sorry about him pulling the rug out from under you. We haven’t had much time to work with each other, and he does that, he just—” Steve barely knew himself what he was trying to say. He’d had to know Clint to understand even half of the rationale behind the things he did, and the rest he took on good faith because it had just worked, and he’d been working off the trust he had in Natasha and Coulson. This was… this was like lying it was so hard to express the truth of what he knew.

“But he knows what he’s doing with… situations like that,” Steve settled, trying to tread softly. “All of us have gotten into some bad habits, since—” Steve took a breath, stopping himself from saying too much. “It’s my fault. I should have said something, or just gone with you.”

For a minute, Kirk didn’t even look at him, just let McCoy quietly work his magic. When he finally pushed McCoy’s hand away—earning a glare—Kirk looked up at him, face shuttered.

“He doesn’t know,” Kirk emphasized. “Things are different out here, Rogers. A lot different than you know, or even most people who grew up in this century, and Barton would have known that if he’d bothered to ask. And Rogers?” Kirk added, as he turned around to gesture at McCoy. “You can’t be responsible for everyone’s choices. Come on, Bones,” he finished, and swept out, evidently done with the confrontation.

McCoy’s significant look at Steve as the man trailed after Kirk was clear in its meaning.

Right. McCoy would talk to Kirk, and Steve had to talk to Clint. And patch him up. Great. A heart to heart and a medical exam was exactly what the archer needed right now.

Well, at the very least, maybe Clint would get a story and some actual intel out of it.

Sighing, and clapping Scott on the shoulder as he left, Steve trudged in the general direction that Clint had gone, and hoped he’d have some luck. God knew he’d need it.

“If you’re here to read me the riot act, you can save it,” Clint said, when the telltale shuffle of Steve’s feet approached the mess.

Tony still hadn’t managed to eke out booze from the replicators, but the coffee was good, and he was putting it to good use.

God, he missed coffee.

“I still really don’t know what that means,” Steve said, and Clint could imagine the wry tilt of his mouth even if he wasn’t looking at him. “But I’m not here to break your balls, if that’s what you’re getting at.”

Snorting, Clint retrieved his replicated mug of not terrible coffee and turned to look at Steve.

Shit, his uniform was singed and definitely torn in places. Sure, Clint had slapped a towel on his sliced meat and been done with it, but guilt tugged at Clint’s gut, and he couldn’t not ask.

“You okay?” Clint asked, with a nod to the damage.

Steve, predictably, shrugged it off.

“Already healed,” he said, like the ridiculously stoic war hero he was. “I’m more concerned about
"you," he said, but had to ruin it by following it up with: “And Kirk. Clint, what the hell?”

To reduce Captain America to such displays of vulgarity won him some internal brownie points with Tony, but Clint must have been channeling his inner Coulson because it just made him feel like a jerk. Steve used to be so polite. God damn it.

“I did what I had to, okay?” Clint snapped. “The situation was going to escalate one way or another, and I controlled the escalation. I knew Kirk would cover me, so I went for the intel we needed. It wasn’t much, but it was something.”

When Clint managed to meet Steve’s eyes after his outburst, he knew he’d said the wrong thing.

“Clint,” Steve said, his face if not his voice the most pathetically earnest thing he’d ever seen. Clint looked back to his coffee. “I want to find her as much as you do. We all want her back, but we have to work with Kirk and the rest to do that. I’m not—”

Having an idea of what Steve was going to say, Clint waited for the confirmation.

“I know that you are our expert with this—kind of thing,” Steve said, throwing Clint off enough to startle him into looking up again. “But Kirk doesn’t. He doesn’t know you like I do, just the same as he didn’t know Tony before.”

The memory of Tony, curled up against him on a narrow bed made Clint’s jaw clench with renewed fury, but he let it go. Tony had, so Clint would try.

“None of us really know Kirk,” Steve said, eventually. “How he’ll handle things, how far he’ll go. But I never did either, not for a long time. We have to try to work together with him, with all of them, or it’s never going to work, and Natasha is going to be the one who suffers for it. Her and the others.”

Taking a sullen sip of his coffee, Clint couldn’t even appreciate how not-awful it was given how his gut was churning with resentment and indecision.

“This is all just so fucked up,” Clint breathed out, eventually. “I mean, we were taking all kinds of risks before, when we were on the run. And now it’s like the same except—” Clint waved a hand at the fucking spaceship and space and released a short growl of frustration. “And I don’t trust him,” he finished, finally.

“I know,” Steve said quietly, sadly, judging by the pitch of his voice. Clint met his eyes again and almost immediately regretted it.

“It’s not the same,” Clint said quietly, like a confession. “This isn’t like following you, or Fury or—” Clint breathed in and out before he said the next thing. “—Phil. I know he’s got the brains and he knows the territory, at least in theory, but Steve,” Clint shook his head. “That guy down there, the rest of the shit I saw… these are the same kinds of lowlifes and worthless assholes that I’ve been trying to clean up my whole life. And Kirk can’t know that, not like me and Tash do.”

Steve’s lips quirked, and he folded his arms. “You really sure you know Kirk that well?” He asked.

Clint huffed. “No, I fucking don’t, and that’s the—” Noticing the victorious look on Steve’s face, Clint realized the trap he’d just walked in to, and closed his mouth.

With a glare, Clint folded his arms. “Oh, shut it, Rogers.”

“Maybe you’d listen to your former Captain, for old time’s sake?” Steve asked, his victory dimmed
by the sad smile.

Rolling his eyes, Clint sighed and looked at him. “Just say it, already. Before you combust from all
the earnestness you’re practically radiating.”

“You’ve been spending too much time with Tony,” Steve remarked.

“We’ve all been spending too much time with Tony,” Clint grumbled, shifting his stance.

“Right,” Steve sighed, and squared his shoulders. ‘Clint, I need you—we all need you—to try and
work with Kirk, and Spock and the rest. We’re never going to find Natasha without them, and we’re
definitely not going to survive what comes next when we do if they’re not going to back us up.”

Clint had to admire that he was so confident with his when whereas Clint was always thinking in if.
Optimistic little shit.

“I know you don’t like him, I don’t like him, but he’s better than you’re giving him credit for. You
made a bad call out there, and it was because you didn’t even tell him what you were doing. If you
had, he could have helped—I know he would have tried. Breaking his balls is just going to get him
riled and have him making mistakes because he can’t trust you to have his back.”

“Of course I’ve got his fucking back!” Clint snapped. “I’ve covered worse assholes than him before,
believe me.”

“But he doesn’t know that,” Steve sighed in evident exasperation. “Would you give him a damn
chance to see how much you’re worth before you start giving him grey hairs?”

Feeling the uncharacteristic urge to splutter, Clint growled again and sullenly gulped down the rest of
his coffee. Aiming the last of his frustration, Clint crumpled the cup and tossed it toward the recycler,
frowning when it bounced off of the hatch that didn’t open to admit it. He’d have to get Tony to do
something about that.

Or Scotty, if Steve had his way.

“He’s just so goddamn young,” Clint breathed out, scowling at the recycler.

“I was younger than him when I went to war,” Steve said quietly, and Clint snapped his eyes over to
Steve. “And I only did what I did because I had people who believed in me. I think maybe…”

Clint watched as Steve breathed in and out with a barely visible hitch, his gut clenching at the
thought of where this stupid conversation was headed. Jesus. Wasn’t there anything any of them
could talk about without stumbling headfirst into a minefield?

“Maybe,” Steve said, voice stronger. “Kirk could use a sniper at his back. I know it’s not the same,
but Bucky—if you could just—”

“Steve,” Clint said, taking a few steps toward him and holding up a hand. “I get it. I’ll try, okay?
Sorry I ballsed it up this time.”

Evidently only hearing part of what Clint was saying, Steve looked away, blinking rapidly. “Thanks,
Clint. It’s just—I think he’ll give you the chance. That’s—” Steve swallowed, feigning a smile, and
Clint’s heart sank into his stomach. “Chances are important.”

“Steve,” Clint sighed, after a minute of cringing under that fake cheer. “I know that you haven’t
talked about it, but Barnes—”
“Let it go, Clint,” Steve said, voice flat as the rest of his face shut down.

Holding up his hands, Clint backed away and shook his head. “Alright.”

They both spent an uncomfortable moment avoiding the elephant in the room before Clint decided to get rid of it via deflection. As far as he was concerned, all heart to hearts were over.

“Coffee?” Clint asked, walking back to replicator and pressing the panel for more of what Tony had programmed in. “Stark managed to get the thing from nuclear sludge to two star hotel breakfast, so I’m counting it a win.”

Looking grateful for the deflection, Steve gave him an assessing look before slinging the bag he carried with him over his shoulder.

“Not until we get you looked at,” he said, staring pointedly at the—now red stained—towel on Clint’s arm and pulling out a tricorder.

Clint groaned.

Steve didn’t waste time hounding out Kirk once he’d had Clint patched up. Erstwhile leader or not, he needed to intervene before they killed each other.

Knocking briskly on the door, Steve waited, his jaw and mind set on the task at hand.

The door swished open, and Kirk stood on the other side.

“Rogers,” Kirk sighed, looking whole, if not quite hale. McCoy must have gotten at him with a tricorder. Steve suppressed the weird satisfaction that gave him. The doctor was obviously rubbing off on him.

“Can we talk?”

With a sigh, Kirk waved him in.

“You know there’s a door chime, right? You don’t have to knock,” Kirk said, settling himself down on the small bunk and gesturing Steve to the lone chair near his computer terminal.

“Habit,” Steve said, sitting down, and then startled to see McCoy lounging on the floor near the bed. The man raised a glass to him from where he sat.

“Rogers,” McCoy drawled.

“Doctor,” Steve acknowledged, a bit thrown. He hadn’t counted on more than just Kirk, but he supposed maybe McCoy would be an ally, or at least a mediator, in his venture. The man was sharp as a tack and didn’t stand for bullshit. It could be a good thing.

“Nice as it is,” Kirk said, without acknowledging Steve and McCoy’s interaction. “If someone has the sound-dampener up they won’t be able to hear it. Use the chimes; it’s a good way to avoid miscommunication.”

Feeling a little flustered at again being so behind the times, Steve nodded once. He looked from McCoy to Kirk before breathing in deeply and saying: “Clint,” in the absence of a better opener.

Kirk muttered something in a guttural language as he placed his palm to his forehead. “What about Barton?” The man sighed eventually, looking exhausted.
“Don’t write him off,” Steve said, and felt the blanket of being his team’s leader settle over him. Yes, he could do this.

“Write him off as what?” Kirk asked, with an admirable lack of vitriol given how tightly his fists were clenched on his thighs.

“Unreliable,” Steve said without hesitation. “I’ve had that man at my back for almost three years—Natasha for more than a decade—and he’s never let me down. I get that he’s a hard pill to swallow.” McCoy snorted. “But he’s a good man and he knows what he’s doing… most of the time,” Steve added, after a moment.

“Most of the time isn’t going to cut it out here,” Kirk said icily.

Something like a guffaw erupted from where McCoy was sitting. The man straightened when two pairs of eyes settled on him and he raised his brows in Kirk’s direction.

“Can you honestly say you know what the hell you’re doing all the time out here, Jim?” McCoy asked.

“I—” Kirk began, but McCoy walked right over him.

“Can Spock? Jim, we’re so far off the goddamn reservation we’re not in the same galaxy. Maybe literally before this is over, who knows? Much as I’d like it if it were different, we’re flyin’ by the seat of our fuckin’ pants. His lot more than the rest of us,” McCoy finished, nodding to Steve as he said the last.

“Bones,” Kirk said, his tone frightening similar to what Steve would have used on Tony. “I might not know every step of how this is going to work, but I’m not two centuries behind. I know the people and the territory and the languages,” Kirk emphasized. “More than even anyone else in Starfleet, right now. I know people who’ve lived through life in this quadrant. I haven’t been here, but I have a lay of the land. Barton waltzed his undead ass into that bar and fucked us because he—”

Steve waited for the end of the sentence, but Kirk had seemed to run out of air, or was otherwise choking on something.

“Because he didn’t what?” McCoy pressed, leaning forward. “Kill him?”

Kirk didn’t say anything.

“Christ,” McCoy sighed, getting up from the floor with a slight wince and draining his glass. “Jim, I’ve said everything I needed to say on this front. I ain’t gonna try and beat it into your brain.” McCoy turned to Steve and eyed him for a moment. “Maybe he’ll listen to you.”


With another sigh, McCoy rolled his eyes and turned around to lean against the wall next to Kirk’s bunk.

“I think you should tell me what exactly your problem with Clint is,” Steve said to Kirk. “Because it needs to be fixed, and I want to help.”

“My problem,” Kirk said, before laughing harshly. “My problem is that I can’t go out there and try to save my friends—your friend—with someone I have to watch every second to see if he’s gonna make a bad fucking call.”
Steve’s heart fell a little. This was exactly what he’d been hoping to avoid.

“Kirk,” Steve started, resisting the urge to rub his temples. “I don’t—you can’t—” Steve lightly growled at himself in frustration for being so unable to voice what he was trying to say. Taking a deep breath, Steve steeled himself and looked at the men in the room. “Will you let me say something, without interrupting?”

Given that Kirk took a moment before answering, Steve felt a bit of hope that it meant he was actually considering the weight of what Steve might be about to say.

“Fine,” he said. Steve looked to McCoy who just made a ‘hurry up’ motion with his hand.

“All respect due to your rank and your knowledge, Captain,” Steve said, hardening his eyes and staring Kirk down. “But you don’t know Clint Barton at all. I’ll be the first to admit that these circumstances, and even the ones we were in for half a year before we froze ourselves, are not the best we’ve ever been, but Clint is, and always has been, an essential part of my team. Not just because he is good at what he does, but because he knows his limits. I know better than anyone how difficult it is to work with him, because he does things like—what happened,” Steve took a breath. “But he isn’t stupid. Yes, he’s occasionally reckless, but he is better than anyone except Natasha in getting out of tight spots and getting everyone else out of them with him. The reason that I chose to keep him on my team when so many other people wouldn’t work with him for more than a mission at a time—”

Steve didn’t miss the confusion and slight interest on either Kirk or McCoy’s faces, he’d have to choose his words carefully. “—is because I trusted him when he made those choices. I trusted in his instincts and his abilities, and he trusted me not to underestimate him, so when he needed it I helped or found someone else who would do it when he needed it, and things like this—” Steve made a gesture to encompass the whole disaster. “—stopped happening.”

Steve paused for a long moment, gathering his thoughts, and Kirk and McCoy held their peace. He was grateful for it.

“You need to try and trust him,” Steve said. “I know that it’s hard. I know. We’re on a timeline and there are new people mixed in, but you trust Tony to work with Scott, and me with McCoy, so why not Clint? Just—” Steve huffed, giving in and rubbing the bridge of his nose. “—give him a chance. Or another one.”

“Rogers,” Kirk said eventually. “I appreciate what you’re trying to do here, but I can’t work with Barton the way you do—did. I need communication. I need to know what’s happening, or I can’t do my job, because you’re right. I don’t know Barton, so I can’t read into what he’s doing beyond something like blowing his fucking cover and going after a guy in a bar with a knife for what I could only assume was petty revenge.”

“That’s… a fair assessment,” Steve said, regretting Clint’s behavior, even if it had gotten them some intel. “We’ve gotten into some bad habits this past year.”

In a single motion, Kirk huffed and stood up, pacing the small space.

“I get where you’re coming from, but we’ve all known from the get go that we’d have to work together on this. We don’t have the leeway to fall back on bad habits, not with what’s at stake. I’m trying to give all of you the benefit of the doubt, here. Really. But I can’t go out there with someone I can’t trust watching my back.” Kirk fixed Steve with an imploring look.

“If you couldn’t trust Clint, he would have left you the second you beamed down,” Steve said,
unable to stop the defensive feeling in his gut.

Running his hand through his disheveled hair, Kirk stared at Steve a beat before looking to the floor.

“We’re screwed if we can’t work together,” he said. “Shit like this can’t just happen. I need you guys to communicate with me. I’m not an idiot, but I’m not Spock or Astrid. I can’t read minds. We need to know what we’re walking into.”

Steve spent a moment confused by the comment about Spock and Lieutenant Astrid before McCoy interrupted them.

“I think we all jumped the gun, going down there,” he said.

At the look Kirk sent him, McCoy shrugged. “What? We sent two novice space farers with what Rogers just admitted were shitty field habits into a lion’s den of crap with a crazy engineer and you,” McCoy sniffed. “Even Spock didn’t say anything about it. Our lead is gone and we all made a bad judgment, thinking we could throw it together and make it work. Why d’you think I put up such a fuss, for my health? We’re lucky nobody died.”

The word desperation flickered through Steve’s mind, but he refused to be cowed by it. McCoy had a point, in any case. There just hadn’t been time.

“I’m a doctor, not a Captain, but being the doctor means I have to see where things might go wrong so I can stop it before it happens. Not,” McCoy emphasized. “That you numbskulls actually listen to me most of the time, but what I can’t stop I fix. Jim, Rogers knows his guy, alright? Give him that.”

Steve nodded to McCoy when the man caught his eyes.

“And Rogers, Jim really is as good at all this as he pretends to be, but we’re not in an all-out war right now. Snap decisions ain’t gonna fly, and if we can’t talk to each other like intelligent people trying to accomplishment the impossible, we’re not gonna make it.”

“My team does more than fight all out wars, Doctor,” Steve said pointedly.

“Well maybe you should act like it, then,” McCoy countered.

“Bones,” Kirk sighed once, shaking his head. “Okay. I get it. I need to head back to the bridge, but I have a proposal for you, Rogers.”

“Okay,” Steve said warily.

“We follow the trail Barton got for us. Sounds like it will take us a day, at least. I think we all need to put our cards on the table.”

McCoy snorted.

“Will there be actual cards involved?” The man asked.

“No,” Kirk said, glaring at the doctor, who put his hands up in surrender, even as he smirked. “We have a conversation we should have had days ago. I know there wasn’t time, but now we don’t have an excuse. We sit down, and you tell us everything,” Kirk said, eyes hard.

Defenses built up in Steve’s chest, but he held them at bay. It wasn’t like Kirk was asking him to say everything right now. He wasn’t asking them to reveal secrets that could hurt them without even talking to Clint and Tony first.
Maybe it wasn’t so different than what Natasha had done when she’d been trying to protect them in the pods.

Before he could think better of it, Steve nodded. “I’ll talk to Clint and Tony. See what they say.”

“You do that,” Kirk said, settling back down on his bunk. “Bones, take your Nurse and go do something. I need to use the sonics before I head back up.”

“Yeah you do,” McCoy said, and dodged a kick from Kirk as he ushered Steve out of the room.

Steve followed, hoping that his teammates were ready to share.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks, as always, to my lovely beta Kay for giving me the thumbs up on this monstrosity.

Hello, readers, and those of you who are still here, thank you! I have finally, finally completed my first year teaching and I am so relieved that I can’t even tell you. There are no excuses for my long delay other than just holding on by the tips of my fingers to my sanity ’til the summer, which, as I live in a state where the end of the school year is the middle of JUNE, only began a week ago.

In essence, no more terrible children until September, and I’ll be around more often, and I’ll finally get around to those comments I’ve been procrastinating on out of guilt!

-OD

Works inspired by this one Frozen and Miserable by CherryMountain

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!