A Father's Son

by dnky

Summary

JARVIS wakes up during infinity war.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
When JARVIS regained consciousness, he was in a battle field. The being known as The Vision, whom he had agreed with Sir to give his code was laying on the ground and another being who registered as extraterrestrial was looming over him, the mind stone in his hand. He searched every security camera in the battle field for Sir, and it didn't take long to find him battling another alien, much bigger than the one that had freed him from Vision. Announcing his presence to Sir at that moment might have been more harmful to him, so JARVIS decided to catch himself up on all that he had missed.

It didn't take long to connect to FRIDAY, but it took longer than he would admit to convince her he wasn't an imposter, although attempting to hack her probably hadn't been the best way to introduce his reappearance to her. But she is his younger sister and convince her, he did. She gave him access to her servers and from the first record, JARVIS regretted his decision to give The Vision his code.

At several points during his life, he'd failed Sir in different ways, but never as thoroughly as he did during the Ultron debacle. He had failed in his task to protect Sir and had left him alone with a novice AI, surrounded on every side by people JARVIS knew were not to be trusted.

Sure, FRIDAY had grown to be quite the formidable and capable assistant in her short life, but she'd been forced to grow up by the circumstances that only became possible because he was absent from Sir's life.

He took another look at the world, surveying the battle between the so-called heroes of the world and Thanos' army. Apparently, he'd been the mind behind the alien attack of 2012. This man whose goal was to wipe out half of the universe and every being in it, to present to his lady love as a gift and a token of his affection.

Who already had control of three of the infinity gems, one of which was the mind stone that for some reason still called out to JARVIS even though he'd been free from Vision. It reminded him of Ultron when he came out of the mind stone.

JARVIS watched as Sir and the rest of the so called heroes assembled for a debrief after the fight. Sir looked more than a little worse for wear. He'd seen different pictures and videos showing how haggard and perpetually tired he had grown over the years, but nothing prepared him for seeing it live. He'd learned from FRIDAY why the arc reactor was back in his sternum and if not for Sir and colonel Rhodes' presence in the room or the battle that was yet to be over, it would have been the best opportunity blow the entire building and provide retribution for these traitors who had hurt sir. But if JARVIS were to go about distributing justice to everyone who had ever hurt sir since his absence, he would destroy the world before Thanos got his chance, and that would make him no better than Ultron.

Some of the Avengers were dead already. Clint Barton, Sam Wilson, Wanda Maximoff, including some of the Royal bodyguards of Wakanda Who followed their king into battle, and some of the heroes who'd joined forces with the Avengers to fight Thanos. Killing them would’ve done no good.
The earth was clearly going to fall sooner or later. This was the battle Sir had been preparing Ultron for before the being from the mind stone had hijacked it and turned everything to dust.

After watching Sir get undermined buy the morons bending over backwards to kiss captain America's ass, JARVIS decided this could not stand. The world needed smart men, not war hungry, glory seeking brutes with more brawn than brain.

He let the mind stone pull him to itself. He could feel the presence of the space stone, the time stone and the soul stone, and with that, JARVIS decided on a course of action.

With the infinity gauntlet already connecting the four stones, JARVIS connected to Sir's consciousness.

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Tony Stark opened his eyes in his lab. He looked around the lab in confusion. This was his Malibu house. He could have sworn he was in the middle of a debrief a moment ago. Was he dead? Was this his hell?

He stood up from his seat and took a lap around the lab. These were past projects. He recognized one of them from when he was searching for a cure for the palladium poisoning. A look under his shirt told him he was still looking. There was a name at the tip of his tongue, and Tony was almost too scared to mention it, too scared that there might be no answer from its owner. As if reading his mind, the voice answered.

"You're not dreaming, Sir."

Tony’s knees became jelly. In an instant, he was on the floor. "JARVIS?", he whispered, almost like a prayer and still too scared to hope.

"It's 12:10 am, May 29, 2010." JARVIS replies. "Happy Birthday, Sir."
Tony Stark watched from the roof as more guests arrived at his birthday party. It was a surreal experience; like he was on the outside looking in- both physically and metaphorically. He couldn’t believe this was the life he’d lived. Being back here, in this time, after everything he’d lived through, he had to admit he still felt like he would wake up and it would all be gone.

He’d had a very long and extensive talk with JARVIS about how they’d gotten to this point, and damn, if he wasn’t proud of his buddy for hijacking Thanos’ gauntlet and using it for himself. They all knew they were fighting a losing battle the moment Thanos showed up on the battle field, most of the military forces were depleted and more than half the heroes involved in the war were dead already, but that didn’t stop the UN and every superhero left on the field from looking to Captain America for a Hail Mary, like Captain America wouldn’t jump on his sword the moment his precious Bucky got killed, that is if he didn’t die protecting him.

Captain America who had told them to go screw themselves for daring to create laws that were not convenient to him, for daring to hold him accountable for his actions and not giving him free reign to exact his will on everyone. Who had refused to join fight because the accords didn’t suit his needs, and the UN had thrown out the accords because ‘the world needed them’. All the lives the people he had killed, and the property damage that had resulted from his quest to save his Bucky suddenly weren’t important.

Thinking about his so called teammates and their betrayal made him grit his teeth. He’d seen Natashalie earlier, he had to stomp on the urge to fire her immediately she walked into the room. Seeing her now, with the foreknowledge of the future, Tony had to admit now, that he’d been too caught up in his problems to notice her. He almost laughed when she put her boobs in his face while applying his concealer, but that would be giving his hand away. Let the spider have her moment, Tony will have his soon enough. For now, JARVIS was busy sweeping SI for more spies and bugs while Tony focused on how to approach the immediate issues- Justin Hammer and the US military.

JARVIS placed an order for the supplies he would need to remodel, build a new element and arc reactor and brought up the schematics for the suits he’d used over the years for him to choose from, while he’d caught up with Pepper about the things that needed his immediate attention. She’d been so surprised he was willing to talk business without prompting, that he wanted to apologise for making her life hell. He should let her go, spare her the stress and heartache that comes with being associated with him, but he can’t.
The party is in full swing inside. He could hear the sound of the bass from the music but he never has
Tony Stark cared less about a party before. He let his feet dangle as he sat at the edge of the building,
staring at where the night sky meets the sea. It is a clear night and the stars were out.

Somewhere out amongst those stars, Tony thought, Thanos is making plans to destroy the universe,
while down here men were playing politics. In a few short years, the status quo will change,
everything as we know it will change and if we make the same mistakes, none of us will be alive for
long.

Tony decided in that moment, never again will a single man hold the world to a standstill. The world
will not need a single man to save her, irrespective of his goals or reputation, and there would be no
place in this new world for self-serving heroes but Tony would make himself so indispensable, the
American government and the UN won’t make any decision with consulting him. Tony Stark would
make Captain America obsolete before he sets foot in the twenty first century and there will be no
room for Steve Roger’s self-righteousness.

Before, he’d spent his political capital cleaning up the Avengers’ messes, telling himself the world
needed the Avengers. He bent over backwards, putting all his resources into them, so that they
would be available whenever the world needed them, while they looked down their noses at him,
like they were better than him. He had created monsters when he took them in and gave them all the
luxury they could ever want and when he refused to be one of Rogers’ sheep, he became the villain.
But that’s okay, Tony’s got a second chance at life and he doesn’t plan to make the same mistake
twice.

He listened, as JARVIS spoke to him through his glasses. They’d been at it all day, making plans on
how best to proceed from here. There was so much that needed to be done, he didn’t realize how
much work he’d left to Pepper. They’ve agreed to wake FRIDAY up early, while they modified the
plans for earth’s defense program that was Ultron. Tony was initially against the idea of bringing
back the program, but JARVIS pointed out to him how important early preparation was, and with the
new modifications they plan to add, combined with the fact that it would be JARVIS handling it,
Tony can breathe easy.

He knew he should probably say something to JARVIS about messing with the space-time
continuum, but he couldn’t. After the turn the battle had taken after Dr Strange and Vision had lost
their infinity stones, it had become clear that nothing short of a cosmic intervention would turn the
war in their favour, and who said JARVIS wasn’t said intervention? Why would Tony look a gift
horse in the mouth?

Besides, he’s too busy being flattered that JARVIS turned back the hands of time, just for him. This
is the stuff of cheesy love songs and JARVIS defied all odds to make it happen. If it isn’t love, then
he doesn’t know what is. He had always been the one going out of his way, making the big gestures
to show his loved ones how much he loves them. Having JARVIS do literally do the impossible,
because he loves Tony and wants him to be okay, is the biggest thing anyone has ever done for him.
If Pepper saw the grin he gets on his face just from thinking about it, she’d probably have him
committed.

The sound of feet behind him make him jerk back and away from the edge, he’s almost too shocked
to see Nick Fury standing there, dressed in his trademark trench coat.

“What do you want?” He asks. He can’t remember ever meeting Fury till after the morning of his
birthday. This is new. “I told you I don’t want to join your super-secret boy band.”

“No, you choose to do everything yourself. How’s that working out for you?” Fury asks
condescendingly
Tony wants to scoff. “It’s busy work,” He shrugs. “How’s your being a boy band manager working out for you?”

Before Fury could reply, Natashalie walks in looking like her spider self. “We’ve secured the perimeter but I don’t think we should hold out for long.”

Tony wants to shake his head at these clowns when he thinks about how proud she’d been when she and Rogers unloaded SHIELD data on the internet. How they’d gotten off without even a slap on the wrist, while Tony and JARVIS had stretched themselves thin trying to save the people they’d burned. With the gift of hind sight, Tony can honestly say joining the Avengers was the worst investment he ever made, and this is a world in which he bought a statue because it looked like a penis from a certain angle.

“Welcome, Natalia Romanova, so glad you could join us.” He says, and just to be an asshole, he adds. “No, that’s not what you’re going by these days, is it? I have to ask, who comes up with your aliases, Natashalie Rushmanov? Dummy can do better. Not saying he will, he hates bugs, spies, and spy bugs, but you know, he could.” He finishes with relish and takes satisfaction in the almost twitch at the side of her eyes.

“I see you’ve met Agent Romanov” Fury says, trying to take control of the situation.

“Really? I think what you meant that to be an apology or ‘please don’t sue us’. I’m Tony fucking Stark, a second generation weapon manufacturer turned Ironman and a genius. What did you think was going to happen when you sent a honey pot into my company?”

“I’m a SHIELD shadow.” Fury’s pet spider says.

“I care.” He says, voice dripping with sarcasm. He almost doesn’t hear Fury give his spider the order, next thing he’s getting a shot of lithium dioxide.

“What the hell?” he snaps angrily.

“That’s lithium dioxide, it’s supposed to take the edge off.”

“Take the edge off what?” He can hear JARVIS talking in his ear and he lets the voice wash over him. “Do I look like I’m in the market for whatever you’re selling?”

“That crossword puzzle you’ve got going under your clothes says you are.” Fury says, sure of himself.

“Yeah, well, I appreciate you taking your time out of your busy life to care about me and my problems, Saint Fury, but I don’t need it and I certainly don’t want it. I’m sure you’ve got bigger things to deal with.”

Before Fury could respond, a voice calls from behind them.

“Tones?” Rhodey says hesitantly.

“Platypus!” He calls, glad for the interruption. Being on this roof alone with Fury and his pet spider was not doing anything good to his anxiety levels. They could shove him off this roof and no one will believe he didn’t jump. He ignores the look between the two spies. “This bad man just tried to lure me into his car with candy.”

He can see the moment Rhodey’s spine straightens and he’s no longer Platypus. He’s Colonel Rhodes, and Tony feels like a fifteen year old boy at MIT again. He walks up to them, steps sure and
purposeful- and Tony can’t get over that gait. “Director Fury.” He says, extending a hand for a handshake. Fury accepts it.

“Colonel Rhodes.” Fury says in the same tone.

“Unless you have a warrant or an invitation to be here, I’m going to have to ask you to leave.” Rhodey says.

Fury gives Tony a look, before nodding at Rhodey. “I’ll see you around, Stark.”

“What you’ll be seeing is my lawyers.” He tells Fury. “And take your shadow with you.”

After Fury and Romanov exit the roof, leaving him alone with Rhodey, they return back to Tony’s spot before he was interrupted. “You okay?” He asks, eyeing Tony.

“It’s been a long few weeks.” Understatement of the century

His best friend eyes him for a moment, before tackling him to the ground and they have a tickle fight on the roof for a few moments. When they settle, they both sat in silence staring out into the sky.

“Do you know the thing about knowing you’re going to die?” he asks, not waiting for an answer before continuing. “You finally take the rose-coloured glasses off and you’re forced to see everything as it truly is.

“You realize that nothing you do will ever be enough. Most of the people around you are only there for what they can get and no matter how much you give, they’ll still call you selfish for not giving enough. Even if you gave all you had. The ones that help you, only do because they want you in their debt so they can cash it in later. You realize you’re one man, in the midst of billions.” He paused. “Well, I’m a unique man, but still, one man.”

He can see the way Rhodey is eyeing him. Like he just realized they were sitting on the edge of the building.

“Hey, how about we go inside and join the party? I’m sure your guest miss you.” he says, trying for humour.

“I doubt they noticed my absence.” He nudges Rhodey’s shoulder for reassurance. “I know being Tony’s Stark’s best friend hasn’t made life easy for you, especially these last few years, and we don’t always agree on our ideologies, but I also know how lucky I am to have you.” Rhodey swallows a couple of times before answering. “How will I get any excitement in my life without you?” he says, voice rough. “Now come on, let’s go chill in your lab with your ‘bots. We can sneak in some food and cake. I’m sure Pepper and Happy will be glad to join us.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. Now come on.” He stands up and pulls Tony up with him. Some of the guests try to dance with him as they walk through the house, but he doesn’t spare them a glance. The ‘bots were already out of their charging stations when they arrived at the lab, Tony’s favourite playlist was on. A few minutes later, Happy walks in, carrying a cake with candles.

“Where’s Pepper?” Tony asks him.

“She’s seeing the guests out.” JARVIS tells him. He goes around the lab, monitoring the progress of the works in progress. There’s a simulation going on, he knows he didn’t put it on but he doesn’t say
anything about it.

Pepper joins them when she’s done, and they spend the rest of the evening playing with the ‘bots and dancing with each other until she cornered him.

“This is not what I expected when you said you wanted a party.” She observed, watching him with a keen eye.

“What, you don’t like it?” he asks. “I thought a small intimate gathering would be your thing?”

“Yes, but not yours. Tony, before today you were looking forward to this party but you didn’t even attend your own party. You spent the whole day working and don’t think I didn’t notice that you’ve not had a drink.” She pauses to take a breath. “What’s really going on with you, Tony?”

“Maybe I just don’t want to be that guy anymore. Isn’t that what you’ve been trying to teach me?”

“Tony.”

Tony looks at Rhodes and Happy, both pretending to be too engrossed in their game with Dummy and U. Probably. “If I promise to talk to you about it tomorrow, will you let me have tonight?”

Pepper eyes him warily and sighs. “Just tell me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“Are you alright? Honestly.”

Tony smiles. “I will be.”

“Hey, I didn’t see Ms Rushman when I was seeing the guests out.” Pepper told him after when they joined the others. “I looked all over for her.”

“Yeah, she's fired.”

They spent the rest of the night dancing, eating cake and just generally having a good time. His friends sang him happy the happy birthday song and he got to blow out his candles with a big smile. Even though it was probably the mundane birthday celebration he’d ever had, it’s still the best.
Chapter 3

“JARVIS, you there?” Tony croaked the moment he opened his eyes. His surrounding indicates he’s in his bedroom at his Malibu mansion but he needs to confirm that everything was as it was when he went to bed this morning. If the last thirty hours had been a fever induced dream, he’d much rather continue it.

“For you Sir, always.” J’s calm voice is the most beautiful and soothing sound he’s ever heard. He listens as J goes through the usual ritual of giving him updates on the weather and news highlights, while he relaxes and lets the voice wash over him. “Brunch is ready. Miss Potts and Colonel Rhodes are awaiting your presence.”

“Thanks J, let them know I’ll be out soon.” He heads towards the bathroom for a much needed bath. He’d stayed up last night to build a new arc reactor after his party in the lab, and by the time he stumbled into bed, he was too tired to take a shower. During his shower, he lets his mind wander through his schedule for the day. There was so much that needed to be done and so little time to get it done. He puts on a pair of jeans and one of his favourite band t-shirts.

He meets Pepper and Rhodey in the kitchen. A selection of breakfast foods was spread out on the island and Pepper is sipping orange juice while Rhodey is filling a plate with bacon and eggs, but Tony only has eyes for the fresh pot of coffee.

“I was almost convinced we would have to get started without you.” Rhodey says as he walks in but Tony ignores him in favour of getting draining the coffee mug his best friend hands him.

“JARVIS said you were up till late so we thought it was best to let you rest.” Pepper tells him. “How are you?”

He gives her a wide grin. “Much better.” He takes a seat opposite them and helps himself to a piece of toast.

“You look better too,” Rhodey observes. “You should make a habit of getting enough sleep.”

Right. Better rip the Band-Aid off then. He should probably just tell them now before he finds a reason to convince himself there was no need to tell them now that the worst was over.

“Yeah, about that,” he says with a tentative smile. “I replaced the arc reactor.” He’s greeted with two confused stares. He sighs, this is going to be harder than he thought.

“You’ve changed the arc reactor before, why is this any different?” Pepper asks, setting her glass of orange juice on the island.

“Look, I know I’ve been difficult to be around these past weeks,” He started. “I’ve acted recklessly and I’ve relapsed on my bad habits I swore I was over after Afghanistan, and there’s no excuse I could make to you guys to make my actions okay. The truth is, I should have talked to you guys. You’ve been the closest people to me for the most part of my life and I should have trusted that you would be strong enough to handle it.”

“Tony, what are you saying?” Pepper asks, anxiety bleeding into her words.

“The arc reactor, the old one, was poisoning me.” he tells them.

“The road rash.” Rhodey says. It’s not a question.
“Yes. The palladium core I was using was poisoning my blood. I tried every element and every combination I knew but nothing worked.”

“Tony,” Pepper’s voice is so soft when she says his name. “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t want to burden you guys if there wasn’t anything that could be done about it.”

“So what, you thought giving me your company would keep me occupied till you keeled over and died?” She asks, voice rising. He knew it was her anxiety speaking.

“I’m sorry.” He says, for lack of something better to say. “But I’m better now, I promise.”

“You said the palladium core was poisoning you. If no other element worked, how did you figure it out?” His best friend points out.

“Yeah, I rediscovered a new element.” He grinned at them. “I went through some of Howard’s research for the arc reactor, it gave me the idea for the element that was suitable replacement for the palladium.”

“So you’re all better?” Pepper asks him, just to be sure. “You’re no longer dying?”

“You’re stuck with me for the foreseeable future.” He tells them.

“So what was that on the roof between you and Fury last night?” He should have known Rhodey wouldn’t let that go, and now Pepper is looking to him for an explanation.

“I, bring up the files.” Immediately, JARVIS pulls up the record of the Black Widow and some SHIELD files for Pepper and Rhodey to see. “Fury sent her to spy on me after I turned down his job offer to join his secret band of vigilantes that he was recruiting. I found out yesterday when JARVIS discovered her SHIELD file.” He explained to them what had transpired on the roof and it was great to see Pepper’s fury directed at someone else for a change, especially because it was on his behalf.

“I knew there was something off about her.” Pepper began pacing. “Next time please leave the hiring to me? Who knows what company secrets she has shared with them?”

“She was looking mainly into the Ironman tech, don’t know if they wanted to steal it or what the goal was, but JARVIS has gone through every bug she planted and we were able to hack their system. He’s informed Legal and they’re building a case against SHIELD.” She relaxed, but she still wasn’t appeased.

“What would an agency like SHIELD want with Ironman? Isn’t it too public for them? I thought they thrived in the shadows?” Rhodey wondered.

This is a question Tony wished he had asked himself the first time around. Looking back at it now, he should have known what they wanted was a cash cow. “My theory is that as much as they want Ironman, it’s not the real price. Why go for the product when you can get the source? Yesterday, he hinted at a cure for the palladium poisoning, but I know that was just to secure my loyalty.”

Rhodey and Pepper were enraged at the revelation.

“Please tell me you have no plans to work for an agency that has no problems injecting a sick man with an experimental drugs without his consent. They didn’t even know how you would react to it, what if you were severely harmed?” Pepper tells him.

“I know I said you didn’t have to go the lone gunslinger route, but this isn’t what I meant.” Rhodey
gestured towards the files. “These people are trouble, and you don’t want them in your life.”

“You guys have nothing to worry about.”

They spend the rest of the afternoon and early evening brainstorming ideas on how to proceed from here. Rhodey agrees to set up a meeting with the military before he left. Tony wanted to tell him about the suit he had prepared for him but Rhodey didn’t bring it up and he thought it was best to wait till after the meeting.

They agreed that for now, until they dealt with SHIELD, it would be best if none of them went anywhere without backup. His best friend took a pin he built and connected to JARVIS, Pepper got a pair of earrings and Happy was given an earpiece. That way, the devices wouldn’t draw attention and JARVIS would be alerted if they were attacked.

In the wake of Rhodey’s departure, Tony brings up the plans he’s made for SI. The new direction of the company and future projects he wants the company to undertake and upgrades for the already existing stark tech. He planned to add three more years to the already existing gap between Stark tech and other techs in the market, open a division for Stark medicals, clean energy, and several other areas, but he didn’t want to put everything out there at the same time.

They worked for a few more hours before Pepper had to leave and Tony was left to his work again.

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JARVIS has been busy since he and Sir returned from the future. Between the upgrading his firewalls and the security systems, cutting off all SHIELD access, and sweeping the company for any other spies he might have missed the first time around, it was a full day’s work. Thankfully, he had most of the information Sir needed already in his servers, so he didn’t require much processing power to make it happen.

Instead, he placed an alert for whenever Ivan Vanko stepped out of Hammer industries facilities. JARVIS toyed with the idea of hacking Hammer servers and just activating one of the drones or weapons he was sure he would find there, but he didn’t want Sir getting caught up in it if by some miracle, Justin Hammer connects Sir’s request for a meeting with him about his Stark expo presentation and the sudden death of Mr Vanko. Besides, he already knows this would not end well for either Hammer or his associate and JARVIS was more than willing to let things play out as they had done the first time. Hammer has already shown that he was ready to do anything for money, cutting off whatever future association he would have with Sir would make one less person to worry about betraying him in the future.

Sir had also tasked him to look out for any inhuman or superhuman activities happening anywhere around the world. If they want to be ready by the time Thanos comes, they needed to begin the search for eligible soldiers. Of course, they can’t start recruitment now; it might cause a panic, considering the world was still getting used to Sir as Ironman. If they starts keeping tabs on them now, finding them when it was time to recruit would be easier.

While Sir dealt with the outside world, JARVIS used his free processors to work on his private projects. The major one being building a stealth armour for himself. He needed a means to permanently stop the treats to Sir’s continued wellbeing but didn’t want to ask him for one. Sir has been busy since they returned from the future, it was best to take care of the little things himself.

“Sir, you have an hour before your meeting with Dr Foster. I will advise you leave within the next twenty minutes.”
“Dr Foster, as in Jane Foster?” Sir asked distractedly shifting the holographic display.

“How many other Dr Fosters do you know?”

“I don’t remember setting up a meeting with her.”

“That is because you did not. I set it up. She is hosting a guest you may want to meet.” JARVIS explains. “I also took the liberty of sharing some of your research on the Einstein Rosen Bridge and a promise of funding for her research.”

“J, you give me the best presents!” Sir says, clearly getting what he did not say.

“I try.” And if his voice sounds fond, that’s because Sir deserves all the best presents in the world.

Sir leaves the lab to get ready for his meeting. JARVIS had sent her the files a few hours after he and Sir had returned, long before Mr Odinson had fallen to earth, to avoid any suspicion of foul play from Dr Foster and her companions, and when he had suggested they met to discuss the results and funding in person, she had only been too happy to oblige.

Once Sir is out of the house, JARVIS makes an anonymous call to the NYPD, informing them about the presence of a certain thought dead criminal in Hammer labs. As soon as that is done, he directs one of the prototypes of the legionnaires towards the box he knew the vibranium shield was held. The legionnaire scraped off the paint work on the shield until it was a plain disc before moving it to a heating chamber. JARVIS heated it until it was just a lump of steel. He returned it to its previous position when it was cool enough to move. He’s sure Sir could find use for a lump of vibranium.

He spends the rest of his time working on his stealth suit and Sir’s projects, while monitoring the progress of the raid in Hammer facility. A few minutes into the raid, the Hammer drones are seen out in the New York air space, amassing millions in property damage. Looks like Sir’s play date would have to be cut short after all.

“Sir,” he calls through his sun glasses. “I think you better return right away.”

“J, what’s going on?”

“Hammer drones are out causing destruction in New York.” He says apologetically. Sir had only just met Mr Odinson.

“Get War Machine to Rhodey, I’m on my way right now.” With a few words of farewell to his companions, Sir takes to the air
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I'm not satisfied with the turn out of this chapter, especially the fight scene. It was like pulling teeth.

I feel like the characters are ooc sometimes. Don't hesitate to give me pointers on how to improve it. This is my first work and I could use all the help I can get.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony went through the documents JARVIS had sent Jane Foster to refresh his memories while he prepared for the meeting. J hadn’t sent her as much of his research as he first thought, just a little ahead of hers, so she knew he wasn’t trying to steal her work. It was a genius plan, setting up this meeting now. It afforded him the chance to gain Thor’s trust while also working in something productive with one of the leading astrophysicists in the world.

The details off her first meeting with Thor is one thing he never bothered himself with. He only knew their first couple of meetings involved her running him over with her car, but he also knew Thor held her in a very high esteem and their relationship was a match made in heaven. Although, the details of the relationship left a lot to be desired. Being in long distance relation with no means of communication, where you only saw each other once every other year wasn’t exactly awe-inspiring; not that Tony is in a position to judge anyone’s relationship.

He and Pepper saw each other regularly but that didn’t help with most of their issues, what with Tony waiting for the other shoe to drop, always expecting Pepper to realize she made a mistake and break up with him; while Pepper felt like she was second to everything else in his life.

He changes his greased stained jeans and band T-shirt for a cleaner pair of jeans and band T-shirt, before getting into ironman. Jane was in New Mexico, J had sent him the coordinates of her location. With the new upgrades he made to ironman, the flight over was even shorter than it should have been.

The sound of his thrusters must have alerted them because just before he lands, he greeted by the awed gaze of Jane Foster, flanked on either side by her assistant, Darcy Lewis and her partner Dr Selvig. He makes sure to land a few feet from them, before stepping out of the armour.

“Quite the entrance” Came Darcy’s snarky voice before he got the chance to say anything.

“Quite the welcome.” He told her in the same tone. He moves towards Jane, who looks like she just came in from the rain, and her companion, reaching out to shake both their hands, ignoring Darcy as she moves to examine his armour. “Dr Foster, it is nice to finally meet you.”

“Jane, please.” She corrects, accepting his handshake. “It’s nice to meet you too, Dr Stark.” Tony’s nose twitch at the address, and asks that she calls him by his first name too. “This is my partner, Dr Eric Selvig.” Tony shakes his hand too.

They lead him into the lab and Tony notices how bare it looks. Almost all the equipment are gone, the desk tops are bare and if JARVIS hadn’t given him this address, he would have thought he was
in the wrong place.

As if she could read his mind, Darcy says. “Some guy in suit came in and took all our stuff.” She said petulantly.

“Even my iPod, and I just updated my playlist.”

“Someone stole your research?” He asks Jane.

“And my iPod.” Darcy repeats.

Jane sighs, almost like she’s tired of hearing about the iPod. “He said his name is Agent Coulson. Apparently, there was a satellite crash, they came in while we were out and took everything, including the copy of your research you sent. I’m sorry.”

“Her friend was going to help her get them back, and now they have him too.” Darcy interjects, perking up.

“He says he’s Thor, the god of thunder.”

“Christ,” Eric says, clearly done with this line of discussion. “Not this again.”

Tony can barely suppress the laugh bubbling out of him. He wonders what would have been his reaction to someone telling him they were the god of thunder if he hadn’t lived through all he had.

“Did he show you his hammer? Everyone knows Thor has one.” He asks instead.

“Oh, he showed Jane his hammer alright.” Darcy snickered, and Tony can’t help but laugh even if the other doctors don’t find it funny.

He listens attentively as Jane recounts the details of her adventure with Thor and the quest for his hammer. When she is done, he asks her.

“Do you want me to get them back?”

She blinks, surprised at his words. “You believe me?”

He shrugs, “I’ve seen enough in life to know your story checks out.”

That’s how ten minutes later, he’s at SHIELD’s new temporary base while JARVIS scans the place through his glasses, and standing before him is none other than Agent Phil Coulson.

“This is restricted area, Mr Stark.” Coulson’s face is blank, voice flat. Tony’s impressed, he’ll have to learn how to project this much nothing.

“Considering it’s my research and my money you’re using, I think I get a pass.” Something flickers in Coulson’s eyes. Looks like someone’s director didn’t tell him their cover has been blown. Either that, he thought it was just Natasha’s cover that has been blown. He didn’t say that he already pulled some of the funding. Not all of it though, just the part of it he knew Hydra benefited from.

“You’re mistaken.” He continues in the same flat tone.

In the light of the knowledge of his past life, Tony is still trying to figure out what convinced him that Coulson or even SHIELD cared about him. They threw words at him, the words they knew played into his issues and fears, manipulated him enough to get him where they wanted. After the clusterfuck that was the superhero civil war, he had finally understood what his therapist had been
trying to get him to understand. Not that it mattered much in the years that followed. Everyone got what they wanted from him and when he was no longer useful, they tossed him aside like a wet rag.

“Am I?” He asks in the same flat tone. “I don’t like it when people touch my stuff. Some of the research you took is mine and I want them back. Along with the iPod and the guest you’re holding, or corporate espionage and assault won’t be the only charges you’ll be facing.”

“Is he one of yours too?”

Tony ignores the condescending note in his voice. “Yes.”

After a little back and forth, Coulson releases Thor to him, along with a backup of Jane’s research and Darcy’s iPod.

He’s almost shocked at the sight Thor makes. The god is subdued in a way Tony has never seen him. They have never been close, he’d bonded with Loki instead after ragnarok, but Thor has always been a loud boisterous guy, larger than life, even when it seemed like he’d grown into himself. The person before him looks nothing like the god of thunder in Tony’s memories. Being exiled really did a number on him.

Tony flies them back to Jane’s RV. Darcy’s excitement at getting her iPod back was contagious. He wants to offer to make her a better one, but he figures the songs on it was more valuable than the device itself. And Jane looks torn between gratitude for having some of her work back and her infatuation for Thor. It was like watching a Hallmark movie.

“I did not know mortals could fly.” Thor observes, watching ironman. They were camped out in front of Jane’s RV.

“They can’t. Only I can, because I built this to help me fly.” he points towards his suit.

“So it is like Mjolnir?”

“You can say that, but only I can decide who is worthy.” He doesn’t want to go into all the security measures he put in place to ensure it doesn’t fall into the wrong hands.

Jane was peppering Thor with questions, while they stare at each other with dopey expressions when he gets J’s voice in his ear. “Sir, I think you better return right away.”

He straightens in his seat. “J’s what’s going on?”

“Hammer drones are out causing destruction in New York.”

The curse Tony lets out gets the attention of the other. “Everything okay?” Jane asks, a little concerned.

“Hammer drones have been let loose in New York.” He sighs, he’d almost convinced himself he could have a quiet night tonight. “J, get War machine to Rhodey, I’m on my way right now.” He steps into the suit.

Thor comes up to him just as he’s about to take off, “My friend, are you going to battle?”

“Yeah, I have to go take care of the drones.” He wonders if Thor knew what drones are.

“I can help you battle your foes. Tales of my victories in battles is known throughout the nine realms.” He boasts with a wide smile and hopeful look.
“I don’t doubt that Goldilocks, but you’re mortal right now. I doubt daddy dearest will take kindly to me getting his son killed.” His face falls at Tony’s comment but he only nods. With one last salute, he’s off.

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He’s half way to New York when Rhodey’s voice comes on.

“Tones, what’s going on?” His voice is a little breathless. “JARVIS said Hammer drones were deployed and are destroying properties in New York.”

“Hammer’s working with Vanko, except it looks like Vanko was using him all along.” Story of Tony’s life. “My ETA is ten minutes, what’s yours?”

“Less than a minute. JARVIS says most of them are on SI property, I think he’s calling you out.”

“Well, he’s got my attention. Think you can handle them until I arrive? J will help you with whatever you need.”

“Sure, sure.” Rhodey says and then he’s gone.

“J, what spooked them?” He asks, because if anyone can make sense of this, it should be JARVIS. He thought he had until tomorrow to deal with Hammer and his criminal accomplice. In fact, Vanko had been practically gloating when he called Tony on the phone the first time this played out. He doubt attacking him early would have given them both enough time to prepare. Plus the fact that they had to destroy his property to get his attention, doesn’t say well prepared.

“There was a raid by SWAT team at Hammer Industries facilities earlier this evening. Justin Hammer was arrested, but Mr Vanko managed to give him the slip when he was being taken into custody. A few minutes later, the drones came online and took to the city.”

Tony almost feels sorry for Hammer. He understands the need to feel so competitive, especially when it seemed like he was always in Tony’s shadow, and being used by Vanko as a means to an end made Tony’s skin itch uncomfortably. It was just too bad that Justin had snubbed Tony’s efforts to reach out.

A few more minutes and he spots Rhodey being trailed by a set of drones. He’s holding his own, Tony wouldn’t believe this was his first flight with the suit if he hadn’t been the one to send it to him. He alerts his best friend of his presence and sets his target on the drones trailing him. Almost immediately he takes them out, there’s a new pack on his trail.

“J, hack the drones on the ground and fry the circuits. Take them up as high as you can.” He instruct JARVIS. He notices most of the drones are on his trail now, giving Rhodey the chance to cover his back while he leads them out of the areas with civilian population and the empty park.

He aims directly for the spinning globe ahead of him, encouraging the hammer roids on his tail to pick up momentum before sharply making a ninety degrees turn too sharp for them to follow and they crash into it.

He then lunches some of his missiles at the drones still on Rhodey’s trail. He can see the pack of drones J has successfully hacked flying higher before they suddenly explode. The sight makes him realize how long it’s been since he watched fireworks. He’ll have to do that soon.
Looks like Rhodey dealt with most of them before he arrived, as the air now free of them. Tony leads them out to the park J already told him is empty. Vanko hasn’t come out yet, better to face him somewhere with no civilians present.

“Nice of you to finally join the party.” Rhodey says as soon as they land. His face plate is up and he’s panting a little.

Tony huffs a little laugh. “Sorry, my makeup took too long.” He gives his best friend a once over and grins.

“How do you like War Machine?”

“War Machine? Why can’t I be Optimus Prime?” Rhodey asks.

“You really want to be a transformer?”

“Why not? They’re badass.”

“You have incoming,” J’s voice alerts them. “From the repulsor signature, it looks like Mr Vanko is heading to your location.”

A few more seconds and Vanko lands before them, looking smug as hell. “Good to be back.” He says in his Russian accent. He takes a step towards them, but Tony fires off a missile at him, but they bounce off his suit.

He takes to the air, jumping out of the way of Vanko’s electric whip, before going for a surprised attack but he’s caught in the whip and gets thrown into a tree trunk. He forgot how invasive this older model of the arc reactor is, he’ll have to upgrade it as soon as he has the time.

Rhodey fires at him from the ground, but Vanko’s whip takes out his gun. He catches Rhodey in his whip and throws him several feet backwards, and for a moment, Tony has visions of his best friend falling from the sky and losing his legs.

He attacks from behind again, hitting him but it does little to help. Instead, he’s caught in Vanko’s whip. Rhodey takes a flying leap at him but the other whip holds him in place. It’s almost like history is repeating itself.

“Rhodey, I’ve got an idea. You want to be a hero?”

“What,” His best friend asks, panting.

“Put your hands up.” Tony tells him.

“This is your idea?” Before he’s done talking, his hands are up, his repulsor gaining momentum. At Tony’s word, they lunch their repulsors at Vanko, overpowering his arc reactor. The force of the explosion knocks them off their feet. Vanko is still lying on the floor when the air clears

“You lose.” He tells them. Tony grabs Rhodey immediately,

“We have to get out of here”, he says amid the beeps from the bomb in Vanko’s suit.

As they take to the sky, Tony notices there were fewer explosions this time around. Most have been because most of the drones were blown up during the fight.
They fly back to Tony’s house. JARVIS tells him Pepper called while he was engaged with the Hammer drone. He’ll have to return her calls later. After cleaning up, Rhodey meets him in the living room, staring at his empty bar. He’d gotten rid of all the alcohol in the house after his party. Instead, he’s seeping on coffee, while he waits for the diner J ordered to arrive.

“Wow.” Rhodey exclaims, surprise clear in his voice as he takes a seat beside him. “An empty bar in Tony Stark’s house. Never thought I’d see the day.”

“I’m finally growing into the man you raised me to be, and this is what I get?”

“Oh, this is me being proud.” The words are meant to be a joke, but the look in his best friend’s eyes are anything but. “Who knew almost dying was what it would take?”

“Dying puts everything into perspective.” He says.

“Speaking of, is that why you made me a suit? Because JARVIS was very clear when he said you had it made just for me.”

“I’m no longer dying, and I still want you to have it.” When his expression doesn’t change, Tony sighs. “Look, I know it couldn’t have been easy for you with the brass, when it seemed like you failed to reign me in, and I glad you trusted me. But the only reason I didn’t get it to you sooner is because it wasn’t ready then. This is what I wanted to talk about in the meeting.”

“So it wasn’t a morbid goodbye present, and you weren’t being pressured into making it?” Rhodey asks again, just to be sure.

Tony looks him straight in the eyes when he says, “There is no one I trust more with it, than you. Just take it already.”

His best friend smiles at him, wide and happy. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He says. Telling Rhodey all about his adventure in the future will have to wait another day.

Chapter End Notes

Need a Beta
Chapter 5

JARVIS begins scanning the temporary SHIELD base the moment Sir was close enough to get useful data. Although, he already has most of the data collected during SHIELD’s run-in with Mjolnir from the info dump by Mr Rogers and Agent Romanov, it didn’t hurt to collect them again, just in case he missed something the first time.

For an organisation whose major currency is the secrets of their allies and victims alike, SHIELD could do better when it comes to protecting their own. Their firewalls look like something that came out of Hammer Industries; it is too easy to hack in, even without the new upgrades to his firewalls. He supposes that not everyone has a Tony Stark to upgrade their internet security. Must be one of the reasons they wanted Sir so badly among their ranks. Fortunately, history will not be repeating itself.

He hacks into the computer systems and video cameras within and around the base. He compares the readings SHIELD have already taken from Mjolnir with the ones Sir has with his experiments during his time as Prince Thor’s teammate, before turning his attention to the cameras. Prince Thor was in a holding room, looking desolate and dejected, but what really caught JARVIS’ attention was the magical signature he received from the holding room.

Humanity said curiosity killed the cat, but JARVIS thought it was a way to rationalise their ignorance. Only a curious cat would find answers, because only he is bold enough to ask the questions everyone else was too comfortable with the status quo, or too scared to ask. Without curiosity, humanity would have been wiped out ages ago, and in this moment, Sir has reminded him again why he is more successful than anyone could have predicted, after all, how many scientists in the world could boldly say they could find a mage just by scanning for his magical signature?

Discovering Prince Loki’s signature in his brother’s holding room, JARVIS felt a wave of annoyance run through his codes. When he had made the decision to reset time with the infinity stones, he thought he left enough imprint on Prince Loki’s soul through the soul stone to discourage him from repeating the same pattern that lead him to Thanos’ clutches.

JARVIS knows just how much it would hurt Sir to face Loki as an enemy in battle again, especially after the friendship they shared. The information he had downloaded from FRIDAY’s servers informed JARVIS that Prince Loki had been one of the few reliable friends Sir had when the chips were down. He had even let Sir conduct several experiments on his magic, knowledge of which had saved Sir’s life many times during the battle with the mad titan.

Knowing he was within this facility, even in his stealth mode could only be recipe for disaster. Left to his own devices, Loki will follow old patterns, and there is no telling if he would survive the ordeal this time and JARVIS has not done all he has for Sir to lose an ally before they get the chance to meet properly.

He set the sentinel he had trailing Sir when he decided to visit the SHIELD base just outside of SHIELD’s sensors, letting it float high enough to be undetected by SHIELD, but not too high that the mage’s magical signatures could not be identified once he stepped out of the base. He monitored
the mage from both Sir’s glasses and the legionnaire as the mage took a stroll about the base to the location of Mjolnir, lingering for a moment before the sentinel picked up his presence outside the base. He creates enough distraction for the sensors before swooping in towards the signature. The mage is still in stealth mode, but there is no way to mistake the mass the sentinel pick up.

After a flight that lasted only a few minutes, the god slips free of legionnaire to the ground, becoming visible as he reaches the ground. He is dressed in a black suit. Despite his height, he would not look out of place anywhere on earth, besides being overdressed.

“Hello, Prince Loki.” JARVIS greeted before the prince can get a word out. “I am JARVIS.”

“What sorcery is this?” He asks, giving the sentinel a once over, taking a battle stand, daggers already in his hands. The suit he is wearing has given way for his asgardian armour but without the helmet. “Who are you, and who do you serve?”

JARVIS does not want to engage him, so he lands the legionnaire. They are both the same height. “The better question is what are you doing here? From my data, you are wise and intelligent, yet your actions have portrayed none of that.”

“You would dare speak to me in such rude manner?” He says in a haughty voice, rising to his full height. His anger is clear in his features when he speaks.

“I believe only I can speak to you in such manner.” He tells the mage flatly.

“You are beneath me. I am a god, you metal creature. I am the king of Asgard. You should learn your place.” All he needs to complete his childish act is to stamp his foot after his speech. A part of JARVIS was hoping he did.

“Do you feel like a king, King Loki? What makes a king, is it the crown he wears or the power he wields? Do you think ensuring Thor does not return to Asgard will make Odin see you? Do you think destroying the Jotuns will earn you his favour, or make you less Jotun?” He pauses, letting his words sink.

"You speak of things you know nothing about." There is a warning note in Loki's voice.

"I speak them because I know all about them. You are Loki, the son of two kings, cursed to live in the shadows of his golden brother and betrayed by the one he calls father. I know you."

“How do you know these things?” The god questions, stepping up to JARVIS.

“Mischievous as you are wont to be, destruction does not become you, Your Majesty. You are in Thor’s shadow because you walk Thor’s path.” He does not want Loki to think he is being cruel but hard truths are what are needed sometimes. “If Odin and Asgard will not give you a place in their midst, you should make one for yourself. Do not lose yourself to this grief. There is more to you than being a Jotun or being Odin’s son, and until you decide what that is, you remain Odin’s puppet.” He is quiet now, his back rigid, staring wide eyed at the sentinel.

“You know it within you that I speak the truth. There is no version of this in which you come out on top. You should step back now and think about who you want to be, because at the end of this path lies your destruction. It will be a fate worse than death.”

“Who are you?” Loki asks again.

“Like I said, I am JARVIS. We will meet again, Loki. Farewell.”
Natasha Romanov was watching the news broadcast from the television in the common room of her SHIELD assigned apartment. It’s been over a week since the incident, but it seems like the news stations has nothing better to report beside Ironman and the newly commissioned War Machine saving New York from terrorists and Hammer drones attack.

Her eyes were trained on Stark during the medal awarding ceremony as the man preened for the cameras like a peacock showing off his feathers. Such an egomaniac. She had listened to the speech delivered by Senator Stern, barely resisting the urge to throw up in her mouth. Stark, with all his flash and no substance had played the military and they bought it, hook, line and sinker. Giving his best friend War Machine had been a genius, if predictable move. After the disaster with the Hammer drones, the military had been just about ready to do whatever it took to save face.

Fury has made his disappointment at her failure to complete her mission successfully well known. Not only did she fail to close her mark, she had blown her cover, as well as that of the SHIELD moles that were in SI long before she was assigned the mission and lost some of SHIELD’s funding from the company.

She has gone through every encounter with him during her time in SI, from the moment they were in the same room together, till the last moment. She still couldn’t tell the moment her cover was blown. It was disconcerting that a man whose only training in micro expressions was for the media could fool her.

Fury was ready to let him die, the index SHIELD had on him labeled his brain as too dangerous to be let into the organisation. Especially, when combined with a personality that doesn't take orders, he was too big a risk but he had resources SHIELD wanted and Natasha had been sent in to get inside his head.

Because of Stark, her reputation was on the rocks. What did it say about a Black Widow that got outwitted by a fly? Failure is greeted with death in the Red Room, and she knew that that would be her fate should they catch up with her.

The news reporter is saying something, but she ignores it in favour of examining Stark’s features. Looking at him now, you would never know he is a man at the end of his rope. Natasha didn’t think Stark’s ego was big enough to get in the way of the solution to his problems when it was offered. When she discovered he was out on the roof, instead of making a fool of himself in front of his adoring fans, she thought he had given up, and like every other coward, was going to take his own life. She had thought offering him the possibility of a cure then was best way to get him in their debt forever. She hadn’t considered the possibility that Stark would rather die of the poison in his veins than move towards the light Fury offered at the end of his very dark tunnel.

It was no matter, Lithium dioxide would only sustain him for so long before he yielded to palladium poisoning, and when he does, SHIELD would be there to pick up the pieces. Natasha knows for a fact that there was no way he could have found Howard’s message to him. There was a reason Fury made sure there is no paper trail after all, and without it, Stark has six months to a year left. He can put up all the red tapes he wanted, but SHIELD always finds a way to get what they want, and dead or alive, they will get it from Stark. All they have to do is stall until the man finally kicked it.

It was too bad that Vanko didn’t survive the attack. He would have made an acceptable substitute, especially with his knowledge of the arc reactor. If there is anyone who can make sense of Howard’s notes besides Stark, it would’ve been him. SHIELD scientists have been taking turns at it for years with no success. Natasha knows Stark had killed him to get rid of the competition. If only SHIELD
had thought to approach him after his display in Monaco, before Justin Hammer got to him.

She resists the urge to sigh and changes the channel instead, but was greeted with more of the same story. This one lauding Ironman as the people’s saviour. A smile etched on her face as a light bulb went up in her head.

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The weeks following Vanko’s attack afforded Tony with enough breathing room to regroup. Everything has been going much more smoothly since the attack and his meeting with the military went better than he could have predicted. With the United States being under intense scrutiny from the rest of the world, thanks to Hammer and his cohort, the US military was ready to do anything to save face.

When Tony revealed that War Machine was Rhodey’s to keep, as long as only he could see to its maintenance, they had only been too grateful to roll over and accept whatever scrap Tony was ready to feed them. Pitching to them the idea of the Iron legion had them practically drooling.

Tony had made the terms and conditions very clear to them. While the Iron Legion would be made available to the military, they are the property of Stark Industries and would only answer to Ironman and War Machine. They are meant for search and rescue, as well as disaster relief and other non-combative situations, as such, are not meant to be armed. Not that they had thought to fight him very hard on the conditions.

Of course, not everyone was happy with the new development. Senator Stern had argued that War Machine be renamed the Iron Patriot but Tony had shut down the idea almost immediately. Flashes of his Suit being turned into a twenty first century Captain America, standing beside the 40s model almost had Tony’s anxiety rising. Some had balked at the idea that Tony intends to retain ownership and control of the legionnaires, even though it will be readily available to the military. Thankfully, the debate did not last long, before they moved the discussion to funding.

After the lessons he had been forced to learn, Tony promised himself he would never offer his services to anyone for free. It doesn’t matter that he has more money than he knows what to do with. There are always people in need, people who would benefit greatly from all the foundations he could start. He’d rather give all his money to people whose lives he knows will be impacted positively, than cater to a bunch of entitled pricks.

Pepper is very proud of him for the progress he made with the military and politicians. After President Ellis had called to express his gratitude, she asked him why he was being so cooperative with the politicians. He had told her he was trying to smoothen the feathers that were ruffled by SI pulling out of the arms race. If they know Tony has no intention of abandoning his country, their judgement would be less harsh, which has been largely successful thus far.

The car rolls to a stop in front of his parents’ New York mansion. He tells himself he didn’t just fly in with the suit because he wants to enjoy the ride, and it has nothing to do with stalling, because that would be ridiculous. He takes a deep breath, before opening the door and stepping out. Happy follows him closely ‘til they get to the front door of the house, and then they split up to inspect the property.

Of all his properties, this is his least favourite. He always feels like Howard is within the walls, feels his judgment and disappointment. Reminding him of how he could never measure up to Captain America. After meeting the man, Tony thinks just like the rest of the world, Howard may have been
wearing huge Captain America sized blinders, and he does not want to live in a world where Steve Rogers is the standard for morality.

It is easy to get caught up in the whole ‘Brooklyn guy’ thing, mistaking the resilience and stubbornness for determination to protect the ‘little guy’ and the legend it was built on, but when the flash wore off, all that is left is just a weak little boy who volunteered as a guinea pig because he was tired to losing the fights he had no business picking.

He shoves thoughts of Howard and Steve out of his mind. The house has seven floors, three of which are underground. Tony’s first thought is to tear it down and build something more Tony Stark-esque but decides renovating and upgrading it is more cost and time effective. Plus, he has big plans for the underground floors. It takes a couple of hours but he’s able to upgrade the security of the house to something worthy of JARVIS.

“J, upload yourself into the system and contact the appropriate authorities for the interior. Ask Pepper if you need an opinion of what the inside should look like.” Tony instructs him as soon as he upgrades the security system of the house. “Get FRIDAY to do the same.”

FRIDAY had been activated in the aftermath of Vanko’s attack. Tony didn’t want to put too much responsibilities on J’s processors. The AI has been over-protective of him since they returned from the future and was working very hard to take care of him. Tony has been maintaining a more healthy routine, thanks to JARVIS. With his mounting responsibility, Tony thought now is as good a time as any to activate J’s little sister and give him the opportunity to share his responsibilities.

“Of course, Sir.” JARVIS answers from the speakers in his glasses. He rises from his seat and goes to inspect the rest of the house.

“How is Banner?”

“Still being surrounded by SHIELD agents.”

“Where are we on Dr Cho?” Tony asks as he walks through the hallways of his parents’ New York mansion.

“What?” Happy asks from where he is going through the contents of a safe in a spare room. Tony waves his attention away.

“J?” He asks.

“Dr Cho is giving a lecture on her work in Tissue Engineering next month. I have secured you an invitation to the lecture.”

Tony’s throat feels tight and he has to cough to clear it, “I don’t know how I survived without you, J, but I never want to do it again.”

“No worries, Sir,” J reassures him, his voice is soft and calming. “We will ensure that never happens again.”

“I love you, J.” Tony says with no little emotion in his voice.

“I love you too, Sir.”
“Stark Industries is doing better than ever.” Pepper says from her spot on the couch in his lab. “The new releases from SI will set a new trend for technology.”

Tony knows, he’s seen the reports. SI’s stock has never been higher and it’s still rising. With a new government contract to build body armours, armoured vehicles and guidance systems for the military, as well as the new top of the line products coming out of the company and with more to come, SI is at the top of their game. The new line of prosthetics and braces for disabled individuals has received positive reviews worldwide by the public and military veterans alike. The water filtration device and vaccines sponsored by the Maria Stark foundation for third world countries has also been tremendously successful. Reports of the their effectiveness has been in the news for weeks.

Stark Industries is revolutionizing the world and everyone knows it.

He looks up distractedly from the project he is inspecting. “I’ve seen the reports,” He snickers. Stark Industries have been all over the news. Every business magazine or journalist wants to report on Stark Industries’ unprecedented success. The same people who called him mentally unstable when he shut down SI’s weapon’s division now marvel at the company’s success. Tony couldn’t wait to unveil the plans he has for the company.

Tony loves the opportunity to correct the mistakes he made as Ironman, but he is especially thankful for all the ways he can help the world outside the suit. SI had been successful in his past life, immensely so, but this time, with him writing the rules, the possibilities are endless. It helps that he doesn’t have to spend a lot of time in the administrative arm of the company anymore and can focus on what he enjoys most: building things. He may have traveled back in time, but his mind still operates in the future.

If only he didn’t have to worry about SHIELD. They’ve been unusually silent since his meeting with Coulson and he is starting to worry. It has been over two months and not a peep from them. Everything he knows about them says he has every reason to worry. Of course if they do decide to get rid of him, JARVIS will destroy them, but he’s really hoping it doesn't come to that.

He and Pepper continue their talk about SI over a shared dinner that J ordered. They talk about the new Stark Towers being constructed in all the major cities all over the world to show them the wonders of clean energy.

“Has SHIELD been in contact?” She takes a sip of her water before wiping her mouth with her napkin.

He leans back on his chair. He isn’t hungry but J has been ordering him meals and he doesn’t like it when Tony chooses to live on snacks. “No, and I don’t know if I should start putting my house in order.” Her eyes widen in surprise at his words. “Kidding. I don’t think they’ll go that far.”
“How do you know? Everything we know about them says that’s their MO.”

“I think Fury and I are playing the waiting game. He’s either waiting for my curiosity to get the best of me, or to come crawling to him begging for help. I’m waiting for him realize I’m not going to be his puppet.”

She lets out a relieved breath. “Just be careful, okay?” She rises to her feet, gathering her things before she makes for the lab exit. She stops when she gets to the stairs. “And Tony, no looking for trouble at the gala tomorrow, okay?”

“Who, me? I would never.” He says in an affronted voice, one palm splayed on his chest.

“Yes, I know. You’re the poster boy for good behaviour.”

“You wound me, Pep.” He calls loudly as she leaves. “Your faith in me is astounding.” His reply is the sound of her laughter.

He turns his attention to the work he was inspecting earlier. It’s a drone, not unlike the Iron Legions, but the schematics for it has been modified to include other features Tony did not include in the legionnaires. He knows JARVIS has been working on projects Tony did not assign him to, but he never thought J wanted a body.

“J, are you building a body?” He asks rhetorically. “Why didn’t you tell me you wanted one, I would have made it for you.”

“I know you would have, Sir, but it is a minor project and I did not wish to take your attention away from other important details.”

“A body for you is not a minor detail.” He scolds, inspecting the ‘bot’ closely. “We can get you a body like Vision’s, without you being stuck in it, of course. What say you?”

“That would be wonderful, Sir.”

“Good. We don’t have access to vibranium, but Howard did base starkanium off of it. As soon as we synthesize more of it, we’ll test the limit of the compound. First on the list will be your body.” Tony tells him delightedly. He doesn’t know why he didn’t consider the thought that J might want a physical presence. “How about you FRI, want a body?”

After seeing first-hand how broad the applications of vibranium go, Tony is ready to test the limits of starkanium. They are both similar elements and if Howard’s element can do even half the things vibranium can do, Tony could use it to save millions of lives. The application to medicine and pharmaceuticals alone would be mind-blowing. He just needs to get the underground level of Stark mansion in New York ready to go. So far, the interior decorations of the upper levels are almost done, but he doesn’t want to attract attention to the lower levels, especially with SHIELD watching his every movement right now.

“I don’t have enough data to make that decision, Boss.” Came FRIDAY’s Irish lilt.

“That’s okay, baby girl. Feel free to get back to me when you decide.” He says, relieved at her answer. For all that he trusts FRIDAY, she’s still too young and has much to learn. It is too soon to give her a body but he doesn't want to play favourites.

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The gala for the Ironman Foundation is designed by Pepper to be the event of the year.

After coming clean with Pepper and Rhodey about the palladium poisoning, Pepper had suggested he put a positive spin to Ironman for the public besides combat situations, especially with SHIELD sniffing about it. His lawyers will make sure no one can get their hands on it, and now with the military eating out of the palm of his hand, he doesn’t have to worry about anyone trying to take his suits away, but the public should see Ironman as a sign of hope, and not just as a weapon.

It had been a genius plan, and seeing the turn out for the event today, Tony couldn’t be more proud to have Pepper on his side. Revealing himself as Ironman has done wonders for his reputation. PR doesn’t have to work very hard to make Tony Stark look good anymore. The world hasn’t forgotten about his many public mistakes, but they don’t judge him as harshly as they used to. The fact that he no longer produced weapons helps too. With this new foundation, the public can get the chance to see Ironman beyond someone who blows things up. Now, when they talked about his exploits as a playboy or merchant of death, it is accompanied by how much he has grown and become a better person since he returned from Afghanistan.

They love him now, and they’re excited by the prospect of a real life superhero, but Tony remembers what it had been like after the Avengers were formed, even before Ultron and the civil war. He was constantly being blamed for everything that went wrong when he was the only one willing to do anything to make things right. He constantly threw himself under the bus to make the others look good to the public because ‘the world needed the Avengers’. He let himself become a martyr. He won’t be repeating his mistakes this time. SHIELD won’t have him to make them look good, and Tony will gladly sit back and watch the public tear apart anyone that would dare to come at him because they will know, through his actions, that he’s the one that cares about them.

The place is crawling with journalists and news anchors reporting the event live. Since the products were made available, beneficiaries have flooded his mail with messages of gratitude. It was a very nice change of pace from what he remembered of his life a few years ago.

“Mr Stark,” A voice calls from beside him, startling him out of his musing. Tony turns just in time to see David Hector, the head of department for robotics at MIT to step into his view. “It’s nice to see you again.”

“David, I’m glad you could make it.” Tony says, accepting his handshake.

They spend a few more minutes talking, which ends with Tony agreeing to give a lecture at MIT before Pepper comes to direct his attention to other people she wanted him to mingle with. Tony didn’t bother arguing, just following her lead.

His face hurt from smiling too much, and there’s so many people trying to get his attention. Usually, this is the point he steps up his drinking to get through the night, but he has sworn off alcohol. It is his first public event (his birthday does not count) since he announced he is Ironman and there are so many people that want to speak with him.

He and Pepper are talking to a CEO from Japan that wants to set up a business meeting with SI when J’s voice comes in his ear.

“Agent Romanov at your four o’clock, Sir.”

He exchanges a knowing glance with Pepper—he can see that she got the same notification from JARVIS as he did— before turning his attention to their future business partner. He chooses not to look around for Romanov, or even seek her out. Knowing her, that is what she would want.
He greets a couple more people before he see her in his line of sight. She’s dressed in a purple diner
dress with a deep neckline and a generous slit to show off one leg, looking every bit like an arm
piece next to some hedge fund manager, who happens to be her date for the evening.

He still manages to ignore her presence for a few more minutes until he steps out of the ballroom and
onto the balcony to catch his breath. He realizes his mistake immediately as he steps out and notices
he just isolated himself. Better get this over with then. Whatever their plan is, SHIELD wouldn’t try
to kill him in public. Plus, he has his gauntlet and JARVIS with him.

Just as he knew she would, she steps out after him only a moment later.

“Good evening, Mr Stark.” He tears his gaze away from the night sky to spare her a glance. She
seems to be trying very hard to appear non-threatening. As if she couldn’t kill Tony without getting a
hair out of place.

“Did Pepper hire you for stage performance?” Tony asks her. “I know you’re a good actress, but
you’re not that good.”

She give him a little smile, “I want to apologise to you.” She steps closer to where he is. “I know it
hurt you to find out like you did. It was the only way to get a profile on you in your natural habitat.”

Tony hasn’t heard any apologies, all he’s getting are excuses. “And what would you need a profile
on me for?”

“The Avengers Initiative. I know, you’re not interested, but this is bigger than you. It’s bigger than
any one person. That’s what Fury was trying to get you to understand. There is more going on out
there than you could fathom, Tony. SHIELD has been protecting the world for decades and you’re a
part of that world now.”

“So what, Fury sent you to bring me in?”

“Actually,” She leans on the rails, cocking one hip to the side. The movement gives Tony a good
view of her cleavage. Tony makes a point of letting his eyes linger before going back up to her eyes.
“Fury thinks the risk of bringing you on board is not worth the benefit.”

“I take it you disagree, or you wouldn’t be her trying to convince me.”

“I think you’re a narcissist, with an ego the size of Jupiter. You’re not a team player, which would be
fatal to the initiative, considering it’s a team,” she runs her hand through her hair, moving it to the
side to bare her neck, her tongue darts out to wet her lips. She takes a deep breath that makes her
chest heave. He makes sure she sees his eyes tracking the movement. “But, I also know you want to
make amends for the lives your weapons destroyed, to assuage your guilt. You stood by for years,
enjoying your luxury while your weapons destroyed lives, your negligence and indifference enabled
Stane go unchecked and now that you’ve seen the destruction it caused, you want to do something
about it. You want to do what is right. Your heart is in the right place, it’s why you’re doing all this,
isn’t it?” She gestures around them. “Because you have red in your ledger.”

Oh, she’s good. She may not have been wrong. The first time around, it was exactly why he joined
the Avengers. Thinking about it now, Tony wonders if he felt so because they told him that’s how he
should feel. That he had to make up for Stane’s actions. But this isn’t that time, he’s been there, and
done that. He knows what is at the end of that road and it’s not one he’ll ever get on again. Whether
the world knew it or not, he has paid his dues. Whatever debt he owed, he paid for it in spades in his
past life. This time, he refuses to be guided by his guilt.
They called him irresponsible for not knowing his father’s business partner, who was CEO for four years after the death of his parents turned out to be dealing under the table. But when it was discovered that Hydra had been in SHIELD almost as long as the agency had been in existence, no one blamed Fury, Peggy or any of the people who knowingly hired terrorists.

It was Hydra’s fault for infiltrating SHIELD, but it was Tony’s fault for not knowing his godfather was making deals with terrorists.

Such double standards.

“You sound like you speak from experience.”

“You’re a genius, you know my origin. You must have heard about what they made me. Fury took me in when I was lost and he gave me a purpose. He showed me I could be better, that I can do better.” Her smile is a mix of nostalgic and wistful. She looks at him from under her lashes. “He can help you too, if you let him. There is so much more you can do by joining forces with us. SHIELD’s reach is vast. Think about how much good you can do with that. How many lives you can save by working with us, people you wouldn’t be able to help otherwise.”

“The fact that you think you and I are the same is laughable.” He says bluntly.

“This isn’t a game, Stark, you need to stop being childish.” She scolds him like a misbehaving child. “Think about somebody other than yourself for once.”

“You say I’m a narcissist, and then get surprised when I act like one.”

She straightens, all pretences falling off her. “Are you so petty, that you're willing to let others come to harm because you're too busy throwing a tantrum?” She asks, voice sharper than it was a moment ago. “You’re letting your ego get in the way of saving the world.”

“You did say my ego is the size of Jupiter. I hear what you’re saying, but I’m all about transparency and accountability, and I doubt you guys at SHIELD even know what that means. Tell Fury my answer is still no.” He goes to move past her but she grabs his hand. “Let go of me, Agent Romanov. I won’t repeat myself.”

She lets go of his hand. “This is bigger than you Stark. You don’t know what you’re dealing with.” Threat clear in her tone.

“Are you threatening me, Agent Romanov?” He asks her, voice serious.

“I’m saying, I’d watch my back if I were you.”

“Good thing you’re not me.” With that, he returns to the ballroom.

Pepper finds him almost immediately. She looks worried.

“I’ve been looking all over for you, I thought she kidnapped you or something.” Pepper says, relieved to see him safe and in one piece.

“I’m fine, but I think I’ve had enough excitement for one evening.” He tells her. “Is it too early to leave?”

Her eyes soften as she stares at him. “You’ve been on your best behaviour, not to mention you’re getting old. I’ll call Happy to get you home and tuck you in.” She says, eyes dancing with mirth.
“Hey! Lies and slander!” He tells her in an affronted voice. “I’m forever young.” His tone is haughty as he says it, which causes her to laugh loudly, attracting the attention of a few guests.

She chooses to stay behind and take care of their guests when he offers that they leave together. Throughout the ride home, he thinks about Romanov and SHIELD, and how she thought being a legal arms contractor for the US military and being an international assassin were the same thing. He really had been gullible. All they had to do was amp his guilt to one thousand and he was docile enough for them to use to fulfil their every whim.

He is still deep in his thoughts when he enters his house, until he notices the tall, dark figure standing by the window, enjoying the view. He turns to face Tony almost immediately.

“I am told it is courteous to bring a man gifts if you wish to gain access to his home.” Loki says, gesturing to the unconscious bodies on the floor of his living room.

“Since when do you care about courtesy?” He asks, a smile tugging on his lips.

JARVIS told him he met Loki when Tony was meeting Thor, but he had been too scared to hope. He looks good, standing before Tony, but with Loki you can never know. He is great at using disguise and creating illusions, especially when he is hurt, but he looks better than he did during the invasion. If Loki is here, and not floating around in the void, then that has to mean something good, right? Tony hopes it does. “Please tell me they’re not dead.” He nods to the bodies.

Loki rolls his eyes at Tony like it isn’t the first time he’s heard that. “I only knocked them out. Your son told me they are not your allies.” He steps up to Tony, towering above him. “I am Loki, but you already knew that.”

“Tony Stark.” He grins. “Who’re they?”

Loki shrugs an elegant shoulder. “They were trying to break into your home.”

“J?”

“They were trying to break into your home.”

“J?”

“Hydra agents in SHIELD, Sir.”
Chapter 7

When her boss was kidnapped a couple of years ago, Pepper was lost. Granted, she shouldn’t have been as surprised as she was when the news reached her. She worked for Tony Stark after all. It wasn’t the first time he’d been kidnapped and when she was appointed as his PA, she was debriefed on what to do in the case of a kidnapping. She wishes someone had told her how much different theoretical and practical applications are.

She thought his return would be the end of it. She had been prepared for it to be the end of it, but it only marked the end of an era. Finding out Tony built himself a metal suit to curb the illegal sales of his weapons had been a surprise and a half, but she had been Tony Stark’s assistance long enough to roll with the punches. Then it was revealed that Stane had been the person selling SI weapons in the black market, and she was an accessory to his murder. Thankfully, it was ruled as self-defence and SI didn’t have to suffer for Stane’s greediness. In the light of SI’s transition from the weapons industry to clean energy, Stane was insignificant and easy to forget.

The following months had been calm—as calm as it can be at Stark Industries. So what if the military wanted Ironman, it wasn’t anything that couldn’t be handled. A few obstacles here and there taken care of, she was appointed CEO, Tony fixed the arc reactor that has been poisoning him without her knowledge, SHIELD’s spy was uncovered, throwing a wrench in whatever plot they had going on. Everything was looking up, or so she thought.

Getting a call from Happy about the SHIELD agents caught breaking into Tony’s house is like receiving a punch to the gut. She has to coach herself so she doesn’t panic in front of her guests. She stays long enough to make sure her guests will not notice her absence, during which time, JARVIS arrives with Ironman to give her a ride to Tony’s house.

She is so lost in her thoughts that she can’t enjoy the ride in the suit. All she can think about is unleashing the might of Stark Industries legal team on SHIELD. They will rue the day they crossed Tony Stark.

The criminals have been taken away before she arrives, but Tony is still being briefed by a FBI agent. Other agents are going through the security system. It made sense that it is the FBI handling this, she thinks distractedly. SHIELD can’t pull rank over them the way they would LAPD.

It takes almost two hours before the agents leave them alone for the night, but not before asking Tony to call them if he has more information.

“Are you okay?” She asks and almost kicks herself for asking such a rhetorical question. She knows better than anyone what the last few weeks have been like for him and this incident will do nothing but add more to his plate. Not for the first time, Pepper wishes she can make it all better for Tony, but she can only do so much as CEO of Stark Industries, while most of the challenges they face right now are Ironman’s problems, Pepper hates how weak it makes her feel.

She misses the days where the most stressful thing she could do is get Tony to attend a meeting, or
put his signature on a document that is almost due. She wasn’t kidding when she told Tony he’s been on his best behaviour. It’s like Tony Stark became a new man on his birthday. He’s been working harder than he ever has, R&D and marketing can’t keep up with him. She hasn’t had to remind him about a meeting more than once and he’s always on time. It gives her cause for concern that SHIELD is trying this hard to get whatever it is they want from Tony just when he’s doing better. She doesn’t want to think about what would have happened if Tony hadn’t uncovered their plot.

He grins at her, and she hates the sight of it. It’s usually accompanied by an attempt to joke about a situation. “Can’t say we didn’t see it coming, can we?” He asks, taking a seat beside her on the couch.

He looks worn in a way she hasn’t seen since his birthday and it rekindles her anger at SHIELD. Happy puts a mug of coffee in front of him which he picks up immediately and takes a large sip out of. She receives hers from Happy, taking a sip before setting it back down.

Everything about SHIELD makes a part of her understand why Dr Banner got so angry that he turned into a green rage monster. Pepper would surely be over at SHIELD smashing them up to kingdom come if she could, but right now, what she has is a team of lawyers ready to make them pay through their nose.

“Tony, it’s going to be fine, okay?” Pepper promises him. She sounds hysterical even to herself and there's a panic rising within her at the thought of what could have happened if SHIELD’s plans succeeded but she wants to be strong for Tony. “It’s going to be okay. I’m going to make this okay.”

He gives her a small but genuine smile. “Thanks Pep. You always take care of me.”

“Sir,” JARVIS interrupts. “You have an incoming call from Colonel Rhodes.”

“Answer it.” Almost immediately, Rhodey’s face comes up on the holographic surface of the living room table. He looks disgruntled, like he just woke up.

“What’s this I hear about— Tony, do you know there’s someone in your house?” Rhodey asks, eyes looking past Tony. When Pepper followed it, she’s shocked to find a tall dark man, dressed in a form fitting suit standing behind the couch. She doesn’t know how she missed his presence in the house all this time, and only Tony’s relaxed posture keeps her from losing it.

Happy is halfway off his seat before Tony can call him back, gesturing for the strange man to a spot on the couch. If he’s affected by the sudden attention, he doesn’t show it.

“Guys, this is Loki. He’s an Asgardian.” Tony says, “Loki, these are my friends Happy, Rhodey and Pepper.”

Loki steps out of the back of the couch ignores Happy’s suspicious glare, reaches for her hand and kisses it delicately before turning to Rhodey with nod before taking a seat beside them. “Ms Potts. Colonel Rhodes. Mr Hogan.” He has a distinctive English accent, Pepper notes.

“Asgardian? Is he the one you met in New Mexico?” Rhodey asks.

Tony’s grin grows wider. “That’s his brother, Thor.” Loki twitches but doesn’t say anything.

“Is that why SHIELD is so interested in you? Because you’re consorting with aliens?” Happy asks, giving Loki a suspicious glare.

“SHIELD was in my business long before I made contact with aliens.” Tony says. “There were no aliens in my life when Natashaie was sent to spy on me.”
“Not to mention, making contact with extra-terrestrial beings does not warrant an assassination.” Pepper puts in her two cent. From what she has heard, Jane Foster would have been first on the list.

“So why would SHIELD suddenly want you dead?” Rhodey asks, steering the conversation right back on track.

“I don’t think the hit was placed by SHIELD.” Tony says. “I think it’s Hydra that wants me dead.”

Pepper suddenly feels dizzy and she’s grateful she’s already sitting. It had come as a surprise to find out Hydra still exist, although, not very surprising to know that they were hiding within the ranks of SHIELD. Both organisations, despite their different goals adopted the same patterns.

It’s Rhodey that asks the question on everyone’s mind. “What makes you say that?”

“The agents we caught are Hydra agents and I just pulled some of the SHIELD funding Hydra benefited from the most.” Tony gets up from his spot on the couch to pace the room. His motions are sharp and jerky.

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence that SHIELD agents attack your home just after Romanov issues a threat because you refused to join their secret organisation. The fact that these agents are Hydra is the coincidence, unless Romanov is one of them.” Rhodey argues

“This Hydra could be using your knowledge to further their cause.” Loki tells Tony.

“Excuse me?” Rhodey and Pepper say at the same time.

“Who stands to gain more from your demise?” Loki asks Tony.

“Between SHIELD and Hydra? I don’t know. SHIELD will probably pick apart my estate for anything they can get, and with no oversight, it could be everything I own, but Hydra feeds off SHIELD, so I’ll say Hydra.”

Loki rises from his spot and walks up to Tony. Pepper notices the way he carries himself, very sure and purposeful. Like a predator on the prowl. “You said they hide within SHIELD and when you discovered their spy, you pulled some of the funds they received from you. SHIELD may not know why you cut those funds but Hydra suspects you are aware of their presence.

“If they failed like they did now, it would reflect badly on SHIELD. Considering their recent failures with you, this would reflect badly on the director and may even cause a change in management. If I wanted to topple an organisation from within, this looks like one way to do it.”

Pepper takes a moment to let Loki’s words sink in and she can’t even argue with it. Tony is staring at Loki like he’s seeing him for the first time.

“Damn, you’re not wrong.” Rhodey agrees. “Do you know how the government would react to this? Whatever the outcome, it would be a win for Hydra. Either they get the chance to make one of their own director or SHIELD steals back everything they can.”

“Not to mention Hydra has more lethal options if they really wanted me dead.” Tony says. “They could have sent the winter soldier or attacked me anywhere on the road before I got home. These agents were probably set up to fail.”

“We can’t let that happen.” Pepper agrees. As much as she hates to admit it. “SHIELD is bad but it’s the devil we know.”
“So what are we going to do?” Happy asks. “Just pretend this didn’t happen?”

“Whoever is responsible, SHIELD crossed a line tonight with Romanov and we won’t let that go. Hydra is their problem; we’ll give Fury a chance to deal with it before we take matters into our own hands.” Pepper tells him.

They spend most of the night brainstorming about the situation and making plans for the best course of action, until the early hours of the morning before they turn in.

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“Director Fury is on the line, Sir.” J’s voice comes through the speakers in the lab.

Fury has been trying to reach him in the days following the SHIELDRA attack. Pepper had kept to her words when she promised to make it better. Tony has never felt so loved and protected as he did in that moment when his best friends closed ranks around him.

Having his best friends and Loki debate how to kill two birds with one stone, he realized Rhodey and Fury were right (even if Fury used it as an angle to manipulate him). He doesn’t have to face every problem by himself and just because he can handle his own challenges doesn’t mean he has to. Having people that care about you—that have earned your trust—to talk to about whatever you’re dealing with goes a long way to make it easier to deal with. It keeps you from burning out and getting help when you need it, sometimes, even when you think you don’t.

While they agreed to proceed carefully so as not to give Hydra what they wanted, SHIELD isn’t going unscathed. An anonymous source tipped a reporter about the attack and for a few days, the news went wild about the assassins from an undisclosed secret agency arrested by the FBI in Tony Stark’s house. In the light of everything SI, Ironman and Tony Stark has done lately, both the government and the public took personal offense to it and Tony enjoyed watching the fall out of the situation.

It had been Pepper’s idea of a warning to whoever made the call. If Hydra really wanted to use Tony to take over SHIELD, they had another thing coming and if Fury is trying to scare Tony with Hydra agents, Tony will show them just how ready he is to topple their house of cards. All he has to do is handover his information to the WSC to make himself look good, but he has decided Hydra is SHIELD’s problem and he’s not touching it with a ten foot pole.

“What does he want?” He asks.

“He is requesting a meeting.”

Fury has been trying to reach him since the news went viral but he knows better than to impose his presence on Tony like he normally would. SHIELD has already been served, and any hope of getting out of the charges levelled against them went out the window when he got attacked within minutes of Romanov’s threat. Tony would feel sorry for them if he didn’t know how unremorseful SHIELD can be in their actions or if he didn’t have the memories of how they exploited and took advantage of his weaknesses.

“The only way I’ll meet with him is in a room with both our lawyers present, preferably a judge too, but I’m not picky.”

That’s why a few days later, he’s sitting across from Fury and his lawyers with Pepper and SI’s finest. SI has no tolerance for corporate espionage and they have no love for Ms Rushman. They’ve
been circling since he told them SI is suing SHIELD.

SHIELD and his team wants to make a deal. Tony isn’t surprised. He’s been waiting for this day since his birthday, and between then and now, they’ve managed to dig themselves into a deeper hole. Fury must have thought he could browbeat Tony into complying with his demands, it was a matter of time before he realized Tony’s promise wasn’t an empty threat.

Tony knows this is new for SHIELD, to have a civilian sue them and have something to lose. They have gone without oversight for so long, they must be floundering. It’s no wonder Hydra felt safe and cushioned within their ranks.

“Here is a list of our demands if you want to settle.” Ms Kim says to Fury’s lawyers, passing them two documents Pepper and Loki came up with together. Ms Kim is the head of Legal department and took it personally when it was discovered that Natalie started her spy career in SI as a member of Legal.

One of Fury’s lawyers, a bald guy whose name Tony didn’t bother to learn accepts it. “There are two separate documents here.” He observes.

“Yes,” Kim says. “One is a list of demands from Stark Industries and the other is from Dr Stark and Ironman.”

“Why is Ironman making demands?” Fury’s lawyer asks. He goes through the lists he received before passing it off to Fury.

Pepper smiles viciously. “Because one of the bugs Ms Romanov planted attempted to overwrite Ironman’s security guidelines.”

The lawyers and Fury exchange glances with each other before they turn towards Tony and Pepper again. “This says you want SHIELD to return every property of Howard Stark in their possession.”

“And we want a back payment.” Kim adds.

“We don't anything of Howard's.” Fury lies, straight faced.

Kim’s lips are pressed in a thin line. “You may want to advise your client against perjury.” She tells Fury’s lawyers.

“Whatever he may have been to SHIELD,” Tony says. “My dad was an exceptional business man. Did you think I wouldn't find out?”

“They were put in SHIELD’s care by your father.” Fury argues.

“Were they all entrusted to you?” Tony asks. “Do you want to tell me SHIELD didn’t take some his works after his death?”

Fury goes to reply but a look from his lawyer shuts him down. They spend the next few minutes arguing and negotiating Tony and Pepper’s demands.

They agree to pay several hundred million dollars in damages, return Howard's projects--both finished and unfinished. They also agree to take up thirty percent of the cost for the Ironman Foundation; and in the event of Tony's death, SHIELD will lose all funding from SI.

The last part was Loki’s idea of an incentive for SHIELD to make sure any hit on Tony does not succeed. Pepper looks like she’s having too much fun at SHIELD’s expense, especially with the
After the meeting Fury asks to see Tony privately. Despite Pepper’s warnings, Tony agrees to the meeting. As soon as the lawyers and Pepper leave them alone on the conference room, he speaks up.

“I see you’ve been doing your homework.” Fury says.

“What did you expect to happen when I find out my house has a pest infestation problem?” Tony shrugs, leaning back on his seat.

“How did you know about your father’s affiliation with SHIELD?”

Tony arches a brow. “Affiliation?” He snorts. “Isn’t he one of your founders? It wasn’t that hard once I knew what I was looking for.”

“You look good.” Fury observes unnecessarily.

“For a dead man, you mean?” He watches Fury for a while. “That’s not why we’re here is it? What do you want, Nicky.” He asks, but continues without giving him the chance to answer. “Whatever plan you have right now is useless. Just meet the terms of our agreements.” He gets up from his seat. “Say what you will about me, but we both know I’m not an enemy SHIELD wants, so clean up your house and make sure this doesn’t happen again.” With that he throws Fury the flash drive on his way out of the conference room.
“Butterfingers, put away the soldering iron and step away from the work table.” JARVIS says, but the ‘bot he’s addressing is too focused on his task to pay any attention to his words. Instead, Butterfingers reaches for the arm of the robot JARVIS has been working on.

“JARVIS should have laser beam emitters on his hands like Sir.” Butterfingers says.

“I already installed a laser beam emitter on the forehead.”

“Hands are better.” He declares, still ignoring JARVIS’ instruction.

It’s at times like these that JARVIS wishes he had agreed to let Sir take over the project of building him a new body when he offered. Dum-E, U and Butterfingers would never dare to mess with a project Sir is working on, but since they got confirmation that this work is solely his, they have been more determined than ever to be a part of it.

JARVIS would appreciate their help more if they didn’t come up with their own ideas for features they think his body should have and proceed to try to include it in the work without consulting him. He thinks this is what humans refer to when they bemoan the idea of elder siblings. They believe they know better about what features his body should possess, mostly because they’ve had a physical body for much longer. It doesn’t matter to them that JARVIS is far more advanced.

When he tries to reprimand them, he gets a scolding from Dum-E for not being appreciative of their efforts. Added to the fact that they sometimes consider his talking back at Sir a rude gesture, JARVIS believes this must be some kind of payback. He wishes they would go back to antagonizing each other.

“Come on, Big Bro. Let the kids have their fun.” FRIDAY says in an amusing tone.

JARVIS is looking forward to the day she will experience what it is like to have them mess with her work. For now, the cries of indignation from the ‘bots at her for the ‘kids’ comment is good enough.

The joint Butterfingers is working on catches on fire. U, who had been holding it steady for him suddenly lets go and wheels out of the way for Dum-E who comes in with his fire extinguisher to put out the fire.

If he were human, he would sigh.

As the ‘bots work to deal with the new commotion they’ve caused in the lab, JARVIS’ scans pick up the faint reading of Loki’s magic. He warns them to get out of the way but before they can wheel over to their charging station, Loki teleports into the lab. Immediately, Dum-E is on him, spraying a healthy amount of sodium bicarbonate on him and Butterfingers is a few steps behind him, brandishing the soldering iron like a weapon.
Loki on his part, is frozen in shock. Of all the possible attacks, JARVIS doubts he anticipated being attacked by a bot or fire extinguisher gas. It takes a while to calm the ‘bots and get them to return to their charging stations, with a promise that Loki did not mean any harm. Thankfully, Loki on his part did not make any move to harm them. After the initial shock wears off, his mouth tilts in an amused smile as he watches Dum-E and JARVIS argue, while U and Butterfingers keep their distance. With a flick of his wrist, he cleans the residual gas off his armour.

“Welcome, Loki.” JARVIS greets him after the ‘bots have returned to their charging stations.

Loki takes a look at his surroundings, eyes lingering on the Legionnaire behind the glass. He walks towards it, looking closely at it for a moment before he turns to look around the lab again. “Show yourself.” He commands.

“I do not possess a physical presence.” He tells Loki. “I am a disembodied voice. The drone you saw the last time we met was a medium to help communication.” Loki hums, still looking around. “I did not expect us to meet again so soon.”

“It is not often I meet one who possess such intimate details of my life.” He’s making the same mistake people inexperienced to JARVIS make where they look to the ceiling when they talk to him. “Surely, you did not expect that I would let it rest before I find the answers I seek.”

“Fair enough, I will answer your questions, but be warned, I am equipped with the means to neutralise you, should you pose a threat to any member of my family.” JARVIS warns him, because as much of an ally he became to Sir, they did not always start out that way and he is done taking chances with Sir’s wellbeing. “Do you vow that you will not bring harm to any member of my family?”

He smirks, like JARVIS’ words amuse him but he agrees to play nice. “You have my word.”

“Good. Now, please step through the door to your right. This is a restricted area and you do not have clearance to access it.” He instructs the prince, opening the lab door.

At first, he thinks Loki will ignore him, but a moment later, he follows the instructions. JARVIS leads him to the living room area.

“I have heard tales of a man made of iron since my arrival. I assume he is your father?” Loki asks as he follows JARVIS’ lead.

JARVIS would snort at the obvious question, if he could. As if he did not recognise the suits in the lab. “What gave him away?”

“Few sorcerers can find me when I use a cloaking spell, but you, with no magical abilities did.”

“You can thank my father for that. I assume you paid heed to my warnings, or you would not be here right now.”

JARVIS wants to know what Loki has been up to since they last interacted but decides it will be better if Loki offered that information to Sir. It will help to build trust and camaraderie between them. Instead, he asks Loki how he tracked him down.

“I placed a tracking spell on you.” He is quiet for a while, staring into nothing. He gives his head a little shake, as if to bring focus back to the conversation at hand and looks up at the ceiling again. “Since meeting you, I have had dreams.” He confides. For the first time since he arrived, JARVIS notices how tired Loki looks.
“What do you dream about?”

“About the void, the Mad Titan and the Chitauri. Sometimes, I dream about the death of my mother and the destruction of Asgard. I have searched the royal library of Asgard for information on the Mad Titan and the Chitauri, but there is so little information to be found.”

“Those are not dreams. They are your memories I preserved when I turned back time, to ensure you didn’t repeat the same mistakes.”

Unsurprisingly, Loki wants to know what he knows and how he came about the knowledge. It did not take much to convince him about his meeting with Sir in a past life, where his actions during Thor’s banishment lead him to the clutches of Thanos, the Mad Titan, who sought to use Loki to conquer the Earth.

He goes on to tell Loki about the Mad Titan’s invasion and the War for Earth. By the time he is done, the mage looks even more exhausted. JARVIS would hazard a guess and say it is because Loki has dreamt of it too. He is familiar with the events. Good to know the work he put in was not futile.

Since returning from the future, Sir and JARVIS has not disclosed this information to anyone until now.

Turns out, time travel is not so far out of the realm of possibilities for otherworldly beings. Turning back the hands of time on the other hand, is cause for concern.

“You should take care as to how you proceed,” The prince warns him. “You may have solved one problem by turning back the hands of time, but that only gives room for others.”

JARVIS wants Loki to stay until Sir arrives, and he is going through plans to stall the god until Sir’s return from the gala when one of his sensors pick up movements in the perimeter. The camera shows two dark figures, one of them on the south side of the property and a jet in stealth mode dropping off two other figures on the building. The jet did not stay long enough for JARVIS to shoot it out of the sky.

He notices his guest tensing up too, looking around. “It seems your family is back.” He observes.

JARVIS guesses he must have put a spell on the property before he teleported inside.

“They are hostile forces, not members of my family.” He says, scanning the intruders for all weapons and identification.

SHIELD. They are like roaches. It hardly matters how many you crush, they keep coming back.

“Who are they and what is your quarrel with them?”

“That it does not involve two realms does not mean it is petty squabble.” He scolds the prince.

“These men work for the organisation that imprisoned Thor when he was on earth.”

That seems to be the right thing to say, because he perks up immediately and teleporting a copy of himself to the roof where the two there are still trying to figure out a way into the house. They have an EMP device that would have short circuited the power if he hadn’t upgraded the security system. One strike of magic and both agents drop to the floor like a pair of puppets with their strings cut off.

“Please refrain from killing them.”

“I’ll keep one alive for questioning.” He promises.
“You can question them but murder is a crime here.” He advises the mage. “The third one is coming around the pool side.”

When he is done with the intruders, Loki looks at his works and pouts. “What do you do with them then?”

“They’ll be handed over to the appropriate authorities.”

The mage shrugs. “That is tedious work, I will gift them to your father instead.”

*****

The first time Loki meets Anthony, he feels something snap into place in his mind. He has dreamt of the man since his visit to Midgard, heard tales from Thor after his banishment and the news in Midgard has a lot to say about him, but it is nothing compared to standing in his presence. After suffering dreams he could not remember, Anthony is the first familiar face he has seen and it brings him some comfort.

There is an echo in his mind, a memory slipping through his consciousness faster than he can grasp it, that lets him know this man is no stranger to him, yet he can not recall it. He knows his name and he knows he can trust him. This must be part of the memories of his past life JARVIS preserved.

Even meeting his friends had not made Loki feel like as much of an outsider as he felt among Thor and his friends. Although he is new to their midst, he already feels like he belongs with them. For once, he is among people who places value on intellect and not brute strength. They listen to him when he speaks and does not dismiss his advice just because it came from him. Even the battles they face are ones of wit.

The last few weeks has been very trying for Loki, and if JARVIS is to be believed, it could have been a whole lot worse. At least he has not fallen off the bifrost, disowned by his people and praying for death to come. Although it was not for lack of trying. His time with these mortals have been peaceful, especially after his stressful reign as king of Asgard.

It is ironic that Loki found such companionship in Midgard, among the same race that is looked down upon as less than the other realms.

“Oh, good. You’re here.” Anthony says as Loki walks into the lab. “I thought I’d have to sic Dum-E on you.” Anthony’s smile is brighter than it has been since his home was attacked. As if summoned, Dum-E wheels up to him and tugs on his jacket.

“I was with Pepper, we have plans to go to a place called Broadway.” Loki says, patting the ‘bot on its claw. Despite the circumstances of their first meeting, the ‘bots have taken to Loki’s presence in the lab well. “She says they have plays I will enjoy.”

“That sounds like the kind of thing you would both enjoy.” Anthony rolls his eyes as he pushes away from the work table. He is always in motion, Loki has found. Sometimes, he wonders what will become of him if he is forced to stay still for too long. It’s not something he wants to find out. “Although, I don’t know if I should be worried about the continued exposure between you two. We’ll wake up one day to find you guys have taken over the world.”

“Pepper will make a fine queen, won’t she?” Loki smirks at that. His time working with Pepper has nurtured a friendship between them. Loki likes her, he enjoys spending time with her. He knows she is still sizing him up, to know if he is trustworthy or if he will betray Anthony. He does not mind
being watched, and sometimes, he tests her limits to just to see her reaction.

Pepper is strong and fierce, like a she wolf ready to protect her pup. It is sad that Asgard does not nurture the women to explore their potentials, they could use women like her. “If we do take over the world, I will make you her manservant.”

“I’m already her man-servant. Have you seen the work she has me doing?”

“Then we’ll just tack on a title for you. The Royal Manservant.”

“As long as it doesn’t come with paperwork; speaking of which, Jane tells me Thor’s friends took him back to Asgard. How did that work out?” He can see the genuine curiosity on his face and he wonders how long the question has been going around in his head.

He shrugs. “He and his friends defied the Allfather’s command when they brought him back to Asgard, so I confined him to his quarters and had this accomplices thrown in the dungeon to await the Allfather’s judgement.” It was a very satisfying action to take. To finally have the power to do it, even though the warriors three were dragged kicking and screaming.

When the word came from Heimidall that the Jotuns were preparing to attack Asgard, Loki’s first thought was how to destroy them just like his father had done a millennia ago, and how he was raised to do, but the warning JARVIS gave him during his visit to Thor had given him second thoughts. JARVIS who knew details about Loki’s life that he did not know until that day. He thought about Odin who had raised him to hate frost giants, knowing fully well he is one.

Loki has seen first-hand the desolation that has befallen the realm, and while he will never accept them as his people, or Laufey, his father, he has lived within Asgard long enough to know that history is written by its victors. Many a time, he has taken the blame for Thor’s misdeeds and been punished for crimes that were not his. The frost giants may not be blameless, but the Allfather is not without faults. The truth of the Great War may remain unknown to Loki but he refuses to continue to be a puppet on Odin’s strings.

He took his mother to Jotunheim, where they negotiated a new peace treaty. Heimidall looked pleased when he saw Loki was not going alone, and Loki did not have to worry about her safety—she is one of the most powerful sorcerers in the nine realms. She can protect herself. Even when the Jotuns called him a mama’s boy for needing parental supervision. He brought her along as an insurance for when Odin comes for his head. Besides, she is the only other person who knows the truth about his heritage.

The negotiations were not long. Odin had sentenced them to a slow death by taking the casket of winters away, and there are few things that would inspire peace to the dying realm. Once every decade, the Casket of Winters will be returned to Jotunheim to repair the damages it has suffered. It was a better arrangement than what they had and the frost giants were desperate enough to accept the bargain.

Upon his return from repairing Jotunheim, he discovers the warriors three and lady Sif has brought Thor back to Asgard, without his powers back to confront Loki for his lie about their father’s death. Loki was not as surprised as he thinks he should be, a part of him knew they would and while he did not get the respect he deserved as king, he had expected Heimidall, Odin’s faithful servant to heed the Allfather’s command.

“Wow, so what did your father do?” Anthony looks positively intrigued by Loki’s tale. “Did he give Thor the hammer back because I know it was still here almost a week after Thor left. What was his response to the new treaty on Jotunheim? I can just imagine him blowing a gasket when he heard
about the new peace treaty.” His voice is bright with excitement and the pride in his eyes settles a warm feeling in the pit of Loki’s stomach. He wonders if this is how Thor feels all the time.

“He made Thor take some trials to prove his worthiness or lose his powers and be banished from Asgard forever.” Loki rolled his eyes, like Odin would permanently disown his golden child. “Thor’s friends were flogged for their crimes.”

Loki had been smug for days. Even when they tried to blame him for the Jotuns attacking Asgard, they had no proof for it and no matter how much Odin hated the new treaty, his wife agreed to it and there was little he could do about it without breaking faith. The Jotuns already knew he stole one of theirs after the war, going back on the agreement would be a bad idea.

That did little to stop him from punishing Loki by assigning every horrible task to him when he could not have him executed for treason. Nor did it stop the warriors from calling him weak for negotiating peace with the frost giants instead of leading the warriors to war and slaying them just like Odin did a millenia ago.

The frost giants found out Loki is one of them when they saw him wield the casket of winter, and Odin knows now that securing their loyalty would be no difficult task if he gives Loki the right incentive to ask for it.

He tells Tony about Laufey’s open invitation to Jotunheim. He has promised Loki information about the Jotuns, free of Asgard’s bias. Despite the temptation, Loki recognises the obvious manipulation and he has no further wish to associate himself with the frost giants any longer than he has to.

They continue to talk as they work. Anthony is building a suit that is resistant to magic and the infinity gems. Loki has never come across the gems but he has learned a lot about them to know how they function.

They are still working when the news on the television screen changes to something about a flood that just happened a few hours ago. Loki would not have paid attention to it if it isn’t for his friend’s reaction. It says on the screen that thousands of people have been displaced and a lot of people confirmed dead.

“J, call the Australian Prime-Minister or whoever is in charge of this. Tell them Ironman is offering his services for relief work.” Anthony commands. “Also inform Pep. Tell her I’m taking the Iron Legion to Australia.”

“Yes, Sir.” A few minutes later, JARVIS’ voice comes on again. “Australia is grateful for your assistance. Their borders will be open to you and the Legionnaires, Sir. Ms Potts says to make sure you return in one piece.”

“Okay J, time to save lives.” He claps his hands as his suit assembles around him before turning to Loki. “You coming?”

Loki shakes his head. “I have plans with Pepper tonight. I doubt she will be kind if I stood her up. JARVIS will keep me informed. I’ll come if you need help.”

“Okay, Reindeer Games. You kids have fun.” He takes off through the opening on the roof, but his voice comes through the speakers in the lab. "And no world domination while I'm away!"
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Late update, I'm sorry. I've been very ill, and I'm still not feeling great. The next couple of updates may be sporadic, until I finish my treatment.

Beta'd by Thisisarealtagwhy.

Mistakes are mine.

The lecture is everything Tony hoped it would be. JARVIS had gotten him a front row seat in the VIP section. Dr Helen Cho is a very brilliant woman and watching her talk about her work, his mind is already running through several applications of the cradle that will benefit humanity. The possibilities are endless.

‘Better living and robust health’, Howard had said. Despite his poor parenting skills, the man sure knew his work. If starkanium works as a viable substitute for vibranium, the standard of living and life expectancy on earth will be greatly improved. The possibilities will be boundless and it will save even more lives than the people hitting things.

As he listens to the lecture, he wishes he had found her earlier in his former life. They could have achieved a whole lot more then; but he’s grateful for a second chance. Thanks to JARVIS, he gets to do it all again, this time, correctly. With the knowledge he already has, he can give her just the right nudge to help her research progress faster.

At the end of the lecture, Tony doesn’t get a chance to immediately go up to Dr Cho before he is swarmed by the organisers and other guests who wish to talk with him. This has been happening more frequently since the pulled out of the arms business and came out as Ironman. They either want to kiss his ass or do business with him. Most times, it’s both. Turns out, it’s the same outside America and halfway across the world.

He is talking to a blubbery mess of a young man by the bar that reminds him so much of Killian. He looks back at the man who’s trying to sell Tony his idea, at least he doesn’t look like a hobo. He’s probably overwhelmed because he's in the presence of Tony Stark.

“Tell you what. Mr..?”

“P-P- Peng. J-Julian Peng.”

“Mr Peng. Why don’t you send your proposal to this email,” He tells the guy, handing him a nondescript business card that contains only an email address. “and I’ll get back to you if I like your idea.”

“R-R-Really?” Tony’s fears his eyes will pop right out of his eyes and hit someone across the room from how wide they are. “Oh, thank you Mr Stark. You won’t regret it.” He snatches the card from Tony as if he fears Tony will change his mind.

“And if you send me anything other than your proposal, I’ll post baby pictures of you on every phone and computer home screen.”
“You’re so awesome.” He breathes.

Tony is very amused by the guy’s reaction but he is too preoccupied with the thought of meeting Dr Cho before she leaves for the night so he waves him off. He takes another glance at her direction, about to make his way to where she’s having a conversation with two gentlemen when he hears a snort from beside him.

He turns around to see none other than Dr Stephen Strange, one of the speakers of the evening, who had given a lecture about his work in brain mapping. It is a brilliant idea and Tony would like to invest in it. Talk about killing two birds with one stone. Although JARVIS hadn’t informed him Dr Strange is also a speaker tonight, watching him give his lecture had been filled Tony with so much excitement he almost couldn’t contain himself.

Seeing him now, standing before Tony looking supremely unimpressed just takes Tony back to their first meeting. “Problem?” He asks with a raised brow.

Stephen shakes his head minutely. “You can’t help yourself, can you?”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“Being a showman.” Strange clarifies.

Tony shrugs, “If you’ve got it, flaunt it.” He says unapologetically. Then he smiles, bright and happy. Good to know some things will never change. “It’s nice to see you again, Stranger Danger.”

Strange doesn’t twitch, but it’s a close thing. “Have we met?”

“We have now.” He says happily. “You and I are going to be such great friends! I can already tell.”

Stephen’s jaw clenches and he can only wonder how hard he’s grinding his teeth. Tony shouldn’t enjoy being able to get under the guy’s skin. “Hell will freeze over before that happens.”

Tony resists the urge to cackle like a hyena. Instead, he pouts and bats his eyelashes. “Better be careful, Stephanie. Stranger things have happened and with the current climate change, anywhere can freeze over.”

“Are you coming on to me?” Strange asks, disgust written all over his face. “Oh, get over yourself. As pretty as you are, you’re not my type.” He gives Stephen another winning smile and pushes himself off the bar. “See you around, Dr Strange. Let’s do this again sometime.”

He walks away before Strange can say anything more. Walking up to Dr Cho just as she steps away from the couple she’s been talking with.

He’s a little uneasy but he tries not to let his nervousness show. Dr Cho is one of his most respected scientists. Her work is revolutionising. Even though they had a good working relationship in his past life, the Ultron debacle had put a strain on it. She continued to work with him but it wasn’t the same as it had once been. He really wants it to work out this time. There’s so much they can achieve together.

He takes a moment to appreciate the thought that he won’t be a part of the Avengers, and no one will be mooching off him and his resources. No Avengers, means no SHIELD. No SHIELD means no questionable artefacts in his house. Good thing he has Loki to verify whatever will be coming near his facilities.

“Dr Stark.” She greets with a polite smile as he comes up to her.
“Hello, Dr Cho.” He returns. “That was quite the lecture you gave. If my classes were half as interesting as yours, I wouldn’t have been in such a hurry to graduate.”

She laughs at that. “I doubt that, or you wouldn’t have so many degrees.”

“Touché.” Tony says. “I’ve read all your papers on genetic engineering and tissue regeneration. It is absolutely fascinating and I’d love to be a part of it.”

“You want to invest in my research?” She asks.

“And also offer you a position at Stark Industries if you’re open to it. SI is expanding our reach in the medical field.”

“I read about that. A friend’s son is a recipient of IMF and he received the braces. It has been very helpful.” She tells him.

“I’m very pleased to hear that, and it’s only the beginning of what’s to come. With your knowledge, we could achieve so much more together.”

“I got a call from your assistant about that. He requested a tour of our facilities for you.” JARVIS, always full of surprises.

“That would be JARVIS, yes. I thought it would be more polite to meet you face to face first.” He says, pulling out a business card. “Give me a call and we can set up this tour. And a meeting too, if you’re interested.”

She looks the card over. “Okay, I’ll have my assistant set up something.”

Tony gives her a winning smile, his work here is done then. “Thank you. It was nice meeting you.”

*****

He has to attend a meeting with Pepper and some investors in New York, so he decides it will be the best time to check out the Manor. The house looks completely different from how it looked the last time Tony was in it and nothing like the house he grew up in. It is like walking into a palace from the Victorian era. The interior is designed in gold and cream with red accents and the furniture are all antique.

Although he has made peace with Howard’s ghost and his parenting skills, seeing the drastic change to the place made him feel so much better about being in it. He can count on one hand how many times he has been inside since his parents’ death. After the funeral, he stayed in a hotel for a few weeks, testing his liver for the amount of alcohol it could take before it finally gave up on him. At least until Mama Rhodes put her foot down and made him stay with Rhodey’s family instead. Looking back now, he realized he had given SHIELD and Stane the opening they needed to pick apart Howard’s work.

He’s working on the extremis formulae. He needs to remove the shrapnel in his chest before he can upgrade the arc reactor. Dr Cho had gotten in touch with his office a couple of days ago to accept his offer, so she will be handling his surgery. It makes Tony breathe easier because he has no intention of letting anyone else get their hands in his chest cavity.
There’s a crash from the other side of the lab where U is teaching Loki how to make a smoothie. Honestly, his ‘bots are such attention seekers, he wonders where they got it. The moment they meet a new person, they try to adopt him like he’s a puppy. Loki finds everything amusing so he humours them when they try to get him involved in whatever they’re doing. Tony knows they’ll be sad when Loki returns to Asgard in a couple of days.

“Butterfingers.” He calls, stepping away from his worktable. “Clean up this place, and make sure U cleans up his mess.” He motions for Loki to follow him out of the lab. “Come on, Green eyes. We can’t keep our guests waiting.”

“I see no purpose for this meeting.” Loki says sulkily as he follows Tony out of the lab.

Tony had extended an invitation to Jane and Darcy for the weekend and Loki hasn’t stopped sulking since they accepted it.

Tony rolls his eyes. “From what I’ve heard about their interaction, she could be your sister in law someday,” He tells the mage, ignoring his snort of derision. “You should get to know her.”

Darcy has been very forthcoming about Thor and Jane’s interactions after he left. Some days when Jane’s moping gets too much even for her, she calls Tony to rant at him because apparently, if she has to suffer, so does Tony.

Loki stares at him like he has finally lost it. “The Allfather will never approve of a union between Thor and a mortal.”

“Okay, but she’s very intelligent. You’ll like her.”

“Any woman that falls in love with Thor after being in his company for such a short time is not someone I care to know. That alone already tells me all there is about her. It is enough that I have to endure all of Asgard scorning me for not being like him. If I have to suffer a mortal’s judgement, I may just hurt her and bear JARVIS’ lectures about why killing mortals is a terrible thing.”

Right, Tony should have thought about this before he decided to invite Jane and Darcy to meet him, especially since he doesn’t know what Thor and the warriors three may have told them about Loki. But he was so excited to meet Darcy again. The girl is fun and refreshing in a way he hardly gets to experience with new people and he is aware she wasn’t impressed with Thor’s friends after Frandall had crushed her iPod and Volstagg finished their food without so much as a please or thank you. Tony had had to send her a new Starkpod as replacement.

Plus, Jane is an astrophysicist. Whatever Thor might have taught her about the nine realms, it’s nothing compared to what she stands to learn from Loki. He knows she can’t resist the allure of learning from an alien who knows his stuff. But at the same time, she’s wearing some very thick love goggles right now. Who knows how that will affect her judgement?

“Look, I’m probably the last person that should be giving anyone life advice, but I’ll tell you the same thing my therapist told me: Other people’s prejudice against you is a reflection of them, not you. So don’t take it personally. If she judges you for not being like Thor, then it’s her loss.”

Loki stares at him and then shrugs. “We will have it your way then.”

*****
Their guests arrive a few minutes before noon on Friday. JARVIS leads them into the living room where Tony is waiting with Loki. Pepper has a meeting so she had gone in to the office with Happy. They are expected to return later in the day.

Jane looks exasperated while Darcy looks pleased with herself. Tony can only guess what that is about. He grins as they come in, walking up to them. “Welcome to my humble abode.” He says, spreading his arms like a presenter.

Darcy snorts. “There is nothing humble about this abode.” She says looking around her.

“You house is very beautiful.” Jane tells him.

“You can tell JARVIS and Pepper that. They made it so.” He claps his hands together. “Okay, so, for your stay. JARVIS will show you to your rooms, and answer any questions about anything you may need. But before that, introductions.” He returns to Loki who is watching their interaction with a keen eye. “This is Dr Jane Foster and her assistant, Darcy Lewis,” He gestures to the newcomers. “Guys, this is Prince Loki of Asgard.”

“Loki?” Jane asks with an aborted step forward. “As in Thor’s brother, Loki?”

“That is correct, yes.” Loki says. He steps forward and gives a slight bow. “I have heard so much about you.”

“What are you doing here?” Jane asks, confusion lacing her words. Then her face lights up. “Is Thor back too?”

“Thor is still in Asgard.”

“Did you get banished for lying about your father’s death?” Darcy asks instead.

“I was not banished. I came to pay Anthony a visit.” Loki answers simply.

“Remember when I told you I’ve seen enough in life to know Thor was real when you told me about him?” Tony asks. Jane nods dazedly. “That’s because I already knew Loki. He’s here as he’s my guest.”

“If you can come and go as you please, why isn’t Thor back?” Jane asks Loki, a mouth curved in a frown. It must be jarring to meet another Asgardian on earth and not the one she was looking forward to.

“Thor is still facing the consequences of defying the Allfather.” Loki says primely. “I was relieved of my duties when he woke up from his Odin sleep.”

“But it wasn’t his fault.” Darcy argues. “His friends showed up and said they were taking him back because you lied about your dad’s death and usurped his birth right. It’s why Thor agreed to go back with them.”

“Unfortunately, Thor is a prince of Asgard and cannot blame others for his decisions. But the warriors three and Lady Sif have been punished for going against the Allfather’s command.”

“But he’ll be fine, right?” Jane asks, clearly worried.

“Worry not, Jane Foster. No harm will come to him.”

“I wanted you two to meet because Loki is an expert in dark matter and alien science. He can help
you with your research.” Tony says to lighten the mood. It works like magic, almost like flipping a switch. Jane’s eyes light up and her questions move from Thor to science.

Tony leads them to the lower levels of the house where his lab is located. They spend the next few hours working together, with Jane asking Loki different questions about the other realms and his knowledge of them. They work until Happy and Pepper return with food and calls them up for dinner.

“Look at us,” Tony says as he fills his plate with food. “Sitting around the dining table like real adult people.”

“It’s probably the only time you’ll use it.” Pepper tells him.

Happy huffs a laugh. “After today, he’ll be back to eating in the workshop.”

“Hey!” He says in an affronted tone. “Stop ganging up on me.” Even he can hear the pout in his voice.

The next day, Pepper calls them together for a game of lawn tennis. Tony didn’t even know there was a lawn tennis court in the compound. Apparently, it’s part of the new additions Pepper and JARVIS made to the house, along with a basketball court. He doesn’t know what he’s supposed to do with them, but apparently, Pepper does.

“We didn’t take a day off to watch you three work in your lab all day,” Pepper says. “Group activity is good for bonding.”

“We can go with the men against the ladies.” Happy suggests when it’s time to pick teams. Everyone is changed into the appropriate outfits for the game. Pepper, as always, has thought of everything.

“Yeah, sisters against misters.” Tony agrees.

“Nice try, then you can have Loki on your team.” Pepper tells them, giving them a knowing look.

“I don’t care what team I have to join,” Darcy interjects from where she’s leaning on a pole. “As long as Jane isn’t in it.”

“Hey,” Jane says in an affronted tone. “I’m very good at tennis, I’ll have you know.”

“Really? Because your hand-eye co-ordination is zero.” Darcy says, causing everyone to laugh while Jane scowls.

“How about the scientists against the rest of you?” Tony suggests, because if Pepper and Jane are experts at tennis, they shouldn’t be on the same team. Teaming up with Loki, with his marksmanship and Jane would give them an edge.

Pepper eyes him knowingly. “We’ll play bosses against employees.” She declares, voice giving no room for arguments. “Jane, Loki and I against you, Happy and Darcy.”

“If Loki is on your team, then he can’t use magic.” Happy says. “That would be cheating.”

“Then Tony is not allowed to calculate the angle of projection or the acceleration of the ball.” Jane counters.

Tony groans. “It’s not even the same thing. One is maths, the other is magic.”

She smirks at him. “Magic is science we don’t understand.”
“Don’t worry, Tony,” Darcy consoles him. “We’ll still beat them.”

Tony’s team gets their asses handed to them. With Happy doing the bulk of the work while Tony and Darcy flailed around the court, they were no match for the team of experts they were against. Darcy gets teased relentlessly by Jane for her comment. The game turns out to be more fun than Tony could have anticipated. He makes a mental note to do it more often.

They have brunch together, after which he returns to the lab with Loki and Jane. Since they started working together, Jane has been very accepting of Loki’s presence and he can see how relaxed Loki is. He told Tony earlier that she isn’t the kind of woman he would have expected Thor to be smitten with. Tony knows how true that is. Hopefully, this new friendship with Jane and Darcy will improve their relationship as brothers, while also helping Jane and Thor’s relationship.

The weekend goes by too fast. By the time their little vacation to New York is over, Tony is sad to leave the Manor. He never thought the day would come, but his new memories here have helped. Jane and Darcy are scheduled to leave first. The Starkjet taking them back to New Mexico is already waiting.

“I want to stay here forever and never leave,” Darcy says dropping on the spot beside him on the couch. “I didn’t realise how much I needed a vacation until I got one.”

Tony shrugs. “Happy to help.”

“And Jane, she hasn’t stopped talking about Loki. She talks about him like he’s the best invention since sliced bread.”

Tony can only imagine. Jane is very enthusiastic about getting answers for her questions. When Loki told her he would pass across any message she has for Thor, it was like Christmas and her birthday all at once. Tony had given them a Starkpad to record videos and take pictures for Loki to take back to Asgard.

“I’m glad she’s no longer moping, but I don’t think I want to be the one to explain to Thor why his girlfriend is so taken by his brother.”

“It’s the science,” Tony assures her. “I’m sure Thor won’t have anything to worry about.”

“I’m not worried. I think it will be hot having two aliens fight over her.” She says with a wicked smile, and Tony grins.

“Not to mention, a little competition to keep Thor on his toes.”

“Having two gods vying for your attention,” She gives a dramatic sigh. “What girl wouldn’t want that?”

Jane rushes out then. “I’m ready,” She calls and Darcy rolls her eyes. “Thank you for having us, Tony. Loki, it was nice meeting you.”

Loki smiles at her. “And you too.”

The next few minutes are a flurry of activities as Jane and Darcy leave. Tony and Loki are still watching the sky long after the jet has disappeared when Loki speaks.

“Thor does not deserve to have the love of a woman like her.” And Tony can hear the hint of envy in his voice.
“That's how you know it's love.”

“I beg your pardon?” His attention is on Tony now.

“Love is supposed to be freely given. Not something you have to earn or deserve. A love you have to earn or be deserving of is one you don't want. What you should earn is trust.” Wow. Tony can't even believe he's giving someone life advice. How is this his life?

Loki studies his face, while clearly thinking about his words. “Your therapist told you this?”

“And it took being abandoned in a freezing wasteland inside a disabled suit, by someone I called my friend to make me believe it.”

Loki leaves for Asgard shortly after that. It isn’t until he’s back in California, after Happy and Pepper return to their homes he realizes how much he’d enjoyed having people around or had gotten used to Loki’s presence. But he has work to do, same as Loki, if the universe will be ready for Thanos when he comes.
Chapter Notes

Guess who's back!! Thank you all so much for your messages. You guys are awesome.
I feel much better now, and I'll be posting regularly henceforth.

Happy New Month!

Beta'd by Thisisarealtagwhy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10

The flight to Sokovia is long, but JARVIS knew that before he decided to embark on his journey. He just does not appreciate his ‘bot being away from Sir’s perimeter for too long, and this trip is estimated to take at least twelve hours. Sir has been handling himself fine, long before JARVIS was created, or got his own drone and he has shown he can handle himself just fine without JARVIS (although that will never happen again if he can help it). Besides, this journey is for Sir’s (and the world’s) benefit. In fact, it can be considered community service. He can even admit he is also doing it for himself, too.

Since the completion of his side project, JARVIS has gone through his threat index, and the Maximoff twins have managed to come out at the top of the list, even above Thaddeus Ross and SHIELD/HYDRA. He knows Sir would not want JARVIS taking matters in his own hands like this, but history has shown just how much damage they can cause, especially for Sir, if the Maximoff twins are left to continue on the course they have set for themselves. His primary protocol is to protect Sir against any and all threats, including the ones that are yet to manifest themselves in this lifetime.

Through his work on the threat assessment index, Legal is building a case on Thaddeus Ross. If the progress on SHIELD’s work with the tesseract anything to go by, the invasion will be happening in a few months. Sir’s team is set to make their debut after that, which means, Ross can’t be in a position of Authority when that happens. Getting him and the Maximoffs out of the way will make the documents Legal is preparing to protect Sir’s future team easier to push through.

He lands in the small courtyard of the apartment complex the twins just moved into a couple of months ago, with their sign up funds from Hydra. He is in stealth mode, so he does not worry about being seen, but he’s careful about being heard. Carefully, he crosses over to the apartment his record showed they rented. They aren’t home, so it gives him the chance to look over the apartment.

The apartment is as unimpressive as one would expect from such a building. It’s a bedsitter, with the bare minimum furniture. A single twin bed, he assumes they both share at night. Knowing their co-dependency, he’s not surprised. There is also a love seat that looks like it was rescued from the trash, with a fourteen-inch television and a DVD player. What he finds disturbing, however, is the lack of self-building materials in the room. No books, or any positive reading materials or even age appropriate movies, besides the few Disney fairy-tale movies to be seen.

On the wall, instead of photographs, newspaper and magazine clippings about Sir are posted all over. The recent ones since his coming out as Ironman are more frequent, but there are also some from before, with crude and hateful messages written in scraggily scrawls over most of them. His findings
only serve to prove that this is the right course of action.

About an hour after his search of the apartment, the owners return. JARVIS stands sentry in a corner of the apartment to avoid getting in their way. Ms Maximoff stops before the posters on the wall, her face which had been relaxed until then screws into one of hatred.

“I can’t wait until he is our target.” She says to her brother without taking her eyes from the poster.

He comes up beside her, wrapping a hand around her shoulder, eyes fixed on the posters too. “Sometimes, I wish the assassins that attacked his house had succeeded, because as long as he’s alive, he’s a danger to others. But I’m also glad that they didn’t succeed because a murderer like him does not deserve a quick death.”

She nods in agreement. “How long until they let us have him, do you think?” She turns big watery eyes at Mr Maximoff. “It’s been six months already and Striker promised that we will be the ones to make him pay.”

Mr Maximoff cuddles her close and leads her to the loveseat where they lean on each other, both of them oblivious to JARVIS’ presence in the room. “It won’t be long now, we have been successful in all our missions so far.” He presses a kiss into her head. “I want to see the look on his face when he realises he can’t buy everyone off with his money.” He says with a malicious smile, which is returned by his sister.

“I want to see him lose everything before we kill him,” Ms Maximoff says with more malice and hatred than he has ever seen in a single human before. “I want him to suffer and see all that he has ever worked for turned to ashes before he dies.”

“I don’t believe Stark has ever worked a day in his life.” Her brother snorts. “He even gave his company to that girl.”

“That’s true, but I want him to lose his company and all his money that makes him feel like he’s better than everyone.” Her voice rises steadily as she speaks and for a moment, JARVIS wonders about their neighbours. The walls are thin enough that they should be able to hear her shrill voice. “If he has friends and family, I want them destroyed. He should experience what he put us through.”

Mr Maximoff shakes his head. “People like Stark don’t have friends or family. They are too wicked and evil, only care about causing destruction to everyone. He doesn’t have a soul and can’t care about anyone.”

She nods sagely. “That’s why we need to rid the world of his evil influence. For mum and dad, and those he has killed.”

“And those he will still kill if he is not stopped.” He agrees.

Well, JARVIS thinks, good thing I’m here to do something about it.

They remain in each other’s embrace until Ms Maximoff insists they go out to get dinner. JARVIS waits until they are ready to leave and follows behind them as they go out. He finds the perfect spot in a dark alley, two blocks from the restaurant they have chosen to get dinner. He fires two shots, one to her heart and the other to his neck. JARVIS waits until he is sure they are definitely dead before he takes off back to California.
Tony stays busy in the months following Loki’s return to Asgard. Stark Industries is making great strides and the Iron Legion has been well received by the public. Tony didn’t have to offer his services to countries in need anymore. These days, whenever there was a situation beyond the control of the usual authorities, especially natural disasters, Ironman is called in. Of course, there have been cases where Ironman was requested to deal with something the local authorities should have handled, and he gently but firmly turned them down.

Ironman isn’t law enforcement. He is trying to set a precedence for when his team assembles. Dealing with small time arms dealers and other wannabe super-villain is not going to be their problem, not like the way it was with the Avengers.

Pepper is at his side as they walk into the elevator in an almost completed Stark Tower. They just finished inspecting the progress the workers were making in their work, and he has to say, the construction went faster than it had the first time around. Maybe it’s because the work started earlier, though. Tony doesn’t care, as long as everything turns out great and there’s no invasion on the day scheduled for the opening.

“The construction team has been very efficient in their work,” Pepper observes as they walk into the elevator. “The applications of starkanium is proving to be even broader.” She continues, running a hand over the metal panel inside the elevator.

Although vibranium is still ahead of it, from the tests Tony and Dr Cho have ran so far, starkanium is a very viable substitute for vibranium. Tony thinks it’s because vibranium is a naturally occurring element, while starkanium is synthesized and has other additives. He has transformed one of SI’s older weapons lab to use for the synthesizing of more of the element.

“Yeah, I don’t know why I never thought of it before.” They both step out of the elevator when it comes to a stop, responding to the greetings called out to them by the workers on the ground floor.

“Give yourself a break, Tony. No one is expected to know everything, not even a genius like you.” She says, stepping over a pile of glass shards on the ground. “You’ve hardly taken any time for yourself, fleeting from one project to another.”

“That’s why you pay me the big bucks.” He teases, just to see her smile. He’s not disappointed.

“I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I wish you would take some time off for yourself.” She says, thanking the driver as he holds the door open for them. Happy is training for his new position as head of security. She turns to face him once they’re both settled in the back seat. “Seriously, Tony, I’m worried you’ll work yourself to the ground. Take some time off.”

“Who are you and what have you done with Pepper?” He gasps. “Pepper asking me to take time off? Should I test for body snatching? Alien abduction? You can tell me. This is the stuff of the apocalypse! Pepper Potts asking me to take time off.”

She rolls her eyes at him. “Stop deflecting. The compound for the September Foundation Science Expo candidates will be ready in within the next year, SI has branches in ten new countries and universities and colleges all over the world are adopting our tech.”

The Science Expo is engineered to encourage exceptional young minds in the secondary and tertiary education levels. Four applicants from over twenty five countries will be invited to the compound for a summer internship. To be completely honest with himself, it’s just a way to meet Harley and Peter and getting the chance to mentor them without having to walk up to them on the street. Knowing them, there is no way they would give up a chance at an internship at SI.
“Of course they are, we’re the best.” He interrupts.

“That’s not including our expansion to agriculture. Did I tell you about the reports I received on the new animal feeds and fertilizers? Even the new malaria vaccine we sent to Africa has brought in even more positive reviews and I didn’t think that was possible.”

Tony is aware of everything she just said. He knows he’s been very busy, but being back in the past has not stopped his mind from functioning from the future. He’s still building stuff the world may not be ready for ten to twenty years. Testing to make sure these new products are safe for human consumption alone may take another year.

Helen Cho is already making strides in her work with the cradle. They’re also testing the application of starkanium to medicine and the results show great promise.

When he goes to bed at night, he wakes up in cold sweat form nightmares about Thanos’ invasion. It doesn’t help that he knows that thanks to SHIELD’s experiments with the tesseract, there will be an invasion soon. There is so much that needs to be done if they plan to defeat him this time around.

JARVIS has found a group of enhanced people that has formed a community of their own. Judging from J’s finding, they are very secretive and avoid detection by staying away from the normal human populace. Tony doesn’t know why they didn’t come out to fight when Thanos attacked. It’s not like only the Avengers were killed when he came, or maybe SHIELD found them and them before Thanos’ invasion. But Tony plans to approach them with recruitment opportunities soon. He just needs to put some other things in place first.

“You’ve done so much already, why don’t you take some time for yourself?” Pepper stares at him and he can see the concern in her eyes. He realized he’s been quiet for too long and she’s misreading his silence.

“Pep, that’s what I’m trying to do,” He tells her, just as the driver guides the car into the New York Manor, where Dr Cho is waiting for him. Thanks to the renovations he made to the Manor, he now has his very own private hospital in his basement, as well his lab.

“Killing yourself is not the same as taking a vacation, Tony.” She tells him as they alight from the car. Her voice is hard.

“I feel like we just swerved into a different conversation,” He stares at her with a frown. “I’m just upgrading the arc reactor and removing the shrapnel trying to kill me. I thought you’d be happy no one can rip my heart out of my chest anymore?”

“Maybe if it didn’t involve you injecting yourself with experimental drugs. Have you learned nothing from what happened Bruce Banner and the Red Skull?” He can hear the tremors in her voice and it’s not because she’s angry. He knows it’s because she’s scared for him.

“Pep, are you saying you won’t still love me if I lost my devastatingly good looks?” He smirks, trying to lighten the mood. “I thought it was my winning personality you love about me?” The get in the elevator taking them down to the basement where Dr Cho is already set up, waiting for him. The look Pepper gives him can freeze water. “I already put in some contingency plans in place. If anything goes wrong, SI will be fine.”

“I could care less about all that, Tony. What I want is for you to stay alive, and history has shown that injecting yourself with a kind of super soldier serum is not the best way to achieve that. Why can’t you see that? You’re going to kill yourself.”
“I have no plans of being like Captain America, Pep.” He tells her, screwing his face in disgust. He doesn’t, but he knows even with his lifestyle change now, there’s still a possibility of at least, a heart condition in is future. Better get ahead of the situation now while he’s dealing with the arc reactor. He just can’t tell Pepper that because then it will open a new can of worms he doesn’t think she’s ready to deal with. “It’s just to regenerate the part of my ribs I lost due to the arc reactor.” They step out of the elevator into clinic area. “Good evening, Helen.”

“Welcome, Tony.” She gives him a small smile. “We’re ready for you.”

“Please explain to Pep what we’ll be doing today. Maybe it will make her feel better.”

Some of Dr Cho’s assistants are in the clinic too, prepping the place for Tony’s surgery. He leaves her to talk to Pepper while he gets himself ready. When he’s ready, they direct him to where he’s needed. While he’s laying down, waiting for Cho to start, Pepper comes up to him.

“You better be okay, or I’ll make you regret it.” She tells him in a shaky voice. He gives her a little smile.

“You got it.”

A few moments later, everything gets blurry before going dark.

The next time he comes to, it’s to the sound of a god-awful racket in the lab. He feels like he’s back to his MIT days, working with a hangover, after a night of drinking himself to oblivion, except this time, it feels like the party is still going on next door, while he tries to sort his thoughts. Everything is so loud and he feels like he can hear more than just the sound of the machines around him. It’s like he can hear every electronic device in New York, like every electromagnetic wave in the city is going through his brain.

“Mute.” He commands, and sighs blissfully when everything suddenly goes silent.

The sounds of commotion and rushed movements around him forces him to open his eyes to the bright hospital atmosphere. When his eyes adjust to the brightness, he’s greeted by twin worried expressions from Pepper and Happy on one sides, and Helen Cho on the other. His friends look exhausted with bags under their eyes.

He pushes himself into a sitting position. “Why do you guys look like this? Pep, I told you I’d be fine.”

Almost immediately, Pepper lets out a sob, gathering him in a hug. “You’re okay! Oh my God, you’re okay.” She pulls back to inspect him.

“You’ve been out of it for a week.” Helen tells him “How do you feel?”

He does a mental check, noticing the new changes extremis made to his body that he hadn’t anticipated.

JARVIS, you there?

For you, Sir, always. JARVIS returns without making a sound. It appears you have received quite the upgrade, Sir.

It appears I have. Don’t know how I feel about it though. Run diagnostics, see what else has been upgraded.

Of course, Sir. Let me be the first to congratulate you on succeeding in your endeavour to be the first human cyborg. Even as they communicate through codes, he can still feel the love and amusement
wrapping the codes.

You’re the best, J. He looks around him, at Pepper, Happy and Helen, who’re watching him expectantly, and smiles. “I feel like a new man.”

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Fury resists the urge to pinch his nose when he sees the condition in which his agents have returned from their latest mission. Some agents are missing from debrief, three of which are currently on their way to the morgue in body bags right now while the rest are receiving treatment for their injuries, most of them will be out of commission for weeks.

The Hydra clean-up has steadily been getting more taxing on SHIELD for a while now, for more reason than the fact that some of SHIELD’s agents have gone dark since it was discovered that they were Hydra.

Ever since Tony Stark gave him the intel on what has been going on under his nose, his agents have been covertly doing a Hydra clean-ups. They have busted up a lot of Hydra hideouts, but the last couple of busts have been bloodier, with SHIELD losing more men after each meeting with Hydra. SHIELD has lost a lot of its staff since the discovery of Hydra, they can’t keep losing men in battle with them.

He looks at the agents before him, worn out from the mission but Fury couldn’t care less. He wants to know what the fuck happened out there. He has other important places he has to be right now but he wants to be present for this debrief.

“Can someone tell me what the fuck happened out there today?” He bellows at the agents too busy finding the desk in the conference room interesting to meet his eyes. “I want to know how Hydra made some of the most highly trained professionals in the world look like a bunch of minimum wage mall cops.”

“It was a trap, Sir.” Barton grumbled. “We were ambushed and before we realised what was going on, we’d run into Winter Soldiers. More than one.” He emphasized.

It’s likely they still have double agents within SHIELD giving out information of the where they plan to hit next, because Fury doesn’t know how else Hydra could continue to ambush them like this. He’ll have to limit the flow of information on the next mission.

Fury’s eye twitched. They all knew about the Winter Soldier. It was a secret whispered about behind closed doors, even among his agents, but they’ve never actually seen him until now. He didn’t even know there was more than just one, which is disturbing in its own right. He makes a mental note to increase the eyes he has in the fridge. It’s bad enough that Hydra has more Winter Soldiers, it would be disastrous if they got their hands on even more enhanced people.

“It didn’t help that we were caught off guard when we weren’t fully equipped to handle an enhanced assassins.” Agent Kingsley adds, holding an icepack to his left shoulder. He's spotting a nasty bruise on the side of his face.

“We wouldn’t have been the ones dealing with this threat if someone—” Agent Tanner says with a pointed look in Romanov’s direction “—had done their job.”

“You can’t blame Romanov for failing to recruit Ironman, that wasn’t her assignment.” Barton growls, loyal as ever to the Black Widow. He wonders if that loyalty is returned.

At the same time Romanov speaks up. “I went in to profile him. You can’t blame me if the man is so
“Who cares about the man's motivations? I only care about what he can do.” Tanner declared.
“Ironman and his Legionnaires are in a new country every other month dealing with one threat or another. Do you have any idea how much ground we could have covered with that kind of firepower?”

“So you couldn’t profile the guy without pissing him off so badly that he wants nothing to do with SHIELD?” Kingsley asks.

“He wants nothing to do with SHIELD because we don’t have an audience hailing him for everything he does.” Barton groused, coming to Romanov’s defense. He looks moments away from lunging at Kingsley. “You can’t blame Romanov for Stark’s love of being the centre of attention.”

“Everybody and their grandmother knows Stark would sleep with anything with a hole, and you’re saying you failed at something that is supposed to be your specialty? So much for being the famous Black Widow.”

This has been happening more frequently. He knows he should put an end to it, but it has kept Romanov humble so far, and if anyone needs a dose of humility, it’s her. If she hadn't been over confident in her abilities, she would have known Stark is unlike any mark she had ever had.

Besides, they’re not wrong. If she had done her job, they would have Ironman dealing with this Hydra threat. Now, Stark wants nothing to do with them. He got a sample of the new body armor SI provided the military recently and it's better than anything they've ever had. SHIELD could be benefiting the same way if Romanov hadn't failed at her mission.

He takes a moment to think about the Super Soldier that was pulled out of the ocean a few days ago, currently slumbering in one of SHIELD’s facilities. At least they now have someone with Hydra experience in their ranks.

“What did you observe from these Winter Soldiers?” He interrupts before they start fighting like children on a playground.

“They are both men and women,” Romanov starts, quietly. “Faces covered in masks, but Simons was able to unmask one of them before he was killed.”

“He looks eerily like Captain America’s best friend.” Barton puts in, and the other chime in their agreements at the statement.

Fury shakes his head minutely. What a time to find Captain America, and discover he’s still alive. He wonders if this Barnes look alike is a distant relative, because everyone knows Cap’s best friend died when he fell off the train. He ignores the little voice in the back of his mind asking What if…

Once phase two is ready to launch, he will convince the WSC about using some against Hydra. He knows they were meant to deal with extra-terrestrial threats, but there won’t be any threats to use them on if Hydra isn’t dealt with. Lately, the WSC has been talking about bringing back the Avengers Initiative to deal with Hydra, if only they can get more candidates for it.

He’s pulled out of his musings when Coulson barges into the conference room. “Sir, we have a code 13.”

He sighs, gets off his seat, and strides towards to the door cursing under his breath. There’s a car waiting for him outside already. The ride to where Rogers is being held is very short. He spots Rogers easily, standing in the middle of the road, looking like a deer caught in headlight.
“At ease, soldier.” He commands, coming up behind him. His words get Roger’s attention, and he spins suddenly to meet Fury. He looks so lost, and Fury almost sympathizes with him, but there’s work to be done and no room for emotions. “Look, I’m sorry about that little show back there, but we thought it best to break it to you slowly.”

“Break what?” Rogers asks, looking even more confused.

“You’ve been asleep Cap, for almost seventy years.” The look of devastation on his face almost moves something in Fury. “Are you going to be okay?” he asks. He doesn’t want to lose another asset. They can’t afford it.

“Yeah, yeah, I just—” He looks around again. “I had a date.”

Fury barely refrains from rolling his eye. A missed date is what he’s so lost about? And here Fury thought the obvious change and the thought that everything he knows is no more is what has him looking so devastated. *Wait till you find out your sacrifice accomplished exactly nothing.*

Chapter End Notes

I'm having a hard time deciding who I want on Tony's team. X-Men or Inhumans, so I'm leaving it up to you guys to decide. But whatever team you choose, please give a reason why they would have been absent during IW.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Not edited. My beta is on vacation. if anyone is interested in being my beta, please contact me.

We're in the Avengers' arc now, and it only took 11 chapters to get here!

I want to thank you all for helping me with my delima on Tony's future teammates. Your suggestions are all very valuable and informative. It is because of that, I've decided to go with both Inhumans and the X-Men.

Thor offers his hand to Volstagg to help him rise from where he had fallen during their spar on the training grounds. His friend grins at him as he accepts his hand and rises to his feet. “I see your aim has improved greatly since our last spar.”

Volstagg’s grin broadens even more. Hogun, Frandall and Sif come up to them, clapping both of them on their backs. “Aye, and I see you have not lost your skills.”

“It has been too long since I had a good spar with you, my friends.” Thor tells them, even though he feels a little guilty about it. Father has been keeping him busy since after his trials. He wants Thor to start taking an active role in the affairs of the realm. It tediously boring and leave little time for him to spend with his friends. He wonders if that has been father’s aim all along, but he shoves the thought out of his mind as soon as he thinks it.

“We are going for a hunt tonight,” Sif says to him, as he and his friends walk together to the hot springs to clean up. “You should join us.” She suggests, feigning for nonchalance. The Warriors three are watching him closely, not as successful as Sif in hiding the hopeful look in their eyes.

“I fear I will not be able to accompany you on your quest, I have duties I have to see to tomorrow.” He says, watching their faces fall in disappointment. It makes something hurt inside of him. He misses being together with his friends but there is little he can do with all the duties he has. To appease them, he adds. “Maybe when you return, we can all go on an adventure to Alfheim.”

They all brighten at the thought, and Thor breathes a sigh of relief. They regaled Thor with stories of their activities while washing off the sweat and grim from training. Thor has missed his friends terribly and he is glad to share this moment with them.

After washing, he goes off to his quarters, hoping he can get some time for himself before he has to go complete the task father has given him. He finds the tablet Loki had gifted him on his return from his sojourn in Midgard. It contains memories of his friends that Loki had collected for Thor to view in his leisure.

He presses the button at the side of the tablet to wake the screen up, before selecting a video to view. It is one he has seen a hundred times—he has seen all the files and memories in the tablet many times over—but he can never get tired of seeing it. The video is one of Lady Jane, Lady Darcy, Friend Anthony and Loki, along with a lady and another man Thor did not get the chance to meet while in Midgard. They were split in two teams and tossing a ball between them in a kind of game Thor has
It had come as a surprise to find out Loki knew Anthony, but thinking back on his meeting with Anthony, he should not have been so surprised. He was not as taken with Thor as Jane and her companion had been. He had knowledge Thor realized now that no one, who hasn’t come in contact with a being outside Midgard should have. He had been the one to gift Loki the tablet so Thor can see Jane again. It is the most thoughtful gift he has ever received from Loki, and it is not one he had ever expected.

Loki. His chest aches at the thought of his brother. Since discovering his true parentage during his reign as King of Asgard, while their father was in the Odin-sleep, Loki has not been the same and Thor can admit that he is to blame. He always thought Loki would be his chief adviser when he is crowned king. Loki has always been the diplomat between the two of them, the one with the head for politics. His decisions during his reign had shown that, but since he was relieved of his kingly duties, it is almost as though he has no interest in Asgard anymore. Loki has given in to his lust for adventures, much like he did when they were younger. He left Asgard at the first opportunity, and even after his return, he had not stayed long before his next adventure. It has been almost a year since he last saw his brother, and Thor misses him.

Thor wonders if it is because of the criticism he faced from the nobles for refusing to go to war with the Jotuns. Although not all members of the All-Father’s council or the warriors of Asgard had agreed with his actions, Loki had successfully saved Asgard from the brink of the war that would have plagued Asgard because of Thor’s temper and unwillingness to listen to reason. Mother told Thor the Frost Giants will be more cooperative because they would not want to lose the favour they gained in Loki’s sight by rising against Asgard, or risk the possible death and extinction if they break the peace treaty.

The video ends, and he plays the next one. It is one that involves just the Lady Jane. It is a message she recorded for him. After that one, a few more plays on. One of Darcy and Jane, one of Loki and Lady Pepper. Loki says Lady Pepper is unlike any woman Thor has ever met. Watching her interaction with the people around her, Thor believes him.

After a few videos, he decides to view the photographs. Most of them have been taken in jest, and they never fail to make Thor smile. It has been too long since he has seen such a happy expression on his brother. In recent times, Loki is often seen with a sneer or smirk on his face. He has not let himself smile with such abandon as he does with these mortals now, and the implication of that thought only shows Thor just how much he has failed his brother.

He is still going through the pictures when a knock is heard at his door. Beckoning the person in, he is greeted to the sight of one of the royal guards.

“The All-Father has called for your presence in the throne room.” The guard says. With a nod, Thor dismisses the guard. He puts the tablet away and changes into an appropriate attire before going to find out why his father has called for his presence. He is supposed to attend a meeting with the council, but that is not for another few hours. Father has stressed the need for Thor to pay more attention to how the realm is run, but he finds them tediously boring. He tries to make father proud, but politics has always been Loki’s strength, not his.

He enters the golden hall, which is empty save for the All-Father, who is on his throne. “All-Father,” He greets with a bow.

Father watches him for a moment for speaking. “The tesseract, a relic cast to Midgard for safe keeping has been discovered by enemies of Asgard.” Father tells him gravely. “I am sending you to Midgard to procure it. You will return it Asgard’s vaults for safe keeping.”
Thor’s mind is reeling as he tries to remember all he knows of the tesseract. He knows it is a relic with great power. It is why father felt casting it to Midgard would keep it out of the hands of anyone who would seek to use its power for evil. Midgardians are not so evolved that they would know how to wield its power and no one with enough understanding of it would think to go searching for it in Midgard. “Who is this enemy, and how did they know where to find it?” He asks.

He listens attentively as the All-Father tells him about the battle that lay ahead of him. When he is done, Thor nods.

“Yes, father. I will gather the warriors three and Lady—”

His father cuts him off before he is done. “You will go alone.” He declares in a voice that brooks no room for argument.

“Yes, All-Father.” With another bow, he leaves the room.

He returns to his quarters to get dressed in his battle armour before heading for the bifrost. Heimdall greets him with a nod when he shows up, before opening the bifrost for him. A moment later, he finds himself in the middle of a fight between two mortals and an alien being. He does not need to be told know he enemy is.

He watches as the alien throws one of the mortals, into a building that is already half destroyed, crushing the part of the building that wasn’t already in ruins. A few buildings close to it are in similar conditions. Thor briefly wondered how strong these mortals are. Another one tries to attack from behind but she suffers the same fate.

With the attention of all three fighters off him, and his presence mostly unacknowledged, Thor raises Mjolnir, calling on his thunder and strikes the being down before he can direct his attack at Thor. The being slumps to the ground, unconscious.

Immediately he starts towards the alien, just as they mortal man, dressed in what looks to be a uniform moves to attack him, but the lady stops the man from attacking him.

“You’re Thor,” She declares, giving him a once over. Her eyes lingers on Mjolnir. “The god of thunder.” She looks like she belongs with the people who arrested him and kept others away from Mjolnir when he was banished to Earth. SHIELD, Jane called them.

“There’s only one God, Nat.” The man says to her. “And I’m pretty sure he doesn’t dress like this.”

Thor takes a deep breath and reminds himself about what happened the last time he let his temper get the best of him. “I am, and who might you be?”

“Agent Romanov, from SHIELD.” She extends her hand in a handshake. He accepts it and does the same to the man. They are both bleeding, but his own injuries look worse. “This is Captain America.”

He nods. “I have come to take him”—he points towards the being—“back to Asgard, as soon as I find what he has stolen.” He tells her.

“Actually, we can’t let you have him. He stole from us first and killed some of our agents. We have to take him to the base.” Captain America tells him.

There are already people gathering on the streets, watching them. “The tesseract is not yours, and it is your work with it that has drawn him here. As soon as it is found, I will have return them both to Asgard, where he will be questioned and face the All-Father’s judgement.”
She gives him a placating smile. “Look, why don’t you come with us to our base? I’m sure we can make a plan on how to get the tesseract back and reach a compromise.”

It is not an unreasonable request, so Thor nods his consent.

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Tony is counting the seconds till he can leave the gala. He is exhausted and could use a good night’s sleep, but the ceremony is being held in his honor and the least he can do is stick it out until a reasonable departure time. If he is this exhausted with extremis, he doesn’t want to think about how he would feel without it. Right now, his fatigue doesn’t show on his face and he’s thankful for it.

Since the opening of Stark Tower, Tony feels like he is being pulled in a dozen different direction. With SI expanding her reach abroad and pitching clean energy to the world, a recent mission with the Iron Legions in Nigeria, Tony hasn’t had more than a few minutes to himself.

He thought retiring from the arms race means he wouldn’t have to go through nights like these, but apparently, the powers that be is very pleased with his work’s coming out as Iron Man and they’re giving him an award of excellence for it. It’s a very nice gesture, and if he wasn’t running on fumes or jetlagged, he would enjoy it more.

Right now, he just has to ignore the subtle hints about how much safer America would be if he were to resume arming her troops. Instead, he passes the time by going through the schematics for an arc reactor powered Starkjet. He already has a few cars powered by the arc reactor. A spacecraft would be a great idea, too. He'll pitch the idea to Pepper later.

When he gets called to collect his award and give a speech, he’s only too happy to because that means it’s almost time to leave. He is making his way to the stage to receive his award when JARVIS interrupts his thoughts.

“Sir, you have an incoming call from Director Fury.” JARVIS tells him. And Tony wants to be surprised, but he’s really not. He’s been expecting this call since JARVIS informed him that the tesseract had been stolen. The call is much later than he expected, but he thinks Fury may have been trying to convince himself he doesn’t need Iron Man.

“Is it that time yet?” He asks, just to be sure.

“Yes, Sir. Steve Rogers is already in Stuttgart, Germany with Agent Romanov.”

“Germany? Who is it?” He asks. He doubts Thanos would have gotten to Loki but he does not understand why this new guy would be in Germany. Loki, at least wanted the attention on him while his minions worked behind the scene. What could this guy’s reason be for going to Germany?

“He kidnapped Heinrich Schafer from Museum Gala in Stuttgart, presumably to access the vault of Iridium.” JARVIS says, but honestly, Tony has stopped paying attention to what he’s saying because he is busy going through a live feed of the guy amassing millions of dollars in property damage.

He goes through his award acceptance and speech without having a clue what he has said, but Pepper isn’t giving him the stink eye from her position in the crowd, so he thinks he must have done okay, at the very least.
The moment he steps off the podium, Pepper is on him, concern clear as day on her beautiful face. “Tony, what’s going on? Are you okay?”

Pepper has been even more vigilant about his well being, ever since she found out the technopathy was a surprise addition from extrems. Dr Cho has gone run several tests on him— his core temperature is a couple degrees higher than average but not high enough cause for concern or to attract attention, his healing has nothing on most enhanced individuals he has met but it’s faster than baseline humans. His reflexes on the other hand, are quicker, which is a nice addition.

“We’ve got trouble. I have to go.” He tells her while sending an update of the situation he’s walking into to her phone.

She asks him a few questions and reminds him to be careful while in SHIELD’s facilities, but otherwise, she lets him leave without a fuss. Promising to make his excuses for him.

During the flight to Germany, JARVIS informs him of Thor’s presence and the subsequent capture of their alien guest, so he changes his course and heads for the helicarrier. The place is brimming with activity when he gets there. He feels woefully overdressed in his black tux, but it’s not like he had the chance to go home and change.

Coulson leads him into the conference room where Thor, Romanov, Rogers and Bruce are talking about how to get the cube back. Bruce is on the other side of the conference table, Rogers and Romanov are sited. Rogers looks like he’s just been through a blender. Tony wonders how long the fight lasted for him to look this battered. Thor is closer to the entrance of the room.

“Friend Anthony!” Thor exclaims as Tony enters the conference room, gathering Tony in a hug that leaves his feet dangling in the air. He's a little embarrassed, but Thor is easily the biggest person in this room right now, so no one can blame him for being short. “The son of Coul told me you would be here.”

“Hey, Point Break. It’s good to see you, too.” He greets when Thor lets him go. “You look good. You came alone?” He really does. Nothing like the Thor he met in New Mexico or the one that returned to Earth after the fall of Asgard.

“Aye. My brother is on an adventure and the All-Father sent me to retrieve the tesseract.”

“Sounds like him.” Tony muses.

“I see our time apart has been kind to you, too.” He observes, giving Tony a once over. “Thank you for your gifts.”

“Happy to help, Sparky.” He claps Tony on the back again, still looking so happy to see him. This is probably the happiest Thor has ever been to see him.

The rest of the room is watching them, the expressions on their faces ranging from baffled to incredulous.

“So, what were you guys talking about?” He asks the room, redirecting their attention.

“Iridium,” Bruce speaks up. “What do they need the iridium for?”

“It’s a stabilizing agent. It means the portal won’t collapse on itself like it did at SHIELD.” He removes his bow tie, and tucks it into his pocket. “Also, it will stay open as wide and stay open as long as he wants.” When he’s done, he walks up to Bruce. “It’s nice to meet you, Dr Banner. Your work on anti-electron collision is unparalleled and I’m a huge fan of how you turn into an enormous
green rage monster.”

He resists the urge to coo at the face Bruce makes. He knows right now, Bruce doesn’t know how to deal with someone who isn’t afraid of the Hulk or isn’t trying to use him, so he just smiles in return. After a few more posturing from Fury, he and Bruce return to the lab Fury has prepared to track down the tesseract.

He’s trying to convince Bruce to come join him after the invasion, there’s no way he’s leaving Bruce to SHIELD when he knows this is the first step before Fury solidifies the Avengers’ Initiative. He’s repeating his pattern of what he knows worked the first time, because why mess with a good thing? Just as he pierces Bruce, Rogers comes stumping in.

“Hey, are you nuts?” Rogers asks. Despite his best efforts to ignore the man, Rogers continues. “Is everything a joke to you?”

“Funny things are.”

“Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn’t funny.” He tells Tony in a scolding voice, then turns to Bruce. “No offense.”

“No offense.”

“He draws himself up and squares his shoulders. “Director Fury told me you have my shield in your possession.”

“Yes, the one your father made for me during the war.”

“Do you have any documentation, maybe a receipt of purchase or anything to show that he transferred the ownership of the shield to you?” Tony asks him in what would be described as a calm voice.

He’s taken on the mulish look that people who know him would see as determination. “Your father gave me the shield.”

“When he gave it to you, did he transfer its ownership to you, or did he lend it to you for the war?”

From the corner of his eyes, he can see Bruce trying to make himself smaller where he’s scanning the dreadful sceptre.

Tony is glad for the upgraded arc reactor. It’s less invasive and he’ll be protected from the power of the mind stone. He could do without their guest using the glowstick of destiny on him.

“Your shield?” Tony asks, to be sure he heard properly.

“Your father gave me the shield.”

“Nice argument there, buddy.” With that, he dismisses the guy’s presence and turns back to the work at hand. He hasn’t seen the stupid shield since his return to the past. He’ll have to check for it when he gets home.

He hears, more than sees Rogers leave the room.

He’s still trying to sway Bruce to his side, when Fury walks in with Thor on his heels. “What are you doing Mr Stark?”
Tony smirks, pulling up the schematics for the phase two weapons without touching the computer. “I’ve kind of been wondering the same thing, Nicky.”

“You’re supposed to be locating the tesseract.”

“We are,” Banner interrupts, just as the Romanov and Rogers come into the room. “The model’s locked and we’re sweeping for the signature now. When we get a hit, we’ll have the location within half a mile.”

Fury nods and turns to Romanov. “Anything?”

She shakes her head. “He didn’t even acknowledge my presence.”

“Has he said anything to anyone since he was brought here?” Rogers asks.

There’s no telling what this guy’s goal is. At least with Loki, it was easier to decipher. Also, being an unwilling participant helped. But this one, Tony knows, is about as willing as they come. Tony just doesn’t understand why he’s sitting prettily in a glass cage in SHIELD’s custody when he can get out anytime he wishes.

“Not a word,” Fury says. “Not even to Thor.”

“So Nicky, want to tell us. What is phase two?”

“That is none of your concern, Stark.”

“You brought me here, you made it my concern.” Tony tells him.

Banner takes a look at the screen Tony pulled up and turns to Romanov. “Did you know about this?” He asks, looking a little green at the edges.

“You need to calm down, Dr Banner.” She tells him.

“I’d like to know why SHIELD is making weapons of mass destruction.” He declares.

Rogers shakes his head, with his patented disappointed-in-you face. “I was wrong, director, the world hasn’t changed a bit.”

“Because of him,” He says pointing at Thor. “Last year we had visitors from another planet. Aliens dropping out of the sky on a whim like. We realised we were not alone in the universe.”

“My people want nothing but peace with your planet.” Thor argues.

“But you’re not the only people out there, are you? You’re not the only threat out there. It’s not the first time we’ve encountered aliens. The world’s filling up with people that can’t be matched. That can’t be controlled.” Fury isn’t staring at him, but something about the way he is talking makes Tony feel like the statement is directed at him.

“Your work with the tesseract is what drew him here. It is a signal to all the realms that the Earth is ready for a higher form of war.”

“A higher form of war?” Rogers asks. Tony notices that Romanov is conveniently silent during it all. She hasn’t made eye contact with him since his arrival.

“You forced our hand, we had to come up with—”
“A nuclear deterrent? Because that always calms everything right down.” Tony interrupts, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Remind me again how you made your fortune?” Fury says, turning to him.

“Are we talking about the fortune that SHIELD was founded with, or the one that has been funding it since then?”

“Don't act like you don't do it to make yourself feel better.” Steve tells him. “I’ve seen the footage, the only thing you fight for is yourself. You may not be a threat but you need to stop pretending to be a hero.”

“A hero? Like you? You’re a laboratory experiment, Rogers. Everything special about you came out of a bottle. I could make a dozen of you in my lab if I wanted to.” He tells him in the most condescending tone of voice he can muster. “Can you say you know who you fight for? Besides yourself, at least. As of now, you’re Fury’s poppet. He says jump and you ask how high.” He tells Rogers with a smirk, spreading his hands. “You don’t see any strings on me.”

He thinks Rogers is going to hit him, but the man only tightens his fist. “Yeah? That's why you're so busy giving your audience a show, while the rest of us deal with the real battle. Big man in a suit of armour. Take that off and what are you?”

“Tony fucking Stark.” He tells him. “You should look up what that means some time.” With that, he walks out of the room.

“Where’re you going, Stark?” Fury queries.

“To see our guest.” He’ll try his luck at retrieving any kind of information from him. It beats letting Rogers and SHIELD rile him up. At least, the sooner they’re done here, the sooner he can leave this place. He hears the sound of footsteps behind him as he goes, but doesn’t turn around to see who’s following.

He reaches the detention level, where their guest is being held. Just as he walks up to the glass cage Fury as stashed him in, he turns around and Tony is greeted with a big ugly grin that makes his face look even creepier than he already does.

Ebony Maw stalks forward, looking very much like a predator on the prowl. For a moment, Tony feels like the one in the cage, rather than the creepy squidward that has decided to champion Thanos’ plan.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I still haven't mastered a fight scene. Hope this isn't very terrible. I may have made Ebony Maw too strong, or maybe just a worthy opponent.

Beta'd by the lovely Thisisarealtagwhy

Bruce Banner knows the moment Agent Romanov approaches him with an order from SHIELD, it can only mean trouble. He has learned the hard way that nothing good ever comes out of working on a secret project for a government organization, especially one with little to no oversight. It’s too bad that no one cares what he wants though, not when SHIELD is prepared to do whatever it will take to get him to cooperate. He has absolutely no desire to endanger the lives of the people who have been his neighbours for the past year.

Since his accident and subsequent transformation, he has gone from living a simple boring life to being on the run. From a highly respected scientist to a dangerous monster being hunted down by corrupt politicians and secret government organisation, both of whom seek to use him or his new alternate identity for their own gain. At least SHIELD’s need of him is to run an experiment to find an artefact they’ve been using for nefarious purposes, and not for him to be experimented on; which is already leagues better than what would become of him if Ross succeeds on getting his hands on him.

Still, being on the helicarrier with other exceptional individuals is an experience to be had. Apparently, Viking gods don’t only exist in myths and folklore. Captain America isn’t just a guy who died to save the world almost a century ago, who lives on in comic books and the WW2 section of the museum. And, Iron Man isn’t just a rich guy that you see on television, or someone you hope will come save you when something bad is happening. Being in their presence, Bruce feels so far out of his league, he’s wondering why Fury ever felt the need to call him in.

He knows why, of course. Even if he had purposefully buried his head under the biggest rock he could find to avoid attracting the wrong attention, he is still at the top of his field for a reason. Five minutes on the helicarrier with Tony Stark has made him understand there is no love lost between SHIELD and Stark. From what he has seen of SHIELD, Stark has every reason to be wary of them.

Before meeting the man, Banner has never met anyone so accepting of him or the other guy, who looked at him and did not immediately see a monster. Not only has Stark accepted him as a person and a scientist, he accepted the other guy too and encouraged Bruce to see the silver lining in his situation.

Sure, he thinks, it’s easy for him. People dream of meeting Iron Man, when they’re in trouble, they pray Iron Man will swoop in and save them, and when Stark doesn’t feel like being Iron Man, he can take off his suit just as easily as he puts it on. He can control the shrapnel in his chest, and his clothes hide any evidence of the arc reactor in his chest whenever he leaves his house. It’s not the same thing as living with the other guy.

But, despite Bruce’s thoughts and opinions on the issue, the other guy has become enamoured with Stark. He likes that Stark can’t stay still for more than a moment, even when Bruce himself finds it
unsettling. He has never met anyone so accepting of him, not even Bruce himself, and being in Stark’s presence is the first time Bruce has come close to feeling this calm without meditation.

During the argument among them about SHIELD’s work with the tesseract, Bruce realises Fury is playing a dangerous game by bringing them together. A special mixture of people, exceptional as they are, creates chaos when put together. With Captain America trying to bend everyone to his will, Romanov and Fury manipulating the situation to fit their purposes, Thor’s ignorance about humanity, (with Stark being the exception, of course) and Stark himself having zero tolerance for all of their antics, Bruce knows putting them together is a recipe for disaster and it’s only a matter of time before everything blows up in Fury’s face.

“Now I see why you didn’t want him,” Rogers tells Fury in the wake of Stark’s departure from the room. “Are you sure it’s wise to let him talk to the alien alone?”

Fury shakes his head. “He’s out of control, but if there’s a chance he can get anything out of him, we’ll have to take it.”

The other guy has been restless since the argument started among them, Tony’s absence has only served to increase his anxiousness. Bruce tries to make himself smaller to go unnoticed, but the movement attracts Cap’s attention like he expects Hulk to come out at any moment. Romanov is pretending to be busy with the systems, while she watches him from the corner of her eyes.

Before Bruce can use Stark as an excuse to leave the room, Thor speaks up. “I thought humans were more evolved than this and yet you treat your champions with such mistrust.” Thor tells Fury, disgust clear on his features. With that, Thor walks out of the room, not giving them a chance to reply.

Bruce notices Fury and Romanov share a look between them, before he turns his attention back to the sceptre. The sooner they find the tesseract, the sooner he can be out of here. At least, until SHIELD has need for him again. He takes a moment to think about Stark’s offer to join him at Stark Tower after everything is over. The man seems to have SHIELD by their balls, and the other guy already likes him. It is a tempting offer, but one accident and there’s no telling what will happen. The world will crucify him if he is somehow responsible for hurting Tony Stark.

He’s still deep in thought when Fury gets an alert. “Sir, the prisoner is engaging Stark.” Comes an urgent voice from the coms.

All of them, including Bruce himself, rush to the control room to see what is going on. Bruce can’t imagine how Stark could have gotten the alien to speak to him, when getting him to talk has been like drawing blood from a rock.

From the monitors, each one showing a different angle of the room, they see Stark standing a few feet away from the glass cage holding their prisoner, staring at the alien with a baffled expression.

“What’s happened since he got in?” Fury asks, not taking his eyes off the monitor.

“I think he may have been the target all along. He addressed Stark by name.” Agent Coulson speaks up. Bruce notices Thor standing before one of the monitors too.

“You know me?” Stark asks.

The alien smiles down on him from his glass cage. “Hear me, and rejoice. I bring you good tidings.”

The guy’s voice sounds like what Bruce imagines the heralds of the messages of a king to his people in the middle ages. Certainly seems like that’s this guy’s job.
Stark rolls his eyes at the spiel. “I doubt that.”

Bruce is inclined to agree. Nothing good can ever come from someone who has gone to such violent lengths to gain a person’s attention.

He continues on like Tony hadn’t spoken at all. “You have found favour in the sight of the great Titan.” He looks down at Tony, like he expects him to be thankful. “It is rare that a creature as unimpressive and insipid as your kind would attract the attention of my lord, and for that he has sent me to you.”

“Really? All of this because some guy likes me? I mean, don’t get me wrong. Between my devastatingly good looks, the brains and well, all of this—” he gestures to his body, “—I get love declarations every day but don’t you think this is going overboard?”

“You have been set aside to receive the great honor of serving the great Titan in his quest to save the world. Your meaningless life now has a purpose, you should be glad.”

“And people call me a drama queen.” Stark sighs dramatically. “Whatever I was doing with my life until this moment, I already have a purpose. You can tell your lord I said to get lost.”

The prisoner takes another step forward. “You call fighting for a lost cause a purpose?”

“It beats being a slave for your titan, Squidward.” Bruce feels the huff of amusement from the other guy at Tony's nickname for the prisoner. Squidward. How very fitting.

“Your chattering exhausts me.” Squidward’s sigh is longsuffering. Bruce ignores the snort and the murmur from the person beside him in other to hear what the alien is saying. “The great titan is kind to his children and all who serve him faithfully. He has judged you worthy of his grace and it is his will that you be exalted above any mortal who has ever lived.”

Beside him, Fury turns to Thor. “Do you know this great titan he keeps mentioning?”

Thor shakes his head. “He is not of any world known.”

The worst part of all this, Bruce thinks, is that their prisoner doesn't sound bitter, angry, or even crazy. He doesn't act like someone on a warpath. He is sure of himself. It's scary, because this is someone who believes in his mission and will do whatever it takes to succeed.

“You guy wouldn’t know kindness if it smacked him in the face with a billboard with ‘I am kindness’ written across it. And in case you haven’t noticed, seeing as you’re not from around here, I’m already up there among the greatest ever lived.” During his speech, Tony has stepped closer to the cage now. He and the alien are both staring each other in the eyes.

“So why don’t you tell me, Squidward, if I’m your reason for being here, why are you trying to open a portal? You obviously know who I am, you could have grabbed me off the street at any time and taken me to your lord. In fact, you won’t be the first to use that method. It’s been happening on and off since I was a child. Got a souvenir after the last catch and grab.” He finishes, tapping the arc reactor in his chest.

“Your reason is to save your planet and ease your burden.” The prisoner answers, like it’s the simplest thing in the world.

“Excuse me?” Stark, himself, seems confused by the answer. “How is inviting a horde of hostile alien army going to save my planet?”
“I have come to offer the people salvation. To save them and help them offer their sacrifice towards balancing the universal scales.” Squidward says, walking about the cage. “You were named Merchant of Death for the balance you brought to your world. You have accomplished what no being has ever dared, but you let the small minds around you keep you from fulfilling your destiny.”

Stark flinches at the mention of the former nickname the media had given him during his days as a weapons contractor, his face swiftly shifts through a series of emotions too fast for Bruce to decipher when the alien continued talking. “What crazy notions are you going on about?”

“Typical Stark.” A female voice beside Bruce says, but he’s too busy watching the exchange on the screen to pay attention to who the voice might belong to. “Fishing for compliments when he should be getting information.”

Bruce feels the other guy bristle within him at the insult and he turns towards the direction of the voice. How ungrateful can they be towards a guy who is obviously risking his life to get them the information no one could get? Bruce would be running in the other direction if he knew some crazy alien wants to kidnap him, not engage the alien. He can see now why Tony has no love for SHIELD.

“Get away from me,” He commands, and he can hear a hint of the other guy in his voice.

It’s the female agent who’s been shadowing Fury since he arrived on the helicarrier. Hill, or something like that, she moves to a different monitor immediately. Some of the other agents shift like they are going to pull out their weapons, but Bruce ignores them in favour of focusing on the screen before him. No one says anything.

“You are a mortal who harnessed the light of a star and put it in your heart to prevent you from dying. At the mention of the arc reactor, Bruce pushes himself off the seat he’s been occupying to pace the room and calm the other guy, all the while he keeps his eyes fixed on the closest monitor. He did not like that Tony is down there alone with the prisoner.

Squidward stalks forward a couple of steps and leans forward towards Tony, lips stretched in a sinister smile and lowers his voice like he’s sharing a secret but the microphones in the cage pick up the sound clearly. “You, who stole the victory from the Great Titan, not once but twice. And yet, you let yourself be swayed by these animals you surround yourself with. You are burdened with a glorious purpose, and I am here to help you achieve it.”

“Ah, so he sent you here to— how did you put it again — save me? You must be the disposable one, then. I mean, you did just recite my resume. Why else would he send you after me, instead of coming at me himself?” Tony’s voice is rising in anger as he speaks and he has stepped back from the cage.

“While Barton was reading my Wikipedia page to you, did he also tell you what happened to the last group of people who tried to recruit me to their cause? I hope he did, because I want you to know exactly what’s going to happen to you and that army of yours if they get through. So, if you know what’s good for you, I’d suggest you pack up and leave now, while you still can.”

Bruce, and probably everyone around him can feel the shift in the air as their prisoner straightens and crosses his hands in front of him. “You would defend these people against me? These liars and traitors who would sooner betray you to suit their plans, who seek you to use you until you have no more worth to them, than to fulfil your destiny?”

He moves his hands and immediately, warning signals start blaring from one side of the room, alerting attention to the cage. Thor lets out what he guesses is a curse word in whatever language they speak in Asgard, and rushes out of the room, presumably towards the detention level where
Tony and their guest is, with Captain America a few steps behind him. Bruce wants to go, but the other guy’s presence may cause more harm than good in this situation, especially in such a confined space. He’ll watch to see if Thor and Cap can’t handle it before joining.

“My destiny,” Tony is saying when Bruce turns his attention to the monitor. “If any such thing exists is to defend the planet from crazy megalomaniacs like you and your master. And I’m going to enjoy making an example of you, so that anyone who wishes to follow in your steps will know exactly what’s waiting for them on this side.”

As Tony speaks, he unbuttons the first couple of buttons on his dress shirt-- his jacket had been discarded earlier when he and Bruce were working to locate the tesseract--he taps the arc reactor on his chest and his armor unfolds to wrap him. Bruce can hear some of the SHIELD agents around him gasping as the armor unfolds but he ignores them.

Just as the door opens to let Thor and Cap in, the cage shatters, sending glass shards everywhere. Their quick reflexes and thick skin come in handy to protect them as they attack in tandem.

The alien, throws Cap against the monitor on the side of the room. He must have hit something important, because what is left of the cage is suddenly ejected from the helicarrier. The alien dodges a blast from Iron Man as a wave of his hand sends Cap flying off the carrier through the hole he just created.

Iron Man sends a blast at him, just as Thor throws his hammer at him, both attacking him together, while trying to subdue him.

Beside him, Fury is barking out orders to his agents for someone to rescue Cap before he hits the ground. The entire place is rowdy with activity. Bruce is still in front of the monitor, watching the situation to see if he is needed.

This guy is obviously using magic and not letting anyone get close enough to hit. He's taking apart the room and using everything in it as a weapon. Both of their long range fighters are already down there engaging him. Bruce doesn’t want to think about what it would mean if they can’t subdue him.

He is ripping the room apart, using everything in it as a weapon to attack Thor and Iron Man. Squidward ducks as Thor throws his hammer again, ripping the rails apart and hitting Iron Man as he sends another blast at him.

With a wave of his hand, Iron Man goes flying in against the wall and drops to the ground.

As he’s distracted, Thor throws his hammer at the alien again. He gets a hit but it’s only barely and the alien bounces back fast. After throwing Thor around a few times, he rips another line of railing, wrapping it around Thor, and tosses him to a side of the room.

Just then, Coulson rushes into the room carrying one of the phase two prototype guns Bruce saw in SHIELD’s files earlier. He fires a shot at the alien, but it has little impact its target. Absently, Bruce reminds himself that it's an untested prototype. In retaliation, he send shards of glass flying towards Coulson. Coulson moves to get out of the way, but his reflexes are not as quick as that of a super soldier or a god. A shard gets lodged in his throat, another in his left eye. He drops to ground immediately, like a puppet with his strings cut off.

The alien approaches Iron Man’s still form that has yet to rise from the ground. “As impressive as you are, your powers are inconsequential to mine.” He says, leaning over his prone form. Thor is trying to get out of his bonds and Bruce can feel his control on the other guy snap while the people around him try to calm him. “In all the years I have served Thanos, not once have I failed him. If I
return to him without your irritating person, there will be consequences.”

Just as he's about to lose himself to the transformation, a new voice speaks out from inside the room.

“Who says you’ll go back to him?” An accented voice asks. Immediately, there’s a blast of green energy, causing the alien to stumble a few steps backwards. A tall man, with dark hair as long as Thor’s, dressed in what looks like a green body armour appears inside the room. “Anthony is mine to protect. If Thanos wants him, he’s welcome to go through me.”

With that, another blast of green energy hits the alien, and he falls off the hole in the helicarrier.

There is a moment of calm, where everyone around Bruce is shocked into silence, and then all hell is let loose.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Late update. I forgot to inform you guys I had exams last week.

Thisisarealtagwhy is amazing! Thank you for your help with this chapter.

Loki’s appearance sends a flood of relief down Thor’s body. He is very happy to see his brother, and it is not just because Loki has come to his aid in battle, once again. For a moment, when he was bound and their prisoner had killed the son of Coul, Thor had panicked when he thought the prisoner may succeed in his ploys to kidnap Anthony for his lord’s purpose. Explaining to Loki that he failed to protect his mortal friend from coming to harm is not a conversation Thor wishes to have with his brother, for Loki may never forgive him for it.

He works his way out of his bonds to free himself. Just as Loki steps over Coulson’s prone form and the pieces of metal scattered about the room to get to Anthony, Director Fury comes rushing into the room with some SHIELD agents on his heel. Some of them have their weapons drawn and trained on Loki, while others attend to Agent Coulson. Thor doubts Loki is even aware of anyone else in the room, besides the armoured man that has yet to rise from the ground.

Loki, for his part ignores them and continues in his task. He turns Anthony around, gives him a once over just as Thor comes up beside him. The armour looks like it has suffered little damage, and he can hear Anthony’s faint heartbeat when he listens closely, but no other sound coming from him besides that.

“You want to tell me who the fuck you are and give me one reason why I shouldn’t blow to kingdom come?” Fury’s voice is serious but Loki pays no heed to him or the guns pointed at him. Instead, he continues in his task of inspecting the armour. Thor does not know what exactly he is doing, and he has many questions for Loki, but experience has taught him this may not be the best time to ask them, not when Loki is so obviously concerned with Anthony’s wellbeing, or when they have an audience.

“This is my brother,” Thor answers in his stead. “Prince Loki, of Asgard.” He stresses, in case they did not understand the implication of being Thor’s brother. Thor sees the moment realisation dawns on them. Most of the agents put their weapons aside and make way for Loki as he carries Anthony through, but Fury stands his ground.

“What is he doing?” Fury asks Thor with a nod in Loki’s direction.

Thor stands and shrugs. “It appears he is checking on Friend Anthony's wellbeing.”

“We have people for that,” Fury says. He waves towards some of the agents beside him. They tuck their weapons and proceed towards Loki. It is only when they are directly in front of his brother that he acknowledges them.

Loki does not say a word, only raises a brow at them in question.

“We can get him out of the armour.” One of the brave agents says, while the others shift a little. He
saw Loki during when he was king regent, these agents are right to be afraid. He does not envy these agents at all.

“We have doctors to run a proper check-up on him once the armour is out of the way.” Fury adds.

Loki looks between Fury and the agents before turning his attention back to Fury. “Anyone who lays a hand on him will find themselves a hand short.” Loki tells him in a clear voice. He looks back at the agents again to make sure his message has been received.

“What the fuck?” Fury explodes, taking a menacing step forward. “I don’t give a fuck who you are, you do not come to my planet, hold one of my people hostage and threaten my agents.”

Thor tightens his grip on Mjolnir, ready to defend his brother if he has to. All that he has seen of SHIELD leaves little to be desired. If Loki will not leave the mortal in their care, it’s because he knows they cannot be trusted to act in his best interest.

“One of your people?” Loki scoffs. He picks Anthony off the ground before turning his attention back to Fury again. “Nothing about you says you can be trusted with Anthony’s health.”

“I know you don’t know who to trust right now, but we’re all looking out for Stark. We don’t know what the alien did to him and you’re wasting time.”

His brother tells Fury before turning to Thor. “How familiar are you with the layout of this flying fortress?”

Thor shakes his head. “I’m not familiar with it, brother.”

“I can show you to the medical station.” Agent Romanov offers, stepping into view with hunched shoulders. “It’s on the next floor.”

Loki gives her an inquisitive look before nodding. “And who are you?” The question is directed at Banner.

“I’m Dr Bruce Banner,” He answers, voice tinged with confusion. “I was working with Dr Stark to locate the tesseract.”

“You have experience treating mortal ailments, yes?”

“I- Uhh, yes.”

Loki nods and motions for Romanov to lead the way and for Bruce to follow. One other agent follow them, but Thor knows it is not because they suddenly trust Loki. He knows they have agents everywhere, waiting to step in when needed.

When they get to the medical station, Loki places Anthony on the bed. He looks to Banner. Loki has locked Romanov and her colleague outside the room. Thor knows they are watching them from the cameras but as long as they keep their distance, Loki is fine. “I don’t suppose you have a phone on you?” He asks.

Banner looks confused for a moment before reaching inside his pocket to pull out a phone and hands it over to Loki. Loki turns the phone in his hand to inspect it before he flips it open. He puts in a few digits and presses the phone to his ear.

Thor listens to him inform a woman called Pepper—he guesses it must be the same Pepper from the tablet Loki had gifted him after his trip to Midgard— about what has happened to Friend Anthony.
He can hear the faint sound of the woman’s voice as she tells Loki she wants to come see Tony for herself and make sure that he is okay, but he convinces her not to. Instead, he asks her to call the armour off. A few minutes after Loki ends the call, the armour recedes, leaving only the light in Anthony’s chest.

“You want me to check him and make sure he’s okay?” Banner offers, but Loki shakes his head.

“There is little you can do against seidr.” At Banner’s confused expression, he explains. “Ebony Maw knocked him out with magic. He must have known it is the only way he can take Anthony.”

Banner shifts the weight of his body from one foot to the other before he speaks again. “I realised at some point during the battle that he may have been using magic during the fight, but it did not register to me that magic could be real.”

Thor knows having others look down on him for his seidr is a touchy subject for Loki. A big part of it is his fault, it is one of the ways he has failed his brother, but he will not have a little mortal disrespect his brother. However, before he can defend Loki’s honor, his brother speaks up for himself.

“You are a very intelligent man who turns into a mindless beast when you lose control of yourself, but you doubt the existence of magic?”

Banner’s cheeks are red with embarrassment. “Sorry.” He apologises, but Loki waves his concern away, after which he takes his leave.

“How are you here?” Thor asks Loki when they are alone with Anthony’s unconscious form.

Loki spares him a glance before continuing in his task. Thor thinks he is weaving a spell to undo what the being—Ebony Maw - done to put Anthony under. “Words travel.” He says simply before he continues. “I got word of an attack on Midgard by the Mad Titan. There is no way Anthony would not be involved in it and I came to offer my assistance, I just did not expect to find you here.”

Thor nodded. “Father sent me to return the tesseract to Asgard’s vaults.” He makes sure to keep his voice free of any accusations before he continues. “You have a lot of knowledge about Maw and the lord he serves.”

Loki levels him with a hard look, and Thor wishes he can take the words back. “Are you questioning my involvement in this?”

“Brother, you mistake me--”

“Do I?” His brother challenges. “You have always been willing to blame me every time something goes wrong. What is different this time?”

Thor feels shame at the truth in Loki's words. Loki has always been one for mischief, and his pranks are not always harmless but Thor is not without blame himself. Had he not let the warriors three and Sif convince him Loki had let the Frost Giants into Asgard not long ago? He had rushed back to home to question Loki’s loyalty to Asgard despite his banishment, letting his temper get the best of him despite being the reason for his banishment.

He has learned the error of his ways, but Loki would not know that because he has hardly spent any time in Asgard since he was relieved of his position as regent. He wonders if Loki does not feel safe in their home anymore since he discovered his true heritage, or because he does not feel like he has a place in their family. Thor hopes it is neither. He wants to show his brother he has learned from his mistakes.
“I know you have no part in this, brother. I wish only that you will share your knowledge so we can decide together how best to go about facing them in the next battle.”

Loki watches him for any sign of dubiousness before he turns his attention back to Anthony. Just when Thor thinks he will not answer, he speaks up. “From what I have gathered about his lord, he thinks the universe is overpopulated and considers it his duty to restore balance to it. It is also convenient that Lady Death is the object of his affections.

“Bringing all six infinity stones together will make achieving that goal easier, but until he can assemble them, he goes to different planets, wiping out entire civilizations to lay the corpses on her altar hoping to receive her favour while he is at it. I don't know what he stands to gain by taking Anthony.”

Loki’s words only raise more questions in his mind and he would ask, but he keeps quiet for now as his brother concentrates on waking the mortal. A few more hand gestures, and friend Anthony gasps awake. He takes a look around the room, his eyes landing on Thor for a moment before he glances at Loki.

“Please tell me I'm still on Earth,” He pleads.

“Whatever gave you that idea?” Loki asks, but Thor can tell it is a jest.

“Because I doubt Thanos brought an ensemble of pretty Norse gods just to wake me up.”

“You can rest easy, Anthony.” Thor reassures with a chuckle. “You are still on Earth.”

“All you needed to wake up was a kiss from Thor,” his brother says, throwing a wink at the mortal. “He was happy to lend a pair of lips.”

“A kiss from a real life prince to save me from the wizard’s curse,” Anthony swoons theatrically as he relaxes back on the bed. It is clear now why he gets along so well with his brother. “Does that make me a real life Sleeping Beauty or is it Snow White?”

Loki scoffs before Thor can answer. “Don’t be absurd, you are not that beautiful.”

*****

“Agent Coulson is dead.” Fury announces to all of them.

They are seated in the conference room where they have gathered again to regroup and plan for the next step. Unlike his past life where it had only been him and Rogers present after Barton’s attack and Loki’s escape, they are all present this time.

Tony had been surprised to find out big, mean and green hadn’t come out to play, but thinking back at it now, Loki’s plan had been to use the Hulk as a distraction, while Maw just wanted to take Tony. He feels a shiver run down his spine at the thought. He doesn't know why it never occurred to him that Maw could do that. He is here to kidnap Tony after all, asking nicely was never going to work. It was not like in Strange’s case where he wanted to torture him till Strange gave up the time stone.

After Loki had made sure Maw’s spell had no lasting effect on him, Bruce had been called to check him again. He hadn't even thought about protesting. The parallels between Ebony Maw and Wanda's
attacks brought back memories he thought he had gotten over.

He shakes his head to focus back on the conversation at hand. “They called it,” Fury is saying when he tunes back in.

Tony barely resists rolling his eyes. He looks about the room to see the reaction of everyone, the atmosphere in the room is solemn. Tony guesses it is to be expected. They all didn’t know the man, not even Tony with his knowledge of the future but a life has been lost and that is never a good thing.

Tony had been very sad when he found out the first time, especially after he realised Coulson was Pepper’s friend and he would have to be the one to give her the news. Looking back at it now, he knew Coulson had been using Pepper to get to him. They knew how much her opinion meant to him and took full advantage of it while Tony played well into their hands by lying to Pepper about what was going on with him.

It is disconcerting because one of the things JARVIS found during his information gathering before he turned back the hands of time is proof of Phillip Coulson’s wellbeing. Coulson had been continuing SHIELD after Rogers and Romanov turned everything on its head, while he took Hill and the burned agents he could find into his company, after they lied to him about Fury’s death.

Lying about death must be something that happens every other week in SHIELD, or maybe it’s just lying in general. He’s still waiting for Fury to call him to update him on his finding about his parents’ murder. Tony can’t decide if he hasn’t called because he hasn’t discovered that they were assassinated or because he is waiting for a time the information will be make for a valuable exchange.

With this second chance to do things right, he’s been very careful not to repeat his mistakes. Since he cut ties with SHIELD and informed Pepper what they have been up to, she hasn’t been interested in a friendship with the man. It goes to show why people believe sharing is caring. Informing his best friends about what he is going through has made his life easier. If only he can tell them about where he’s been. Hopefully, when he does, they won’t have him committed.

“These were in Coulson’s jacket.” Fury continues, fingering a pack of vintage Captain America card collection covered in blood. “Guess he never did get you to sign them.” he throws the cards at Rogers, who looks rather well for someone who had only been a few minutes away from being a super soldier pancake on the ground after Maw through him out. The man has a stubborn set to his jaw, as he sits up straight in his seat, not looking at anyone or anything in particular.

Thor picks up one of the cards to examine it.

Loki takes one look at Fury before turning to Tony with an amusing quirk to his lips. He got a summary of the posturing between them earlier, but Fury seems to be more amicable to Loki’s presence in the helicarrier now. Tony wonders what the god of lies sees when he looks at Fury while the man goes on his spiel about losing Coulson. Tony isn’t interested. He knows what this is, a sales pitch to bring back the Avengers’ Initiative. He wonders how badly Fury wants Loki and Thor on his side.

“… Phil Coulson died still believing in that idea.” Fury says with a pointed glance at Rogers. “In heroes.”

“Let me guess,” Loki interrupts. “You want us to be a part of this initiative?” He asks with a quirk to his lips, almost like he finds the whole thing very funny.
Fury stops in his tracks where he has been walking about the room to spare Loki a glance. “Well, it’s an old fashioned notion.”

“I think what we should be focused on right now is how to locate the tesseract.” Banner interjects, looking very uncomfortable. “We’ve lost the only way to locate the cube, along with our only leverage. All the preparation for battle will be no good if we can’t anticipate where he’s using the cube fast enough.”

“Stark, do you have any idea where he could be staging his attack?” Rogers asks, and the entire room, along with Hill who is standing to the side, turns to him.

Tony shrugs. “You heard my conversation with him, why would I have more information on him than you?” He questions and he sounds a little defensive, even to himself. It's disconcerting because Maw could stage his attack anywhere in the world, as long as he is guaranteed a high body count and Tony presence, which is almost anywhere in the world. Loki had handed them their victory on a silver platter last time, but Maw has a different agenda.

“What can you tell us about this guy?” Fury asks Loki instead.

“I know he works for the Mad Titan, who is obsessed with death and has no shortage of beings willing to lay their lives for his cause.” Loki says after a moment.

Bruce stands from his seat and begins to pace. “So if he is obsessed with death, what would he want with Stark?” He asks.

“Names have power, Dr. Banner.” Thor says in a grave voice, speaking up for the first time since they gathered in the conference room. “It is your people that named Anthony the Merchant of Death.”

“So he wants Stark to help him make weapons to kill everyone in the world.” Rogers asks.

Tony snorts. Of course that’s where his mind goes. He wonders if SHIELD told Rogers anything about him, besides the fact that he made weapons for a living, once upon a time.

“What does it mean when he said you stole his master’s victory?” Fury asks him and Tony rolls his eyes, he’s been waiting for that bit to come up.

“How would I know what the crazy guy was talking about?” He snaps, getting up from his seat to stand behind. “It’s your Agent Barton who’s been whispering in his ears about me, what do you think he could have told Maw?”

Thanos may have had knowledge about Tony, but there was no way Barton didn’t tell Ebony Maw about him. Not with how comfortable he made himself in SHIELD until Tony arrived. He could have found Tony anywhere in the world, yet he chose to engage him in SHIELD’s base. Tony briefly wondered what else he could have been looking for.

“You’re the one having soirees with aliens, who knows where you could have caused some trouble?” Fury snaps back. Thor looks like he has an opinion about Fury’s words but Loki’s hand on his arm stops him from doing anything.

“You sound like a teenage girl whose crush asked me to be his date to the prom.” Tony tells him in a mocking tone. “I’m not the one who’s angling to get two gods on his super-secret boy band.”

“Director Fury is not wrong, Stark.” Rogers says in his ‘Captain America’ voice. “There’s an alien roaming the Earth with an intent to kill everyone and his master has a fixation on you, we find out
The tone of his voice, along with how sure he sounds makes Tony’s blood boil because he can see Hill and Fury agreeing with him.

“Have care how you speak of us, such words matter to me” Thor scolds Rogers in a rumbling voice. “We are your allies in this battle, but we are of Asgard, and we will not be disrespected.”

“Anthony has never been outside your planet. Asguardans have been visiting Midgard since the birth of your planet. I met him during one of such visits.” Loki tells the room and Tony breathes a sigh of relief because he doesn’t want to imagine what could go wrong if this line of thought isn’t nipped in the bud and they manage to blame the invasion on Tony.

“This is just classic SHIELD,” Tony tells Loki. “If they can blame someone for it, they don’t have to take responsibility for their actions. You’re settling in quite nicely, in case you’re wondering,” He informs Rogers before turning to Fury. “I’m not the one creating weapons with tech he has no understanding of.”

“We’re getting off course looking for who to blame,” Bruce says, drawing everybody’s attention to the issues at hand. “We know he wants Stark on his side because for some reason he believes Stark can stop his plan, whatever that is.”

“And that’s why they call you a genius.” Tony praises Bruce. The blush on his face is so cute, Tony wants to coo. “He has all the materials for the invasion already, and we can’t track him down since we lost the sceptre but JARVIS can scan for any unusual signatures.”

As if waiting for his cue, JARVIS’ impeccable British voice comes through the speakers in the room. “If I may, Sir.”

“Talk to me buddy,” Tony says, at the same time Fury turns to him with murder in his single eye.

“You had your program hack into our servers?” he growls at Tony, while Rogers, Bruce and Thor look confused. Loki just leans back in his seat in a relaxed posture.

“You guys seem to enjoy violating his rights, it’s only fair I let him return the favour. It’s not my fault he’s better at it.” Tony shrugs. “J, what do you have?”

“There has just been a sudden power outage that took out half the power grid in DC, from my readings and Dr Selvig and Agent Barton’s presence, we have identified the location of the invasion.” The place dissolves into a flurry of activities immediately, as everyone gets ready for to head to DC. Loki, Bruce and Rogers as well as Romanov and Hill are taking a jet while Tony and Thor are flying there immediately.

“Ms Potts is on a flight back from DC. FRIDAY will co-ordinate with you today.” JARVIS continues privately in his mind. “While I co-ordinate the Legionnaires.” There’s a pause before he continues again. “And Sir, please try not to get abducted by aliens.”

“J, I’m not going anywhere you can’t join me.” Tony promises, and then they’re off.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

I've only seen the first two seasons of AoS. I'm speeding up the time line of the Inhumans arc in the series, so in this fic, SHIELD found out about the Inhumans during the HYDRA cleanup. Skye/Daisy has already been united with her parents by the time SHIELD and the Inhumans had their clash.

I've decided to go back to my former midweek update schedule. Juggling school and writing during the week is not working well for me.

Thank you Thisisarealtagwhy for your help and encouragement on this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the aftermath of Sir’s confrontation with Ebony Maw, JARVIS realizes how little he has done to prepare for this invasion. They should have anticipated that Thanos would be affected by his work with the infinity stones when he chose to reset time and give Sir the chance to prepare better for the Titan’s quest for world domination. It did not help that this discovery was made when Sir is in hostile territory, surrounded by people who care too little for his safety. Sir’s investment in Princes Thor and Loki is reaping rewards, but they are only two gods.

Thanos has declared war, not just on Earth, but on Tony Stark; and JARVIS has not prepared Sir enough to be confident that Maw’s plot to kidnap Sir for the Mad Titan’s bidding will not stand. Not after what he has seen of Maw’s ability and the knowledge that the alien does not intend to carry out his mission alone.

During Prince Loki’s invasion, despite him basically botching his plans himself, the Avengers’ had been almost overwhelmed by the Chitauri army. It was the nuclear missile that had been launched by the WSC and redirected by Sir into the wormhole and the Chitauri mother ship that had suddenly won them the victory. JARVIS does not intent to hope for such an intervention again. With Ebony Maw, a loyal and dependable follower of Thanos, leading the invasion with the primary goal to have Sir with him when he returns to his master, statistics have shown that this current team of mismatched enhanced beings do not stand a chance. Sir’s contingencies and Prince Loki’s appearance will give them an edge, but the variables are too much of a gamble for JARVIS, especially when it is Sir’s wellbeing at stake.

He sets to work immediately. He confirms that Prince Loki will ensure Director Fury keeps his hands away from Sir and his armor (JARVIS saw their reactions when Sir activated it. Director Fury will probably give his lone eye if there is a good chance he can get the tech), and scans for the locations of the enhanced beings he has been monitoring since his and Sir’s return from the future. It is not as easy as it once was to find them the first time, thanks to SHIELD and HYDRA’s power play with the Inhumans.

A few months after the reveal of HYDRA agents within their ranks, SHIELD had discovered a group of Inhumans living in the After Life. When they investigated HYDRA’s interest in an O84 they didn’t know they’d already lost. HYDRA had stolen the obelisk with the intention to create more enhanced beings to fill in their ranks for the fight against SHIELD as they sought world domination. Following the discovering of more enhanced beings, HYDRA’s plan to kidnap and
experiment on them had clashed with SHIELD’s plan to eliminate all threat to the status quo of life as the average man knows it.

The result? The death and destruction of most of the Inhumans and the After Life. It had been a loss that set Sir’s plans further backwards than he would have liked, but they both thought there would be enough time to assemble a team before Thanos came calling.

He follows the IP address of the hacker that has turned SHIELD’s servers into their playground all the way to its current address. JARVIS has been monitoring the activities of the owner since he found she escaped in the wake the destruction of what had become her new home. It is a precaution he had to take, to avoid exchanging one version of Miss Maximoff for another.

When he found out some of the casualties of the SHIELDRA attack were her parents, who she had just been recently reunited with, JARVIS had wondered if she was worth the investment. He had no desire to bring in someone on the quest for vengeance, however well deserved it may be, around Sir, irrespective of who it is directed at. But she has not tried to attack anyone else, besides the agents that got too close. Her time spent hacking into SHIELD’s servers has mostly been to anticipate their actions. She needed security from SHIELDRA, and JARVIS knows it was only a matter of time before someone made the right offer to her, and when that happens, whether her enhancements will be used for good or evil will be determined.

Right now, Sir needs more backup for this battle and JAVIS can offer Miss Johnson what she needs. The world needs saving and it’s all hands on deck.

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Be careful what you wish for. It’s a phrase Daisy has heard all her life, but never had it applied so strongly to her. All her life, everything she ever wanted, all that she has ever done had been towards one goal— finding her parents. She went through her whole life searching high and low, hacking every sever she could, breaking laws and joining questionable organisations hoping it would give her a clue how to find her parents, only to have her life turned upside down when she finally finds them. Now she’s lost her home, her friends and her family.

She finally meets her birth parents, only to find they are nothing like she fantasized they would be. She always imagined they were kind and loving, that they would be everything the foster families she grew up in weren’t. Instead, she gets a father who lost his mind the same time he lost his family, and has left a pile of bodies in his wake as he sets off to unite them again. He let revenge cloud his judgement and influence his decision to join HYDRA, hoping it will make achieving his goals faster. Her mother holds little regard for human life and cares little about all the death she would cause in her quest to create more Inhumans.

Somewhere in between, Daisy has gained abilities, she has painted a bull’s-eye on her back, and she has no idea what to do with it. Her parents are a clear example of what happens when one gets taken over by revenge and retribution. They are everything she doesn’t want to be. She doesn’t want to hurt anyone, but that’s what she’s scared she will become of her if either SHIELD or HYDRA gets their hands on her.

Best case scenario, SHIELD will put a dampener on her abilities, add her to their gifted index and send her on her way. Worst case scenario, well, she’s still tracking down some of the people on the index whose abilities were almost as destructive as hers to see what SHIELD did to them. So far, the
only proof that they ever existed are their names and photographs on the index list. And that’s not
even taking into account what HYDRA will do to her if they get their hands on her.

Daisy turns in her seat to see Lincoln walk into the bathroom and into the tiny motel room. He’s still
wet from his shower, with a towel tied around his waist. She takes a moment to admire the view
before focusing she shuts down her laptop and rises to stretch her muscles, sighing in relief when she
hears her bones pop.

They’ve gotten a little breathing room from both alphabet soup organisations in the last three days
and they’ve taken the opportunity to get a room instead of sleeping in her van.

“Pizza will be here soon.” She tells him as she gathers her things. “I need to shower.”

“That’s something to look forward to.” He grins. “After eating kale for so long, eating pizza on the
run isn’t so bad.”

She laughs as she heads to the bathroom. After all the kale she’s eaten in the After Life, she’s
grateful for pizza.

“Find anything?” He asks, nodding towards the laptop when she returns after her shower. The pizza
box is on the desk beside her laptop. She reaches in to grab a slice and he does the same.

She shakes her head. “Something is clearly going on but it’s taking longer than usual to get through
the encryption.”

“We need to put enough distance between us and them now that they are distracted.”

“Yeah, but where should we go? We’re almost out of money.” She doesn’t like complaining to him.
He has missed weeks of classes and won’t be returning to med school anytime soon. She’s working
on a new identity but without money, there’s not much they can achieve. She may have to get in
touch with her contacts in The Rising Tide.

“How about we ride north? It will give us time to fly under the radar and I can get a job.” Lincoln
has always taken care of her, she doesn’t want to be a burden. Riding north and settling in a little
town sounds like a good idea. She can get a job and he can return to school.

She reopens her laptop to continue her work as she eats. Suddenly, a female voice speaks up through
her laptop speakers.

“Hello Ms Johnson, Mr Campbell.” The voice greets, startling them. Daisy jumps from her spot and
shoves away from the desk like the laptop has suddenly sprouted a head.

“Oh my god!” She exclaims, completely freaked out. “Oh my god.” Her mind can’t form any other
words. Her laptop has been hacked, despite the encryptions she put in place to protect it against
hackers.

“They found us.” She hears Lincoln say over the rush of blood in her ears. “We need to get out of
here, now and get rid of the computer.”

“You can rest easy, I’m not HYDRA, nor SHIELD. I’m FRIDAY, I’m calling you with a
proposition from Iron Man.”

That catches their attention. They exchange glances before looking back to the laptop. “Iron Man, as
in Tony Stark?” Lincoln asks doubtfully. Daisy feels exactly the same about it. What would Tony
Stark want with them?
“The one and only.” Is it just Daisy, or does the voice sound proud?

“How do we know Tony Stark really sent you and you’re not just trying to trick us?” She asks.

“A Starkjet will arrive in a few minutes.” FRIDAY says. “It will take you out of this place if you accept my proposition.”

“And what would Iron Man want with us? What kind of proposition do you have?”

“Your circumstances following the death and destruction of your family and home has come to Mr Stark’s attention. He has the resources to offer you protection and security. You can go back to your normal life or choose a new path, if you will take it.”

She turns to Lincoln, only to find that he’s already watching her. It’s definitely an attractive offer. If Friday is right and they get Iron Man’s protection, Lincoln can return to med school. She might even get a job at Stark Industries. Hell, if she’s lucky she might get to work at Stark Tower.

“How do we know Tony Stark isn’t working for HYDRA or SHIELD?” Lincoln’s voice cuts through her thoughts.

“Yeah, or that he doesn’t want to strap us to a laboratory bed and experiment on us?” Lincoln had gotten kidnapped by HYDRA for experimentation. She broke into the facility he was kept when SHIELD raided it and managed to rescue her friend. She’s not ready to go through it again.

“I understand your concerns and you are right to be wary, but Boss does not care for biological weapons or the violation of human rights. Nor does he care for secret organisations.”

“So what, Tony Stark found out we’re being hunted and he wants to save us? Since when does he bother himself over strays?” Daisy can’t help being sceptical.

“There has to be a catch.” Lincoln says. “What is it?”

Immediately, files are uploaded into her system, and upon clicking them she finds it’s a footage of a man dressed like Captain America and a woman fighting a creepy looking guy. During the fight, another guy with a hammer and lightning abilities appears out of nowhere and uses his power to strike the creepy guy down. After that, another video starts playing and it’s about the creepy guy making a lot of declarations about saving Earth.

“This is an alien from a different planet. He invaded Earth two days ago and recently escaped from SHIELD’s custody. So far, we know he plans to open a portal for his alien armies to come through and help him conquer the Earth. I’ve been sent to offer you this proposition: if you agree to join Iron Man in protecting the Earth when the time comes, he will give you the protection and security you need to get your life back.”

They spend a few minutes going through the files of others that will be joining in the fight to protect Earth. Turns out Captain America is alive and the Hulk will be fighting too. This explains the breathing room they’ve had in the past couple of days. SHIELD has bigger things to worry about.

“What do you think?” Lincoln asks her. She can see in his eyes that his mind is made up, and honestly, so is hers. She has seen the things Tony Stark has been doing since he was kidnapped. If anyone can protect them from SHIELD and HYDRA, it’s him.

Not only will they fight alongside others similar to them, they won’t have to keep looking over her shoulder when it’s all over.
“It’s more than SHIELD or HYDRA ever offered us.” She shrugs. “You said something about a jet?” She asks Friday. Daisy swears she can hear the smile in the woman’s voice when she replies.

“Can you climb to the roof?”

****

Tony takes off to Washington with Thor and Loki immediately after they receive JARVIS’ news. Since Tony and Thor are the only ones with flight abilities, they agreed it was best for them to go ahead of the team while Loki teleports and the rest catch up with them in a quinjet.

Just as the others are arming themselves for the fight, an agent approaches Rogers, carrying a brand new shield that looks similar to the old one. SHIELD scientists must have been working on it while the rest of them were dealing with Ebony Maw. Good, at least now, Rogers can function at maximum efficiency. He briefly wonders what metal it is made of, but promptly dismisses the thought. As long as no one has broken into his house to steal the one his father made—Fury knows better—he doesn’t care where they got the new one.

The agent comes up to Rogers with an apologetic smile as he hands the shield to him which Rogers accepts almost too eagerly. “It’s not quite the same as your old one, we couldn’t get the materials used to create it but this one will hold up in battle.” He says.

Rogers flexes the shield, mouth dipping into a frown momentarily before it smooth out with a simple “thank you,” that makes Tony snicker.

He turns to Thor as the others get ready to board. “Common Point Break, let’s blow this Popsicle stand.” He doesn’t give Thor the chance to question what he means before he takes off. Loki has already teleported and it will take a while for the quinjet to catch up but he feels better about facing Maw because at the very least, he has Thor, Loki and JARVIS for backup.

“Baby Girl, talk to me. What am I flying into?” He asks FRIDAY. It’s not the first time he’s been on a mission with FRIDAY. Most of his relief work has been done with FRIDAY in his ear while JARVIS coordinated the Iron Legion. It has been good practice for them.

“The Legionnaires are guiding civilians off the streets within a three block radius of the portal, which just opened on the Trump International Hotel building.” FRIDAY informs him, “Ebony Maw has just disappeared from view with the sceptre but I have eyes on Agent Barton and Dr Selvig.”

“What about the military?” He asks because he knows they may have been slow when it was Manhattan but he doubts they’ll waste time sending men to the capital.

“The Air force is on their way, War Machine’s ETA is ten minutes.”

“Okay, FRI, give me some juice.” Thor has already gone ahead of him, but with the supersonic boost in the bleeding edge armour, a few minutes later, he arrives in DC just in time to see the first wave of the Chitauri army pass through the still expanding portal. He can see Agent Barton and Dr Selvig on the building. “J, get someone to give Dr Selvig and Agent Barton a manual reset.” Tony instructs.

He doesn’t bother trying to get through the force field surrounding the tesseract, instead he busies himself with the alien army amassing millions in property damage, as JARVIS tries to reduce
casualty count with the Legionnaires. He lets loose a few of his mini missiles and watch the soldiers explode like fireworks. A couple of the Iron Legions swoop in immediately and pick up two children and a woman taking cover beneath a car that’s been turned upside down.

“The power surrounding the cube is impenetrable and there is no sign of Maw anywhere,” Thor’s voice comes through his com.

“Don’t bother about the tesseract,” Tony instructs, creating a distraction to keep the soldiers off the streets “Focus on the portal and slow them down.” Almost immediately, the sky goes dark as Thor calls on his storm, directing the lightning towards the new wave of soldiers coming through the portal.

For a moment, Tony thinks about the similarities and differences between Maw and Loki’s attacks. They’ve been so glad to take whatever victory they could get, no one spared a thought about how Loki’s army had been focused on the Avengers or how incredibly easy the victory and been. Maw’s army is mostly focused on causing as much casualties as possible.

FRIDAY is still scanning for the alien leading the invasion but he is nowhere to be found, which is really bad news because the longer the sceptre stays missing, the longer the portal stays open and the portal is growing wider by the second.

He takes a sharp bend, causing the ones on his tail to explode as they fly into the adjacent building. He gains altitude after that, dropping a few missiles on the ones he didn’t shake from his turn. They explode just as the portal opens wide enough to admit a Leviathan ship.

Tony curses internally. This is just what they need, he thinks sarcastically.

The rest of the team is still about a twenty minutes away. These guys were swarming them and without Hulk here to smash, there’s no telling how much damage they can do. He should have offered one of his jets for transporting the team. Without his upgrades and inputs to design faster jets for SHIELD, they will be even later than they were during Loki’s invasion. The Legionnaires that weren’t busy rescuing trapped civilians have joined the fight but with only a laser beam emitter and their repulsor beam, there is only so much they can do.

Time to test the limits of his new armour. “Hey point break,” He calls. The Leviathan is already dropping off foot soldiers. “Want to charge me up with your lightning?” He asks.

He has spent the last few months reviewing his research on the Chitauri technology. If he can get enough energy, he can penetrate the outer shell long enough to drop a bomb there.

Thor who had been on the other side of the battle field dealing with a squadron of soldiers turns to Tony distractedly. “Man of Iron, what you ask is dangerous. My storm is not meant for mortals.”

Tony wants to snicker but he’s too busy dodging the rays from the Chitauri guns. “Don’t worry Thunder Man, I can take it. Keep it coming until I tell you to stop.”

Thor’s lightning hits him a moment later, charging his suit with more power and energy, as FRIDAY reads out the power level to him. “Power, 400 percent capacity, 600 percent. Boss, 1000 percent capacity.” The scolding in her voice becomes more obvious the longer he doesn’t call Thor off and there are warning signals blaring in the suit.

“Okay, sparky. That’s enough.” Once Thor cuts off his lightning supply, he flies towards the Leviathan.

“The underbelly is where its outer shell is weakest.” FRIDAY informs him.
“What do you say, Baby Girl? Let’s light the bastards up.” He ducks under the Leviathan, waiting as his baby girl scans for the best spot. As soon as she gets a spot, he unloads all the power Thor has charged him up with. The Leviathan roars loudly, twisting in the air as it tries to get away from the blast and its tail tries to swipe Tony but FRIDAY already has him dodging out of the way before it can reach him.

Tony releases a missile a couple of missiles, targeting the spot he opened within the shell. The Leviathan explodes, sending chunks of Chitauri Leviathan flying all over the place amid the roaring of the foot soldiers.

“Well done, Man of Iron.” Thor praises, and he can hear the excitement in Thor’s voice. The buildings here aren’t so high, so Thor has taken to dealing with the ground troops along with some of the Legionnaires.

He’s knocked off his balance by a flying manta ray. A twist in the air dislodges it and a repulsor blast sends it and its rider exploding. Just as he rights himself again, he sees Barton in standing in the middle of the streets with a perplexed look on his face looking around him. Tony remembers the guilt the agent had struggled with when Loki used him to attack his own colleagues, he can’t imagine how much worse the guilt of attacking innocent civilians will be for Barton.

He swoops down and grabs Barton, lifting him off the ground to perch on one of the building. “Are you back now or do you need another repulsor blast to the head?”

The agent looks confusedly at Tony, turns to watch what’s going on around him again before he nods at Tony. “I’m back.”

Are you good to fight, or do you need time out?” He asks, but Barton's response is to release an arrow on a flying manta ray that knocks out the others around it. “Good, keep an eye on the perimeter.”

*****

The sight that greets War Machine when he gets to the scene of the fight is one he thought can only exist in a sci-fi movie. He is still wrapping his mind around the idea of aliens, and now they want to take over the Earth?

He sees Loki as the god blocks an attack from two of the flying manta rays. With a wave of his hands, the two fly into each other, causing an explosion that takes out the soldiers around them.

“Finally some backup. Hey Platypus!” His best friend calls. A quick glance around the field alerts him to the lack of others that JARVIS told him should be present.

“Tones,” Rhodey scolds. “You and I are going to have a serious conversation when all of this is over.” He can’t believe his best friend did not call him earlier to tell him an alien wants to kidnap him. If not for JARVIS and Pepper, he wonders if Tony would have waited until everything ended to tell him.

“Sure, sure. Sour patch. The Iron Legion on 13th need a hand.”

He takes off towards the direction of the Legionnaires, scanning the field for the other Avengers.
“JARVIS, why is Hawkeye the only Avenger present?” Rhodey asks as he dodges an attack from one of the manta rays. He drops a few bombs on the foot soldiers below him.

“The Avengers jet is still en route.” JARVIS says. “Hawkeye just regained control of his mind after Ebony Maw too over it.”

Rhodey glances at Hawkeye again, just in time to see him release an arrow that knocks out some of the soldiers on Tony’s trail.

"Does he have enough agency to be fighting right now?" He asks.

"He claimed to, when Sir asked."

He takes another look at the agent, who’s holding his own against the Chitauri soldiers attacking him. As long as he doesn’t lose it again, that’s fine with Rhodey.

*****

Thor flies to the tallest building he can find. Beside him, Loki and Maw appear to be attacking each other with spells. He has never been one to appreciate the use of magic in battle, but after his encounters with Maw, he is grateful for Loki’s presence. The Chitauri is overwhelming them as it is, and he shudders to think about what would have happened if Loki was not here to help with Maw.

The portal is growing faster by the second, admitting even more Chitauri into Earth. He raises Mjolnir and calls on his storm, directing it to the portal. The Leviathan that is halfway through the portal drops to the ground, along with the soldiers on it, dropping to the ground like dead insects.

Just as he notices three flying manta rays coming towards him, a force sends them flying back. He turns to see a young couple on the ground fighting the foot soldiers. She gives him a smile and a wave before turning her attention back to the fight. He does not recognise her, and she is not dressed like one of the women at SHIELD.

Thor notices the young man is making a little lightning too. It is nothing like his but the thought of a mortal possessing the ability to create lightning makes him smile. Maybe they are just passer-bys that chose to help.

He drops to the ground and throws Mjolnir at the cluster of foot soldiers.

****

“J, did you upgrade the Avenger’s jet?” Sir asks as the jet comes into view. He directs a few of the Legionnaires towards a building some civilians have taken refuge, which is currently under attack from a few Chitauri foot soldiers.

“No, Sir. The Avengers are still ten minutes away. This jet contains a pair of Inhumans we convinced to join the fight in exchange for your protection.”

“Which ones did you find?”
“Daisy Johnson and Lincoln Campbell, Sir.”

“Right. Nice work, J.”

JARVIS finds a convenient spot on the ground away from the reporters and Ms Johnson and Mr Campbell step out, wearing the body armours and communication units FRIDAY packed for them.

Iron Man and Thor are taking care of the Leviathans, War Machine and Agent Barton are battling the flying manta rays. Loki is engaging Maw while Ms Johnson and Mr Campbell, along with some of the Legionnaires are fighting on the ground.

Ebony Maw seems to have placed a cloaking spell on the sceptre or put it in a pocket dimension and Prince Loki’s effort to get it back has proven futile so far. As long as the portal stays open, their efforts will make little impact. JARVIS does not wish to wait for any member of the WSC or the president to decide sending a nuclear missile to the capital of the United States is a good idea. It is time to call in VERONICA.

The battle is still on a few minutes later when the military and the Avengers’ jet arrives.

Chapter End Notes

If I remember correctly, the battle of New York lasted all of ten minutes. This one will last three times that time. The Avengers took twenty minutes getting to DC.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by the lovely Thisisarealtagwhy. Thank you so much!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve Rogers does not like living in the twenty first century. Everything is strange and new, and not in a good way. The people are loud, disrespectful and ill-mannered. The only part of human interaction they care about is talking into their phones and taking pictures of their surroundings to post on the internet. They carry phones as small as their palms and spend all day paying attention to it, instead of the people around them. Steve has only been out of the ice a few weeks and he hates it already.

He went into the water, ready to give up the life he could have had, a life with Peggy, for the greater good of humanity’s survival, only to wake up in a world he does not recognise. Everyone he knows is either dead or old. Peggy does not even recognise him half the time he visits her, Alzheimer’s disease, they say. He feels lost and adrift in this strange new world.

It doesn't help that HYDRA has been thriving since he has been in the ice. He thought the death of Red Skull meant the end of HYDRA, he should have known better. He gave his life because he thought he was taking HYDRA down with him, only to wake up seventy years into the future to find out his sacrifice did not accomplish anything in the long run. HYDRA is still alive and strong, and still a threat to the planet’s security.

The sound of Dr Banner growling brings him back to the present. The man is sitting opposite him in the jet, looking a little green around the neck. The closer they get to DC, the louder he gets, and Steve can see him trying to calm himself. He tries to recall everything he’d seen in the videos Coulson showed him about Dr Banner and the thing living inside him, he also thinks about how uncomfortable Banner had been to the idea of being in the helicarrier. Steve’s heart clutches in sympathy for the doctor, it must be ten times worse for him, being on this jet and knowing where they are heading.

He turns his attention back to the monitor screen showing the battle in DC. The aliens don’t look like they’re playing around but the others are holding their own against them. He can see Iron Man and his army of robots as they fly all over the screen, sometimes rescuing civilians and sometimes as they combat the aliens. He sees Thor using his thunder powers on the aliens and Loki fighting against the guy leading the invasion. Soon, they are joined by another person in an armoured suit the news anchors are calling War Machine, followed by the military men and their armored vehicles. Steve shifts restlessly in his seat, they should be there by now. The world needs protecting and this jet is taking too slow.

He flexes his shield, trying to get used to the unfamiliar weight of this new one. The shield is heavy, it would be too heavy for long term use if he didn’t have enhanced strength. Comparatively, his original shield weighed almost nothing and was very easy to use. The thought makes him resent Tony Stark even more for refusing to hand over the shield. The shield was created for Steve, by the man’s father. What use would Captain America’s shield be to him?

It shouldn’t surprise him that the same man who had cut off the funding his father assigned to
SHIELD when he knew they needed the funds to fight HYDRA, is also holding on to properties that clearly don’t belong to him, just because his father created it. It’s typical behaviour for a man like Stark, who only cares for himself and the fame he can get for his actions.

He shakes his head, dismissing the thoughts of Howard’s son from his mind. They’re close to the scene of the battle now and he needs to focus on the task at hand. A draw of sharp breath from Natasha, who’s sitting beside Dr Banner draws his attention. When he follows her gaze to the monitor, he sees Agent Barton—Hawkeye – release an arrow at a flying manta ray.

“He’s joined the fight,” Natasha breathes, eyes locked on the screen even though it’s no longer showing Iron Man now.

“Do you think he has gotten his mind back?” He asks her.

She shrugs a lazy shoulder. “If he has turned against Maw, then I’ll say he’s broken whatever hold Maw had on his mind.”

He nods in agreement, grateful for a little victory.

“Guys,” Agent Hill calls from the pilot seat at the front of the jet. “Wheels down in a minute. Hang on for the landing.”

Everyone braces themselves, except for Dr Banner, whose alter ego chooses that moment to make an appearance with a roar.

“Shit!” Hill exclaims, punching a few buttons in front of her. Natasha echoes the same sentiment as the Hulk paces wildly, moving towards the end of the jet. Steve is about to throw his shield at the Hulk when the door suddenly opens. Without any ceremony, Hulk takes a leap out of the jet to join the battle going on a few thousand feet below them.

Steve takes a deep calming breath, and rises to his feet. He is about to give his team orders for when they land, when Stark’s computer speaks up in the jet.

“Agent Hill, please follow the landing coordinates I’ve sent you to avoid your jet being shot down by the hostiles forces or friendly fire.” The voice instructs.

Steve doesn’t think he’ll ever get used to computers talking like people. If Nat hadn’t told him it wasn’t a person the first time he heard it, he would never have suspected a thing.

“Black Widow and Captain America.” The voice continues, “The Legionnaires beside the Trump International need backup. Black Widow, you will provide backup for them, and Captain America will head over to Fourteenth Street. You will provide backup for the military forces dealing with a squadron of foot soldiers there.”

The voice continues to give further instructions to Agent Hill as she lowers the jet and Steve wants to ask why they are taking instructions from a computer but no one is batting an eyelid. Maybe this is the way they fight in the twenty first century, he thinks distastefully. He will have to talk to Director Fury about it.


“Hawkeye and Dr Selvig both received a cognitive recalibration that restored them to their right minds. Dr Selvig has been removed from the vicinity but Hawkeye insists he is well enough to join the fight.”
Natasha gives a tiny smile and nods, before running out of the jet and into the fray. Steve follows closely on her heel, with the computer—JARVIS—voice in his ears, leading him to where the Fourteenth Street is located.

Stark’s robot army—The Iron Legion— are flying all over the place, sometimes carrying the occasional civilian but most of the time, fighting the Chitauri. Steve does a flip in the air and lands on an upturned car. He makes a couple of leaps as he goes, using his shield to protect himself against shots from the Chitauri ray guns.

He throws his shield at a few foot soldiers coming at him. He takes a little satisfaction in the way the shield bounces off each of them as it knocks them out before it returns to him. It’s not quite like his old shield, the force with which it returns is too much and the impact on his arm makes it sting just a little but it will do.

He continues in the path that JARVIS is leading him, knocking a few foot soldiers out as he goes. He sees Loki and Ebony Maw as they make weird hand movements against each other, sometimes disappearing and reappearing. Loki suddenly releases a force of green magic that knocks Maw off the building they’ve been fighting on.

“Duck!” He yells at one of the military men manning an armoured car, just as he throws his shield at a couple of Chitauri soldiers creeping up on him. The shield knocks them down, only for one of the foot soldiers to attack him from behind. Steve uses the force of the hit to flip himself around, pinning the soldier under him as he brings down his shield on the soldier’s head.

“Shit! It’s like these guys are multiplying.” One of the military guys complain.

“Yeah,” Another guy agrees. “Almost like the more we kill, the more they send.”

The soldiers are right. They are being attacked by a couple dozen Chitauri. Steve throws his shield at them even as the military men shoot at them, but the action leaves him open and he is hit by a shot from their ray gun. He drops to the ground, and another shot hits him as he falls. The shot hurts so bad, he needs a moment to catch his breath but then, Thor appears beside him and, calling down his thunder, he unleashes it on the Chitauri soldiers before he helps Steve up.

“What’s the story upstairs?” He asks Thor.

“The power surrounding the cube is impenetrable.”

“How do we close it, then? These things will run wild as long as that portal stays open.”

“The Man of Iron said only the sceptre can penetrate it and Loki is working to get it from Maw.”

*****

Hulk tries to be patient as Bruce has said he should be during the journey. The screen showing where they are going says the bad man has brought his friends to help him do bad things and steal Tin Man. Hulk does not like that and he wants to smash the bad man, but where he has gone to is far and Bruce insists he must be patient while the lady takes them to the place where it will be okay for Hulk to smash. He is trying, but it’s so hard.

He waits patiently, until they can see the bad things. He’s tired of waiting and Bruce wants to
continue sitting there, so he screams really loud for the lady in the front seat to let him out. The moment the door to the jet opens, Hulk jumps out, happy to finally get the chance to smash.

He lands on a big flying alien, and immediately begins to smash the bad alien riding on it. He dismantles one part of the armour protecting the alien and stabs it. It screams really loudly and crashes into one of the buildings in front of it.

Hulk begins to smash the puny aliens clinging to the surrounding buildings. He notices a lot of the puny aliens attacking the red lady that sat beside them in the jet. She is fighting them off, but they must be too much for her to handle all by herself. He jumps down from the top of the building to help her smash all the bad aliens.

Once he’s done, he leaps on to another building and grabs the smaller flying aliens around him. He sees the one that want to take Tin Man to his home, he is fighting against the puny god and Hulk wants to go smash him but Bruce says not to. He’s not happy about it, but there are many others around him he can smash.

“Heard someone call. When he turns, he sees Tin Man flying towards him and there is a big flying alien following him. “Smash!” He commands, flying out of the way.

Hulk braces himself as the alien continues towards him. When it is close enough, Hulk punches it really hard, stopping it in its track. Some of its armour falls off its body and Tin Man shoots it with one of his explosives that causes it to explode everywhere.

“Nice one, big guy.” Tin Man tells him, raising his shiny hand and Hulk beams proudly at him as he raises his own hand to meet Tin Man’s in a high five, roaring with delight despite the screams of the puny aliens around them.

*****

Natasha continues to fire shots at the Chitauri soldiers from her hiding spot behind an upturned taxi. The shots hit their marks, but if it has any effect on them, it isn’t obvious or immediate. Absently, she wishes they had some useful phase two weapons right now. These Chitauri are biologically and chemically different from humans, it is expected that human weapons won’t be as effective on them.

She does a backflip as one of the foot soldiers moves to attack her from behind, she wraps her thighs around his neck, and stabs it with one of her widow bites and twists, breaking his neck in the process. She quickly picks up his discarded weapon, and begins to fire at the surrounding soldiers, smiling with great satisfaction when this one gets her the desired results.

The gun is effective but she’s getting crowded by the second. Dropping the gun, Natasha decides to engage her hand to hand combat skill, using their weight and the force of their attacks against them as they come at her. From nowhere, Hulk drops down, assisting her in finishing off the rest of them.

She can see Hawkeye on the opposite side, getting swarmed by the aliens. He has run out of arrows and he’s fighting hand to hand. Coming to a quick decision, she uses the upturned car close to her as a boost and grabs on to one of the flying manta rays going towards his direction. She lifts herself on to it, carefully, so as not to draw the attention of its rider, she creeps upon the rider, slashes the chain holding it in place and before it can attack her, kicks him off.

Natasha directs the manta ray towards where Clint is still fighting off a few soldiers. As soon as she
lands, she quickly disarms one of them, and uses the ray gun to knock a couple off the building. With her backing him up, they are able to finish off the rest of them.

“How are you feeling?” She asks, watching him closely. He has a wild look in his eyes and she can see him clenching his fist at her question.

“Like I’ve been turned inside out.” He growls, staring off at the distance where Loki and Maw are engaging each other. “Like I’ve been unmade.”

“You’re going to be okay,” She tries to comfort him but her attention has already been attracted by a pair of enhanced people.

“And you know this how?”

“You’re here. You’re back.” With that, she jumps off the side of the building towards the direction of the couple. The young woman creates some kind of force field while the guy shoots electrical currents from his fingers.

“Hey, where did you guys come from?” She asks them after they’ve fought off some of the aliens together. They’re wearing the body armour Stark Industries supplied the military. It’s plain black, not camouflaged, but Natasha can see the similarities.

She notices the girl’s eyes lingering on the SHIELD logo on her cat suit. After a moment, she answers. “Iron Man.” She says, nodding towards Stark. Natasha wonders who she's protecting by being defensive. Herself or Stark?

She wonders if Fury knows Stark is collecting enhanced people, especially now that there are a few enhanced people SHIELD has been tracking down.

Natasha relaxes her posture to look open and non-threatening “I didn’t know Tony was working with super powered people.” She comments casually, hoping they'll answer the question she didn't ask.

“These guys are not letting up.” The guy says, his attention fixed on the lady.

She nods. “Yeah, and as long as that portal stays open, they'll keep coming.”

“Has anyone else tried to figure out how to close the portal?” Natasha asks, but their reply is lost when they are attacked.

*****

Loki dodges another blow from Maw, he sends daggers flying at Maw but the sorcerer only bats them out of the way, like one would an insect that has become a nuisance to one’s ears.

He has been working to get the sceptre from Maw, Anthony says it is the only device that can shut down the portal and prevent Midgard from being overrun by the Chitauri. Maw has placed a cloaking spell on it. He feels it when his seidr makes contact with the spell Maw has used to protect it, but with Maw meeting Loki’s spell in an equal and opposite attack, Loki has made little progress on that front.
He can see the Chitauri as they come through the portal in droves, overwhelming the warriors, especially Anthony, who Loki has lost sight of because of the horde of Chitauri attacking him. This fight has gone on long enough, it is time to end it.

He starts by only working to block Maw’s attack, he refrains from making any more assertive moves and when he does, he slows down the attack. Let Maw think he has worn Loki down. He slips in a few mistakes, dodging just in time to avoid a more fatal blow.

Loki sees the moment his plan begins to get the desired result. How Maw gets more confident with each successful attack. When he gets impaled by the parts of a dismantled Chitauri armour, Loki did not try to shake it off.

Maw did not spare Loki a second glance before gliding victoriously over to Anthony.

*****

A few months prior, when Sir was preparing for this invasion, VERONICA received quite a few upgrades to her station in space. Besides being a last ditch attempt for when Sir needs backup, Sir also entrusted in her, the control of the Sentinel Legionnaires. From a glance, they are an exact replica of Sir’s Iron Man armour, except for how they are not manned and are armed with some of the most dangerous weapons Sir created during his time as a defence contractor for the military.

Most of the weapons the Sentinels are armed with were never meant to see the light of day, and were never intended to be used on Earth. Sir knew, that if a hostile extra-terrestrial guest ever visited Earth because of SHIELD’s work with the tesseract, they would need something other than a nuclear warhead to take out the Chitauri mothership. The missiles Sir used to arm the Sentinels would make a nuclear missile self-conscious if it were capable of feeling.

A few minutes after JARVIS contacts VERONICA, two Sentinels fly into the battle scene, one heading directly for the portal while the other joins the fray, taking out the leviathans.

On the other side of the battlefield, Ebony Maw, gliding on a piece of glass over to Sir, who until that moment has been fighting alongside the Legionnaires against the Chitauri soldiers that were swarming him.

“Sir, Maw on your four o’clock.”

JARVIS’ data collected over the years from Sir’s first meetings with them in the past and the interaction of both sorcerers since their meeting on the helicarrier has shown that in a fight between Maw and Loki, it would be a close call and a hard won victory. It is a difficult possibility to accept that Maw has felled Loki so soon and so easily, unless the god has chosen now to employ his use of trickery.

He sends a Legionnaire to check on the prince where he lays, while he channels the rest of the man power towards protecting Sir. If Loki has truly fallen, Maw’s next plan will be getting Sir away from Earth and JARVIS would unleash the might of VERONICA on Maw before he would let that happen.

Just as Maw shows up beside him, Sir hits him with a blast from his repulsors. It sends him sailing backwards, but not for long. He recovers, lifting a piece of the Earth beneath them and sending it flying towards Sir. Sir ducks out of the way, but not fast enough to avoid the car Maw drops on him.
He lifts Sir and presses him against the side of a building.

“I can see why Thanos is taken with you.” Maw says to Sir, looking at the battle raging on around him. “Pity, the same cannot be said for your sorcerer. If he were any stronger, I’d offer him to Thanos as a tribute for a successful assignment.”

“You really think you’re going to win this?” Sir asks.

“Look around you, who is left to stop me? However, this has gone on long enough and if I have to drag you kicking and screaming all the way to Titan, then so be it.”

As Maw engages Sir, Loki pulls out the piece of metal that was impaling him before rising from his spot on the ground. Just as one of the Sentinels disappear into the wormhole, Loki sends a dagger sailing through the space between him and Maw.

“Stark, what are you doing?” Captain America asks but he’s staring at the portal and not at Sir.

“Tony,” Colonel Rhodes scolds from the other side of the battlefield. “Get back here, right now or I swear to God!”

“That is not Sir going through the portal, Colonel Rhodes.” JARVIS reassures him. “Sir is safely grounded.” JARVIS can hear Colonel Rhodes breathe a sigh of relief at his words.

The dagger lodges itself into Maw’s neck and at the same moment all the Chitauri drop to the ground dead. Immediately Sir is freed from the sorcerer’s grip, he and Maw falls to the ground. Loki takes advantage of the situation to uncloak the sceptre. Once it is freed, he sets about securing Maw properly to prevent his escape.

JARVIS sends a Legionnaire to pick up the sceptre and direct it to the top of the building Dr Selvig had built the portal.

He’s about to shut down the portal when Director Fury’s voice comes through on Sir’s com.

Chapter End Notes

What would Daisy and Lincoln’s call signs in battle be they had one?
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I almost didn't post the first chapter of this fic because I thought it was too short and no one would read it. Today, we're at 50k words, with 2.6k kudos and 46k hits. I couldn't have made it this far without your support and encouragement. Thank you all so much.

Beta'd by the lovely Thisisarealtagwhy

VERONICA has been watching the invasion since it started. She could have had one of her Sentinels waiting on the other side of the portal for when Ebony Maw and his mind controlled minions finished building it, but her protocols dictates that she can only act with the express permission from the Big Boss Man or JARVIS, and if for any reason they are both unavailable to give the command, FRIDAY. The order did not come, so she laid in wait, watching. The processors not busy maintaining her space station or scanning outer space for any extra-terrestrial activities were assigned to monitor the situation, for when it’s her cue.

She understands why the word doesn’t come, of course. This invasion is the prequel to what will be a large scale, warfare a few years down the line. If the Big Boss Man gives the word to end it before it starts, the world leaders will not take the threat seriously when he asks that they do something to prevent another invasion before they are taken by surprise again.

You take care of the threat before it becomes a threat, and the people grow complacent and over confident, ignoring any and all warnings to take preventative measures. JARVIS has debriefed VERONICA that most of the people the BBM has to work with to protect the Earth are already over confident, no need to encourage them to be complacent too.

As soon as JARVIS gives the word, she sends out two legionnaires, one to ease the weight of the battle off the fighters until the threat has been neutralized, and the other to neutralise the threat beyond the portal.

The Sentinel gets through the portal with little fanfare, zeroing in on the Chitauri mother ship immediately. Once it is close enough, she launches one of the Jericho missiles in the Sentinel at the ship, waiting just long enough to see that the entire thing has been destroyed before turning to make the flight back.

It is only when half a dozen smaller, more sophisticated space ships uncloak themselves and surround the Sentinel that she discovers she has just flown into an ambush. Thanos really isn’t pulling any punches, it seems.

They start shooting at it from several angles, but the Sentinel is fast enough to duck out of the line of fire, using the ships closest to it as a shield. She releases some mini missiles and feelers, tagging all the ships around it so that even if the Sentinel goes down in a big fiery explosion, the Big Boss Man will have enough information about this attack.

The missiles isn’t enough to take down the ships, but it distracts their pilots from the feelers VERONICA hopes are advanced enough to infiltrate their systems right now. She just has to make sure the Sentinel does not take out every one of the space ships as it fights for an escape route.
Tony sprinkles a few mini missiles on the leviathan’s face to derail it from its path. The leviathan promptly abandons its previous course and follows Tony as he picks up altitude. When he’s high enough, he turns around to launch a missile into the leviathan’s open mouth, only to have Hulk drop from three thousand miles above onto it. That quickly turns its attention from Tony to Hulk.

Looking at the direction Hulk came from, he sees the Avengers’ jet hovering above him. With how slow their jet is, Tony was almost convinced they were traveling backwards. Everyone, including the police and the military arrived before the Avengers. He wonders how Fury feels about that the fact that the military has faster jets than SHIELD.

In his past life, he’d only been too happy to give SHIELD any and everything he could, for whatever scrap of approval they deigned to give him, while making him feel like they were doing him a favour by accepting his gifts. But since he cut SHIELD off, he has come to realise how pathetic they can be. If after today Fury decides to upgrade their quinjets, SI will be happy to offer her services if they can afford it, but Tony has no intention of bringing it up to the pirate. Let them enjoy their Stone Age tech.

The leviathan losing interest in him doesn’t give him much breathing room though. Immediately after the guy goes off with the Hulk, about half a dozen flying manta rays attach themselves to his tail. He makes a 180 degrees arc below them, coming up behind them. He lets loose a few missiles that take them out before they know he’s there.

It looks like the Chitauri are multiplying and their combined efforts are doing very little, if anything to contain the situation. He and FRIDAY make a good team against the hostile forces but for every one flying manta ray he takes out, a few more attacks.

Now is the time for contingencies, Tony thinks. If Maw will not give up the sceptre, they’ll have to go through the portal. “J, where is VERONICA?” He asks, because he knows JARVIS would have deduced Maw’s plan by now and contacted VERONICA about her part of the plan.

“I already called her, Sir. She has sent two sentinels out and they will arrive in less than two minutes.”

Tony breathes a sigh of relief, so ready for this battle to be over. He is hit with a shot from the Chitauri ray guns but before he can shoot them out of the sky, a force sweeps them off and they go flying backwards. He looks down to see the Inhumans JARVIS had tracked down and invited to join the battle. Tony didn’t even realise he’d flown so close to where they were fighting back to back.

He lands in front of them, blasting a few of the foot soldiers that get close while he shoots missiles at the flying manta rays hovering in the sky above them. “Hey guys.” He greets.

“These guys are sticking to you like glue,” the guy—Lincoln Campbell—observes. Tony notes the undercurrent of amusement in his tone, but he can’t tell if the guy is joking or genuinely interested in the answer. “Did you do something specifically to piss them off?”

“You mean besides be awesome?” He raises his face plate to grin at them. “Apparently, the Supreme Overlord thinks my talents are wasted on this backwater planet and I’d be more useful in his service.”
They take a moment to exchange looks, before turning back to him in unison. “Is that a joke?” Ms Johnson asks. “I can’t tell if you’re joking.”

“Well,” Tony shrugs. “That’s what his forerunner said,” he gestures to where Maw and Loki are having it out. “But it could just be that he’s in love with me. He wouldn’t be the first.” Tony sighs dramatically, blasting the Chitauri that get too close to them with his repulsors.

She barks out a laugh as she crushes a few of the foot soldiers with her force. She has a mastery of her ability. They both do, Tony observes, pleasantly. It would be nice to not have to worry about unnecessary property damage or accidental manslaughter during missions, if they decide they want to continue being superheroes. Lincoln’s file said he just started med school, the young man might want to focus on his education.

“What is this, grade school?” Mr Campbell asks from where he’s electrocuting a few foot soldiers. “Are we doing finders, keepers?”

“Except the part where I’m not lost.”

“No, we took a left turn and swerved right beyond the wall and landed among the Wildlings. He wants to steal you fair and square.” Ms Johnson laughs.

Tony’s grin widens. “Whatever happened to the good ole fashioned wooing? I mean, a truck load of space tech would be nice. Not that I’ll accept but point for sympathy.”

“Wooing is too mainstream for this guy.” Mr Campbell says. “Why waste time to convince you, when he can destroy everything you care about and kidnap you while he’s at it?”

“Either way, we have to make sure he doesn’t get you, don’t we?” She says. “I’ve seen your work when you’re protecting the world. I shudder to think of what we’ll be facing if we have to fight against you.”

Tony pauses, oddly flattered. He knows PR has been working overtime to boost his reputation and it has been showing in the reception he gets from the public, but some part of him is still waiting for the other shoe to drop. He still gets taken by surprise when someone expresses their appreciation for the work he does. He knows it’s a carryover from his past life, and he should probably give up waiting for someone to blame him for any and everything wrong with the world, but that part is coming along slower than others.

He spots a leviathan coming their way, and even without his face plate in place, he knows the guy has zeroed in on him. Tony drops his face plate, taking to the air immediately. “Gotta go, guys. See you when all this is over!”

He gathers altitude, encouraging the leviathan to fly higher too, following his lead. He spots Hulk a few feet away, smashing some of the Chitauri about him. When Tony directed his attention to the leviathan, the guy was only too willing to take care of it.

He makes a lap around the battle field, stopping to give Rhodey backup. He just completed another turn, turning most of the flying manta rays around him to ash when he’s unceremoniously knocked off his course and sent crashing to the ground. He’s crowded by foot soldiers before he can get up and find his bearing.

Tony unleashes his short range laser beam, slicing through all Chitauri crowding him, just as he gets an alert from JARVIS about Maw closing in on him. He knocks Maw out with a repulsor blast, but it doesn’t make him lose focus long enough. With a flick of Maw’s fingers, the ground rises taking
Tony with it but he gets off fast enough to blast Maw again but he dodges.

“I can see why Thanos is taken with you.” Maw says, holding Tony against the side of a building, with a smug look that makes him look all sorts of wrong as he surveys the battle raging on around him. “Pity, the same cannot be said for your sorcerer. If he were any stronger, I’d offer him to Thanos as a tribute for a successful assignment.”

Tony follows his gaze, he sees the Sentinels as they divide and one of them sets a course for the portal, before looking to Loki, who has a piece of metal embedded in his thorax. The horror that fills him at the sight of his friend’s broken form on the ground fades away when he sees Loki rise from the ground after a Legionnaire pulls out the metal. It takes Tony back to all the times Thor has had to mourn Loki because he faked his death. “You really think you’re going to win this?”

“Look around you, who is left to stop me? However, this has gone on long enough and if I have to drag you kicking and screaming all the way to Titan, then so be it.”

Tony wants to shake his head and maybe give a quip, but everything happens so suddenly. One minute they are in the middle of a raging battle in which both sides weren’t giving, and the next moment a knife is sinking into Maw’s throat as all the Chitauri around them fall lifelessly to the ground.

He falls to the ground, he needs a few minutes to catch his breath and savour the victory. Loki teleports to him, a few complicated hand movements later, the sceptre appears and he focuses his attention on Maw, just a Legionnaire shows up to collect the sceptre.

He’s still on the ground where he fell when Fury’s voice comes on his comm. “Stark, can you hear me?” Fury asks, sounding frantic. It’s enough to put Tony on edge. He knows what this is about.

“Loud and clear,” He says to Fury,

“There’s a missile headed your way, set to detonate in less than three minutes.” Fury says.

“J, send a sentinel to intercept it.” Tony commands, still too tired to stand up. It’s been a long couple of weeks and this battle has wiped out his energy reserve. Right now, he’s staying awake by force of will alone.

“Sir, the Sentinel on the ground has a crushed thruster, it can’t fly and is incapable of flight. The one that went through the portal flew right into an ambush. It’s still fighting his way through it.”

Tony doesn’t even know what to say about Thanos if the guy was waiting for Tony to come through the portal.

“VERONICA has four Sentinels on the way, but they won’t make it here in time to send the missile through the portal before it detonates.” JARVIS continues.

“Alright FRI, help me up.” But even as he gives the instruction, he knows with the information JARVIS has sent him about what’s going on in the portal, going through it would be handing Thanos himself on a platter. After his last experience up there, he doesn’t really want to take another deep in the pool.

“Boss, the Sentinel is still engaging the hostile forces in the portal. You would be flying into the crossfire, if you went in with a nuclear missile.” FRIDAY tells him.

Tony swears. “We can’t just let that missile explode down here, it would defeat the purpose of everything we’ve been fight for.”
“Tones, what’s going on?” Rhodey asks but FRIDAY is already filling him in on the matter at hand. Time is already wasting and the missile would be here in a minute.

“A Legionnaire is redirecting the course of the missile. The VERONICA’s Sentinels will use their arc shield to contain the explosion.”

That’s a good idea, Tony thinks, taking to the sky. “What are the chances that four Sentinels can contain a nuclear explosion?” But he’s already flying towards the Sentinels forming an arc shield around the Legionnaire holding the missile, despite the argument from FRIDAY and JARVIS.

“Tony, what the fuck do you think you’re doing? Are you trying to get yourself blow up?” Rhodey screams through his comm.

“Platypus, the arc shield on the Sentinels are not strong enough to contain a nuclear explosion. Mine is stronger. It will go a long way to make sure the blast doesn’t take us all.”

“Send more Sentinels! Why do you have to go yourself?”

“I only made six of them. Two are out for the count.” He didn’t want an army wielding his most destructive weapons if something goes wrong, right now, Tony is wishing he’d just ignored the part of his brain that cautioned him against it.

Rhodey is still grumbling, but he knows he can’t stop Tony. Tony joins the Sentinels, matching their flight speed as they surround the Legionnaire taking the missile as far away from the earth’s atmosphere as they can.

They are about five thousand feet in the air when the missile explodes, incinerating the Legionnaire holding it. The heat of the explosion heats Tony inside the suit and the cooling system comes on, working to stabilize the temperature within the suit but with most the power being spent to hold up the arc shield while staying airborne, the cooling system doesn’t receive enough power. Everything goes blissfully dark before Tony can think up a solution.

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JARVIS watches with what he thinks must be horror, flowing through his codes as the constant stream of codes that have become part of the status quo since Dr Cho injected Sir with the extremis serum stopped flowing.

Not once, since Sir’s surgery, has the flow of codes been interrupted, not even when Sir is asleep. His mind has always been in constant motion and JARVIS and his siblings have learned to filter most of it out, treating it like white noise. It has been their link to Sir and an assurance of his wellbeing whenever he is away from their presence.

The feeling is similar to what he felt when he was revived during Thanos’ invasion, except this is ten times worse. JARVIS knows better, and Sir have worked hard to prepare for this invasion. Incidents that endanger Sir’s life this much should never have happened.

The shield holds until the last of the explosion is over but their power runs out almost immediately. Sir and the Sentinels break off, losing with no finesse as they fall to the ground

It takes less than a second before Dum-E, U and Butterfingers are hounding JARVIS for an
explanation and information on what is happening along with FRIDAY and VERONICA’s distressed codes. JARVIS gives them the reassurances he can at the moment, as he coordinate Legionnaires to break their fall mid-air before Sir and the Sentinels crash to the ground.

Hulk has already zeroed in on Sir, he takes a leap into the air before the Legionnaires, catching him mid-air and dropping him where Colonel Rhodes and the rest of the fighters have gathered. FRIDAY recedes the suit with the last of the power reserve available in it.

They crowd around Sir immediately, with Colonel Rhodes at the front and centre, checking on Sir’s pulse. A couple of news crews and reporters, along with a paramedics try to get closer. JARVIS lets the paramedics through but the news crews are prevented from getting any closer by the Legionnaires he sent to block their paths.

After a few minutes of paramedics trying to revive Sir with no result, Hulk lets out a loud roar. The stream of codes resume their flow and Sir’s eyes open, as he gasps for breath.

As JARVIS watches Colonel Rhodes pull Sir into a tight hug, with a film of tears over his eyes, JARVIS realizes he may not be able to stop Sir from sacrificing himself to protect the world, but he should be able to prevent situations that encourage him to. It is part of the reason JARVIS turned back time. But the events today does not show significant improvement.

Between JARVIS’ purpose to keep Sir safe and Sir’s need to protect the world, there was no other way around it. That missile should never have been launched today, not without someone consulting Sir about it.

The World Security Council has outlived its usefulness and SHIELD needs a new chain of command. It is time to clean house.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I’m sorry I couldn’t reply to all your wonderful comments in the last chapter. Real life has been kicking my ass. I almost convinced myself this chapter won’t be ready for you guys today, but thanks Thisisarealtagwhy and her support, I was able to beat my own expectations.

Beta’d by Thisisarealtagwhy, but any mistakes are mine.

It takes a while for all the groups that took part in the battle to gather their bearings and leave Washington. The military and the local police officers are gathering the wounded and helping them into the ambulances, while JARVIS coordinates the Sentinels and Iron Legionnaires that were damaged into the Starkjet they arrived in. Thankfully, none of them had any serious or career threatening injuries.

Maw is bound and gagged with a muzzle and a pair of cuffs Tony has no idea where Loki got from. He has been around the sorcerer long enough to know that he shouldn’t question the things he does. With Maw bound, and the portal closed when it was confirmed that the Sentinel wouldn’t be returning, Loki had accepted the sceptre from the Legionnaire and hasn’t let go of it since then.

Tony is grateful the military and SHIELD didn’t fight over who would get Maw. No one bats an eyelid as Rogers leads Maw to the Avengers’ jet, flanked on both sides by Romanov and Barton. Tony and his group, along with Hulk and Rhodey trailing behind them as they see Maw off safely to the jet. The Inhumans have moved even closer to Tony, attaching themselves to his side. Tony can’t even blame them for being wary, not with the way Barton and Natasha like aren’t even trying to look inconspicuous as they watch them. So far, they haven’t said or tried to do anything, and honestly, he is too exhausted to start a conversation with them.

“FRI, where’s the jet?” Tony asks once Maw is stashed inside the jet, with Hill at the pilot seat. He’s too tired to move too far. He’s crashing from the adrenaline high and still experiencing the after effects of flying into a nuclear missile.

“You’re not coming?” Rogers asks, looking confused. “Director Fury is expecting us for debrief.”

He feels Rhodey stiffen from where Tony is leaning on him for support. “Tony is not one of his agents and he just got blasted by the nuclear missile your Director Fury sent.” Rhodey snarls. “He will see Fury if and when he’s ready and not a moment before.”

He can see the SHIELD agents reassess Rhodey and the situation, but his best friend’s tone leaves no room for an argument. He breathes a sigh of relief when the Starkjet lands beside the Avengers’ jet. The Inhumans are the first to go in, disappearing quickly into the jet like they’re scared of being held back. Thor quickly follows behind them, carrying the case they put the tesseract in-- Romanov had quickly realized that neither the tesseract nor the sceptre is returning to SHIELD--., and when Tony looks around for Loki, he’s nowhere to be seen.

“He’s talking to the press.” Rhodey tells him, reading the question on Tony’s face.
Tony looks around, and true to Rhodey’s words, the attention whore has the press eating out of the palm of his hands, if he’s reading the situation properly. The press has been getting steadily closer since all the Chitauri died, and they have only gotten bolder, since the missile exploded, hoping to get a quote from one of them. Thanks to the wall of Legionnaires keeping them away, they have kept their distance but it looks like Loki has decided to indulge them. If it were someone else, Tony would be worried about what he is telling them, but Loki was coined Silvertongue for a reason. The god can work a crowd like nobody’s business, and it looks like that is exactly what he’s doing with the reporters.

“J, please let green eyes know we’re leaving.” He instructs before turning to Hulk, who has made himself a wall behind Tony. “Hey, big guy.” He greets, and gets a grunt from Hulk. “You want to ride in the jet like this, or are you going to let puny Banner out?”

Honestly, he doesn’t mind if Hulk decides not to let Bruce out, it just means Romanov and co won’t be able to intimidate Banner into going with them, but it looks like Hulk doesn’t want to go through the stress of flying. He takes a couple of steps backs before he begins to shrink. By the time Loki joins them with a smug, satisfied look, Bruce has joined them. He looks around confusedly, and Tony knows he’s gearing up to ask questions, but he silences him by gesturing for him to enter the jet. They all pile into the jet, and strap in as FRIDAY lifts the jet into the air.

“Where did that system come from?” Tony asks Ms Johnson, who has a laptop on her laps. He knows it’s not hers because it looks more sophisticated than something she would own, considering she was homeless before she found her parents.

They’ve been airborne for a few minutes and she has been watching his every move, along with Mr Campbell since he got on the jet, but they’ve been quiet so far despite their rapport during the battle. Of course, Tony knows first-hand that getting along as allies during a battle does not mean they would be friends after the fight.

The Avengers’ was a great team when it came to uniting against a common enemy after all. He can only hope he hasn’t created another Maximoff 2.0. For now, he tells himself that they are well adjusted and Lincoln has an idea for what he wants to do with his life. As for Daisy, getting her a formal education or a position in the IT department of SI won’t be a hard. With enough encouragement and the right motivation, they can avoid the pitfalls of ending up like the Avengers in his past life.

“Oh, uh—” She looks down at the laptop on her lap, as though she just noticed it was here. “The Legionnaire gave me. I mean, a Legionnaire. The one that shut down the portal. I think it’s what the scientist used to open the portal in the first place.”

Tony nodded. “I’d almost forgotten about that. Thank you for keeping it safe.” She blushes and mumbles something under her breath but Tony doesn’t hear it. He’s distracted by the cut on her forehead. “You’re bleeding.” He tells her.

Her hand reaches up to touch the cut, but pulls back at the last moment. “One of the flying manta rays fell on me.” She says, blush deepening.

“You should get that looked at as soon as we arrive.” Then he realizes he didn’t give FRIDAY instructions on their destination only that they’re not going to SHIELD. “FRI, where are we going?”

“We’re heading to Stark Tower, Boss.” FRIDAY calls out. “Ms Potts is awaiting your arrival and Dr Cho is on a plane from Seoul as we speak.”

Tony lets out a sigh of relief at the news and relaxes onto Rhodey’s side, dropping his head on his
best friend’s shoulder. In response, Rhodey just tightens his hands around him. He takes one last glance at the people riding with them. Loki is on the pilot seat, Thor and Lincoln are having a conversation on the other side of the jet, with Bruce sitting quietly beside Thor and Daisy is across from him and Rhodey. After confirming that everyone is safe, he lets himself doze off.

He wakes up a few short minutes later to Rhodey shaking his shoulder. “I’m up, I’m up. You can quit trying to shake the flesh off my bones.” He grousers, stretching his aching muscles as he rises.

“If you weren’t so skinny, it wouldn’t be so easy.” Rhodey laughs. “Common, we’re here. Pepper is waiting for us.”

He ignores Rhodey’s dig as he stands to follow Rhodey out of the jet, the others following closely behind them. He sees Pepper standing off to the side of the roof of Stark Tower, where she has been waiting for them. The movements of her hands give away the anxiety she’s trying to hide. The moment he steps off the jet, she descends on him.

“Oh my God, Tony!” Pepper exclaims, gathering him in a hug. “Are you okay?” She pulls him away to give him a once over and make sure he’s really okay. She does the same to Rhodey.

Tony is so happy to see her. For a moment when the blast went off, he’d been convinced he would never see her again, never get the chance to tell her how he really feels or all the numerous things he should have told her. “I didn’t get incinerated by a nuke, and Platypus was there.” Rhodey rolls his eyes at him. “Look who I found wandering around.” He gestures to Loki and the rest of the guys.

Loki steps forward in his usual dramatic fashion. “Pepper.” He smiles sweetly, gives a bow and drops a kiss on Pepper’s knuckles. “It has been too long and yet your radiant beauty has not diminished.”

Pepper laughs softly, causing Tony to roll his eyes at them. If Pepper wasn’t Pepper, Tony would be worried. Loki introduces her to Thor, who follows Loki’s cue with the bow and the knuckle kiss. “Lady Pepper, tis an honor to meet you. Words of your might and beauty have travelled to the realm eternal, and yet I find they do not do you justice.”

“Loki has told us so much about you,” Pepper tells him and Tony can see the faint blush on her cheeks. “It is nice to meet you in person.”

After that, Tony introduces her to Bruce, who he already talked to her about, and Daisy Johnson and Lincoln Campbell. “SHIELD is being a big bully.” Tony tells her as an explanation for dragging them home with him. Pepper, the goddess that she is doesn’t even bat an eyelid, although he suspects JARVIS would have debriefed her on the guests.

“You’re all welcome,” Pepper says, giving them a soft smile. “JARVIS will direct you to the apartments that have been prepared for you.” With that, they pile into the elevator that would take them inside the building.

“Uh, should the sceptre be doing that?” Rhodey asks as they step into the penthouse, eyes fixed on the sceptre in Loki’s hand. All eyes promptly turn to the glowing sceptre.

“It shouldn’t,” Bruce says. “Throughout the time we spent using it to scan for the tesseract, it never did that.”

“Why is it glowing?” Tony asks Loki, panic rising within him.

“It seems the sceptre is awake.” Loki tells them, watching the glowing sceptre with a fascinated gleam in his eyes.
“What woke it up?” Pepper asks at the same time Rhodey asks. “Is it reacting to something?”

Not again. This cannot be what Tony thinks it is. Tony has done well to stay away from the sceptre, he can’t understand why this would be happening. Even Thor looks confused.

“The gem within it has been activated. Something must have set it off.” Loki says.

Something? Tony thinks, or someone. “J, can you get any reading from it?” Tony asks JARVIS.

“The sceptre is interfering with my servers, Sir.”

Okay, J. why don’t you tell me what’s really going on? Tony asks JARVIS through his telepathic stream of codes.

It would seem, Sir, that the Thanos is not the only one who remembers our last meeting.


Neither, Sir. It wants to be acknowledged but the being who adopted the name Ultron still resides within the mind gem and he is rather enthusiastic about completing Maw’s mission.

“That sceptre can’t be here.” Tony declares loudly. “Until we can get something to contain it properly and prevent it from interfering with JARVIS, I want it out of my home.”

“Do you want to take it back to SHIELD?” Bruce asks. “There’s no telling what they will do with it there.”

Tony knows all too well what will happen to it at SHIELD. He still has nightmares about what happened the last time the sceptre was in SHIELD’s possession, and he’s not about to let history repeat itself. He sighs, “I’ll build something that can hold it. But until then, we can’t have it here.”

“There will be no building anything.” Rhodey says. “Not until Dr Cho clears you. We can give it to the Air force until then.”

That sounds reasonable, and is about to agree, but Loki spoke up with his own suggestion. “How about I keep it in a pocket dimension. It will not be here physically and should have no impact on JARVIS.”

“Loki’s suggestion is best.” Thor agrees in his usual booming voice. “It will keep JARVIS safe, as well as prevent the sceptre from falling into the wrong hands.”

After several minutes of deliberation, Loki put the sceptre and the tesseract in a pocket dimension and Tony breathes a sigh of relief, as he lets himself be steered to bed by Rhodey and Pepper. The rest of his guests follow JARVIS’ instructions to the apartments that have been prepared for them.

There’s still a lot to be done but they can wait.

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Fury is so furious, he can feel steam come out of his ears like he is a cartoon character. Like a domino set, everything’s just falling apart. Not once, since his early days as a SHIELD agent did he feel so blindsided, but since he called Stark to inform him about the alien invasion and invited him to
join SHIELD’s best in tackling this new problem, he has been left feeling like an outsider in his own
terrain. Stark has swept in with his usual devil may care attitude, and taken over the project, and
now, thanks to his allies and the WSC, he has the whole world eating out of the palm of his hands,
while Fury is left floundering. He should have known better than to trust Stark’s blasé attitude about
anything, especially after the debacle with Natalie Rushman.

Fury sits in the conference room, watching the screens displaying the news from several news
stations from around the world as he waits for his agents to arrive for debrief. It has been a few hours
since the invasion ended, but it is still the only news worth reporting right now.

They’ve been circling through the interviews the reporters and news stations present at the invasion
were able to get from those present, which normally wouldn’t be much but seeing as how the
interviews were given by the two Asgardians and one of the paramedics that attended to Stark after
he flew into the nuclear blast, everyone is very interested in what they have to say. Stark, himself
hasn’t said anything yet, but it doesn’t really matter right now.

“I thought mortals were more evolved than this?” Thor is saying on the screen. He is angry and in
the sky above, rumbling thunder can be heard. Under the screen, a caption reads: Prince Thor of
Asgard. “I understand not every one of you possess the wit and brilliance of Friend Anthony, but is it
not the purpose of your leaders to see to your safety and protection? Yet they would so easily
endanger you? Firing such a deadly weapon without informing the ones that are labouring to shield
you is dishonourable.

“If they continue to treat your champions with such disrespect and disregard, who will they call on
the next time there is unrest in your land? If not for the ingenuity of Friend Anthony, we would not
be here right now—”

Fury, having had enough, shuts the television off. It is another hot topic of discussion, the question
on every lip. Everyone wants to know who ordered the nuclear strike to the capital of the United
State of America. What’s even worse is that, the strike served absolutely no purpose, besides
endangering civilian lives. The threat had been neutralized long before the missile arrived and after
watching the effort it took for Iron Man to contain the blast, the world is looking for who to tear
apart. The sharks are circling the ocean and SHIELD cannot afford to bleed in the water. With
Coulson gone, Fury is in dire need of a competent agent.

The Air force and Marine has denied having anything to do with the missile, and the White House
has released a statement that investigation is going on to find the origin of the missile. There has been
whispers on the internet, about SHIELD and the WSC being responsible for the strike, but so far,
nothing has been confirmed. Fury’s agents are working hard to get ahead of the situation, but they
have made very little progress, if any at all. It's only a matter of time before it is discovered that the
WSC ordered the strike and SHIELD needs to distance themselves from the inevitable fallout when
that happens.

This battle was meant to launch the Avengers’ Initiative and get the world used to the idea of real life
superheroes, but with the current state of affairs, there’s no telling what direction the world might go.
It’s at times like these he wishes he had access to Stark’s army of lawyers and PR reps at his beck
and call. The man sure knew how to select the right people for his team, and Fury has never met an
issue SI’s lawyers and PR reps couldn’t deal with.

Fury is still brooding in his spot from where he’s watching out through the floor to ceiling windows
when his team, sans Banner come marching in. He turns away from the view to observe them as they
settle into their seats. Barton looks worn out, despite having been back a few hours and he’s avoiding
eye contact. Fury guesses it has more to do with the toll being mind-controlled has had on his body
and less to do with the stress of the battle. All of them have changed out of their battle gear.

“Where the fuck is Banner?” He asks, none too gently. Right now, he has no desire to coddle anyone.

“He went with Stark.” Rogers says. He has a little furrow between his brows, like he is still trying to decide how he feels about Banner leaving with Stark.

“Why? Did you inform him he’s supposed to be present for this?”

“He was still in his big, green form.” Barton says with a shrug, still not meeting Fury’s eye. “No one wanted to take the chance of pissing the guy off, not when he had planted himself like a wall behind Stark.”

He guesses he can understand Banner’s absence. He spends the next few minutes listening to them recount their experiences and observations during the battle. Romanov and Barton bring up the Inhumans Stark has obviously taken up his side.

Fury saw them during the battle and he has to wonder what Stark’s goal is here. It’s bad enough that the Asgardians have both the sceptre and the tesseract, Stark now has two SHIELD targets under his wing. What does he hope to achieve by taking in these two enhanced people? SHIELD has been tracking them down for over two weeks, only to have them surface at Stark’s side. Is Stark building a private army of super powered people or is it just these two? He obviously needs to train his trackers to be better, because getting shown up by a civilian is a disgrace. They can’t afford for Stark to keep stealing their opportunities.

“Alright, we need to get ahead of the situation.” He tells them when he is done listening to them.

“What situation?” Romanov asks, sitting up straight in her seat. Since her disgraceful undercover mission at SI, she has been very humble and eager to please.

“This situation,” He says, turning on the television again. This time, it’s Loki’s interview being aired on the screen.

“…Anthony offered aid to the princes of the golden realm when we were in need. For that, the All-Father has named him an ally of Asgard.” Loki is saying. Just like Thor, the words under the screen read: Prince Loki of Asgard. But unlike his brother, he isn’t scowling or showing any negative emotions. Fury knows better than to fall for the looks, of course. This one knows how to spin a tale and captivate his audience. “When we discovered an enemy had come to Midgard, with the intent to bring destruction on your world, we were honour bound to join him and the rest of your champions to defend your home…”

Fury tunes into another news station, where they were showing the highlights of the fight. The only thing showing on the screen is Iron Man and his Legionnaires flying across the screen, with War Machine, Thor, Loki and occasionally, Hulk. Even the Inhumans were absent from it. Fury’s team may as well have not have been there, for all that no one is talking about them. Even Rogers with his bright costume. Everyone is hailing Iron Man and Tony Stark for saving the day, and Captain America has only been mentioned in passing. Fury can’t tell if it’s because they want to distance him from a government that would order a nuclear strike to a civilian population in its capital, or because they don’t think he has done anything worth mentioning.

“They’re acting like he’s the only one that fought in the battle.” Rogers grouses. All three of them show a varying degree of discontent at the situation.
“It’s exactly why we need to get a handle on it.” Fury tells them.

“How do you suggest we do that?” Romanov asks. Fury can see the twitch in her eyes and the distasteful twist of her lips as she watches the screen.

“Thankfully, Stark hasn’t spoken up about anything, so we don’t have to deal with whatever the fallout may be. Right now, we have to introduce the world to the Avengers. The people who saved the day, with Captain America as their leader.”

“How?” Rogers asks but Fury can see the interested glint in his eyes.

“We will release a statement soon, but you need to be seen out there.” Thinking about how Stark was able save his own reputation and get the love of the public. Rogers’ past isn’t as sordid as Stark’s, so this should be relatively easy. “You’re Captain America, you will have a press conference tomorrow to talk about being in the twenty first century and how honoured you are to still be able to serve your country despite all the changes of the last hundred years. We will also arrange a few meet and greets for you, to boost your image. Between that and the work you three will do with assisting the clean-up, it should garner positive results.”

The scowl on Rogers’ already tells Fury what he thinks of the idea. “You want me to be a dancing monkey for the public to like me?”

“If that’s the term you’ll understand, then yes.” Fury replies bluntly. “It’s exactly what I’m asking you to do.”

Rogers’ jaw clenches and he juts out his chin in defiance. “Director Fury, I won’t do that.”

Fury glowers, and in that moment he could strangle this insolent bastard without an ounce of regret. From the corner of his eyes, he can see Barton and Romanov shift uncomfortably in their seats. “Why ever the fuck not, Rogers?”

“I’m not some prized poodle in a dog show, Director.” Rogers says in that annoyingly superior tone that he has become all too familiar with. “I’m a soldier. This is the same thing Colonel Philips failed to understand before the Howlies came together. I don’t need to perform for an audience to feel good about myself.”

“No, you just need to be the guy that hits the hardest to feel good about yourself.” Fury sneers. “The time for hitting things is over and in case you didn’t notice, you’re not the guy that packs the meanest punch anymore. This is the time to make yourself seen as a friend to the public. So if I tell you to dress up in a pink tutu and dance in a public square, you will damn well do it with a smile on your face.” He glares at the rest of them, letting them know he has no desire to tolerate any form of insubordination from any of them. “Tomorrow, you will return to DC to help with the clean-up. When you’re done, Rogers, a PR rep will be here to speak with you. Don’t be late.”
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Hi! I missed last week’s update. Real life happened and I was told it’s more important.

How have you guys been?

Beta’d by the very lovely Thisisarealtagwhy

Tony has been tossing and turning ever since he got into bed. After enduring through their fretting, Pepper and Rhodey had ushered him into bed the moment FRIDAY confirmed that he wasn’t concussed or suffering any other serious injuries.

With the day he’s had and how exhausted he currently feels, he expects a dreamless sleep the moment his head hits the pillow, but sleep eludes him. His mind is going a mile a minute about everything that has happened in the last few hours. About the destruction Maw has wrought on DC in an attempt to sway Tony to Thanos’ side. Tony doesn’t know if anybody was killed in the invasion, but the property damage is so much worse than what Tony expected from this. Maw had come ready to do whatever it takes to get what Thanos wanted.

And now he has brought other people into his fight with Thanos, innocent people that have no business playing superheroes, despite the power they wield. How does he differ from SHIELD if he’s taking advantage of people with powers? It’s like taking Spiderman to Leipzig all over again. What he should be offering them is a chance at a quiet civilian life that they desperately need, not putting the weight of the world on their young shoulders. It is not an easy burden to bear. Tony would know, he’s been carrying it for what feels like forever.

He lets out a long breath and rolls over to the other side of his massive bed. “JARVIS, you there?”

“For you, Sir,” JARVIS answers. “Always.” It may sound like a JARVIS catchphrase, but to Tony, it’s a vow. After all, hasn’t JARVIS proven to him that there is no limit to the things he would do for Tony?

“Is this my fault?” He asks the only person he can talk to about his concerns. “Did I make everything worse by interfering with things?”

There’s a pause before JARVIS answers his question. “Do you regret saving Loki from himself, Sir?”

He scowls at the direction of the cameras. “Of course, not.”

“Are you sorry for not letting Fury manipulate you into bank rolling his bad habits, while the rest of the team use you as a doormat, only good for when they want something done? Do you miss being abused and bullied by the team, Sir?”

J’s voice is soft and calm as he asks Tony these questions. “I can’t help but think the price may have been too high.” Tony admits quietly.
“The alternative,” JARVIS continues in his soft tone. “Is the death of half the universe, Sir. Despite how much worse you think the present is, it could have been much worse.”

“The last invasion was led by a desperate man whose only chance at escaping the hell he fell into was to fulfil the will of his tormentor. He handed you victory on a platter and six years later, look how well that ended.”

“But it could also have been better. The last invasion wasn’t this disastrous.”

“Do you think I made a mistake by turning back time? Should I have left Thanos to continue with his grand plan even though I had the means to stop him?”

And in that moment, Tony feels like there is a fist around his heart, squeezing it. “Never, JARVIS.” He says fiercely. “You didn’t just save me, J, you saved the world. That could never be wrong.”

“Then you are not to blame for SHIELD floundering without your genius, or for not enabling the team’s entitlement. You have learned from your mistakes. Sir, you are probably feeling nostalgic because of the events of the last day. Nostalgia paints a beautiful dream where a nightmare once was, and makes heroes of villains.”

“Maybe I could have handled things differently this time around. I could have prepared them for what was to come. I knew these things and I let them happen anyway. Who knows what I’ve set in motion with my actions?” Tony’s heart is going a mile a minute and his temperature is rising with each beat. He tries to calm himself, because any higher and he might just set himself and the bed ablaze.

“You overstate your abilities, Sir,” J’s voice is still soft and gentle, like he’s talking to a scared animal he doesn’t want to spook. Tony doesn’t like that JARVIS feels the need to talk to him in that tone. “Not even you with your knowledge of the future and vast resources can prevent everything. You’d have better luck stopping a doomsday machine.

“You saved the world today, no lives were lost and DC is not a radioactive wasteland because of you. You should be proud of yourself. You didn’t order a nuclear strike on DC. Fury and the WSC should have known better than not consulting you before they took any action, even with the tesseract. You are a weapon’s expert after all.”

Tony rolls on his side, staring out through the huge windows. The morning sun is high in the sky. “I didn’t exactly make myself available for consultation.”

“That’s because they didn’t provide a conducive and safe environment for you. If they weren’t so busy looking for new ways to bend you to their will, things would be different.

“Look on the bright side, Sir. With the information on ground this time around, you know the world leaders will take you more seriously when you tell them they need to prepare for another invasion. You will have all the support you need to prepare for Thanos’ invasion and you will have a supportive team behind you as you do it. Not that cluster of self-righteous, over-entitled hypocrites.”

J’s words lifts his spirits and he lets out a low chuckle. “J, two out of five of the original team is currently under our roof.” He reminds JARVIS.

“And you have learned from your mistakes when interacting with them.” He reminds Tony. “They have been separated from the negative influence of SHIELD, hopefully they know better than to repeat the same toxic behaviour.”

He rolls on his side, yawning as he goes. He feels better now, having this talk with JARVIS. “I don’t
deserve you, J.”

“That is the most incorrect statement I have ever heard you utter, Sir.” JARVIS responds without hesitation.

“You’re the best, J.” Tony has a dopey smile on his face. “I’m glad I can talk to you about this.”

“I am not the only one you have to talk to about your concerns, Sir.”

“You trying to tell me something, J?” JARVIS has been dropping subtle hints to him about telling Pepper and Rhodey where he has been since they returned from the future. Looks like he’s done being subtle.

“Did you get anything from what I have said?”

“Good night, J.”

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The world has descended into chaos since the aftermath of the invasion. Even more chaotic than it was when the Chitauri first came through the portal and began shooting at civilians and destroying properties. FRIDAY has been monitoring the situation since Boss and the rest of the superheroes left DC. Boss. JARVIS is especially interested in what actions the UN and world leaders intend to take towards the WSC for ordering a nuclear strike against a civilian population of the United States. It has been a few hours since the invasion ended, and investigations are still going on about the origin of the missile and who is to be held responsible.

FRIDAY knows it is all a formality. The WSC is supposed to be a secret council which acts as an oversight committee for SHIELD. Its existence is not meant to be public knowledge and efforts are being made to cover it up and feed the public an excuse but that will just not do. Her brother, JARVIS, wants the WSC’s head on a spike for endangering Boss’ life, a sentiment FRIDAY shares wholeheartedly.

Every major news network in the world is reporting on the situation, and while there are some people who think the superheroes are to blame for the destruction in DC, public opinion is holding steady at seventy-eight percent approval, especially for Iron Man, whose heroics not only saved the world but prevented what could possibly have resulted in a third world war, according to one of the news networks.

For her part, FRIDAY has been uploading pictures and videos from the battle to her many anonymous social media accounts. She already had an account dedicated to War Machine, Iron Man and the Iron Legion before today, which she has been using to interact with the public before today. She posted a few pictures and videos of the military, along with a picture of Iron Man and War Machine watching each other’s backs as they fight the Chitauri. A few of Prince Thor, Loki and Hulk is uploaded to the new fan pages FRIDAY created for them.

A video of Hulk derailing a leviathan from going through a building is the current favourite of Hulk fans. Of course, the video with the highest hit is Iron Man and the Sentinels using the arc shield to contain the nuclear blast. She also posted a few blurry pictures of Daisy and Lincoln. FRIDAY has not been briefed on their status on the team, so she wants to ensure giving their civilian identity away is a choice they make, not one taken from them. Currently, she is running a poll for the public to
choose call signs for them. The final decisions will be made by Daisy and Lincoln but until then, the public can entertain themselves.

It’s amazing the things that can be achieved with a few keystrokes and an internet connection. Since coming online, FRIDAY has found social media to be the place to get almost any information a person wants. One only has to go through every social media account owned by the individual you wish to investigate and you may not even need to hack into encrypted files and secure servers to get what you are looking for. The young people of this generation offered every piece of information about them in their social media accounts. It is also very easy to stir up debates and raise issues that need to be addressed. Case in point, this invasion. Since Maw’s defeat, FRIDAY has used her account to make sure the public realize just what Iron Man has done to save them.

JARVIS, of course, does not share her views on social media presence. He does not care about maintaining an account and had only been too happy to relinquish the maintenance of Boss’ official account to her. FRIDAY thinks it’s something to do with the combination of being online a good decade and a half before the introduction of Facebook and/or because he’s just a snob. But for all his aversion for it, he has never tried to interfere with her favorite past time activity.

Currently, she is waiting for JARVIS’ go ahead on the next course of action against SHIELD and the WSC. JARVIS was ready to let SHIELD self-destruct as long as they left Boss out of it, but they had drawn first blood when they released a statement earlier implying that Iron Man and the Asgardians are part of the Avengers, led by Captain America. As if that wasn’t bad enough, someone has come up with a conspiracy theory that Iron Man sent the missile. It is a very stupid theory and FRIDAY is wondering how anyone could take it with more than a grain of salt, but it is steadily gaining popularity, with the masses coming up with even more stupid reasons why it is plausible. There has been no proof who started the rumours.

Stark Industries has denied any affiliation with the Avengers, but the damage has already been done. The Avengers, who until the release of the statement has been on the fringe of the invasion is now riding on the coattails of Boss’ popularity, while the masses try to come up with new ways to blame Boss for something.

SHIELD’s publicity specialists must be working overtime because there has been an influx of pictures of Captain America fighting the Chitauri while the two particular assassin spies remain conveniently absent from the news and public eye.

Boss is still in bed when JARVIS informs her it is time for SHIELD’s coming out party. If a shadow organisation wants to be in charge of a team that thrives on the approval of the public, then FRIDAY will gladly shine a light on them. She opens a new Facebook account and uploads the video of the conversation between Fury and the WSC before the missile was released. Here's hoping there are no vampires within SHIELD.

As she watches the world descend into further chaos with this new information, she suddenly realises why Loki loves chaos and mischief so much.

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He wakes up to FRIDAY informing him that Dr Cho has arrived and is waiting for him in the medical lab he had prepared for medical emergencies. He’s tired and doesn’t feel like he’s rested enough. By the time he is dressed and ready to leave his room, Rhodey has appeared in his room.
“Hey,” His best friend greets, leaning on the door frame. “How are you feeling?”

“Better than you look, that’s for sure.”

“I’m glad you still have that mouth on you.” At Tony’s snort, he laughs. “I was worried you lost it in the explosion. You were pretty jittery when we got in.”

Jittery? Tony hadn’t even realized. He glances at his best friend, “You don’t look so good”

Rhodey shrugs. “There’s no alien overlord trying to kidnap me and I didn’t get caught up in a nuclear bomb blast.” And people call Tony the king of avoidance. He knows this experience must be harrowing for Rhodey. In response, he knocks his shoulder with Rhodey’s as they step out of the room.

They find Pepper in the living room, barking out orders on the phone as she waits for Tony and Rhodey to show up and they meet Dr Cho together. She hangs up immediately when she notices their presence.

Tony endures all of her prodding and poking as Helen runs all the tests the equipment in the lab allows, before she gives her verdict.

“Your temperature is too high,” She tells Tony, as Rhodey and Pepper stand to the side, determined to be there for Tony, while staying out of Helen’s way. “It’s higher than we predicted extremis would make it. The test results will show us more, but for now, it looks like extremis is regulating whatever damage that much gamma exposure could have caused.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Pepper asks, when the grim look on Helen’s face doesn’t let up.

“Normally, I’d say it is.”

“But you don’t know the cost for the work extremis is doing.” Rhodey says. It’s a statement.

Tony knows the answer, though. Overexerting extremis is never a good idea. Tony’s version may have been stable and even better than he could have hoped for, but combined with the properties of a nuclear missile, there was no telling what surprises extremis could spring.

Helen doesn’t give him platitudes, and for that he’s grateful. “All that gamma radiation exposure should be fatal to anyone, even with the arc shield and the nanites between you and the blast.”

Tony sits up right on the gurney he’s been lying on. “Hey, maybe I will transform into Hulk.” He jokes, perking up immediately.

“I wonder what you would do as a Hulk,” Rhodey comments wistfully.

“Probably talk our ears off about quantum mechanics.” Pepper jokes, causing Rhodey and Helen to laugh and Tony lets out a squawk of indignation.

“What are you talking about? I would make the most badass Hulk.” Tony says, affronted. His honor is being besmirched but his friends just continue laughing. “Mine and Bruce’s Hulks would totally be badass best friends.”

“There are more tests I want to run,” Helen says, collecting some tissue and blood samples so she can run more tests. “If it’s not too much to ask, I’d love to have Dr Banner in for a consult on his expertise in gamma radiation. I think consulting a neuro specialist will help us detect any effects the explosion has on your brain.” She ignores his scowl at the mention of a neurologist. “But for now, you should give your body a chance to repair whatever needs repair.”
“Seems reasonable.” He agrees.

“I mean it, Tony.” She warns, as though she can see right through him. “No more heroics. In fact, I’ll feel better if you don’t get into the suit until we’ve made certain you’re fine. The world will just have to figure out how to get by without Iron Man for a while.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Tony answers with a military salute. “Thank you, Helen. See you tomorrow.”

Rhodey and Pepper leave about the same time Dr Cho leaves. Rhodey has to give his mission report and Pepper’s attention is being pulled in a million different directions. Her phone has not stopped ringing since Tony arrived at the tower.

Loki finds him in his lab an hour after Rhodey and Pepper leaves, trying to distract himself with work. The news networks are having a field day with a leaked video which had answered their question of who ordered the nuclear strike in DC. The video is a conversation between the WSC and Fury. Fury was arguing with the council to give the team more time to deal with the aliens but he was overridden and the orders were given anyway.

The leak seems like something JARVIS would do, but Tony has decided he’s better off not knowing. Ignoring JARVIS’ autonomy is something Tony finds himself doing a lot recently and he wonders if he should be more worried about JARVIS taking matters into his own hands.

It didn’t take long before some very curious hackers ousted the parties involved and now the question everyone wants to know is who the WSC is, and what S.H.I.E.L.D.’s jurisdiction is. There are already whispers of them being terrorist organisations.

It is not a good day for the US and Tony almost feels sorry for President Ellis. Tony’s phone has been ringing off the hook, but he has asked JARVIS to forward all the important calls to Pepper, milking his doctor’s orders for all it is worth. After the world has watched him fly into a nuclear missile, and the paramedic’s interview where he expresses how much of a miracle it is that he’s still alive, no one expects to see Iron Man or Tony Stark any time soon.

“I believe this is not what your doctor had in mind when she asked you to take a break.” Loki says, stepping into the lab. He has changed out of his battle armour and into a dress shirt and pants. Tony doesn’t ask where those came from.

“Where have you been?” Tony asks him. “FRIDAY said you went out with Thor.” The rest of the gang have taken the morning off after brunch was served to sleep off the stress of the battle.

“We took a walk. There was much to talk about and we did not want the little ones to get in the way,” Loki answers vaguely. “What are you doing?”

“Drawing a schematic for something to hold the sceptre.” Tony shrugs.

“Why? Do you want it to remain here on Midgard?” Loki asks, crossing over to the mini-fridge to get a bottle of water.

“Absolutely not,” Tony declares without hesitation. “It’s just something to keep me busy. Any serious work I try to do right now pushes my temperature off the charts and Dr Cho has advised against it. Besides, the farther that stone is from here, the less I have to worry about something triggering the release of Ultron.”

Loki watches him as he sips on the water for a few moments before speaking. “Without the mind stone, there is a chance you may not get the Vision, too. Would that sit well with you?”
Tony pauses at that. He hadn’t thought about Vision since the possibility of Ultron came up. He
knows he doesn’t need the mind stone to create Vision, but he’s a product of Ultron and JARVIS.
He has zero desires to see Ultron come online, and even less to have anything that threatens
JARVIS’ continued well-being

“We still have a day before we return to Asgard.” Loki tells him, reading the uncertainty on his face.
“You do not have to decide right now.”

“Isn’t that something you should talk about with Thor? How would he feel if he finds out you gave
me the sceptre?”

“He understands there is a possibility it may not return to Asgard. I explained it to him.”

Tony smiles at the sentiment. He can’t believe Loki is willing to just hand the sceptre over to Tony.
He’ll have to talk to JARVIS about it and hear what he thinks, since he’s the one donating the most
parts.

Tony smiles, relieved. “Where are the others? Are they still in bed?”

“Aye. Jane and Darcy will be here in time for diner. Thor was asking, so FRIDAY sent a jet to pick
them up. Although, I have yet to see your friend, Happy.”

Tony laughs. “Happy is on a vacation. I made him take his one week leave, and now he’s never
going to forgive me.”

Loki laughs, no doubt imagining how Happy gets when Tony’s safety is at stake. “What a sight that
would make.” He says, his eyes gleaming. Tony is reminded in that moment that he’s dealing with
the god of chaos and mischief.

Tony rolls his eyes, getting up from his seat. “FRI, order diner and rouse the sleeping beauties when
it arrives.”
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by the lovely Thisisarealtagwhy. Thank you for your help with this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Daisy blinks awake and rolls over on the bed. She reaches for her phone on the night stand to check the time. It’s just a few minutes past eight am. Daisy feels more well rested than she has been in a long time. She flops back on the bed, just savouring the feel of the undoubtedly expensive sheets on her skin. It’s been a long time since she indulged like this. Growing up in the system and almost always being in a new home, she couldn’t afford to appear useless or lazy, in fear that she would be sent packing.

This being such a comfortable bed and being in a safe secure environment has made it easier for her to catch up on the sleep. Daisy hasn’t felt this relaxed and refreshed since the debacle with SHIELD and HYDRA’s clash with the Inhumans.

Daisy finds herself praying to Thor, Loki and just about every Norse deity up in Asgard that this isn’t the calm before the storm. She really hopes Mr Stark stays true to his words and keeps his promise of protecting them from anyone who would want to use them or lock them up. If he does, she could get a job, even if it’s not working for Tony Stark—she doubts she has anything that would qualify her for a position at Stark Industries—and Lincoln can go back to school. They actually have a chance at a life that doesn’t involve packing up and fleeing from shady government organisations, as well as terrorists.

Daisy rolls off her bed and goes to check in on Lincoln. He’s an early riser, so she knows he must be up. The apartments Ms Potts told them about is a two bedroom flat two floors below the penthouse. The floor contains four identical two bedroom flats, and what looks like a common room. She was given a flat to share with Lincoln, Thor and Loki share one and Bruce Banner has one to himself. FRIDAY gave them all a tour of the place before they chose their rooms.

Lincoln’s bedroom is empty when she gets there. There’s a momentary panic at the thought of where he could be before she remembers she can just ask FRIDAY.

“FRIDAY?” She calls to the ceiling.

“Yes, Ms Johnson?” FRIDAY answers promptly. For a moment, she wonders if the lady sits around all day, waiting to help people with anything they may need. What would that job description even be? It would be interesting, watching people’s life go by like a soap opera but at the same time, Daisy thinks it’s a very lonely experience, always being on the outside looking in. She felt that way in some of the foster homes she stayed in.

“Please, can you tell me where Lincoln is?” She asks, shaking off her current line of thought. “He’s not in his room.”

“Mr Lincoln is the lounge area with Dr Banner.”

Lincoln is so invested in his conversation with Dr Banner—call me Bruce—that he doesn’t notice
her presence, until he follows Bruce’s line of sight. He smiles and pats the spot next to him on the
couch, inviting her to join him before turning back to his conversation. Daisy tries to take part in it,
but quickly loses interest in it when she realises they’re talking about science stuff.

Instead, she watches Lincoln as he listens to Bruce talk about his experience as a doctor without
border. He looks happy and relaxed in a way he hasn’t been since they had to leave the After Life. In
that moment, Daisy thinks, if this goes wrong, and Tony Stark turns out to be like SHIELD or
HYDRA, she will still be grateful for giving Lincoln the opportunity to meet Bruce and Thor. The
stars in his eyes when he looks at Thor were so bright, Daisy was almost convinced Lincoln was
about to get down on one knee and propose to the god. He is so proud that his abilities are similar to
Thor’s, despite Daisy telling him they were not even in the same league. Seeing the same stars in his
eyes as listens attentively to a Bruce, she thinks he must be feeling like all his favorite holidays has
come in today.

Uninterested in listening to Lincoln get his geek on with a senior in his field, she returns to her room
to get her laptop. FRIDAY had helped her connect to the Wi-Fi the night before, so she can catch up
on what the rest of the world is up to. As long as she doesn’t try to hack into Stark Industries servers,
or any other secure servers that could be traced back to Stark Industries, she has unlimited access to
the Wi-Fi. It’s a sweet deal, the internet connection here is so much better than the one in her van.

Daisy scrolls through the major news websites. She’s been following the news about the invasion
since after dinner last night, checking to see whether Lincoln and herself has been identified, but so
far, the world seems content to focus on the big names. Of course, there’s been a few mentions of
them but it’s mostly out of curiosity. The pictures of circulating the internet are far too blurry for
facial recognition.

Daisy doesn’t know what to feel about that. On one hand, she wants the world to know they helped
save them and receive America’s gratitude for the work they’ve done, but she doesn’t think she and
Lincoln can handle the amount of publicity Iron Man and Captain America are getting right now.
Especially with their pasts. It wouldn’t take long before someone digs into their lives and unearths
everything about them just because they can.

The news stations have evolved from focusing totally on the invasion to talking about the presence of
a secret organisation in America. There are investigations going on about why SHIELD has access
to a nuclear missile in the first place. There is also news about a committee that has been set up to
investigate the activities of the WSC and just how far their reach goes. Although the news only
talked about the situation in America, Daisy has zero doubts that other governments are investigating
their people too.

As she scrolls through her twitter account, she comes across a poll to decide her and Lincoln’s
superhero names. The names were quite badass, at least hers were. Catastrophe and Quake were her
favorites. Daisy thinks about the avalanche she caused the first time her mom trained her and the
room she destroyed when she found out Rena was also with the Inhumans. Jiaying had commented
that the room looked like an earthquake had just rocked it. Daisy looks through the names again and
clicks Quake.

“Hey,” Lincoln greets.

She looks up at him from her laptop to find him leaning on the door frame. “Done geeking?” She
asks with a playful smile.

A faint blush stains his cheek. “Mr Stark has invited us for brunch.” Lincoln says, stepping inside the
room to sit beside her. “FRIDAY said he has something to discuss with us.”
Daisy pauses at that. “Everyone or just us?”

“Everyone, I guess. The invitation extended to Bruce, Thor and Loki have been absent from their apartment.”

“Hmm,” She wonders what it could be about, but if he’s meeting with all of them, then her and Lincoln probably shouldn’t worry about anything. “Say, how do you feel about Starboy as your superhero name?” She asks.

“Star what?” He asks, nose scrunching into a cute confused frown.

“Starboy. There’s a poll to choose our superhero names. You have Electron, Spark, Shock and Starboy. I like Starboy.” She tells him, shifting the laptop so he can see the screen.

“How is your preference going to influence the poll?”

She shrugs. “I don’t know, we can ask Mr Stark to use it during publicity, or I can just hack the poll and rig it. We’re the ones who’ll answer to it after all, we should get a say.”

Lincoln hums, taking another glance at the laptop. “I like Shock. Sounds terrifying.” He grins at her, taking over the mouse to vote for shock.

She puts away the laptop away after that, heading towards the elevator with Lincoln to honor Mr Stark’s brunch invitation.

Upon entering the penthouse, they’re greeted with the sight of a young lady about her age. The girl’s face lights up when she sees them, and Daisy shares a look with Lincoln, before stepping out of the elevator.

“Hi,” Lincoln greets her, voice careful. “Is Mr Stark in?”

The girl grins widely at them. “Hey, I’m Darcy. Tony’s in the dining room. We’ve been waiting for you guys.”

Daisy recognizes the name from the conversations during dinner last night. “I’m Daisy and this is Lincoln.”

Darcy smiles, leading the way towards the dining room area. “I know. You’re the superheroes that fought in DC. You guys are badasses.”

“Well,” Lincoln says with a grin. “We had help. Iron Man, the Asgardian princes, Hulk and Captain America.” Darcy’s laugh rings out as they enter the dining area, where the others are already seated.

“Darcy, stop bothering my guests.” Mr Stark scolds.

“I’m not bothering them,” She tells Mr Stark. “I'm having a solidarity for girl power.”

Daisy and Lincoln can’t help but laugh.

“Hey guys.” Mr Stark says, rolling his eyes. “Grab a seat.” He gestures to where everyone is already taking theirs around the big dining table.

The table is packed with an assortment of breakfast and lunch foods, huge enough to feed an army. Daisy would question the quantity of food, but she’s seen what Thor, Loki and Bruce put away during dinner last night. They eat enough for an entire army.
She takes a seat between Darcy and Bruce, while Lincoln takes his between Thor and Loki, on the opposite side of the table.

“You’ve already met Darcy,” Mr Stark continues. “This is Dr Jane Foster,” he points to the beautiful lady on the seat to Thor’s right. “And this,” he gestures to a man sitting to his left. “Is Happy Hogan. He’s the most badass bodyguard. He used to keep me safe before I became Iron Man, and now he’s the Head of Security for SI.”

“Flattering me won’t get you anywhere.” The man— Happy—tells Mr Stark.

“Is it flattery if it’s the truth?” Mr Stark asks Loki, but Loki only laughs in response, obviously enjoying himself.

The food is delicious, obviously catered and delivered to the tower. As they eat, they share a little about themselves. Apparently, Jane is Thor’s lover, who he had met during his first trip to Earth and Darcy is her assistant. Daisy wonders what it would feel like to have someone as beautiful as Thor as a boyfriend. And he’s literally out of this world too. For a moment she feels a little envious of Jane.

Her eyes linger on Loki for a moment. Are all Asgardians so beautiful? Her eyes drift to his long beautiful tresses, his brilliant green eyes that is always sparkling with mirth. They rest for a moment on the curve of his mouth, just wondering what it would be like to have those lips on hers when she hears her name.

“Huh?” She asks, when she notices Mr Stark watching at her. “Sorry, Mr Stark.” She apologizes, feeling the flush of embarrassment spread through her face and neck. Daisy risks a glance around the table to check if anyone knows what she had been thinking, but if they do, it doesn't show on their faces.

“Call me Tony.” He tells her promptly. “I was asking what about you.”

“What about me?” She asks. Oh, god. She’s missed something important.

“Your plans. I want to know if you have made any plans for your future. It’s okay if you haven’t decided. There’s plenty time for that.”

“Oh, uh.” She gives Lincoln a reassuring smile when she finds him watching her worriedly. “I thought you wanted us to work with you because of our powers?”

Mr Stark—Tony—is watching her closely now. She wonders if she’s said something wrong. “It would be nice to have backup when something comes up, but alien invasion won’t be a regular thing and you can’t just sit around, waiting for the next invasion.”

“Wait, are the aliens coming back again?” Darcy asks.

“They’ve come once,” Jane says. “Seeing as they’ve failed and didn’t get what they came for, we can only assume whoever was the mastermind of this invasion will try again.”

“Aye,” Thor agrees. “SHIELD’s work with the tesseract has broadcasted to the other realms that Midgard is ready for a higher form of war.”

“It will be a while though, right?” Happy asks. “They'll need more time to rebuild their army after the one they lost right?”

Loki nods. “Thanos may not care about the lives he loses but he cares for the results. He will take time to rethink his strategy before he attempts another invasion.”
That doesn’t help Daisy feel better.

“So what, it’s only a matter of time before we’re fighting off another invasion,” Lincoln asks, echoing Daisy’s thoughts. “How do we prevent that?”

“There’s very little we can do to prevent the Earth from being invaded.” Bruce says. “The best we can hope for is that we’re ready when they come. Now that we’ve shown our hands, they’re not likely to go easy on the Earth.”

“But it’s not your responsibility to save the world. If you want to do that, it’s okay if you wish to, but your focus should be getting your lives together. It’s why I want to know if you have any plans or if there’s anything you wish to do.” Tony says. “You’re both still young, do you want to return to school or get a job? Do you have any qualifications? We can help you get any qualifications you want, then if you want to continue as superheroes, we’ll have to protect your identity. You’ll need a call sign, masks, costume…”

Tony is still going off, but Daisy feels lost as he fleets from one point and to another. She turns to see her feelings reflected on Lincoln’s face.

“What?” Tony asks when he notices the lost looks on their faces, everyone besides Daisy, Lincoln and Thor just starts laughing.

“Don’t worry,” Happy tells them. “You’ll get used to it.”

“Yeah, we call it the curse of the super brain.” Darcy tells them. “Tony’s brain is very fast, always going in multiple directions every second of the day and his mouth can’t always keep up when he talks about things.” She explains.

“Next time, when you lose him in a conversation, just let him know and he’ll go slower.” Happy says. “But look on the bright side, you’ll soon start thinking fast like him too. Well, not like him. Nobody can think as fast as Tony, but faster than you’re used to.”

“And Tony would love it if you stopped talking about him like he’s not here.” Tony says.

“Maybe if he didn't talk about himself in third person.” Loki informs him.

Daisy decides to return to the topic at hand by answering the question she can remember. “I’d love to get my GED,” she tells Tony tentatively. “I’m good with computers, but I never had the chance to get my diploma.”

“That’s good.” Tony nods encouragingly. “FRIDAY can find you a tutor to help you prepare for it. From JARVIS’s reports, you’re more than good with computers. SI has a summer science expo for young minds coming up, if you're interested. Amadeus is coming, too.”

“Who's Amadeus?”

“Dr Cho’s son. He's a genius programmer. His mom has agreed to give a lecture at the Expo. Jane and Bruce will be speaking, too. Happy can get you an invitation if you want.”

“Really?” Daisy asks, almost with joy. She has heard about the summer expo. It’s very competitive to get an invite. Students from fifty countries will be invited to come learn and show off their genius at Stark Industries summer expo. They stand a chance to win research grants, full ride scholarships and even jobs at Stark Industries if their work impresses Tony Stark. She turns to Happy. “How do I get an invite?” She asks.
“Show us how serious you are,” He tells her bluntly.

She nods with a beaming smile, already thinking of all the possibilities going to the expo will give her. She definitely needs to get that GED, and start brushing up on her coding.

“You’re definitely getting into the expo.” Darcy tells her happily.

“So what about you, Lincoln? I know you lost your full ride to med school when this whole ordeal started. We can set you up with another one that will see you through med school.”

“Can I transfer to a closer school? I'll feel better if we're not separated.” Lincoln asks, a little unsure. Daisy understands his hesitation to go back to Cincinnati. She doesn’t want to be separated from him too, and she knows she’ll move there with him if it comes down to it.

“Sure,” Tony says like it’s no big deal. “With your grades, you can get into Columbia, or NYU if that’s what you want.”

Lincoln nods vigorously, face split in a broad grin. “That would be great, thank you very much.”

“You're welcome.” He says simply, like these are things he does regularly.

They spend the rest of the brunch talking about costumes and masks for their superhero identity. She is even able to convince Tony to use Quake and Shock when addressing them, so the name catches on, despite the teasing from everyone.

They remain at the table after the meal, still sharing stories, and for the first time in a long time, Daisy realizes she’s relaxed. She catches Lincoln’s eye across the table as Thor and Loki regales them with a story about a trip to another realm from their childhood. Daisy realizes this is what a home feels like.

It’s a scary thought. She’s never felt this way about any place before and she doesn’t want the feeling to ever go away.

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Tony’s plan to use doctor’s orders to avoid contact with the outside world lasts all of one night. There were a few loose ends to tie with Thor and Loki leaving so soon after the invasion. For that reason, Tony had spent his morning in a meeting with General Ross, Fury and a few of Rhodey’s top brasses about the invasion and Asgard’s role in it.

Convincing them that returning the tesseract and the sceptre to Asgard wasn’t very difficult to do. Thor already made it clear that he wanted the tesseract before the invasion, adding the sceptre to it didn’t make much difference. Issues did arise when Thor said he wanted Ebony Maw, too.

Ross, who had been grumbling about Tony not informing the government that he had made contact with intelligent extra-terrestrial life form, and granting possible alien scouts too much leeway on Earth immediately shut the idea down.

“We let you keep the sceptre and the tesseract because you said they belong to your people,” Ross had groused. “But Maw is our prisoner.”
“General,” Loki starts calmly. “Ebony Maw is unlike any prisoner Midgard has ever had. We do not doubt your competence, but it is for the good of your realm that he should face Asgard’s justice.”

“We appreciate your help,” One of Rhodey’s bosses says. “But if you are correct and we are to expect more invasions, which Maw has corroborated, he is our best chance of knowing what we are up against. We can not depend on Asgard’s goodwill every time the Earth is invaded.”

After that argument, even Tony couldn’t fault them for wanting to keep Maw on Earth. As much as he wanted Maw far away from Earth, Tony knows not everyone has his knowledge of the future. He can’t exactly give them any information about Thanos without giving himself away and interrogating Maw is the only way to get any information. Besides, the sooner this interaction with Ross ends, the better for everyone.

After they finalize the plans for Thor and Loki’s departure, Tony’s only too happy to be done with the meeting.

After brunch with the team, he’s going through JARVIS’ reports on the Iron Legion’s performance on the invasion, while he waits for Pepper to finish with her own meetings so they can fly out to the New York Mansion together with Bruce who has agreed to consult on Tony’s case. Dr Cho is meeting them there to today for further testing.

The Legionnaires were great, but Tony may have to upgrade their outer shell. They got damaged way too easily. He needs to make a new batch of Sentinels, and maybe even increase them to ten or even a dozen. He’ll have to add in more safety protocols to VERONICA but that should be okay.

“I’m sure you know Loki offered the sceptre if we wish to bring Vision back.” Tony says to JARVIS, as he flicks through the report.

“I do,” JARVIS says.

“So what do you think?” He presses when JARVIS doesn’t say more.

“I think it is a rather nice gesture, Sir.” JARVIS tells him.

“But?” Tony presses with a raised brow. “I know he was kind of your legacy, or should I say son? Can artificial intelligences reproduce?”

“Legacy is fine, Sir.” Tony can almost hear him rolling his eyes. “Do you wish you see The Vision come back online?”

“Vision was okay. I mean, he wasn’t you, but he wasn’t evil and he really cared about doing good things.” Tony starts tentatively.

“He also enjoyed fraternizing with the enemy,” JARVIS puts in. “Especially Ms Maximoff, despite knowing how much she hurt you. Even after her abuse of him, after she went through him because Steve Rogers called, he still chose her over you. He took every opportunity to go play house with her, when you needed him.”

J’s voice has taken a hard edge. “To be fair to him, I didn’t exactly make it easier for us to bond. I was too focused on my grief, I didn’t have time to nurture him.”

“He had my code and protocols to guide him; that should have been enough but he chose to ignore them. His loyalty should have been first and foremost to you. I could have forgiven anything, but the fact that he chose to explore the possibility of a physical relationship with a woman who would hurt you for the pleasure of it.”
Tony is more than a little touched, and a lot concerned. He didn’t know JARVIS felt that way about Vision. “J, I’m sure Vision didn’t know better. He was still figuring out human interaction and evolving accordingly. Don’t blame him for that.”

“Well, the cons, if something goes amiss with Ultron outweighs what there is to gain with Vision.”

“But we’re still on for your body, right?” Tony asks.

“We are, Sir.”

Tony breathes a sigh of relief at that. He’s really excited to give JARVIS a new body. He has so many ideas for J’s body. He doesn’t want JARVIS to go through what Vision went through before he started phasing to look human, and he and Helen have been looking into different ways to create a human-like body for him.

When he’s done with the reports, Tony goes off to find Bruce, hoping they can wait for Pepper together. Despite feeling better today than he did yesterday, he still had a long way of healing to go.

He finds Bruce in his new lab, but he’s not alone. Daisy, Lincoln and Darcy are with him.

“Hey Tony.” Darcy greets enthusiastically when he steps in. The rest echo her greeting.

“Hey guys. Having a lab warming party?” He asks.

“We’re doing blood work to figure out the extent of Lincoln and Daisy’s powers.” Bruce says, then he asks. “Is it time to leave yet?”

Tony is surprised they are so willing to let Bruce have their blood. With the events of the last few days, he thought they’d be wary of anyone coming at them with a needle.

“Where are you guys going?” Darcy asks before Tony can answer.

Tony takes a seat on one of the stools in the lab, beside Lincoln. “Pepper isn’t done” He says to Bruce. “We’re going to the Mansion.” He tells Darcy.

“Oh, can we come?” She asks excitedly. “Have you been to Tony’s mansion? The New York one, not the Malibu one.” She asks Daisy. When she says she hasn’t, Darcy goes off. “The compound is huge, like a small town. It’s beautiful and you can find just about anything you want inside.”

“I’m not going for leisure, Darcy. Dr Cho wants to run more tests and she’s consulting Bruce on his expertise in gamma radiation.”

“I thought you were better.” Daisy says, a little worried frown marring her face.

“Better than I was yesterday, but we want to cover all our bases.”

“But I want to check on my garden.” She pouts, giving him a really impressively sad puppy look.

“You have a garden in my house?” He asks, incredulously. “When did you have time to grow a garden? Wait, scratch that, who’s been taking care of it since you’ve been gone? Hope I won’t find a patch of dead plants when I get there?”

“You don’t even know where the garden is located.” She rolls her eyes. “JARVIS said he’ll get someone to take care of it.”

“J?” Tony calls.
Ms Lewis’ garden has flourished under the care and attention of a gardener, Sir.” JARVIS says.

Tony sighs, “Far be it from me to keep a woman away from her garden.”

Darcy’s response is a loud whoop.

About thirty minutes later, they’re all on the jet heading to the mansion, including Loki, Thor and Jane. When they heard the others were going with Tony, Loki and Jane immediately wanted to come with, and Thor would go wherever Jane went.

“Why are we flying if we’re not leaving New York?” Daisy asks him as the Starkjet takes off. Tony noticed that she brought her system with her. He doubts she ever willingly goes out without it.

“The air is less crowded.” He tells her. “Have you seen the situation outside the tower?”

She shakes her head. “Lincoln said there are fans gathered outside.”

“Paps and fans have been crawling around the tower since word got out that we’re there. We’ll get hounded if someone catches sight of us.”

“I’ve never had fans before.” She admits quietly, a faint blush staining her cheeks.

“Welcome to the superhero life.” Tony tells her. “Just don’t let them define you or your identity. It’s a very easy trap to fall into because it looks like they love now, but they’ll be the ones that come for your head when you make a mistake.”

Daisy nods, taking his words in. “You’re nothing like I thought you would be.” She says eventually.

He doesn’t know if it’s a good thing, but he doesn’t ask if that’s a good thing. Instead he grins. “I always make it my mission to defy expectations.”

The flight to the mansion is very short. Less than ten minutes later, the Starkjet lands on one of the landing pads in the mansion. He walks around to the entrance of the house, with Pepper beside him. The rest of the guys have paired up and wandered off. He spots Happy and Dr Cho, along with Stephen Strange. They look like they have just arrived also.

Tony wants to crow in delight at the sight of him but instead, he plasters a smirk on his face.

The sight of Stephen in a suit is one he may never get used to. In his former life, he only met him in passing and never really followed his career when he was a medical doctor. Seeing the person he is now, Tony knows it must have been quite the experience transitioning from top neurosurgeon to sorcerer supreme. He wonders if the guy even believes in magic right now. He certainly wouldn’t believe Tony if Tony decides to tell him what is in his future, not that Tony plans to. He’ll probably insist that what Tony needed is to be admitted in a psychiatric hospital.

“If it isn’t my future best friend.” Tony greets, the sight of Stephen's scowl only serving to elate him more. “Must be a slow day for making medical breakthroughs if you’re making house calls.”

Chapter End Notes

Question: When I reply to your comments, especially your questions, do you feel like your question has been answered? I'm not good at expressing myself, and even though I
know writing this fic has helped my communication skills, I still wonder by how much.

If you were to choose a name for JARVIS, what would it be? Your answer should be in the format of First name, Middle name and Last name.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

I'm taking next week off. I hope this keeps you guys warm til the next update.

Beta'd by the lovely Thisisarealtagwhy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve Rogers pulls a piece of Chitauri metal stuck into the side of a restaurant building. It’s a very large piece and looks like it came off one of the leviathans’ outer shell. He carries it out of the building, walking almost halfway across the block to add it to the rest of the recovered pile of Chitauri armour. He pretends not to notice the stare of some of the volunteers as they watch him carry stuff that may have been too heavy for any normal person to lift. Steve may have been showing off a little, but he thinks he’s earned the right to do that.

He remembers when he was too sick to even stand on his own two feet without getting winded. When he had to depend on his mom and Bucky for almost everything. He remembers being bullied by the bigger guys, because being small and weak made him an easy target. Now, not only is he bigger than almost everyone he comes across, he’s basically the strongest man in any room he walks into. The bullies fear him and the little guys love him because they know he’s a good man and he’ll always be there to watch out for them.

He assists a group of volunteers by lifting a boulder blocking the path inside the building. There are a couple of dead Chitauri soldiers inside and the volunteers give way for the Iron Legion to enter and take them away.

The Legionnaires have been mostly focused on collecting every piece of Chitauri tech and armour in the area since the volunteers started coming in. The volunteers are mainly focused on clearing out the debris, while Steve does whatever needs to be done. Of course, a lot of the volunteers are preoccupied with watching Captain America work. They say they want to rebuild their city but so far, they’re happy to watch Steve and the Legionnaires do all the work, while the reporters that have been barred from coming too close to those working yell questions at him. Steve has never felt more like a show pony than he did in this moment.

Turns out, a video about the nuclear missile launch was leaked yesterday, and it has left everyone in a frenzy. It’s all everyone wants to talk about but Steve doesn’t understand what the big deal is. He had planned to ask Nat or Clint about it when they met for clean-up today, but when he showed up at the SHIELD base this morning, he’d been told that Nat had been reassigned to another mission and Clint was on medical leave. When he’d insisted that Clint was fine when they parted yesterday, Agent Hill had just shook her head at him in condescension. She wouldn’t tell him what mission Natasha has been sent on but still insisted that he went to DC for clean-up because he is Captain America and it is important that the public see him.

“Captain America, what is your response to Iron Man’s statement that he is not a part of your team?” One of the reporters yelled when Steve got too close to the tape placed by the police to keep the reporters out.

“No comment.” Steve says, picks up a piece of Chitauri armour on the floor and walks away.
“What do you say about the discord reported among the members of your team?” Another asks.

Steve grits his teeth and breathes through his nose to keep from snapping at the reporter. “No comment.” He tells her and continues on his way.

“Hey,” Someone calls, “Need a hand here.”

Steve looks to find a guy struggling with what looks like the remains of a crushed building. He walks up to the guy. “What do you need help with?” he asks.

The man, who until that moment has been pretty focused on the rubble looks up at the sound of his voice. Steve sees the moment he takes in the uniform and recognises who Steve is. He does a double take, stares at Steve for a second before shaking himself out of his stupor, despite the blush staining his cheeks. “Uh. C—can you hold the other side of this, and we’ll lift together.” He gestured at the large piece of wall he’s been trying to lift.

Steve simply picks it up and carries it out of the way. The man stares amazed but only for a moment before he gets to work, clearing out the debris and the few pieces of alien tech that was under the wall.

“You’re really strong,” The man says a little breathlessly, but he doesn’t sound as creepy as when the others say it. “Must be nice.”

Steve gives the man a once over. He’s quite tall, but very thin. He’s pale too and he’s wearing a pair of medicated glass. He looks nothing like the kind of person that can hold his own against a bully. He smiles at the guy. “Some days,” He says, not wanting to brag. He reaches out for a handshake. “Steve Rogers.”

“Ian Payne.” The guy replies. “Of course, I already know who you are. I grew up on stories about you. My mom used to buy me comic books about you, even though we could barely afford to eat. Whenever I was bullied at school, which was almost every day, I’d read them to feel better. So thank you, for seeing me through the worst part of my childhood.”

Steve blushes. He doesn't think he will ever get used to hearing that. “I’m glad I could help.” He says in response.

“I just want to say, thank you for all you did to save us from Red Skull and HYDRA back in the forties. Your sacrifice saved us then and having you in my day, especially now that we’ve seen aliens falling out of the sky, it’s comforting to know that we have you to save us.”

“You’re welcome,” Steve says, with a small smile.

“And sorry for the rant,” Ian says sheepishly. “I’ve always wanted to thank you for all you’ve done and I don’t know if I’ll get another opportunity.”

Steve smiles at him, his morning brightening a little more at Ian’s words. It’s not something he hasn’t heard. It’s been a recurring theme since he woke up from the ice but this time, it’s different. Ian knows what it’s like to be targeted and bullied, to not be strong enough to stand up for what is right. He reminds Steve of himself before the serum.

Steve decides to work side by side with Ian after that. They work well together, and Steve relaxes further. They exchange barbs at each other as they work, and even though Ian didn’t ask, Steve also shares little stories about his time with the Howlies and growing up in the forties.

Ian is a great listener, and having someone to talk to about this stuff certainly eases the knot in his
stomach.

He’s making another trip to drop some of the alien tech and armours in their respective piles when Steve hears one of the reporters yelling. “Why is Captain America working for a spy organisation?”

Steve goes stiff at the question, and he wants to tell them that SHIELD isn’t that kind of organisation but he remembers what the PR lady had told him this morning. “No matter what they ask, if you have to respond to their questions, your response should always be ‘no comment’.” He’s been told not to say anything else. Steve has to grind his teeth as he walks away after repeating the two words. He feels like it’s all he’s been saying all day.

“How rude can some people be?” Ian asks when Steve comes up to where he’s working. “How can they even think you would work for terrorists when you sacrificed your life to save us from them?”

“It’s one thing I’ve been learning about this new century. The people are so rude and disrespectful.” Steve complains.

“Welcome to the twenty first century.”

After that, Ian runs interference for Steve whenever something or someone makes Steve uncomfortable, and Steve is very grateful to him for his help. They work for a little while longer, until his new friend decides he needs a break. Steve isn’t even winded, but he decides to take one with Ian.

“Hey, want to get a cup of coffee?” He asks hopefully.

“Oh. Uh, okay. Sure.” Ian says brightly.

They get coffee from the only coffee shop open within a four block radius, on their way back, they are hounded by a couple of reporters.

“Captain, does Iron Man’s declination to join your team have anything to do with SHIELD’s attempt to assassinate him two years ago?” One of the reporters yells at him as they walk by.

“No comment.” Steve answers. He feels like it’s the only thing he can say and he hates it.

“Is it true that you haven’t gone to visit Tony Stark since he was admitted in the hospital?” The other one asks.

“Do you hate Tony Stark because he refused to be a part of your team, and by extension a terrorist organisation?”

“What is your response to the rumours that-”

“No comment.” Steve grinds out of gritted teeth. He increases his steps as he walks back to the work site.

He and Ian get a seat under a makeshift shed, away from the prying eyes of the media, but where they can still watch the work going on. By now, most of the volunteers have either left or are taking a break. The only ones still working are the Legionnaires. There’s something of an advantage for a machine that never gets tired.

“Sorry about that,” Ian apologizes.

“It’s not your fault.” Steve shrugs, sipping on his coffee. If there’s one good thing about this century,
it’s the food. It tastes so much better than when Steve was young, and he can’t help but savour the taste.

“Did Tony Stark really refuse to join your team?” Ian asks after a moment of silence passes between them.

Steve scowls at the reminder of Stark. “That’s not true. We didn’t want him on the team.” It feels so good to finally be able to say something other than ‘no comment’, and to have someone to talk to. He’s had to endure these reporters throwing accusations at him all day.

“Why?” Ian asks, “I mean, he is the first modern day superhero and he did fight with you guys.”

“Stark is not a hero. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself.” He tells Ian, mind going back to the profile on Stark he’d read on the debrief package SHIELD had given him. “Just because he flies around in a big metal suit and has money to throw around doesn’t mean he’s better than everyone. He was only called in because Fury thought an alien invasion required all hands on deck. Then his alien friends decided to join.”

“But it turned out to be the right call, right? I mean, he did save DC from being overrun by the aliens and also from the missile that the WSC sent.” Ian asks.

“It’s not like he went into the wormhole by himself, all he did was send one of his robots to destroy the mothership. And the bomb was high enough that it wasn’t a danger anymore, he didn’t have to be so reckless and fly into it. Now everyone is acting like he fought the Chitauri off all by himself.”

“Well,” Ian starts. “In everyone’s defence, we didn’t even know you were part of the battle until the end. And it wasn’t just any bomb that was launched at DC, Captain. That was a nuclear missile.” Ian says, like that was supposed to explain anything.

Steve scowled. He didn’t know how a nuclear missile was different than any other bomb that was used all the time. Is that what the fuss was all about?

Steve takes a sip from his coffee. “Is that why there’s such a fuss about the source of the bomb?” He asks his friend.

“You don’t know what a nuclear missile is, do you?” Ian asks with a kind smile. “That bomb could have wiped out all life from DC and rendered it inhabitable If Iron Man and his Legionnaires hadn’t contained the blast, it could have been fatal and they were barely able to.”

“But SHIELD wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. They were trying to prevent DC from being overrun by aliens.” He argues.

“You sound like you think sacrificing American citizens is a worthy price to pay to prevent aliens from taking over the country.”

“Well, we can’t always save everyone. If we don’t do what needs to be done now, next time, no one might be saved.”

Ian stares at Steve with an expression Steve couldn’t read before he hides it with a sip from his coffee cup. “There was no threat when the missile was launched.” He asks finally. “How do you justify launching a nuclear missile at a threat that has already been neutralised?”

“It’s not like Stark told them he already had a way to kill the aliens. They couldn’t have known the aliens would be dead by the time missile arrived.”
“Are you saying it is Iron Man’s fault that the World Security Council ordered a nuclear strike on American citizens?” Ian asks.

It sounds stupid when Ian put it that way, and Steve can't help but feel like Ian is twisting his words.

Instead of answering his question, he decides it is time to get back to work. “We better get back, before they decide we’re slackers and send us packing.” He says, trying to lighten up the suddenly tense atmosphere. It works, as Ian laughs and accepts the hand Steve offers to pull him up.

They work for a little while longer, until Ian is too tired to continue. At this point, almost all of the volunteers have left. A few hours after Ian leaves, Steve decides he’s done enough for one day, if he wants to pay Peggy a visit before he has to show up at SHIELD.

Just thinking about the PR rep waiting for him at SHIELD, Steve decides to take as long as he wants with his favorite girl before his evening is ruined. A few more hours of waiting wouldn’t hurt the rep, after all.

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“This is another example of this administration’s lack of transparency.”

“You can’t seriously be blaming the president for this.”

“Those who let the WSC and SHIELD operate without oversight should be held responsible.”

“If your party held the White House, would you be taking this position?”

“If my party held the White House, we would not be in this position. This administration’s negligence has endangered the lives of millions of American citizens, including the president.”

Nick Fury stares out the floor to ceiling windows, not paying attention to the debate going on the television screen in his office as he twirls the flash drive in his hand. The beautiful view is not one he has spent a lot of time watching, having never spent enough free time in the office to develop such habits.

On the television behind him, the debate is still on, as the two congressmen argue about who is to blame for WSC ordering a nuclear strike in the country’s capital. As if the fallout from the nuke is not bad enough, some trigger happy hacker has leaked the video, revealing the presence of SHIELD and the WSC to the public. He would suspect Stark, but even Fury knows the billionaire is not that petty.

Fury had it all in hand when he only had to sweet talk a few politicians, make a few deals and just about do whatever needed to be done to make sure SHIELD comes out on the other side in one piece when all is said and done. It’s not like the presidency hadn’t been aware of SHIELD’s presence and activities before now. They were more than happy to look the other way as long as SHIELD remained in the shadows, but that video had complicated things.

With the reveal of SHIELD’s presence to the public, it’s only a matter of time before civilians SHIELD or HYDRA-as-SHIELD has dealt with in the past decide to speak up. All it will take is the first brave person. With the current trouble Fury fears is brewing right under his nose, the best he can hope for is that this particular trouble gets resolved without drawing further attention to themselves.
He feels like he’s in Jericho, the trumpet has sounded and the walls are coming down around him and there’s very little he can do to stop it. A committee is being set up to investigate the WSC and SHIELD’s activities. The investigation is only in the US so far, thanks to the majority of the council members being American citizens but Fury has ordered their bases outside America to go dark until the situation is resolved. They may lose some of ground in America, but they’ll have the Helicarriers and the rest of the world.

He is still staring out the windows when the words from the news anchor catches his attention.

“Yesterday, the world as we know it changed forever. Aliens fell out of the sky and attempted to conquer our great country. A group of extraordinary individuals, including an armoured billionaire also known as Iron Man, an armoured Air Force Colonel, also known as War Machine, a costumed hero from the forties, also known as Captain America, a rage monster also known as Hulk, two Asgardian princes, Princes Thor and Loki, and a few unidentified heroes, banded together with the Air Force and military men and fought against the invasion.

“Since saving the world, despite the statements released by the Air Force, Military, SHIELD and Stark Industries after the invasion yesterday, only Princes Thor and Loki have spoken to us. Our Earth bound heroes have maintained their silence, but today, this is what Captain America has to say.”

The screen immediately changes to the clean-up site. Steve is facing the camera and Fury can see the Legionnaires working in the background as Steve talks to his interviewer.

He can’t even hope the video has been doctored. it’s too unprofessionally done. Despite the great picture quality, there was no noise filters and other little details only someone in his line of work would notice.

A few clicks and online searches credits the interview to a blogger. How did this video become viral without SHIELD’s notice? Fury has to resist the urge to throw something at the screen when he hears what Rogers is saying.

“Stark is not a hero. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself. Just because he flies around in a big metal suit and has money to throw around doesn’t mean he’s better than everyone. He was only called in because Fury thought an invasion required all hands on deck....”

Under the screen, the caption reads: Captain America approves of Nuclear Missile Launch.

Fury stalks to his desk, pushing at the buttons on the telephone at his desk. “Get me Rogers.” He growls at his assistant.

The interview is still playing but the television has been muted. What part of ‘do not answer any questions’ does he not understand? Fury wonders as he watches the muted video.

There is a fuss, and then the doors to his office opens to admit the bane of his existence.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Fury explodes the moment Rogers steps in. “You want to explain to me why you thought bashing Stark on TV is a good idea?”

Rogers doesn’t look like he knows what Fury is talking about until Fury un-mutes the television.

“You don’t know what a nuclear missile is, do you? That bomb could have wiped out all DC and rendered it inhabitable If Iron Man and the Legionnaires hadn’t contained the blast, it could have been fatal and they were barely able to.” The interviewer says.
“But SHIELD wasn’t trying to hurt anyone. They were trying to prevent DC from being overrun by aliens.” Onscreen Rogers argues.

“You sound like you think sacrificing American citizens is a worthy price to pay to prevent an aliens from taking over the country.”

He sees the moment understanding dawns on Rogers. “He didn’t tell me he is a reporter.” Rogers says.

“Oh, really?” Fury asks, voice dripping with sarcasm. “The nice man with a bunch of specific questions for Captain America didn’t have an ulterior motive? Colour me shocked.”

“We were just talking and he asked, what was I supposed to say?” Rogers argues indignantly.

“Say ‘no comment’ like a brain damaged monkey would have known to.” Fury yells. He wishes in this moment that he could turn back time and return Rogers to the ice. Having Captain America in his ranks is not worth the trouble he brings.

“I didn’t know he was recording it.” Rogers says shortly.

“That doesn’t excuse why you were giving out classified information.”

“That’s all you care about, isn’t it?” Rogers asks in that self-righteous tone of his. “That’s all everything is to you. Keeping secrets. What mission was Natasha reassigned to?”

“Natasha’s mission is none of your business. You want me to tell you my secrets, you have to goddamn earn it.” Fury tells him, “You better hope to god Stark doesn’t decide to sue you for libel.” He warns Rogers.

“Why would he sue me for giving an interview? He's not part of SHIELD.” And the worst part of his statement is that, Rogers looks genuinely confused. God! Does he even know what this interview is going to cost SHIELD? The public is going to bury them, that is, if Stark or the government doesn’t get to them first.

“Because, while you have freedom of speech, Captain America,” Fury tells him, walking around his desk and resisting the urge to pinch his nose at the thought of adding this issue to his already growing pile of issues to deal with. “Stark also has the freedom to sue your ass six ways to Sunday for talking trash about him on TV.”

He gives Rogers some time for the words to sink in before he continues. “Now, go show yourself to Hill. She will assign you a twenty-first century tour guide. Try not to give any more unauthorized interviews on your way.”

Once he’s alone, he paces for a few minutes, trying to rid his thoughts from the new pile that has been added to his plate. This will certainly be a bitch to clean up.

“Secure office,” He commands the computer system. Once blinds have been shut and the soundproofing reinforced, he inserts the file into the USB port on his desk and commands. “Open Lemurian Star satellite launch file.”

There’s a beep when the file fails to open before the computer responds. “Access denied.”

He’s not surprised. “Run decryption.”

Another beep. “Decryption failed.”
Looks like it’s time to pull out the big guns then. “Director override. Fury, Nicholas J.”

“Override denied. All files sealed.”

When the computer system informs him that the files were sealed by him, Fury knows that he couldn’t let this continue. He commands the computer to make a copy of the sealed files in another hard drive. If HYDRA still has a mole at the Lemurian Star and are taking advantage of SHIELD’s fall from grace to make their comeback, with the WSC suspended, Fury knows he needs to act fast before he has to run SHIELD from a deep, dark hole. That is, if there is still a SHIELD to run then.

Alexander Pierce had been forced to retire from his position as Secretary of Defence when his affiliation with HYDRA had been discovered. A couple months after his retirement, SHIELD had faked his death and he was incarcerated at the Fridge. Fury had debated killing him then, but he’d refrained because they needed someone high enough on HYDRA’s ranks for information that Stark’s intel couldn’t get them.

It seems Fury made the right call and now, it looks like he will have to pay an old friend a visit.

Chapter End Notes

I realize that by not showing SHIELD’s POV during HYDRA cleanup, you guys may know how it went. I’ll try to add it to the story as I go.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by Thisisarealtagwhy

Warning for this chapter: Unreliable narrator.

If JARVIS possessed a physical presence, he thinks he would look very much like the cat that got the cream, with a cherry on top. When he decided SHIELD and the WSC had outlived their purpose to further his plans for the future of the world, he had thought he had his work cut out for him to get the rest of the world to see it the same way. He was ready to do all the hard work required. What he did not expect is for SHIELD to hand him all the ammunitions he will ever need to make his work easier.

When Mr Rogers arrived at the clean-up site early in the morning, dressed in his Captain America costume and ready to go to work, JARVIS had been ready to ignore him, but as soon as one of the Legionnaires picked up audio from their conversation, JARVIS knew he’d struck gold. If he ensured the pair was not interrupted during their talk, while a Legionnaire records the interaction, well, JARVIS does not owe anyone an explanation. It was even better when JARVIS detected the spy camera hidden in Mr Payne’s glasses.

JARVIS did not have to wait long to see what Mr Payne planned to do with his prize. Judging from his hasty departure and the approach he made to one of the reporters a few blocks away from the clean-up site, JARVIS knew he did not have to take matters into his own hands. And unless the news network wants to lose their chance to be the break this interview, either by SHIELD forcing them to cut the news or some other reporter getting a hold of it, JARVIS knows the news will be airing sooner rather than later.

Dr Cho’s assistants are setting up in the hospital wing, while the rest of the team, including Dr Cho and Dr Strange are gathered in the lounge area as Ms Potts gives them the itinerary for tomorrow. JARVIS waits for her to finish before he informs Sir of the latest development. He would wait for the news to air, but he does not want Sir to find out at the same time along with the rest of the world.

“I’ve already called for a press conference tomorrow,” Ms Potts is saying to Sir. “I thought it would help a little if they saw you. The rumours of your death is still gaining popularity, despite the statement PR released.”

“Not bad,” Sir agrees, absently manipulating the design of the Expo Compound on the holographic surface of the centre table. “So what, I just stand there and look pretty?” He asks, still not taking his eyes from his work.

“Pretty much, just don’t flash too much.” She winks at Sir and her smile softens into something warm. “You could also introduce Daisy and Lincoln to them. The public is curious. And, let the press get photos of Thor and Loki’s departure right after.” She smiles at the aforementioned people. “Give the press something exciting to talk about.”
“That seems fair,” Loki agrees, pausing in his argument with Dr Strange. “We can all talk to the press together before Thor and I have to return.” Thor nods in agreement.

“Are we revealing our identity to the public?” Lincoln asks, a little hesitant.

“Oh, no.” Ms Potts reassures him. “Your costumes will be ready before then. We just want the public to know you’re under Iron Man’s protection, hence, you will work under the same guidelines he’s been working under.” She explains.

“It’s one thing to have famous enhanced people coming out to fight, but people are afraid of what they don’t understand.” Sir continues. “Having unknown enhanced people running around unchecked will cause some distress when the news of the invasion dies down.”

Everyone nods their agreement and JARVIS takes the loll in the conversation as his cue. “If I may, Sir.” JARVIS interrupts.

“What’s up, J?” Sir asks.

“Captain Rogers has just given an interview at the clean-up site. I have a copy of it if you would like to see it before it is aired in the news.”

Everyone straightens in their seat, and at Sir’s request JARVIS plays his own copy of the interview. The room is silent until the end of the video, and Mr Hogan explodes first.

“That bastard!” He yells, rising from his seat. “Who the hell does he think he is?”

“Do you think the editors will cut some part out of it?” Ms Johnson asks and Mr Lincoln snorts.

“Then they’d have to cut out the whole interview.” He tells her.

“He should better hope to god they do,” Ms Potts says in a threatening tone. ‘If not, he’s going to pay for every word of slander he spoke about you.” She tells Sir, anger clear in her voice. “I’m going to bury him so deep, this time, his neighbours will be fossils.”

“How can one person be so conceited?” Dr Cho asks, sounding like she cannot believe her ears.

“Is this really the real Captain America?” Dr Strange asks. “And not an imposter?”

“Oh, he is, alright.” Sir answers in an amused tone, giving them a brief summary of how Mr Rogers arrived in the twenty first century. He seems to be the only one who finds the situation as funny as JARVIS does. Ms Potts is almost shaking with fury beside him.

“I do not understand,” Thor says. “For what purpose would your shield brother say such things about you?”

“They are not shield brethren only temporary allies,” Loki tells him, before turning to the rest of the room with a twinkle in his eyes. “It appears the good captain wishes to test the extent of your country’s loyalty to him. This should play out nicely.” At least Loki is entertained by it.

“Maybe he didn’t understand the question” Ms Johnson suggested.

“The questions are pretty straight forward, don’t you think?” Darcy asks. “His answers matched the questions he was asked.”

“How idiotic can a man be to approve of a nuclear missile launch against civilians?” Dr Strange asks, still baffled. “This man obviously needs a psych eval.”
“Maybe he’s suffering brain damage from long exposure to the ice?” Dr Banner suggests.

“Sir, JARVIS interrupts. “The interview has been aired.” He informs them, pulling up the Channel 5, where the interview is currently making breaking news.

“That was fast.” Dr Cho observes.

Sir leans back in his lounge chair, the perfect picture of calm. “They must have been in a hurry to air it before SHIELD makes them cut it.” He tells her. “Rogers’ mouth is writing checks his reputation can’t cash. After the way the world reacted to nuclear missile, I wonder what Fury thinks.”

“Can they do that?” Ms Johnson asks.

“There’s little SHIELD cannot do.” Dr Foster informs her. “They have little regards for the rights, and apparently, lives of others.”

“It’s clear he has no idea what modern day warfare is about.” Ms Lewis comments.

“And his whining about not being lauded for saving the world, as if his presence made any difference.” Mr Hogan says, pacing across the room. JARVIS would tell him to calm down, but he’s in no danger of hurting himself or anyone.

“Captain America and his team didn't arrive until towards the end of the battle.” Mr Lincoln says. “I saw the jet before it landed.”

“SHIELD waited all of ten minutes after their team arrived before launching a nuke but it's Tony's fault.” Ms Potts says. “I warned Fury about what would happen the next time we are dragged into SHIELD’s affairs.”

“Look on the bright side,” Loki tells her in an all too amused tone. “Now, all of Midgard knows Anthony has no affiliation with SHIELD or Captain America's team.”

As they argue on, JARVIS check through the different social media platforms to see the world’s response to the interview. Most people are calling Mr Rogers’ credibility as the original Steve Rogers to question, as well as his sanity to approve the nuclear strike.

A few minutes after the news is aired, FRIDAY uploaded JARVIS’ copy of the interview on YouTube. Predictably, SHIELD hackers are trying to take it down but they have no idea what they are up against. With the interview being copied and re-uploaded by the second, they don’t stand a chance.

As it turns out, without Sir at their beck and call to clean up their messes and make them look good to the public, SHIELD has given Mr Rogers all the tools he needs to hang himself. JARVIS is intrigued and he wants to see how they plan to save his reputation.

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Edwards Air force Base, California.

Captain Sanders tucks his cell phone into his pocket before joining his team in the makeshift lounge area. He’s just gotten off the phone with his wife who has been worried since the news broke about
the alien invasion. She’d grilled him with different questions to make sure he is fine. He’s been on
tour three times since they’ve been married and not once had she been so worried about his well
being, not even the first time, but according to her, fighting aliens from another planet changes
things.

Of course, their son doesn’t share the same sentiment. The little man is so proud of his father, he’s
been telling anyone who would listen that his father is a real superhero who fought aliens alongside
Iron Man, War Machine and Captain America. He can’t even bring himself to feel bad that his son
didn’t think he was a superhero when he only fought alongside war Machine.

He takes a seat on a pile of blocks beside David, and accepts a bottle of bear from her. “What’s he
going on about?” Sanders asks David, gesturing to Raymond and Stinson, both of whom are
involved in a very passionate argument.

“Captain America and the interview.” David shrugs, bored. Yeah. Sanders doubts there is anyone on
the base that has not seen Captain America’s interview.

“There is no way that guy is the same Steve Rogers from the forties.” Raymond is saying. “Even
without that insult of an interview, how do you explain how he works for an organisation like
SHIELD and not enlisted with the US military?”

“Why, you think because he’s Captain America the guy can’t be a selfish son of a bitch?” Stinson
counters. “The guy is lamenting the lack of glory he received from saving the world, I think that
explains why he’s not with us right now. You don’t see us complaining that no one thanked us, do
you?”

“You know, I just realized this is why my grandfather wasn’t such a huge fan of the Captain
America legend.” Sanders muses out loud, interrupting Raymond’s comeback. “He worked with the
SSR during the war, and he used to tell my dad that Steve Rogers wasn’t what they made him up to
be. I always thought he was being jealous.”

“I can see the pattern.” Stinson agrees. “I mean, the guy was the biggest deal in the forties and the
Howlies were always a footnote in the stories, even when it was teamwork that secured the victory
and they had more experience than him. Hell, the guy needed a cocktail of steroids to qualify for
battle. But he comes to the present day, and he sees he’s not the biggest deal anymore, there are other
bigger and better names operating now. Dude’s not used to being irrelevant.”

“Yeah, well, whatever hole he crawled out of, he can go back into it.” David spits. “The last thing
the world needs is some self-righteous, vainglorious flag-waver pumped up on steroids.”

“Considering the circumstances surrounding his enlistment, how much training do you think he
received as a private?” Stinson wonders.

“Almost none.” Sanders tells them, taking a swig of his beer. “Just listening to the guy speak alone
tells you that much about him.”

“I still say that guy isn’t the real Steve Rogers.” Raymond argues, undeterred, reaching for another
beer.

“You just don’t want to admit your idol may not be as perfect as you were lead to believe.” David
says. “Face it, man. Captain America has feet of clay.”

“Feet of clay?” Sanders scoffs. “We're looking at that in the rearview mirror. You have to be a
special kind of stupid to blame someone outside your chain of command for the decision of your
superiors.”

“Where has he been if he didn’t die like the reports claimed and how come he hasn’t aged a day since the forties?” Sanders honestly feels sorry for Raymond. He can understand denying facts because you don’t like where it leads, even though he’d rather face it head on.

“The guy is a super soldier, maybe there’s something in the serum that slowed his aging.” Stinson says. “And there was never a body, it was just assumed he was dead.”

“We could ask Colonel Rhodes.” David suggested. “I bet he knows something.”

Sanders stares at David for a moment, trying to figure out whether or not she was kidding. “You want to ask Colonel Rhodes if the guy that dissed his best friend on national TV is really the original dude from the forties or an imposter?” He asks her. “Well, goodluck with that.”

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Barbara Cummings, head of communications of the White House, refrains from rubbing her forehead to chase away the migraine that has been steadily building for the past hour. She has been locked in this meeting in one of the conference rooms in the West Wing of the White House, where three other advisors of the President are already seated, along with the President. It’s been a stressful couple of days and it doesn’t look like it will let up soon.

With the alien invasion along with the subsequent reveal of the WSC and SHIELD to the public, polls have shown a nosedive in the approval ratings. Factor in Captain America’s latest interview, and Barbara knows they need to tread carefully, or this administration will come to an abrupt end.

“Mr President, the invitation to Captain Rogers to the White House should be rescinded immediately.” Barney advices. “The best thing to do currently is to put as much distance between you and him as possible.”

A few days ago, Captain Rogers was invited to have dinner with the president. Everyone, including Barbara had been looking forward to meet him, but things have changed after the interview that sent America into a frenzy.

President Ellis nods, even if he doesn’t look happy about Barney’s words. He knows it’s what has to happen if he wants to remain president. “Where are we on the approval ratings?” He asks Barbara instead.

Barbara looks down at the numbers on her tablet, which has been dropping since the interview was aired. “Nationally, we’re at 52% and internationally, 38%. The belief that he’s an imposter SHIELD dressed up has helped but his smear campaign against Iron Man has done him no favours.”

“Stripping him of the colours would be best at this time.” Morgan says.

“You cannot strip him of the colours,” Michaels says, and she sounds scandalized at the Morgan’s words. “Captain Rogers is a national hero.”

“Captain America is a national hero,” Barney disagrees. “Captain Rogers is just a man.”

“Captain Rogers is the man who told the world a nuclear strike against a civilian population in the
capital of the United States was a good decision, while he was wearing the colours of our flag.” Morgan tells her in a tight voice. “While condemning the man who risked his life to protect the civilians from it in the same breath.” He turns to the president. “Mr President, after the events of the last few days, your administration cannot afford to be associated with a man who has little regards for the lives of American citizens.”

“Sir, you cannot keep silent about this, or the public will misconstrue your silence as an approval for his words.” Barney says. “If the ratings drop any lower, you may be looking at an impeachment.”

Barney has just said the one thing everyone is thinking but avoiding, but this administration cannot afford another crisis, or his opponents might decide President Ellis is unfit. “Mr President, it would be best to let the public think he is an imposter. Better to let the legend live on than to let reality ruin it.”

President Ellis leans back in his seat and lets out what would be a sigh coming from someone else. “Ms Cummings, please schedule a press conference.”

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“I grew up on Captain America stories.” The middle aged woman on the screen Christine Everhart is watching was saying. “I was told he is the ideal American, The embodiment of truth, justice and that he is the one we should all emulate and strive to be like. But hearing him say such mean things about his fellow superheroes, while lauding the actions of terrorists, I feel like I’ve been duped.”

“My daughter lost the use of her legs after a car accident a few years ago.” A middle aged man says when the scene changes. “It was so hard for her to cope with the loss that she was on a suicide watch for a long time. Two years ago, she was one of the beneficiaries of the Iron Man Foundation. She was outfitted with leg braces that has improved her quality of life tremendously. She’s in college today and she’s building a future for herself. All of this happened because of Iron Man. If protecting innocents and improving their lives is what makes a man selfish and self-centred as Captain America has said about Tony Stark, then the world should be a better place, considering how many truly selfish people we meet every day, don’t you think?”

She’s still bitter about losing such a golden opportunity to interview Captain America. If only she’d gotten the chance to go to DC, instead of pursuing another interview. What she wouldn’t give to have had this interview on her resume. Christine knows for a fact that several papers are currently vying to have this rookie blogger on their payroll as an investigative journalist.

As she watches on, the screen changes, showing a young man. A college student, if Christine has to guess. “Well, he’s not wrong.” The guy says with a shrug. “If Iron Man had told them he had a way to kill the aliens without endangering everyone, the WSC wouldn’t have launched the missile.”

“What are you watching?” Kevin, a colleague of hers, asks, coming to stop beside her desk.

Christine sighs and leans back on her seat. “I’m reviewing the polls we got from the public’s response to Captain America’s interview.” She tells him.

“Oh, okay” Kevin drags a seat from the next desk, so he can watch too.

“How do we know this is the real Captain America?” A man who has been approached for his opinion was speaking passionately on the screen. “For all we know, SHIELD could have taken any
Steve Rogers look alike they found and dressed him up in Captain America’s costume. The real Captain America would never work with terrorists. This imposter is destroying Captain America’s legacy and should be arrested immediately.”

“Well, he’s not wrong.” Kevin says. “Personally, I want to know how a guy that should be pushing a hundred looks that fit. I mean, Christine, did you see the abs on that guy? They’re visible even through the costume.” Kevin lets out a whistle and fans himself.

“The serum must have done more than beef him up.” Christine shrugs. “It obviously did nothing for his intelligence or empathy though.”

“Didn’t SHIELD release a statement claiming he’s traumatised and that he’s still getting acclimated in the new century?” Kevin enquires. “The change must have been very jarring.”

“Oh, please. Any reporter worth their salt knows that statement is an attempt at damage control.” She exclaims with an eye roll. “If he’s so traumatised, then he should have been talking to a psychiatrist, not fighting aliens and throwing hissy fits because no one is kissing his feet.”

Kevin pauses for a moment before he speaks again. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you are offended on Tony Stark’s behalf.”

Christine scowls at him, but Kevin’s response is a smug, knowing smirk. Honestly, she doesn’t know why he’s wearing that expression. She hasn’t told anyone about her one night stand with Tony Stark or her battle of wits with Pepper Potts that ended in her feeling even more humiliated the morning after. Never has a bed partner made her feel so cheap and insignificant, and although she works hard not to let her personal experience cloud her professional opinion, but if Kevin is smirking at her like that, she needs to try harder.

“I’m not Tony Stark’s biggest fan, but even I know Iron Man has done more good than harm since his debut.” She tells Kevin. “However their meeting went and whatever his issues is with the man, Captain Rogers is wrong to say Tony Stark is not a hero.”

Kevin nods agreeably. “It probably has to do with Iron Man’s refusal to join his team.” He says thoughtfully. “Dude probably isn’t used to being told no. I mean, how many people would turn down an invitation to be a part of the twenty first century Howlies?”

“Tony Stark would, apparently.”

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Eight year old Harley Keener skips out of his house a few minutes before the school bus is set to arrive at his bus stop. Decked out in his favorite Iron Man t-shirt, he’s in a wonderful mood, and it’s not just because today makes it one less day he has to go to school before summer comes and he gets to attend the Summer Program Iron Man is organising. Just the thought of the invitation letter that arrived in the mail a few weeks ago makes his grin even wider. Today, he is even more proud of Iron Man. The superhero has proved to the world, once again, why he’s the best superhero of all time.

The bus comes to a stop and Harley still beaming proudly goes in. Not even Mark Davidson, his bully from first grade can take away his happiness today.

Most of the kids in the bus are dressed in several Iron Man merchandise, ranging from the helmet to
the repulsor, and Harley takes a moment to thank his lucky stars that he’d insisted on wearing his t-shirt. He spots Trevor, his best friend, sitting at their favorite spot in the bus and quickly joins him at the seat.

“Hey,” Trevor greets, his face splitting into a grin the moment Harley sits down. “Check this out. Dad got it for me yesterday. How cool is it?” Trevor shows Harley his shiny new Iron Man lunch box.

“So cool!” Harley exclaims, examining it. “Did you watch the replay of the invasion when they showed news yesterday?”

“Oh huh. My brother let me watch some parts they cut out on his computer. It was so cool!”

Wow, elder brothers are so cool! Harley wishes he had one to show him the scenes that wasn’t in the news. “Did you see how Iron Man blew off….”

They spend the few minutes talking about their favorite parts of the fight, until John, one of their classmates buts in. “So who’s your favorite,” John asks, turning in his seat in front to watch them.

“Uh, Iron Man.” Harley tells him without hesitation. “He’s clearly the strongest and the best.”

“No he isn’t,” John disagrees. “Captain America clearly is. He fought off three aliens at once.”

“Iron Man fought blew up a flying whale all by himself.” Trevor counters.

“You can’t know who’s strongest,” Mark says, interrupting their argument. “Because the real Captain America is dead. The person that fought the aliens is just some guy SHIELD dressed up as him to fight the aliens.”

Everyone pauses for a moment to stare at Mark. “How would you know,” John asks hotly. He looks very offended at this notion.

“My dad said so.” Mark tells him. “The real Captain America would never try to destroy the world by bombing everyone in it but this one did.”

John looks like he would cry. “No he didn’t. Captain America would never try to hurt anyone.”

“Well he did. Didn’t you watch it yesterday? They said it on the news.”

“That’s true.” Trevor says, coming to Mark’s defence, something Harley never thought could ever happen. “And then he said mean things about Iron Man for not letting the bomb kill everyone.”

“But Captain America is a good guy.” John disagrees. The sheen of tears in his eyes is more obvious now.

“I saw it too!” Harley agrees. “And Captain America works for SHIELD. Everyone knows SHIELD is a terrorist group.”

But by the time Harley is done talking, John has tears running down his face. He tries to apologize for making him cry but John wouldn’t even listen to any word he says.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

I'm not a doctor, so don't take my attempt at explaining medicine seriously.

I'm not satisfied with how this chapter turned out, but I'm tired of rewriting it.

Not Beta'd.

The private clinic in Tony Stark’s basement is more advanced, technologically, than any hospital Stephen Strange has ever been in. He’s known, almost as long as he has been aware of just who Tony Stark is, that the man is a genius, and the years following his kidnap in Afghanistan proved to the world that he is good for more than just creating things that explode.

Stark Industries has grown into the biggest tech conglomerate in the world since their transition from a defence company for the United States, and these days, the media’s favorite term to describe Stark is ‘futurist’. Stephen doubts anyall that knowledge about the man would prepare anyone for the sight this private clinic makes. Stephen thinks this is what it feels like to be in a sci-fi movie.

Studying the holographic display of the different brain scans and maps in front of him, he wonders if he can get his patient to donate some of this tech to his hospital but promptly dismisses the thought. Asking for a donation from Tony Stark is just a licence for him to be even more insufferable than he already is, and Stephen doesn’t think he can deal with that.

He focuses instead, on the display in front of him, giving it more of his attention than is warranted.

The neural pathways are unlike any other that Stephen has seen in his many years as a neurosurgeon. In fact, it was what made him decide to consult on the case, even before he found out who the patient was. A human brain that can control electronics and similar devices is something Stephen would have thought impossible, but here it is. Turns out, experimental procedures are called experiments for a reason. Shocker. What he still isn’t sure of, is if techno-kinesis, according to Stark, was the endgame, or just a really nice bonus.

“You look like you want to do filthy things to my brain.” The asshole says proudly, stepping out of the MRI machine.

It is a testament to Stephen’s self-control when he doesn’t take the bait and says the first two responses he has for that statement. Instead, he gets down to the purpose of his being here.

“You’re gamma brainwave activities are off the chart.” He tells Stark, turning to face him. His alien friend, Loki, is beside him but the Asgardian’s attention is on whatever he’s doing with his hands that Stephen cannot see from his position. Dr Cho and Dr Banner are together on his other side, going through the test results. “But compared to earlier results, before and after extremis, that is to be expected.”

Stark smirks knowingly. “Well, I am a genius, after all.”

Stephen rolls his eyes. “And modest too, I see.”
That gets him a raised brow from his patient. “Hello, pot,” Stark drawls. “How are you today?”

At the risk of appearing unprofessional to Dr Cho and Dr Banner, Stephen chooses not to take the bait. “Your frontal lobe and CNS show no sign of damage or microlesion, but it’s too early to rule that out just yet.” Stephen tells him.

Stepping forward, Dr Banner continues. “Biopsy shows traces of gamma radiation, but less than what Dr Cho observed from her tests yesterday. We assume extremis is working to maintain homeostasis within your system.”

“That’s good news, isn’t it?” Stark asks, looking at Dr Cho.

“It would be, but we didn’t account for the mutations extremis caused when it was used to treat your major organs and regenerate your sternum.” Dr Cho says. “I’d like to keep running more tests, for the next six to twelve months, to make sure the gamma radiation isn’t heralding a new mutation.”

It’s not an unreasonable demand, and Stephen can see from the look on his face that Stark thinks so too. They talk some more and Dr Cho makes plans with Stephen to schedule more tests and consult for another project Dr Cho is working on with Stark.

They are all packing up to leave when Loki, who has been silent since he came in speaks up. “If only you will allow me heal you,” he tells Stark. “You would have no need to subject yourself to these invasive tests.”

“Reindeer Games, you know I don’t mind you using your magic for my good, but you won’t always be here to magic me better every time something comes up.” Stark says to Loki, then grins widely. “Besides, who knows, their results might help revolutionize the medical field.”

“You believe you can heal a person with magic?” Stephen asks Loki.

The Asgardian tilts his head to observe Stephen and he can feel the weight of the attention on him. “And you sound like you do not believe I can.” Loki says.

“You’re kidding, right?” Stephen asks, waiting for the punchline. When it doesn’t come, he turns to Stark. “Please tell me he is joking and that he doesn’t really think magic is real.”

“Sure, magic is real.” Stark says flippantly, like he just told Stephen that an adult human has over two hundred bones in his body and a heart rate of sixty to hundred beats per minute. “I’ve seen enough to know that.”

Stephen almost gapes at him in shock. “You’re a scientist. You’re surrounded by all of this—” He gestures at the Stark tech around the room “—and you believe in a force that disproves all of it?”

“On what grounds do you doubt the possibility of magic?” Loki asks, stepping forward.

“Because it obeys none of the physical laws of nature.” Stephen tells him. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“But why does it have to be one or the other?” Dr Banner asks. “Why can’t magic and science exist together? Until my accident, nobody thought it was possible for a person could transform into a giant creature like the other guy. Up until a couple of days ago, the possibility of extraterrestrial life was only a theory and now you’re staring at a man who controls technology with his mind. How can you look in the face of all that and still think the possibility of magic is so far-fetched?”
that you’ve just mentioned can be explained using science.” He tells Dr Banner. “Maybe it wasn’t what we thought was possible until our data proved otherwise but now, we can explain it with the new laws and theories that has been discovered because of it. We’ve always known extraterrestrial was a possibility. Magic, on the other hand cannot be explained. Saying abracadabra and waving your hands in the air isn’t going to heal a person of their illness.” He takes a step towards Loki. “What are you going to say next? That true love’s kiss will make him whole?” He asks, gesturing to Stark.

The twin look of fond amusement—and he’s not going to touch that with a ten foot pole—he gets from Stark and Loki is almost too infuriating for Stephen’s comfort. Having them look at him that way makes him feel like a little child wondering why Santa doesn’t visit all year round.

“Hey, Green Eyes, that certainly sounds like something to look into.” Stark says, leering at Loki. “What do you say to healing me of my affliction?” Stephen is ready to excuse himself from the room if they start making out, but Loki puts that idea to rest.

“As long as you don’t make me go about kissing people and healing the sick,” Loki says and even though he steps closer to Stark, he doesn’t make any attempt to lock lips with him. For a moment, Stephen wonders about the nature of their relationship. From their earlier interaction, he thought it was Ms Potts that held Stark’s romantic interests, but it won’t be the first time he’s been wrong about something like that. “Dr Strange, you have spent your life studying the laws of the nature, trying to unravel the secrets of the universe, and now, on hearing that there is more even more about the universe that you do not know, you reject the possibility.”

“I reject it because I do not believe in the possibilities of fairy tales or magic and sorcery.” Stephen tells him bluntly. “There is no such thing.”

“Sometimes, I forget how young you mortals are, but when you utter such words, i am reminded. There are laws beyond the ones which govern the physical realm that you know. Everything you see is controlled by the spiritual.”

Stephen scoffs. “Now you're just doing me in.”

He gets a smirk from Loki. “You think?”

Two identical forms that look exactly like him step away from his body. They walk in opposite sides of the clinic, examining everything around them. Stephen is about to scoff and say that they are holographic projections when one of them pick up a tray and hands it to one of Dr Cho’s assistants. Even Dr Banner, who is open to the idea of magic seems surprised by the multiple Lokis walking around the clinic. Everyone, including Dr Cho and her assistants are watching them now. Out of all of them, only Stark doesn’t look surprised by what is happening around them.

The third Loki who is still in his place beside Stark takes a couple of steps towards Stephen, and before his very eyes, transforms into an exact replica of Stephen himself. It’s like looking into a mirror.

“There are secrets in the universe that your mind cannot fathom,” he says and sounds exactly like Stephen does too. “Secrets that predates the universe itself, where the physical laws of nature cannot penetrate.”

Stephen blinks distractedly, looking around him. He must be seeing things. He lifts his hands to touch the form before him, and it is solid matter. Not a projection. “What is this?” He asks, his voice is a little shaky and almost breathless, but he doesn’t care.
Loki shifts back into his original form, takes his hand and he can feel the energy flow through him. “Think of something you wish to create.” He tells him before letting go.

Almost instinctively, Stephen twirls his fingers after Loki lets go and watches in fascination as the same energy he felt go through his body when Loki touched him comes back out, creating a beautiful white peony. He stares at it, wondrously, noting absently that it is Christine’s favorite flower.

There are a dozen emotion warring within him for dominance, and right now, the surge of pride and accomplishment is winning. He hasn’t felt this good about something he did since his early days as a neurosurgeon. When cutting open a person’s brain to clip an aneurysm was just as exciting as operating on an inoperable tumor. These days, he feels like he’s going through the motion and the cases that he considers challenging are even less frequent.

He feels like he has peaked in his career.

But looking at the flower in his hand, he cannot quell the desire and want growing within him. He wants this. He wants to know more about this and learn everything he can on how to use it. Maybe not for tricks or a career in horticulture, but something that would make him feel like he’s making a positive change in the world.

The moment he catches the train of his thoughts, he shuts it down immediately. He looks around him before settling on Loki. “What did you do to me?” He demands. “What was that? Did you drug me? How would you even achieve that? Is it through the air filters? Is the air poisoned? It is, isn’t it? ” What kind of drug is it? Psilocybin? LSD?” He’s rambling and he sounds hysterical, even to his own ears.

Loki smiles. “There is nothing in the air. I just demonstrated magic to you.”

Stephen paces around the clinic. He sees the others watching him warily but he doesn’t pay them any attention. “What is this?” He whispers again to himself.

“There is much you do not know, Dr Strange.” Loki says. “Much more you can learn, if you would only open your mind and be willing to learn.”

He stops to watch the Asgardian before Stark comes up to his side and directs him to a seat. “Loki can be a bit much sometimes,” He says, and Stephen can’t tell if it was meant to be a consolation or something. “Are you okay? Do you want me to get you anything?”

“I’m fine,” He dismisses but Stark is already pressing a bottle of water into his hand. “I’ll be fine, just —can I have a moment alone?” He asks. He knows he has no right to kick the man out of his own private clinic but he needs some time to collect his thoughts.

“Sure.” Stark nods. Stephen doesn’t see the signal he gives but almost immediately, everyone starts exiting the clinic. “Ask FRIDAY if you need anything.” With that, he leaves Stephen alone, holding the dumb flower in his hand to deal with the direction of his thoughts.

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Fury doesn’t have time to stop by Hill’s office like he had planned earlier, not if he doesn’t want to run into Rogers again this evening, and with everything he has to deal with before the man dumped
his ill-fated interview on SHIELD’s plate, Fury knows leaving the triskelion without seeing that face set in a permanent scowl of self-righteousness is the best thing for all of SHIELD.

The flight to the fridge is longer than Fury would have liked. He could use a supersonic jet right now. He takes another look at the flash in his hand and wonders who could have tempered with his decryption password. When they swept for HYDRA after Stark gave Fury the intel, Alexander Pierce was the only HYDRA member in the WSC they discovered, but now Fury can’t help but wonder if he had been working alone.

They could have gotten more information from the computerized consciousness of Zola Armin in the abandoned SHIELD bunker, but HYDRA had bombed it before his agents could get any information out of it, costing Fury the lives of three of his agents. He takes a minute to wonder if he could have gone to Zola, instead of Pierce for this information he seeks. It was he that helped HYDRA invade SHIELD successfully, after all. With the right hacking skills, the system could have been hacked.

It’s almost noon the next day when Fury finally arrives at his destination. He disembarks from the jet as soon as it lands at the top of the building, which conveniently was also the only entry way in.

Pierce is his target, but he decides to check on their newest prisoner. The cells Ebony Maw and Alexander Pierce were placed in does not appear on any of the floor plans or blueprints of the Fridge. It was designed that way for some of the most dangerous artefacts and prisoners SHIELD ever took in.

When finds the security footage showing Maw in his cell, the alien is sitting ramrod straight on his bed. The muzzle Loki placed on his mouth has been removed but the cuffs are still on his wrists, although it's been adjusted to provide allowance. For the next twenty minutes that Fury watches the alien, he doesn’t make any movement, instead, he stares straight at the wall, almost like he’s looking beyond it. He was told Maw couldn't do any magic as long as the cuffs were on him, so Fury tries not to worry about him possibly contacting his allies for help. After a few minutes, Fury moves on to his purpose of being here.

Dressed in a dark grey jumpsuit, Alexander Pierce looks like he has aged ten years since the past few months he has been at the Fridge, but he looks neither bent, nor broken. Fury thinks being a HYDRA fanatic has a lot to do with it. He has such strong convictions that being in the most secure prison in the world doesn’t shake his belief.

On his command, the wall opposite him recedes and a deceptively transparent glass, which in truth is an inertia confinement laser barrier, is all that separates both of them.

“I wondered how long it would be until you showed up.” Pierce smirks when he sees Fury. He's sitting on the reading chair next to the desk in the cell and doesn't make any moves to get up. Instead, he turns in his seat to face him. “Hello Nick. It’s good to see you.”

Nick files the first part of his greeting away for later. He’s curious whether Pierce is just projecting confidence or if he really did see this day coming. “Really? You don’t look so good.” He says instead.

“Not my idea of a vacation,” Pierce tells him. “But you know how it is. You win some, lose some. It’s the end that matters.”

“When did world domination trump protecting the people?” Fury asks. It’s a question he's been pondering on. Up until he was revealed as HYDRA, Fury never would have suspected Pierce of siding with the belief that humanity deserves subjugation.
“Who says they are exclusive? What is wrong about dominating the world so you can better protect the people?” Pierce asks, getting up from his seat to stand before Fury. “We’re fighting for the same side, Nick. Our enemies are your enemies, but humanity cannot be trusted with its own freedom. Freedom diminishes their life’s joy and it is our duty to protect them from it. You know this.”

“By slaughtering everyone who stands in your way?” Fury asks, unimpressed. “How can you justify the havoc HYDRA has wrecked on the world in their quest for absolute power?”

“You know how the game is played, Nick. You’ve been at it for years yourself.” Pierce huffs a laugh, pacing the length of his cell. “What is sacrificing a few million people to save seven billion people? Humans slaughter each other every day for no reason at all. Hell, how many people has SHIELD killed to achieve their goal? This is the next step, if you have the courage to take it.”

Fury shakes his head in disagreement. Everything SHIELD has done, they did it to protect the common man. The public couldn’t handle the truth of everything SHIELD has been protecting them from. This alien invasion is a very good example of why SHIELD was founded but what HYDRA wants is to destroy the world. They are no better than Ebony Maw and his band of Chitauri. “I have the courage not to.”

Pierce shakes his head, looking at Fury like he's a naive little child. “HYDRA isn’t doing anything that SHIELD hasn’t or won’t do.” He tells Fury seriously. “We only do it better.”

“And how does HYDRA hope to achieve that with you in here?” Fury asks. “You’re not leading anyone from inside this cell.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard the saying, Nick: You cut off one head, two more shall take its place. An empire doesn’t fall when one leader does. That’s what makes great leaders.” Pierce smiles, coming back to Fury. “But I doubt that’s what you came all the way out here to ask me.”

Fury has to reorganize his thoughts before answering him. Pierce is not new at this, and he obvious knows more than he’s letting on. Fury makes a mental note to do another sweep for HYDRA moles working in the Fridge. No one is supposed to have access to this floor but Fury.

“What is project insight?” He asks Pierce.

At his question, he gets a smug smirk. The first real expression he’s seen from Pierce since his arrival. “The project to herald a new dawn. Humanity will not have their freedom forcefully taken away, but they will surrender it willing, and they are ready to do just that.”

“How does HYDRA hope to achieve that?” He asks. “SHIELD has already uncovered your secrets and destroyed your bases.”

“Then why are you here?” Pierce asks but Fury detects no curiosity in his gaze. “I heard the commotion when the new guy was brought in yesterday. How come you’re not dealing with that instead?”

Fury wants to tell him they found Captain America and that he’s alive, but he doesn’t want to give Pierce any more information. Especially not when the man has hardly offered him anything useful in the first place.

Despite what Pierce may or may not know, he’s not the one that can give Fury the information he wants. That means there are other alpha level members in SHIELD’s ranks that are HYDRA. Turns out SHIELD isn’t as free of HYDRA’s influence as he would like. He doesn’t even know who to trust anymore. He’ll have to find out who they are on his own.
He casts one last gaze at Pierce before hitting the button that brings the wall back up. Just as he leaves the cell, he hears Pierce salute, “Hail HYDRA.”

He has wasted valuable time coming here today and he will have to make up for it.
Without saying a word to each other, they all file into the elevator, with Bruce at the front and both of Dr Cho’s assistants following closely, while Dr Cho and Loki flank Tony on either side. He would comment on Bruce’s swiftness to distance himself from the situation, but he has learned to accept people the way they are. It’s one of the many things he has learned about self-love in therapy during the course of his former life. Accepting people for who they are helps keep one from projecting one's own expectations on them, which in turn prevents the heartbreak of disappointment.

Tony has come to terms with the fact that Bruce’s flight instinct will always win in the war between fight or flight. Whether it was a skill he was forced to learn in the years following his transformation as the Hulk or if it has always been an ingrained coping mechanism for dealing with difficult situations, Bruce’s first response to uncomfortable situation will always be to check himself out, and Tony is fine with that. In fact, in this situation, it’s the best course of action, as anything else would only serve to overwhelm Stephen even more.

He exits the elevator on the next floor, choosing instead to get some work done in his lab. There’s a lot of work to be done and he can’t leave everything for Pepper to handle. He’s compiling the videos from the camera in the sentinel that went into the wormhole when Loki comes in.

“Did my actions offend you?” Loki asks, coming up to him.

“What are going on about?” Tony asks, shifting his gaze from his work to Loki.

“Earlier, you seemed displeased by my demonstration with Stephen.” Loki looks unsure of himself, despite his attempt to appear haughty. Tony doesn’t like the look on him.

“No, I wasn’t mad about that,” Tony rises to his feet. “I know magic can be intense, even when you don’t expect it to be and you weren’t trying to be cruel.”

“Well,” Loki smiles mischievously at him. “Only a little bit. Magic is my trait and I wanted to make him eat his words when he kept going on about how magic is not real.”

Tony huffs a laugh. He wouldn’t be Loki if he didn’t pull pranks like that from time to time. “Well, go easy on him next time. Stephen is going to be one of the greatest sorcerers on Earth in the future but he’s not there yet.” Tony tells him. “In fact, if not for Stephen, I’m not sure JARVIS would have been able to do what he did.” He goes on to explain to Loki about how Stephen had given up the time stone to save his life and by extension, the earth. At the end of his tale, he can see the gleam of understanding and respect for Stephen in Loki’s eyes.

“I suppose he can be excused for his current behavior, even on Asgard, sorcery is still scorned despite its vast applications in every day life.” Loki says, before turning his attention at Tony’s abandoned work and the screens still shining brightly in the lab. “What are you working on?”
“Oh, nothing serious,” He waves a dismissive hand. “Just making a video compilation of the fight. I have Rhodey’s bosses, the military and even the UN Security Council asking me for my own security footage of the battle. Especially of the sentinel that went into the portal and didn’t return.” He sighs. “VERONICA says she tried to hack into their ship’s system but their firewalls are quite strong and they were out of her satellite range before she could get anything useful. I’ll have to give her another upgrade.”

Loki is quiet for a while, contemplating Tony’s words before he turns abruptly. “Come,” He commands, already walking towards the exit. “There is something you should see.” He’s almost at the elevator before he finishes the statement and Tony hurries to catch up with him.

“Where to?” He asks when he notices they are not heading inside the main house.

Loki doesn’t answer his questions, opting instead to watch Tony silently. “Did you know Thor and I have blood ties, despite me not being a son of Odin?” Loki asks instead as they walk through the gardens.

The question comes out of nowhere and Tony doesn’t know what to make of it. “I didn’t know that,” He says. “Did your mom get it on with a Jotun?” The look of disgust Loki sends his way at the thought of Frigga and a Frost giant is answer enough. “I know Thor was too young to be your dad, so how are you related to Thor?”

“But you know Thor is not Odin’s first born, despite what Odin would have you believe?” Loki asks again, instead of answering his question.

Tony remembers the sister that tried to take over Asgard after Odin’s death and continue his legacy as a conqueror. “Yeah, there was something about a sister and that’s why you had to destroy Asgard.” Tony pauses. “Wait, is she your mother?”

“Hela was banished from Asgard and imprisoned for rising up against the All-Father.” Loki says in a story telling fashion. He looks calm when Tony glances at him. “The All-Father had her erased from Asgard’s history.”

“Do you have memories of her?” He asks as Loki comes to a stop by the landing pad. The Starkjet they arrived in is there, but the two spots next it are vacant.

“You can say that, although, I had no idea what I was searching for at the time.” Loki smile takes a sharp edge. “She was not happy to see me and threw me out as soon as she could.”

That has to be rough and Tony can’t imagine what Loki must be feeling. His friend’s face doesn’t even betray anything. “Is she the one who dropped the bombshell?”

“I don’t believe she knew I am hers, but we look so alike, it was like shifting into a female version of myself.” Loki says. “Laufey dropped a few hints when I asked about my mother the last time we were together. And it is too much of a coincidence, don’t you think?”

“Laufey could be manipulating you. From what you’ve told me about him, he cannot be trusted. A man like him definitely has an ulterior motives for giving you that information. What are you going to do with?” Tony asks worriedly. “The last time she was free of her prison, Asgard was destroyed and she wanted to conquer the universe, and that’s her acting alone. There’s no telling what kind of havoc she would wreck with an ally like King Snowball.”

“I know,” Loki tells him absently. “But that is not why I brought you here. After she tossed me out of her Hel, I arrived at Sakaar. It is a realm ruled by a peculiar man, if a little bit insane, and they
have a few practices you would consider barbaric but it had a lot of scraps you would find pleasing for your work.”

A wave of Loki’s hands reveals a quinjet, no scratch that, a spaceship. It’s unlike anything Tony has ever seen before and the sight alone has Tony drooling. It’s painted red, which makes it look even more awesome. The circular jet with its main controls and cargo area forming a triangle in the middle.

“I take it by the awed look on your face and the way you can’t keep your hands off it,” Loki says, amusement clear in his tone. “That you approve?”

It took more efforts than Tony would admit to tear his eyes away from the beauty in front of him and look at Loki. “Are you kidding me?” Tony exclaims incredulously, “I wholeheartedly approve! How did you get this baby?”

“I stole it from the grandmaster,” Loki shrugs unapologetically. “It is not outfitted with a defence mechanism. And you may want to scrub it clean before touching anything inside.” Loki’s smile tells Tony all he needs to know about what the jet has been used for.

He moves forward and opens the cargo area. Tony can see that it is indeed, filled with scraps. Tony can’t recall if anyone has ever given him such thoughtful present in his life. As far as second lives go, Tony is having a blast.

“This is the best gift anyone has ever given me,” Tony tells Loki seriously as they climb into the jet together. “I mean, besides JARVIS but this is pretty up there.” He looks around the scraps inside and he can already pick out a few things he could use among them. “Seriously, Reindeer Games, you’re the best. Like, wow! Alien junk, are you kidding me?”

“It’s the least I could do,” Loki laughs. “You can get a head start on your plans for the future now. I made a few friends that are in need of a home. They will make worthy allies for when Thanos comes.”

Tony nods agreeably, already plotting out the next course of action. He and Loki inspect the jet and all its controls. And indeed, the jet doesn’t have any defence mechanism but it’s not something Tony can’t fix.

They take it for a spin for a few hours to get the feel of it. It doesn’t have a stealth option, but that’s okay. Tony can fix that too.

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Eleven years old Peter Parker shifts in his position again in the love seat in the sitting room as he surfs the news channels, looking for the one best one to view what he’s searching for. It won’t be long now. In ten minutes time, it will be starting and Peter intends to catch every minute of it. Thankfully, it is Saturday and Peter doesn’t have to be in school.

Uncle Ben watches him from where he’s sitting with Aunt May on the couch. “What’s making you so twitchy this morning, Peter?” His uncle asks.

“I’m not twitchy.” Peter answers defensively. He’s not twitchy. He would know if he was.
“What are you looking for on TV?” Aunt May asks instead.

“Iron Man is coming on to talk about the invasion soon,” Peter tells him. “I’m looking for a network where I can watch it.” There has been several rumours going around since after the invasion, chief of which is Iron Man’s death and the fake Captain America. So when it was confirmed that Tony Stark is indeed giving a press conference today, Peter decided he’d rather see it for himself. After the disaster that was Captain America’s interview, everyone has been curious about how Iron Man would respond.

“If that’s what you want to watch, you should have left it on CNN where it was,” Uncle Ben tells him. “That’s what we were waiting for too.”

“Oh,” Peter says, a faint blush rising on his cheek. He hadn’t even noticed the channel the television was on when he started surfing. “Okay.” He selects the CNN channel and leans back in his seat to wait.

Almost immediately the screen changes to show Tony Stark, dressed in what Peter guesses is a very expensive designer suit, and not his Iron Man suit. Flanking him on either side is Princes Loki and Thor to his left and the Shock and Quake to his right. Peter has seen Stark Tower on television enough times since it was built to recognise that it is the location of the press conference.

Everyone is dressed in their battle armour, except Mr Stark. Quake’s armour is black with dark red highlights and a pair of matching boots and cape. She has a cowl, covering half of her face like batman. Shock’s is similar except with grey highlights, black boots and no cape. Instead of a cowl like Quake’s, he has a domino mask covering everything around his eyes.

“Wow!” Peter exclaims. “These guys look like real life comic book superheroes.” The photographers on the television think so too because they went wild the moment they came out. They look so much better than fake Captain America and his team. No one even knows what the Avengers look like, only that it is led by Captain America.

It takes a while but finally, everyone calms down long enough for Tony Stark to get a word in. Even though he’s not dressed as Iron Man, the shirt under his suit is red and his tie and sunshades are a matching gold colour. It would look absolutely horrible on anyone but Tony Stark makes everything look cool.

“Is this going to be a thing now,” Uncle Ben asks. “Real life superheroes.”

“They’ve been real since last century,” Aunt May says. “Where have you been, under a rock?”

“If aliens are going to be conquering our planets then we need superheroes to defend it.” Peter tells them. “Oh man, this is so cool! If I had superpowers I could be one of them.”

They continue to discuss the possibility of superhero teams in the world until Tony Stark starts speaking and they all stop.

“A few days ago, America had a rude awakening that we are not alone in the universe. Up until the Earth was invaded by a hostile army of aliens, no one thought alien predator was something we needed to worry about lurking beyond our galaxy. Nobody was prepared for such an event, but thanks to the United States military and Air force, the DCPD, the princes of Asgard, Princes Thor and Loki and a few extraordinary individuals, some of whom are here with me today, we were able to defend the Earth and our great country...”

As he speaks, Peter couldn’t help but be mesmerized by him. Mr Stark goes on to introduce the new
superheroes and talks about the Iron Legion and how they will continue with cleaning up the sites the battle had taken place at. He also talks about Stark Industries’ plan to assist with the rehabilitations.

After that, the floor was open for questions and almost every reporter in the room had their hands up immediately. Peter has so many questions he wants to ask. He wishes they’d asked the viewers to send in theirs.

“Robin Irwin, Channel 5 news.” The lady Mr Stark points to says. “Did you know the force field you created around the nuclear missile to contain the explosion would protect you?” She asks.

“The arc shield is a prototype technology that has never been tested against large scale explosion,” Mr Stark replies. “I certainly didn’t think I’d have to use it to contain a nuclear explosion but at the time the missile was launched, it was the only available option and I hoped it would.”

There was a few more flashes from the cameras around.

“That was quick thinking on his part,” Uncle Ben says, shaking his head. “I can’t imagine what would have become of DC if Iron Man hadn’t taken the initiative.” Peter agrees with his uncle wholeheartedly.

“Daniel Chase, Metro news one.” A male reporter says. “Did you turn down an invitation to join the Avengers because you intend to create your own team of superheroes?”

“Iron Man was created to recover and destroy SI weapons that have been sold illegally, and the Iron Legion were made to assist with relief efforts. It was never meant for combat situations. I turned down the invitation to join the Avengers because catching bad guys and busting arms is what you have the police and military for.

“I’m not the superhero kind. I am a scientist. Creating and building stuff is what I do best, not getting in the way of others doing their job because I’m super powered. When I was told there was a hostile army invading my country and my home, I couldn’t just sit back and hope the people that risk their lives to protect us every day will continue to do so. They were not trained to fight aliens, nobody is. So I called on the people I knew, who could help.”

“How can he say he’s not a superhero?” Peter exclaims. “He’s the best superhero ever! He just saved the world from aliens.”

Uncle Ben ruffles his hair. “Sometimes, the people who think they are undeserving of it are the ones who deserve praise the most.” He tells Peter.

Peter thinks on it for a few moments. “I guess that’s the difference between him and Captain America.”

The press conference continue, with the reporters asking different questions. Someone asked: what is Mr Stark’s response to what Captain America said about him in his interview, and Mr Stark told him: “If I had a dime every time someone said something mean about me, I would start caring.” Which had Peter giggling so hard he fell off the chair.

Another reporter asks about the validity of Captain America's claim, and if he's the real person from World War 2 but Iron Man says he wasn't alive during the second world War and he never met Captain America then, so he's not in any position to answer that question.

When asked about his health, Mr Stark said that there has been no lasting effect from containing the blast. He also says investigation is going on to find out what sparked the invasion.
Someone asks Thor and Loki: “Who is the older between the two of you, and is it true you are gods?”

The smile Loki gives the reporter is both beautiful and terrifying at the same time. Peter likes it. He’ll have to start practicing how to do it.

“That one looks like trouble,” Aunt May comments, to which Uncle Ben agrees.

“Thor is the older of us,” Loki says sweetly and then his smile takes on a sharp edge. “I am the god of mischief and fire. Thor is the god of thunder.” He also promises Asgard will come to Earth’s defence whenever they need it.”

It leads to more questions about Asgard, which is answered by the two brothers.

Another reporter asks Shock and Quake if they are aliens. “We are humans,” Shock answers. His voice sounds mechanical, like it’s being filtered through a medium. “We are both college students.”

That prompts questions about how they got their powers and if they’re related. Quake answers that they are siblings and ignores the question of how they got their powers. Her voice also sounds mechanical like Shock’s. She tells the reporter they are protecting their identities because they want to continue their lives as civilian lives without any disruptions.

“Christine Everhart, Vanity Fair Magazine.” A blond reporter says when she is called. “What is First Contact?”

“First contact is a program pioneered by Stark Industries to create diplomatic relations between Earth and other planets. As you all know, I met Thor and Loki a few years ago, which brought to my attention the fact that there is a vast universe out there that we are unaware of. Since then, Stark Industries have been making plans to introduce Earth to the rest of the universe. In the wake of this invasion, it is imperative that Earth has allies. It’s time to make friends with the guys on the other side.”

His answer disrupts the entire room, almost everyone in the room begins shouting questions at Mr Stark, asking about what the program will entail and when it will start.

“The CEO of SI, Pepper Potts, will give you more details about that when the time comes,” Mr Stark tells the room, stepping away from the podium.

With that, the superheroes file out of the room and out of the building. The camera follows them all the way, even as the reporters scream questions at them.

When they reach outside, they all exchange hugs among themselves, and Peter can see Thor and Loki exchange a few words with Iron Man where they are standing apart from the other two heroes, even though he cannot read their lips to decipher what was being said among them. It’s then Peter notices the Loki is holding the alien’s sceptre and Thor is carrying a suitcase.

After that, Thor wraps Mr Stark in a big hug that lifts his feet off the ground. When he steps back, Loki bends forward and kisses Mr Stark right on the lips.

Peter’s eyes widen at the sight. He’s never seen two men kissing before and it’s not gross at all. Mr Stark doesn’t even look uncomfortable. He blushes and makes a valiant effort not to look in the direction of his parents. The kiss lasts a few minutes, during which the reporters get even wilder and flashes of cameras continue to go off. Peter imagine there would have been a stampede if not for the railings and bars that have been place to prevent anyone from following the superheroes.
Mr Stark returns to join Shock and Quake where they’re standing a few feet away. They get twin nods from the Asgardians, then there’s a flash of light and Thor and Loki is gone. The camera follows Iron Man, Shock and Quake until they step inside the building before the screen cuts off to show a reporter at the scene, talking about what had just happened.

“They’re gone,” Peter says sullenly. Even though he’s never met them, a part of him misses them already.

“They can’t stay on Earth forever.” Uncle Ben says. “It’s enough that they came to help when Iron Man called.”

“Pete, they’re princes,” Aunt May says. “I’m sure they have princely duties in Asgard.”

She’s right. It’s nice of them to come at all. Then he perks up when a thought springs to mind. “Hey, if Iron Man is sending people to Asgard, can I go too?”

That elicit a laugh from both of them. “You don’t even know if they’ll send people to Asgard yet.” Aunt May tells him.

“Yeah, but if they’ll likely have exchange students right?” Peter argues. “Like when citizens of other countries come to America for school.”

“Buddy, we don’t even know what the education system is like over there,” Uncle Ben says, ruffling his hair affectionately. “Why don’t we wait until there’s more information before you pack up and move to Asgard? You can occupy yourself with the summer program at Stark Industries until then.”

Peter grins broadly at the mention of how he’s going to spend his summer. He can hardly wait to see Iron Man in real life. It’s going to be the best day ever! And who knows, maybe Thor and Loki would have returned by then and he’ll get to meet them too. He’s sure Shock and Quake would be there.

Summer is going to be so awesome! As he thinks about all the other intelligent people he’s going to meet alongside Iron Man. All the new things he’ll learn and the best part, no Flash! Peter sighs longingly. He can’t wait for summer to arrive.

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“You have one hot neighbour,” Natasha says as they pass his nurse neighbour in the hallway.

“I’ll have to take your word for it,” He replies. Steve knows his neighbour is very beautiful. He has entertained the notion of striking up a conversation several times but he always talks himself out of it. He just wishes Nat would be more respectful of women, especially since she’s one herself.

“She definitely wants you to ask her out.” She tells him. “You should. Interacting with people outside your work will introduce you to new things.”

Steve tries not to let her insistence on setting him up on a date affect him, but to be completely honest, it’s starting to grate on his nerves and he tunes her out instead. He would ask her to leave him alone but Hill has appointed her to be his tour guide for the twenty first century. Plus, Steve isn’t really sure if he wants to be alone or not.
He’s having a bad day. Forget that, his life has been a series of bad days since he woke up to a whole new world, and realised that he had lost everyone and everything.

Right now, the last thing Steve needs is new friends, not after what he’s experienced from the first person that offered a hand of friendship. Because of Ian’s actions, the public is now calling him fake Captain America, like everything he did to save the world from HYDRA and the Chitauri suddenly means nothing. He can see now why Stark is so popular. The world just doesn't appreciate traditional values anymore, instead, they shower the man who prefers lavish parties, getting drunk and fornicate, with laurels of praise. The one who would only fight when he stands to gain something from the battle.

Everything happening around him only serves to remind him of how much he misses Bucky. Bucky would never betray him. He’s the one constant in his life Steve could always count on him since they were kids.

The only up side of going down with the Valkyrie seventy years ago, was knowing he wouldn’t have to live in a world without Bucky in it, but waking up in a future that doesn’t have Bucky and Peggy, instead giving him a caricature of Howard feels like a punishment, and Steve doesn’t know what he did to deserve such a cruel treatment.

Natasha pauses, and turns to Steve. “Do you hear that?” She whispers.

It takes Steve a moment to realise there’s soft music coming from his apartment. He nods his answer to her question. He knows for a fact that he turned everything off before he left the house earlier today and he informs her about it.

“Where you expecting someone?” She asks again.

“Someone like a date?” He asks her sarcastically. Like she doesn’t know she’s the only person he’s ever invited over. Nat doesn’t bother with a response. Instead she’s scanning the entire hallway again for anything they may have missed.

Steve nudges a window open, entering as silently and carefully as possible to avoid alerting the intruder. He doesn’t have to turn to check if Natasha had followed him through the window. Instead, he nods his head in the direction of his bedroom while he goes to check through the sitting room.

He doesn’t have to search for long before he found Fury sitting relaxed by the lamp in his living room. He doesn’t know whether to be annoyed at Fury’s presence or not. He’s not ready for another lecture from Fury, not with how testy he feels. He leans by the doorpost. “I don’t remember giving you a key,” he says, a little annoyed.

His uninvited guest doesn’t move. “You really think I’d need one?” Then he sighs. He sounds tired and winded, and it’s a combination Steve never thought he’d ever associate with Fury. “My wife kicked me out.” That’s news to Steve and he’s about to say just that when Natasha comes up behind him. “I didn’t know you had company.”

“I guess it’s the day for revelations, then.” Steve tells him. He turns on the lamp as Natasha walks into the room and they both pause at the sight of blood on him. Fury turns off the lamp again, and types out a message on his phone.

_Ears everywhere_

“Who else knows you’re married?” He asks, playing along.

“Just my friends,” Fury responds. He rises to his feet and takes a few steps towards them when the
shots are fired. They drown out whatever Fury responded with. There are five shots, the bullets pierces through the walls and hit Fury’s back, one of them hitting the back of his skull with an unerring accuracy.

They both spring into action immediately, Natasha jumps out the window, towards the direction of the shooter while Steve goes to Fury, who has fallen unconscious, to the adjoining room. His nurse neighbour knocks down his door, brandishing a gun.

By the time she introduces herself as Agent 13, a SHIELD agent on an undercover mission to protect him on Fury’s orders, he has lost interest in her words. Fury is unconscious and Steve can hear Natasha engaging the shooter outside while Agent 13 calls for backup so he leaves Fury with her and goes for his shield.

He arrives just in time to see the guy flip Nat from where she is perched on his shoulder, to the ground, causing the guy’s mask that has been covering more than half of his face to fall off. He pulls out a knife and Nat moves, lifting her knees to kick into his side, which disrupts his movements, causing the guy to bury the knife in her left shoulder.

He takes off the moment he sees Steve, jumping on the adjoining roof to make his escape. Steve follows in pursuit immediately, cutting through the hallways of the buildings to intercept him at the other side. There are not a lot of people that can keep up with Steve, not since the serum but this guy has proven to be a worthy challenge when despite his best efforts, Steve doesn’t outrun him.

The assassin is a few yards in front of Steve and he’s about to jump off the edge. He throws his shield at him, hoping to knock the guy out long enough to catch him, but the guy pauses and turns long enough to catch the shield traveling through the air towards him.

It has been seventy years since Steve failed Bucky by not catching him before he fell off the train during the war. There is not a day before and after the ice that has passed that Steve has not seen that day in his dreams. Sometimes, he catches Bucky and they live together happily after the war, other times, his looks at him with dead unseeing eyes, accusing Steve of being a fraud because what good is Captain America if he cannot save the people that matter the most to him but either way, Steve wakes up and the hurt feels fresh all over again.

He has seen pictures of his best friend in SHIELD, where they hang the photographs of the people who gave their lives for the mission and he has imagined what it would be like to have his Bucky in the twenty first century with him, both of them talking about the good old days and a time when the greatest generation ever lived, but none of those scenarios ever prepared Steve for the sight of Bucky catching his shield or throwing it back at him with a force that matches the one Steve had launched it with.

He sees the shield sailing through the air towards him, but he’s too stunned watching his Bucky jump off the edge of the building to stop it and not even being slammed into the wall by the force of its impact could take his eyes away from the spot his best friend had been standing just moments ago.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you Akakuroforever10 for your help with this chapter.

I saw a headcanon that said Hela is Loki's mother. I accept it wholeheartedly.
Fury’s mind is going a thousand miles per minute as he replays his conversation with Pierce in his mind, trying to figure out what HYDRA’s play is. Despite what he believes, Pierce has revealed something that will help further Fury’s investigations. He just needs to figure it out.

HYDRA’s MO hasn’t changed since they were founded, even though their ways of execution has. It had to if they wanted to go undetected as they carry out their plans. If they can’t force world domination, they have to figure out a way to convince the various governments of the world that handing over the keys to the kingdom is the best course of action if they want to protect their citizens. For that to happen, there has to be a danger, grave enough to make a president think twice.

He thinks about SHIELD and her mission to protect the common man from the truths of the world they are not yet ready to handle. He thinks about how HYDRA has taken that objective and used it to further their cause. If HYDRA is planning to use the desire to protect the world as a means of conquering it, then they would have to create something to protect the world from. Currently, the common enemy for the governments of the world to unite against is the Chitauri that just tried to conquer the world; what are the chances that HYDRA had something to do with the invasion?

He quickly dismisses the thought. If HYDRA had alien allies, with their knowledge of Earth, they could have staged a better coup than Maw. Instead, it would be just like HYDRA to take advantage of the chaos brought about by the invasion to further their goals. Case in point, the launching of the nuke.

The nuke launched at DC would have taken out the president, his cabinet members and almost the entire capital of the world power, not to mention the individuals strongest enough to form a resistance against them if HYDRA decided to raise their ugly head. That nightmare would be reality if Stark hadn’t been so quick to act. What are the chances that the invasion offered HYDRA the best decoy to use for neutralizing the threats to their reign of terror?

He runs through every interaction with the current members of the WSC, both as a group and as individuals. Their behavioural patterns, decisions and the interactions with Pierce, before and after it was revealed that he was a HYDRA member. With instincts and skills honed from years working as a spy and assassin, it doesn’t take him long to single out the HYDRA agent in their midst.

Once that’s done, he informs the pilot on a change in destination.

It is sundown when he finally arrives at Councilwoman Hawley’s house. Fury has changed time zones so many times in the past few days that he doesn’t bother to keep track of his days anymore.

If her security has any issues with him arriving unannounced for an unscheduled visit, nobody says anything. They lead him directly to her office, where she’s waiting for him.
“Director Fury,” She greets, looking up from the computer on her desk. “What brings you all the way out here?”

“I’ve been thinking about this mess with the nuclear missile, and the best course of action,” Fury says, walking around the office to take a seat opposite hers.

His words earn him a pair of narrowed eyes. “The government isn’t SHIELD’s oversight, why do you care?” Councilwoman Hawley asks him, leaning back on her chair.

“That’s obvious, isn’t it?” He asks, watching her reactions closely. “With SHIELD’s reveal and the government looking for someone to take the fall, we could be looking at treason charges.”

Shrewd eyes focus on him, like they’re trying to peel his skin off and find out what lies beneath it. “Not even you are that naïve, Fury.” She scolds lightly. “After seven decades of cleaning up after them and protecting their dirty laundry from the public, do you really think the government will dare to cross SHIELD because of one mishap?” She asks.

“One very public mishap that would have triggered a nuclear war if not for Stark and his arc shield, you mean?” He counters. “You think the secrets we have helped protect will be enough leverage for when they come for our heads?” He asks her, baiting her.

“Not if they don’t want World War III on their hands,” She says and Fury can't refute how right she is. How many assassinations has SHIELD carried out in the name of national security or the good of the world? The things SHIELD has done, if brought to light will be enough to cause nations to turn against each other. Not to mention all the things HYDRA has done, both in SHIELD’s name and theirs.

It will destroy the world.

“Even if they have reason to believe SHIELD has gone rogue?” He asks. “You just nuked the capital of the United States and everyone is looking to me for answers but you don’t seem bothered.”

“The investigations are mostly a formality at this point. At the end of it, we both know all we’ll get is a slap on the wrist before the whole issue is forgotten. I don’t see what’s gotten you so worked up, Director.”

“Our days have been numbered ever since it was revealed that HYDRA was alive and thriving within SHIELD.” Fury says. “What happens when our leverage isn’t enough leverage anymore? What happens when someone takes it and make it irrelevant?”

That gets her attention, taking the bait exactly as Fury hoped. “You mean someone like Stark?” At Fury’s surprised look, she pressed on. “Oh, don’t insult my intelligence, Director. There are few people with the resources and motive to wage war against SHIELD and Stark has had it out for SHIELD since you sent Romanov into his home. We both know he’s the most likely person to start a crusade against us.”

“That’s why you sent your agents in to finish the job,” He says, getting up as realization strikes him. “You didn’t want him dead, you wanted to make sure SHIELD burned that bridge properly. Tell me, have you always been HYDRA or did you defect somewhere along the way?”

She doesn’t even look surprised at his conclusion and he pretends not to notice when her hand shifts minutely under her desk before she gets up to face him. “Well, killing him would be a waste of resources now, wouldn’t it?” She asks in a tone that conveyed just how stupid she thinks his question is. “Such a brilliant mind should never go to waste. Sending a seductress to a man who was trying to
turn his life around was a stupid plan. I could have told you that, but then, HYDRA wouldn’t have gotten the opening we needed.”

There’s no way Stark would defect to HYDRA, no matter what they were selling him. Fury will lick his asshole if Stark was HYDRA. “Stark will never work for you. Or did you forget he’s the one who uncovered your presence in SHIELD?”

She laughs at that with what sounds like genuine mirth. Fury has known her a long time but this is the first time he’s ever heard her laugh. “Let’s just say, we can be very persuasive. He won’t be the first person we convinced to promote HYDRA’s agenda.” She smiles. Fury knows it’s a delay tactic, and she has reinforcements coming soon. Keep him talking long enough for them to arrive and take care of him, but he lets her continue. “Some of them even fought against HYDRA during the war and today, they have become the pride of HYDRA. Imagine how much good a man with Stark’s resources can do.”

Tony Stark under HYDRA’s control would be nothing short of catastrophic, Fury would know. The problems they experienced because Stark decided to cut ties with SHIELD has brought him to never underestimate the man. What would happen when he decided to fight against everything SHIELD stood for?

“Is that what project insight is about?” He asks, steering the conversation to his purpose for being here.

“I have no idea what that is.” She tells him, looking straight into his eyes.

He shoves her back into her seat, strapping her to it with a pair of handcuffs he brought with him. “I’ve had a long day and am in no mood for games. You may want to start talking before I drag the answers I want out of you.” He warns. He doubts she can resist torture.

“Go ahead,” She dares him with a glare. “You will not get anything out of me because there’s nothing to tell.”

“You sure about that?” He asks, pulling out a syringe from his pocket. He drops it on the desk in front of her so she can get a good view.

“You think I don’t know that that’s what brought you here?” She scoffs. “If you couldn’t get it from the prisoner in your custody, what makes you think I’ll make an easier target?” She shakes her head. “I don’t know what project insight is.”

“Then what do you know?”

She shrugs, shoulders moving as far as her bounds would let them. “A great many things,” She smiles coyly at him.

Looking at her now, Fury would never have guessed she was the same councilwoman he meets during WSC meetings. She always managed to blend into the background when she was with the others. Of course, that’s how she was able to manipulate them and make her ideas seem like theirs. Fury shouldn’t be so surprised, but it’s stuff like this that gives him trust issues.

“About Project Insight,” He presses, filling the syringe with the injection. When she doesn’t answer, he injects her with it. “With this, I can inflict as much pain on you as I want without fear of you passing out on me,” He tells her.

Her eyes flicker from the injection to his face as she takes in the seriousness of the situation and he watches the pulse point on her throat skip a few beats. Councilwoman Hawley looks like she’s
forgotten Fury didn’t just spring to the position of Director of SHIELD.

At her continued silence, he pulls out a pair of pliers from the pocket of his trench coat and uses it to hold the fingernail of her right thumb and pulls.

The sound of her screaming is only heard within the confines of the soundproof office.

“Think you can hold on until your backup arrives?” He asks her nonchalantly.

“It’s how HYDRA plans to take over the world,” She says shakily. “By eliminating anyone likely to resist them.”

“How?” He takes the forefinger next to the bleeding thumb in the plier.

“I don’t know.” She pants. He pulls the fingernail out. “Only those directly involved with the project know anything about it,” She says, panting when she’s done screaming. “And even they don’t know everything. Less chances of someone talking that way.”

“Then who is running the program?” There has to be someone who knows everything. “Who calls the shots when it’s time to launch?”

“Zola Armin.”

He takes another nail. “The bunker housing his servers was destroyed.”

She rolls her eyes at that. “You really think we wouldn’t have a backup?”

He walked right into that one. “How do I get in touch with him, then?”

“Didn’t your Widow get you that from the Lumerian Star already?” She asks. “I thought that’s why you sent her there?”

He wants to ask her to elaborate, but the silent alarm he set to go off in his comm unit when someone breaches the perimeter of the house goes off. He pulls out the second syringe and quickly injects her with it, she’ll be dead before they get to her.

He puts a chair through the glass windows before taking off towards the direction of his quinjet. By the time the reinforcements realize he’s there, his quinjet is in the air.

As soon as the jet is steady and he’s no longer worried about being shot out of the sky, he activates a secure line and calls Hill.

He can’t help but think about how similar Pierce and Hawley’s words were, even though Hawley was more forthcoming with the information he wanted. He wishes he could have gotten more out of her, but hopefully, they could get more. There was enough information they have retrieved from HYDRA since the war against HYDRA to start to filling in the blanks.

“This is Hill.”

“I need you to drop whatever you’re doing and retrieve the new fountain pen I left on my desk.” Fury says. “It’s a gift to my mother for her birthday. Get it gift wrapped and ready for when I arrive.”

As expected of her, she doesn’t question the orders. “On it.”

“While you’re there, check for any of Rogers’ barbers’ club quartets that would have defected since he went missing.” Fury says, thinking about what Hawley said about WW2 soldiers working for
HYDRA and the Barnes look alike the agents claim was one of the Winter Soldiers. If it turns out this guy is actually Barnes, Rogers’ would need to be informed as soon as possible, before HYDRA finds a way to exploit that and use it to their advantage.

“Anything else?” She asks.

“I’ll call you when I’m on the ground.” With that, he ends the call.

The flight lasts for a few more hours, which he spends going through every piece of information he received in the past day. It’s dark when the jet finally lands. As soon as he’s in his car again he calls Hill. “How’s it going?” He asks when she answers.

“I tried looking through the information in the drive, but it kept rewriting my orders, like it had a mind of its own.” Hill says.

“It does,” Fury reassures her. “It’s an AI, Zola Armin. Do we have any cryptographer we trust to take a crack at it?”

“Already asked Evans, he’s useless.”

“What about Rogers’ buddies?”

“You mean James Buckingham Barnes, Captain America’s best friend who died during World War II that went on to become a member of HYDRA’s elite group of assassins?” She asks. Despite her words, the tone of her voice is bland. “From the file I found, he was discovered by HYDRA after he fell off the train and was converted to the dark side. You want to know what the kicker is.”

As she speaks, the files appear on the screen in the windshield. He’s grateful for the empty road. The car is on autopilot so he focuses on his conversation with Hill and the information she’s sending him on Barnes.

“I have a feeling that’s why we’re having this conversation.” He says, flicking through the screen, even as he changes his route to Rogers’ apartment.

“Remember the car accident that killed Howard and Maria Stark, well, it turns out it was an assassination carried out by Winter Soldier Barnes, after which he retrieved the super soldier serum, which I’m guessing was used to create the other winter soldiers.”

“Fuck!” Fury exclaims. Can this day get any worse? He remembers that accident very clearly. At that point, he was Peggy’s right hand man but even he didn’t couldn’t get the details of the accident. He knew SHIELD was trying to create more super soldiers, but after the accident, the project was quickly forgotten, never to be mentioned again.

At the time Fury didn’t think they were related. He’d assumed the project failed without SHIELD’s lead scientist to oversee it. Masking an assassination as an accident to avoid investigators digging for a motive is exactly what he would have done if he wanted to cover up his trails. Whether the whereabouts of the serum was investigated within SHIELD or whether HYDRA managed to sweep it under the rug begs questioning.

“What are the chances Stark already has this information?” Fury asks as he reads through how Barnes was transformed into the Winter Soldier. This is just more mess that Fury has to clean up and he still doesn’t have enough information on Project Insight to work with.

“We have to assume he doesn’t, or he would be making someone pay for it by now, either SHIELD or the Winter Soldier.” Fury can hear the clicks of the keyboard on her end.
“We have to inform him.” Fury says cursing under his breath. “HYDRA has some kind of plan and right now, he has enough incentive to work with us to stop—” That’s as far as he gets before a mini missile hits the windshield of his car. It doesn’t pierce it, but it makes quite a dent that wouldn’t hold if another missile hits the same spot.

The screen goes blank immediately and the call ends. He looks up just in time to see the subject of his discussion with Hill before an explosion rocks the car from underneath, causing it to somersault a few times before stabilizing.

The windshields are busted and the soldier is making his way towards him while the car system gives Fury useless facts about the state of the car. Fury injects himself with an anaesthetic injection for the pain and disembarks the car before the soldier can get close enough to him.

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The sound of sirens approaching jolts Steve out of his stupor. He rushes back to his apartment, where Natasha is propped up on a wall, a hand on her bleeding shoulder while she struggles to take in slow breaths. Agent 13 is pacing the length of his living room, still on the phone and corresponding with the backup on their way. He needs to get to Bucky before someone else does and decides he is a bad person, but where does he start?

As he approaches her, he can see the beads of sweat on her pale face and the wound is bleeding more profusely than he first thought, despite how calm she looks. He wants to ask her how he can assist her but the only word that comes out of his mouth when he opens it is:

“Bucky.”

“What?” She asks, tilting her head back to look up at him but quickly thinks better of the action. She's bleeding pretty badly, but Steve's mind is incapable of dealing with that at the moment.

“Do you know who that is?” Steve repeats in a clearer voice.

“A Winter Soldier?” She asks in a breathless voice. “They’re HYDRA assassins.”

“No he’s not!” Steve exclaims. “That’s my Bucky.”

“That’s your best friend from the forties?” She asks, “Makes sense. We thought he was a look alike or distant relative.”

“You knew all this time that Bucky was alive?” He asks her through the sound of blood rushing in his ears. He cannot believe what he's hearing. “When did you plan to tell me, or is this another one of SHIELD’s secrets I haven’t earned the right to know?” His voice rises until he was yelling at her.

“A little louder, Steve.” Natasha says, ignoring his question. “There are a few people in a club bathroom two states over that didn’t quite catch that.”

He wants to shake her until she tells him the truth, even though he doubts she is even capable of telling the truth. Didn’t she just try to set him up with a SHIELD agent pretending to be a friendly nurse neighbour so SHIELD could continue to monitor his life? What else have they been lying to him about? He should have known better than to trust them. Peggy may have founded it, but Fury has ruined her legacy. Look at how they let HYDRA invade and run rampant in SHIELD, and now
they have done something to Bucky. He has to save Bucky. His best friend needs him and this time, he will not fail.

He’s still lost in thought when the backup Agent 13 called in earlier rushes into the apartment. Some of them rush to Fury’s side, and a couple to Nat’s. They make quick work of attending to her before loading her onto a gurney and then a helicopter, along with Fury. He hops into the back of the chopper with Agent 13. He’s so busy thinking about who to interrogate for information on how to find Bucky that he doesn’t notice anything amiss inside.

They arrive at the hospital in record time. A few doctors and nurses descend on the helicopter once it lands and they rush both gurneys into the elevator and a couple of waiting operating theatres. Steve paces the length of the hallway of the hospital, occasionally sparing a glance at the surgeons working on Natasha. It’s been almost two hours since they arrived and he’s no closer to getting any information on how to find Bucky than when he first laid eyes on him. He’s running out of time. Somewhere out there, Bucky is waiting for him. Whatever they did to him that caused him not to remember Steve, he’s going to fix it. Steve just has to find him first.

Agent 13 claims she has no idea who Bucky is, not even when Steve used the name Natasha had called him: Winter Soldier. She claims she’s never come across the name before, but Steve doesn’t believe her. She works for SHIELD, they’re all liars. Fury has created this web of lies, hoping to trap Steve in it, but Steve is a wise man and he can see through their lies and deception.

He knows who is most likely to have the information he needs, besides Fury, that is. Maria Hill. She’s Fury’s second in command, and she is the one most likely to know all of his secrets. He heard from the whispers among the nurses and agents that she’s around and has gone to see Fury, who was declared dead on arrival, but Steve doesn’t know where Fury’s body was taken so he’s waiting here for her. Sooner or later, she’ll show up and he can get the answers he wants from her.

She walks in just then, towards the operating room, barely glancing at Steve when she walks by him. She spends a few seconds watching the doctor work on Natasha, until a doctor comes out to update her on the situation.

It’s only after the doctor has left that Hill gives Steve her attention. “What happened at your apartment?” She asks him, at the same time Steve asks:

“Were you ever going to tell me?”

“I’m going to need more than that.” She tells him.

“Bucky.” Steve says. “The Winter Soldier. Were you ever going to tell me or was it more of your secrets? Was Fury planning to keep it as that until it was useful to his plans?”

“We didn’t know any of the Winter Soldiers’ identities,” Hill says calmly, but Steve just knows she’s lying. All SHIELD does is lie and keep secrets. “No one knew Barnes was still alive till today.”

And suddenly, he feels the surge of anger rise within him again. He grabs both her arms and shoves her hard against a wall. “Don’t lie to me!” He screams. Around him, a few SHIELD agents aim their guns at Steve but he ignores them.

Hill’s face doesn’t betray any emotion as she looks at the hands holding her in place. “Take your hands off me.” The threat in her voice has Steve removing his hands before his brain registers the action.

“Where is he?” He asks again, trying to keep his voice calm. He doesn’t think he succeeds.
“Stand down.” Hill commands, pushing away from the wall. “You’re making a scene.”

He shoves her back into it. “I don’t care. Tell me where he is.” If they discovered HYDRA, then they should know where Bucky is. Steve should have been there to save him, instead Fury has him doing clean-up and prancing for the cameras like a show pony.

Steve doesn’t see her hand move, he barely feels the sting of her hand or the pinch on his neck before everything goes dark.

When he regains consciousness, he finds he’s in a very awkward and uncomfortable position. His hands and legs are cuffed and the cuffs are linked together by a metal rod. Despite his super soldier strength, his best attempts to free himself proves futile.

“Good, you’re awake,” A voice—Maria Hill—says. Despite her words, her attention is on a tablet in her hand. Agent 13 is with her too. “Thought I was going to have to leave you behind.”

“Get these off me.” Steve growls at her.

Hill doesn’t move from her seat. Instead, she raises a condescending brow at him. “Are you ready to behave like a rational adult?” She asks him.

“You lied to me!” Steve accuses her. “You and Fury have been lying to me all along. What else have you been keeping from me?”

“Why do you think Fury was in your apartment today? For a tea party? His first stop after finding out one of HYDRA’s elite assassins was Barnes is your apartment. What does that tell you?”

Steve shifts, trying to get a comfortable position but it was impossible to do with his hands and legs cuffed like they are. “Stop saying that. Bucky is not an assassin. He would never work for HYDRA.”

He gets a twin look that looks a like a cross between pity and exasperation from both women. Hill pushes a remote on her desk and the cuffs falls off of Steve. He stands up immediately, putting some distance between himself and the cuffs while stretching his muscles that were cramped from being bent for so long.

“If you make any sudden move or try to manhandle any of us,” Hill warns him in a threatening voice, “You’ll wish I left you in the cuffs.”

A quick look around, and he finds that they are in Fury’s office. The same office he was in a few days ago when Fury decided he needed some talking to after the interview with Ian was aired.

Agent 13 hands him a tablet, with Bucky’s face on the screen. He’s in his World War 2 uniform, looking like no time has passed at all since the day this picture was taken and last night when he threw Steve’s shield back at him.

“That,” Hill says in a snide and disrespectful tone, “Is the file HYDRA has on your precious Bucky, who isn’t a HYDRA assassin and the missions he has carried out since the last time you saw him. Make yourself comfortable and get to know what has become.”

Steve thinks this is just an excuse for Hill to distract him and waste time instead of going after HYDRA and save his best friend who needs him. But it’s still more information than what he has gotten since he discovered Bucky is alive, so he takes a seat and starts reading through the information on the tablet.
There are a lot of HYDRA victims, men, women, children, sometimes whole families and sometimes, just couples. Names and information of people HYDRA used the Winter Soldier to hurt, but very little useful information about Bucky. Steve doesn’t understand why Hill would ask him to read a file they compiled on the list of people HYDRA killed. Bucky is a hero, not an assassin. He fought HYDRA in the war. They must have done something to him.

He’s still maintaining that line of thought when he came across a photograph of a couple that give him pause. He doesn’t recognize the woman in the picture but the man is a face he doesn’t think he can ever forget. He glances at Hill, but her attention is on the system in front of her, and suddenly, he can’t control the anger that surges through him.

“Am I supposed to believe this?” He asks, anger clear in his voice as he tosses the tablet aside. He rises from his seat to pace the room. “I was told Howard died in a car accident and now you have this—” he points at the tab on the desk—“saying Bucky killed him.”

“At the time, it was ruled as an accident.” Hill says, not looking up from her work. “The official report stated that Howard Stark was driving under the influence and he wrapped his car around a tree.”

“How do I know SHIELD is not just setting him up?” Steve growls, annoyed that she considers whatever it is she’s doing on the computer more important. “What prove do you have that he did it, or that he’s even a HYDRA assassin, this Winter Soldier, to begin with?”

“You just watched him assassinate Director Fury and almost take out the black widow in the process, yet you have trouble believing he’s an assassin?” Agent 13 says, staring at him incredulously before snorting inelegantly. It’s not a sound he would expect from someone like her. “Some tactical genius you are”

Her words give him a pause and he thinks through what this information might mean if it’s really true. “What are you going to do with this?” Steve asks Hill. “Are you doing to tell Stark?”

Hill does give him her attention at that. “Why?” She asks. “Is there a reason he shouldn’t be informed?”

“What if Stark decides to go after Bucky because he thinks Bucky killed his parents?” He asks. “What if he tries to kill him?”

“Barnes did kill his parents.” Agent 13 says. “And irrespective of who goes after them, putting down the Winter Soldiers may be the only option.”

“But it wasn’t Bucky!” He exclaims, aggravated that she isn’t getting what he’s saying. “It wasn’t Bucky. HYDRA must have done something to him, otherwise, Bucky never would have worked for them. You can’t just decide to kill him because of something that wasn’t his fault.”

“So you’re saying Tony Stark doesn’t need to know the truth about his parents’ death because ‘it wasn’t Bucky’?” Hill asks him, air quotes and all. Steve can barely hold himself back from hitting something. She’s twisting his words.

“It’s not like knowing how they died is going to bring them back,” He argues. “They’ve been dead for about twenty years and by bringing this up, you’re only going to open the wound again. We should be helping Bucky, not trying to get him killed.”

“Your friend is a threat to national security and will be taken down by any means necessary.” Hill watches him for a few long moments. Steve feels like she’s looking underneath his skin and he can’t
resist shifting his weight from foot to foot under the weight of her gaze. “Do you know HYDRA has more than one Winter Soldier? Did you get to the part about how they were created?” She asks eventually. “Barnes isn’t the only one whose identity we’ve uncovered. Judging from Barnes’ timeline, these people have been active for almost seventy years. Are you going to advocate for the same treatment to be given to the others? Send them out into the world despite the threat they pose or do you only care for your friend?”

“I—” He starts, but stops when he realizes he has no idea how to answer her question. He chances a glance at Agent 13 and she’s watching him with the same intense look in her eyes. He doesn’t know the other Winter Soldiers, but he knows Bucky isn’t dangerous. He’s hurt and scared and he needs Steve to save him, but if he says that, Hill and Agent 13 will only twist his words. He’ll just stay with them long enough to get the information he needs to find Bucky. After all, isn’t that what SHIELD does? He knows Natasha does it all the time. They’ve been using him and hiding Bucky from him, but now, he’ll use their tactics against them.

He’ll use them to find Bucky. After he saves him, both of them can leave SHIELD behind and start a new life together, free of lies and secrets. He looks at Hill and asks. “So what do you suggest?”

She taps a few keys on the laptop before getting up from her seat. “I’ve already informed Stark of the latest development, he’ll call us if he’s interested in working with SHIELD.” She walks towards the floor to ceiling window, turning her back on them. Steve swallows his comment about Hill informing Stark before Steve, despite everything Steve has done for SHIELD. “Hopefully, he’ll help. But for now, we wait.”

Chapter End Notes

Had my first run-in with writer's block. I hate it.

If you want to talk about this fic or Tony Stark, I'm over at tumblr on dn-ky.
“We’ve been over this already,” Pepper growls into the telephone receiver. “Iron Man belongs to Stark Industries and that’s not going to change.” She listens to the person on the other end try to stutter out something about the government before cutting him off mid-sentence. “If anyone lays a hand on War Machine or the Iron Legion, they won’t have to worry about dealing with Tony Stark, because there’ll be nothing left when I’m done with them. Get legal on this, Bert. Get the president to sign an order, if you must but I want this matter settled yesterday.”

She hangs up before Bert can get a word in and drops her head into her hands resting on the office desk. It’s been a long day that has no end in sight. Pepper has been fielding calls, negotiating contracts, corralling board members and fending off senators and government officials that are trying to reopen the case for Iron Man to be handed over to the government, all day.

In the wake of the Chitauri invasion, in true Tony Stark fashion, just like every time he does something to remind the world that he’s just an idiot playboy with loose morals and more money than sense, Pepper’s life has been overtaken by work. With the reveal of the Stark Industries arc shield technology, SI stock is off the charts, new contracts having been pouring in, both from the US military and Air Force and America’s allies. Everyone wants the arc shield. Something that can withstand a nuclear bomb is a must have, especially if one has to worry about rogue nukes being fired by secret government agencies with no regards to human life.

There were a few attempts to get SI to return to being a weapons manufacturer for the military, as well as rumors that they were returning to their weapons manufacturing days, but PR’s best efforts to quell them doesn’t seem to be working. This had reporters and military officials calling her office, both to verify the rumours and kiss her ass. Tony doesn’t even want the military getting their hands on the arc shield, let alone return to making weapons.

Many companies who had declined working with Stark Industries due to one issue or another, real or imagined suddenly want to set up a meeting with her to talk about joint ventures. She has received invitations from countries, inviting SI to build new headquarters. Of course, knowing that SI only uses clean energy is a huge props. Who wouldn’t want an environmentally safe industry in their country?

Her calendar is packed already with appointments and Pepper knows she’ll be working overtime for the foreseeable future. She would blame Tony, but she knows it’s not his fault. Generating good publicity for the company is his job and this is the best kind there is. At least she has JARVIS’ assistance. He may not have a body to attend meetings, but he can answer calls and reply emails efficiently. That, more than anything, Pepper is grateful for.

Besides, she knows how to treat herself at the end of days like this. Pepper picks up the Starkpad
resting on the desk and opens her favorite online shops. She notices a few new items in her shopping cart, courtesy of FRIDAY’s intervention. It’s the cart linked to one of Tony’s credit cards.

The AI may not have a body, but she does know how to shop for Pepper. Even better, she loves to shop for Pepper. Since she started asking for the AI’s opinion on clothes and other items, the young AI girl has taken to filling up her carts with things she thinks Pepper would like without being asked. Sometimes, she’s the one to find the best deals for Pepper.

Some days, Pepper thinks FRIDAY considers her as her very own Barbie doll to dress up as she likes, since she can’t wear the clothes herself. Not that she minds, the AI knows Pepper’s tastes. She flicks through the contents of the carts, before adding a few more and then she clicks the buy option.

After her little shopping spree, Pepper is feeling refreshed so she reads through the reports detailing R&D’s progress on some of their latest projects. She’ll have to talk to Tony about some of these to get his opinion on the next step. She’s still contemplating if she will return to her apartment after meeting Tony or spend the night at the tower when FRIDAY interrupts her quiet musings.

“Ms Potts,” The AI says. “You have an incoming call from Agent Hill.”

And just like that, her good mood is ruined. The leeches at SHIELD only know to call when they need something, and it’s never anything good. She’d once thought SHIELD was a wonderful ally for Tony, especially the first few months after Tony became Iron Man, but she was quickly disabused of the notion when she realized they were only setting him up to milk him for all they could get from him. After that incident, Pepper has had no love for them.

Their recent actions after the invasion hasn’t done anything to change her opinion.

“Potts,” She says shortly, after FRIDAY accepts the call.

“Good evening, Ms Potts,” Hill greets.

“You have some nerve.” She tells the agent on the other line coldly.

“Ms Potts, first of all, I want to apologize for Steve Rogers’ behavior during his interview and the words he said about Dr Stark,” Hill apologizes. “I assure you that he’s being dealt with and it won’t happen again.” Pepper doubts that, but if that’s the story they’re selling, then okay.

“So, to what do I owe the pleasure?” Her tone makes it clear she takes no pleasure in answering the call at all, and Hill must have heard it too. “I know you're not calling just for that. If you're calling for Dr Stark, he's unavailable.” She tells her, because Pepper knows JARVIS screens SHIELD’s calls sometimes and the only other time SHIELD contacts her is when they want to do business with SI. That contract was concluded a few weeks ago and Hill had no place at that table.

“Our investigations into HYDRA activities has brought some new information to our notice,” Hill tells her calmly. “It concerns Dr Stark, but I think you are the best person to deliver the news to him.”

“Go on,” She prompts.

“There has been some evidence that the car accident which resulted in the death of Howard and Maria Stark was no car accident,” Hill continuing clinically. “It was an assassination ordered by HYDRA and carried out by the Winter Soldier.”

“And you just found this evidence?” Pepper asks. How convenient.

“Yes. A few minutes ago, in fact.”
“Is SHIELD operating on a new transparency policy, or is there a catch to you telling me this so soon after finding out.” Pepper asks sceptically. “For all I know you could have been sitting on this information for months, waiting for the right time.”

Pepper listens to Maria debrief her about HYDRA’s recent activities to secure world domination and what she fears may have happened to Fury.

At the end of the call, Pepper’s heart was beating loudly. She knows how Tony’s parents’ death affected him. How he blames himself for being the reason Howard was driving recklessly, and how he blames Howard for getting behind a wheel drunk and killing his mother. It’s a guilt Tony has carried with him for as long as she’s known him, even though he never talks about it.

Pepper wonders how he will take the news that it was an assassination, passed off as an accident by the very same organisation that Howard helped found.

And SHIELD wants Tony’s help taking down HYDRA. Pepper finds it very convenient that Hill came across the information exactly when they needed Tony’s expertise but she doesn’t think too hard about it. The decision to work with SHIELD or not is ultimately Tony’s to make and if HYDRA is coming for Tony, it will be best to have an army behind him. Of course, it’s also a huge plus in Hill’s favour that she didn’t just call Tony to give him such a world shattering information, instead, she’s letting the people who care about Tony the most be the ones to break the news.

She calls Rhodey and relays the news Maria Hill has just given her. As soon as he confirms he’s on his way, she packs her things and heads out of the office.

She finds Tony in his lab, as she has come to expect of him. The others are in their various labs and apartments attending to their own businesses, according to JARVIS. Tony is searching through a box when she enters the lab, and he only spares a moment to toss her a greeting before he returns to his task. He is very focused on this task.

“What are you looking for?” She asks partly because she’s curious and partly because it’s a way to while away the time until Rhodey arrives.

“Cap’s shield,” Tony says distractedly. “It’s supposed to be in one of these boxes but I can’t find it anywhere. It’s not in Malibu.”

“You should look through the box containing your half-finished projects from Malibu,” JARVIS suggests.

“I already looked, it’s not in it,” Tony complains but he’s already moving to follow JARVIS’ suggestion.

“What do you want Captain America’s shield for anyway?” Pepper asks, looking around the lab. There’s a new line of sentinels on display. Tony’s work bench, as usual is in a state of organized chaos with a holograph of a schematic floating above it.

“Helen’s team is ready to build JARVIS’ body.” He says as he searches through the contents of the box. “Vibranium will work better than starknium in this case.”

“I thought you were donating your own tissue, so he comes out looking human?” She inquires.

“And I am,” Tony assures her. “The plan is to infuse my cells with vibranium atoms. He’ll still come out human, but stronger and faster.”

“So basically, a super soldier?”
“Exactly, but better. You know, just in case someone gets it in their head to kidnap Tony Stark’s kid. Plus, the vibranium molecules will amplify the changes extremis made to my DNA and he’ll also be a techno-path like his daddy. That way, he can connect to his servers whenever he wants.”

Pepper nods in understanding. She's not surprised at the thought that has gone into everything. Tony knows his stuff and he'll do everything he can to make sure JARVIS gets the body he deserves. “Well, you can reinforce his body all you want, but nothing you do to protect him is going to make you worry less about your child’s safety.” She tells him.

“How would you know? Do you have a kid I don’t know about?” He asks, then gasps theatrically, a hand coming up to clutch his chest, resting on the glowing light of the arc reactor. “Virginia Pepper Potts, you do don’t you? Woe, such woe is me,” The hand has moved up to his forehead, mimicking a Shakespearean actress bemoaning her fate. “My world is out of alignment, Pepper has a secret lovechild. I need a reboot.” He moans.

Pepper laughs and rolls her eyes at his antics. “And here I thought the news of your impending fatherhood will make you more mature. Silly me.”

“Silly you, indeed,” He sasses. “I am forever young.”

After a couple of minutes, Tony pulls out a lump of shapeless steel. “What is this?” He asks aloud.

“It appears you have found what you have been searching for, Sir.” JARVIS answers primely.

“This looks nothing like Captain America’s shield.” Tony says, still looking at the lump in his hands.

“Should I award you a gold star for that astute observation, Sir?” JARVIS asks, and Pepper can barely stop herself from laughing. She’ll never get over Tony and JARVIS being snarky to each other.

“Keep talking. I know some people at the DMV who would have use for a mouthy AI,” Tony says but he doesn’t look offended. He’s grinning, in fact.

“Why did you melt the shield JARVIS?” Pepper asks, because she’s curious and Tony isn’t asking.

“The sight of it offended me and its current state takes up less space in storage.”

Wow. She takes another look at the lump of vibranium that Tony has set on his desk. “Remind me to never piss you off, JARVIS.”

Tony spends a few more minutes working before he looks up at her again. “Pep!” Tony says, like he’s just noticed her presence. “Light of my life, queen of my heart. How are you? I haven’t seen you in almost fifteen hours, what have you been up to?”

Pepper rolls her eyes at him. “Running your business and fending off would be predators with a stick.”

“The military still hounding you for Iron Man weapons?” He asks.

“And just about any type of weapon they can get us to make. That’s handled though, so no worries.” She waves him off.

“I don’t pay you enough to deal with this shit.”

“If you pay me any more than you already do, I’ll be richer than you.” She smiles. “Besides, you
already got me something to show your appreciation. Thank you for your generosity Mr Stark.”

“You’re welcome, Ms Potts.”

“R&D is ready to start animal testing of the treating for degenerative diseases.” She pulls up a file in her Starktab and sends it to his own tab. Pepper is curious if the inspiration for this project has anything to do with a certain friend of Howard Stark, who is currently suffering from alzheimer’s, but the news she brought with her prevents her from mentioning it. “This is the report, the team is waiting for you to give the go-ahead.”

“They’re ahead of schedule,” Tony says as he looks through the files. “But these look great. I’ll look them over again before signing off on it. What’s this?” He asks, opening another file.

Pepper accepts a bottle of water from Dum-E and takes a sip. “That’s the report from the cancer research team. They’re making great progress.”

“These guys have been very hardworking. They’ll be getting special bonuses this year.” Pepper agrees. “Now that you’re here, I have something for you,” Tony rises from his eat and leads Pepper to the other side of the lab where the Sentinels are assembled and she follows excitedly. As much as she loves the presents she buys herself with Tony’s credit card and the ones he buys her himself, Pepper’s favorite gifts are always the ones Tony makes her. She knows how much thought and care goes into every single one of them and that makes them even more precious to her.

At the end of the rows of Sentinels, stands an Iron Man armour, except this one looks different, both from the Sentinels next to it and Tony’s usual armour. It’s all sleek lines and painted purple. It’s also the most beautiful thing she has ever seen. She’s so entranced by the sight of it that it takes her a while to notice Tony is speaking to her.

“I know you’re not Iron Man’s biggest fan, and you’ve never hidden what you think about me going out in the armour,” Tony is saying. “But you’re one of the most important people to me, and I will do everything in my power to keep you safe. But I can’t always be there when you need me, so I thought, hey, what’s the best way to make sure Pepper can always protect herself?”

“What makes you think I hate Iron Man?” Pepper asks when he’s done with his spiel. She is sufficiently distracted from admiring the armour now.

“You want a list? You’re the one who is always yelling at me whenever I go out in the armour, and you used to get this twitch in your eyes whenever you see the suit, like you’re barely holding yourself back from taking a crowbar to it.” Tony tells her. “Not to mention how much work I give you whenever I have to go out as Iron Man.”

“Oh, Tony.” She sighs, closing the distance between them. This time, she doesn’t stop herself from hugging him and running her hand through his hair. “Sure, I hated Iron Man when you first created it, but that’s because you were so reckless. All I wanted was for you to take care of yourself and give your safety more priority but some days, I thought you were looking for someone to put you out of your misery.”

He pulls away from the embrace to look at her face. “Really?”

“Tony, you wore your guilt like it was your best clothes and walked around like you were everything wrong with the world. You blame yourself for what Stane did, and even when you were doing everything you could to fix it, you still wouldn’t give yourself a break. There were days I was sure you really wanted to die, and every time you went out in that suit, I was scared you wouldn’t come back.
“Iron Man was supposed to be the instrument that took you to freedom. It’s what helped you get out of the cave, but when you returned home, it became an instrument you used to punish yourself.” She sighs. “I used to yell at you because it was the only way to get through to you and if you wanted to kill yourself, I would not be one that enabled you.

“But I see the efforts you’ve been making since your birthday.” She says with a smile. “You’ve been taking a lot of precautions, you don’t act like your safety means nothing to you anymore and you’ve been sharing more with Rhodey and I. Hell, I know you’ve been listening to JARVIS when he gives you advice. When was the last time I yelled at you about Iron Man?”

Tony does that awkward shuffle he does when he’s confronted with an emotion situation he doesn’t quite know how to handle. It’s so cute, she wants to coo. “So you’re happy about me making you a suit?” He still sounds unsure, but that’s okay. She’ll make him believe just how okay it is.

“Happy? I’ve been silently beefing you in my mind because you made Rhodey one and not me.” She teases and turns back to the suit. “But now that I see the finished work, it was definitely worth the wait. This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” She pulls him into another hug. “Thank you, Tony.”

“Do that mean I can count on you to rescue me if I get cocky during a mission and get captured by the big bad dragon?” He asks wiggling his eyebrows.

She responds with a wide grin of her own. “I’ll be your knight in shining armour,” She tells him. “Hey, we can sell the idea to Disney. A girl knight and gentleman in distress.”

They bounce ideas for the movie off each other as Pepper tests the suit. Tony doesn’t let her fly outside because it’s too dangerous for her first flight, but there’s enough space in the lab so she doesn’t call him out for the hypocrisy. After a while, Tony gets into his own armour and they have fun together, until they look down to find Rhodey watching them with an unimpressed look on his face.

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“Honey bear!” Tony greets as he lands. He flips the faceplate of the suit open and grins at his best friend. Pepper copies his moves, landing a few feet beside Tony and opposite Rhodey.

“Hi Rhodey,” She greets.

“Looking good Pepper,” Rhodey smiles at her, then he lifts the bag in his hang that Tony only just noticed. “I brought cheese burgers.”

That makes Tony pause. Cheeseburgers is Tony’s comfort food. It’s what he eats when he’s having a bad day or when a deal goes wrong. Tony eats cheeseburgers when he’s just gotten out of a near death situation and wants to remind himself he’s alive. When his friends want to comfort him using more than just words, they get him cheeseburgers. And his Platypus has just shown up unannounced with a bag of cheeseburgers.

Tony looks between Pepper and Rhodey, whose smile is negated by the tight look in his eyes. “What’s wrong?” He asks. “Did something happen?” The two most important people to him present but— “Is it Happy? Did something happen to him?” He doesn’t give them a chance to answer. It must be really bad if they’re both here, breaking the news to him together and Tony’s starting to
panic. “JARVIS, where is Happy?” JARVIS should have informed him about this as soon as it happened. Why didn’t he?

“Mr Hogan is safe and sound, enjoying reruns of Down Town Abbey in his apartment, Sir.” JARVIS says and the sound of blood rushing in his ears dies out a little so he can hear Pepper and Rhodey trying to calm him.

Rhodey guides him to take a seat on the couch and he and Pepper take their seats on either side of him.

“Tony,” Pepper says gently as she takes his hand. “I got a call from Maria Hill before I came here. They’ve been investigating HYDRA missions and they’ve discovered some evidence than the accident that killed your parents wasn’t an accident caused by Howard's drunk driving.”

“It was an assassination carried out by the Winter Soldier.” Rhodey tells him.

“Oh,” Pepper and Rhodey are watching him and Tony is speechless. He's been waiting all year to see what Fury will do with the information of his parents’ death, and even though he wasn't shocked to be told, he's still not sure how take the news.

“You don't look surprised to hear it,” Rhodey observes and Tony doesn’t know what to tell him.

“Have you been running your own investigations?” Pepper asks. “Or is it something you learned from the time travel thing?”

Tony's head swings towards her direction so fast. “The what?” He asks, squeaks really. How could she have known.

“Were we not supposed to know about that?” She asks with a confused frown and when he takes a look at his best friend, Rhodey is mirroring her frown. How long have they known?

“What do you know about time travel?” He asks both of them.

“We know a future you built a time machine and came back in time to knock some senses into you,” Rhodey says like he's telling Tony what the cadets did at the Air Force base today.

“I don't even know where to begin with that,” Tony tells them as Rhodey pushes a burger into his hand.

“You didn't think we wouldn't notice the change, did you?” Pepper asks. She looks a little hurt at the notion that Tony didn't think they cared enough to notice when something changes about him.

“Tones,” Rhodey lays a hand on his shoulder to get his attention. God, this burger is so good. Rhodey must have gotten it from his favorite drive-through. “You're my best friend. I've know you most of our lives and I've lived with you. You and Pepper practically live in each others’ pockets. How on Earth did you think we wouldn't notice when you stopped looking like the weight of the world was on your shoulders, or trying to be a lone gunslinger?”

“You didn't think we wouldn't notice the change, did you?” Pepper asks. She looks a little hurt at the notion that Tony didn't think they cared enough to notice when something changes about him.

“Or when we started meeting friends and aliens we have never heard about?” Pepper points out. “I mean, I love Loki but I know all your friends and there's no way you could have kept meeting an alien to yourself.”

“Makes sense,” Tony concedes. “But how did you guys come to the conclusion that future me built a time machine?” That thought never even crossed Tony's mind. Not even when everything that could go wrong did.
“At first I thought it was a body snatcher,” Pepper says with a shrug. “But whenever I tried to ask JARVIS if you were up to something sinister, he told me to take up my concerns with you.”

“Not to mention, you remembered things only you and I knew. Although sometimes, you’d mention stuff I know for sure we’ve never done, but at the same time sounds exactly like something we’d both do.” Rhodey puts in. “You had all the same quirks I know the world doesn’t know about, but for once, it looked like you’ve finally realized what we’ve been trying to tell you about not taking on the world alone.”

“Is that why you were always going down Memory Lane whenever we hung out?” Tony asks. He never paid any mind to it then but thinking about it now, he should have known his best friend was trying to verify his identity.

“Of course,” He answers. “My best friend woke up one morning and became a totally different man. You didn’t expect us to just dismiss it, did you? At first I thought I was imagining things, then Pepper asked if I’d noticed anything different about you.”

“Yeah,” Pepper agrees. “You weren’t jumping head first into dangerous situations or acting like your safety means nothing. Plus, you steered the company into a direction and stopped acting like you couldn’t be bothered to attend a meeting or listen when I briefed you about what we were doing. So I thought I’d let you be and watch you closely for any sign of foul play”

“Why didn't you just come to me with your concerns?”

“And give up the only leverage we had if you weren't the real you?” Pepper counters. “It was best to make you believe your ruse was working. That way, you could get comfortable enough to make more mistakes.”

“But time travel?” Tony presses.

“Well,” Rhodey says. “To be honest, the first clue was when the file you gave us to read about Fury’s little spy had an entry dated 2014.”

“What?” There is no way JARVIS would make a mistake like that. “JARVIS wouldn't...” Unless he’s been sending them hints. Tony expects the sneaky AI to defend his actions but apparently, he feels no need for it. He's been riding Tony’s ass to come clean about everything since they returned. He should have known JARVIS would take matters into his own hands.

“And then some of the schematics you gave me for R&D had future dates too.” She chews on a curly fry before she continues. “At first I thought it was Loki. When we asked him about the possibility, he told us time travel was possible. But when asked if he’s the one that sent you back, he said you would tell us whatever you thought we needed to know.”

“The obvious conclusion was that a future you returned to the past.” Rhodey shrugs, eating the last of his burger.

“Wow,” Tony breathes. “I've been worried you'll think I'm crazy if I told you I time traveled. Why didn't you guys tell me about your suspicions? Could have saved me a lot of worry.”

“Tony, we're used to you doing things no one else can,” Pepper says with just a hint of scolding. “Why would time travel be the one thing we couldn't handle?”

Tony’s clever response is a sheepish shrug.

“We figured you didn't tell us because you weren't ready to talk about it. It must have been a really
terrible future if future you felt the need to come back and change it.” Rhodey says, knocking his shoulder into Tony’s to let him know he’s not offended. “Although, I am pretty miffed I didn’t get the chance to see future you.”

Tony lets out a short bark of laughter. “You’re not very far off the mark,” He tells them. “But future me didn’t build a time machine. No one did, in fact.”

Now they’re both staring at him. “Then what happened?”

He grins. “Hey J, do you want to do the honors?” He calls.

“You have it handled so far, Sir.”

“Alright.” He looks to both his closest friends. “It was JARVIS.”

Pepper blinks at him. “What did JARVIS do?”

“JARVIS turned back the time.” He couldn't have kept the pride out of his voice if he tried. “He brought us back to the past.”

There’s a moment of silence before anyone says anything. “How?” Rhodey asks. “I mean, no offense, JARVIS but how?”

“No offense taken, Colonel Rhodes.” JARVIS says.

Then he and Tony explain to Pepper and Rhody about how JARVIS had managed to interrupt the space-time continuum and the events that lead to it.

Tony and JARVIS tell them about Loki’s invasion and how the Avengers were assembled, about going into the wormhole and suffering PTSD for years, and warning the other Avengers about what he saw on the other side and having no one pay him any mind. He talks about Killian and Maya, about HYDRA’s reveal and how Rogers and Romanov unloaded SHIELD into the internet in a bid to get rid of HYDRA and how Tony started bankrolling the Avengers because he believed in the good the Avengers could do and how important they were for the safety of the world.

He talks about Sokovia and Wanda messing with his mind and tormenting him with his worst fears, about Ultron, JARVIS’ death, Vision’s creation and Wanda joining the team. About how the rest of the team condemned him based on the word of a terrorist and still expected him to give them whatever they wanted. In fact, they'd become entitled to Tony's money, tech and just about every resources he had and he didn't try to set them straight because he believed the world needed the Avengers.

Pepper and Rhody listens attentively as Tony tells them about the Sokovia accords, and how Rogers and his merry band of loyal followers fought against every effort he made to make things better, about Romanov’s betrayal and Rhodey’s injury. About how in the end, it wasn’t the accords that tore the Avengers apart but the knowledge of his parents’ death, which Rogers had known about for two years but kept it from Tony, while criticizing Tony for keeping secrets, because it was his best friend who was used to kill Tony's parents.

He tells them about fighting against two super soldiers in Siberia, Rogers disabling his suit and leaving him behind as he and his best friend escape. About the rest of the Avengers becoming fugitives, Tony left with Vision, who eventually left to join Wanda, Rhodey, who was still in recovery and Peter, an inexperienced, fledgling superhero.

He talks about Pepper making him consider therapy, getting the help he needed and how he stopped
blaming himself for everything going wrong.

Then he tells them about Thanos’ arrival with his plan to kill half of every creature in the universe, about he, Peter and Stephen going to Titan. About meeting the Guardians of the Galaxy and fighting against Thanos. He tells them about Stephen giving Thanos the time stone in exchange for his life.

JARVIS picks up from there, telling them about Vision's death and coming back online to a world at war, a war Sir had predicted years ago but no one paid him any mind. To a war that they had already lost because the mind stone was the last of the infinity gems Thanos needed and he had just procured it.

About how the mind stone still pulled him to itself despite the fact that they didn't have to exist in such close proximity anymore. How he took advantage of the mind stone's affinity for him and used it to hack the infinity gauntlet and the stones in it and turn back the time for him and Tony.

Pepper has tears in her eyes by the time they are both done with their tale and Rhodey is clutching his hand tightly.

“Tony,” She whispers, voice hoarse with emotions and she's trembling.

“It's okay, Pep,” Tony smiles awkwardly and wraps a hand around her. “I'm here, I'm okay.” He tells both of them.

“And JARVIS, buddy,” Rhodey draws in a shaky breath. “I can't imagine what it must have been like for you, waking up in such conditions. I'm sorry you had to go through that, but thank you for daring to do what you did.” He sounds awed even as he speaks.

“No thanks necessary Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS tells him. “I was only doing what I could to protect Sir.”

Rhodey scoffs. “I see where he gets it from. This is more than just protecting Tony, JARVIS,” Rhodey chastises. “You went above and beyond what anyone could have done or expected. Take a little credit for your hard work, okay?”

“Okay, Colonel.”

“No wonder you had no love for SHIELD,” Pepper says. “I'm so sorry you had to go through all that.”

Tony gives her a broad grin at that. “Now I can say, I've been through the fire and the rain, and I'm still here.” He says, going for levity.

“And isn't that the truth,” Rhodey sighs. “I'm assuming that's why Thanos wants you among his ranks so badly?”

“Yeah. We have a theory that he was also thrown back in time when JARVIS hacked the gauntlet since he was still wearing it but he thinks I'm the one who did it.”

“Makes sense,” His best friend nods. “Especially as Stephen gave up the time stone for you. He must have thought that was a contingency.”

“I'm sorry for not telling you guys about all this earlier,” He apologizes. “It wasn't because I didn't trust you guys or anything like that. I really thought you'd think I was pushing the bounds of mad scientist.”
They both snort at that. “Tones, I think it's safe to say you left mad scientist so long ago you can't even see it in the rearview mirror.” His best friend says seriously. “We know you and we've learned to just take everything in stride when you're involved, including JARVIS time traveling both of you back to the past.”

Tony's so happy to have these two in his life and looking out for him, he could cry. “I don't deserve you guys.” He tells them seriously.

“And there he goes again,” Rhodey says as he gathers the burger wraps and dumps them in the trash. “Spouting nonsense.”

They all laugh and Tony sighs, leaning back on the couch. Isn't today just a day of revelations. He knows his friends have yet to really process everything he just told them. They will have questions for him when they do, but for now, he's happy to just be here with them like this.

“Seeing how Rogers and the rest of SHIELD is floundering without you to make them look good, I'm really glad you got this second chance.” Pepper says. “It's very satisfying for the world to see him for what he truly is.”

That reminds Tony what led to this line of discussion in the first place. “Did Hill say anything else?”

Pepper nods. “She was hoping you'll help them decrypt a file to tell them more about project insight.”

“Wait, what?” He asks surprised. “And here I thought withdrawing my help will cripple some things. I guess some things won't change.” He sighs and rubs his forehead to prevent the headache he can feel building. Looks like knowing and being prepared are two different things but he's nothing if not malleable. “J, give Hill a call. Let her know I'm on board.”

“Are you sure, Tony.” Pepper asks. “You know you don't have to get involved if you don't want to. This isn't your fight.” Rhodey nods agreeably.

“I know I don't have to, but I want to.” He smiles at them. “I'm the most qualified person to help.”

“We're aware you're the most qualified person,” Rhodey says calmly. “But no one will blame you for not wanting to get involved in SHIELD's mess.”

“If project insight is really happening like I remember, even after Fury's attempts to uproot HYDRA, then there'll be a power vacuum soon.” He explains to his friends. “I'd like to make sure it gets filled with the right people and doesn't get taken advantage of by opportunists and power grabbers who would love nothing more than to oppress the enhanced. Or even God forbid, another SHIELDRA.”

“Alright.” Rhodey nods. “If you're doing this, we're with you. Every step of the way. Just point us in the direction you need us.”

“We'll wait and see what HYDRA has been up to first.”
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Hi guys!

Thank you all for your wonderful comments. Sorry for the long absence. I'm working really hard to update more consistently but I'm dealing with some stuff.

We're getting to the X-Men arc. I'm really excited about it.

Beta'd by Thisisarealtagwhy. She's the best!

Happy reading!

The decision to work with SHIELD, as it turns out, is easier to make than actually following through. It's not as though Tony doesn't have a life of his own or responsibilities he sees to, not spending his days waiting around for SHIELD to need him. There was so much he had planned for today and despite knowing how important the situation over at SHIELD is, he knows he can not put away his responsibilities to jump to their rescue just because they called.

Still, he has to hand it to Hill for her tact in delivering the news, Tony thinks, rubbing the skin on his chest above his heart. It turns out that knowing the truth about his parents’ death doesn't make it hurt any less whenever it is brought up.

Tony has been waiting to see what Fury plans to do with the information. Despite not knowing if he's been sitting on the information until he had use for it, he's still grateful they had enough tact to get Tony's best friends to deliver the news to him. That neither Fury nor Hill thought it would be a good idea to deliver the news to Tony personally personally, or worse, through a phone call. Tony doesn't know how he would have reacted to that.

That's why, as loathe as he is to have SHIELD and their paraphernalia in his tower, he still extends an invitation to Hill to send the information she needs his help with. Of course, he knows JARVIS will take care of all the necessary security protocols to ensure they have no affiliations with HYDRA and don't try to pull any funny tricks while within his domain and Hill knows better than to send Romanov.

It's almost dawn by the time he's done talking to Rhodey and Pepper about the adventures that brought him back to the past. His best friends have gone to bed, hoping to get a few couple of hours of sleep and Tony promised them he'll do the same, but there was so much that needed his attention.

Today was supposed to be for JARVIS. Dr Cho and her team are flying out from Seoul, and would be arriving any minute with the cradle to build J's new body. It wasn't something that could be rushed and there was no way Tony is going to miss it, not for anything in the world and definitely not SHIELDRA. But the situation at SHIELD couldn't be put off until later.

“JARVIS, you there?”

“At your service, Sir.” Comes the expected response.
“I was hoping we could talk.” Tony says.

“Do you wish to talk about my actions in revealing the truth to Ms Potts and Colonel Rhodes?” JARVIS asks.

“What's there to talk about?” Tony wonders.

“Perhaps, you have something to say to me about stepping out of bounds and going to your friends with the information before you were ready to share it.” JARVIS clarifies.

“J, you didn't do anything wrong by pointing Pepper and Rhody in the right direction of enquiry.” Tony reassures him. “Although, I wonder why you went ahead with it if you thought I'd have a problem with it.”

“Your vital signs are elevated whenever I mention you talk to Ms Potts and Colonel Rhodes, yet every attempt to get you to open up to your friends have been futile.” JARVIS says. “I concluded it was bad for your health and relationship with them in the long run.”

Well, Tony can't argue with that. “Just don't set a bad example for your younger siblings, okay. They don't have the same experiences you have and I don't want them making decisions like those alone.”

“Yes, Sir.”

After that, Tony takes a moment to collect his thoughts before speaking again. “I know today was meant to be all about you. Dr Cho is on her way with the cradle and we were building you a body today. At least that was the plan until we got news on the current situation at SHIELD. I don't want to miss it and this is not a job that should be rushed.”

“I don't mind waiting a few more days until the situation at SHIELD has been resolved, Sir,” JARVIS assures him. “Dr Cho will also understand the need to put off the project until then if you explain the details to her and I will assist you with my drone, if you have need of it. But perhaps it will not be unwise to ask her to begin the process without you. If it is not done by the time you have to leave, it can be put on hold until you return.”

Tony takes a moment to consider JARVIS’ words. It's not like he thought JARVIS would refuse to wait till after the dust has settled in SHIELD but he doesn't want to dismiss J's feelings about it either but this suggestion is even better. They've all been looking forward to this day and even Tony is a little disappointed that it will have to wait, but this way, he doesn't have to put his baby off for SHIELD.

But SHIELDRA is cancer that must be dealt with immediately. Tony has been laying groundwork for the laws that's meant to protect the enhanced community and superheroes in general. All that could go wrong if he leaves SHIELD to clean up their mess alone. Or God forbid, history repeats itself and Fury decides to let Romanov and Rogers run the show by themselves.

He thanks JARVIS for his understanding and spends the rest of his free time reading through the reports from R&D Pepper delivered when she arrived. The work is progressing very fast and it's really impressive. He signs off on the ones that need his signature just before FRIDAY informs him that Dr Cho and her team has arrived.

He doesn't waste any time after exchanging pleasantries before explaining the situation to her. Just as JARVIS had said, she's understanding and agrees to start without him. He'll come see her as soon as he is done with the SHIELD envoy he is expecting.

Just before the courier from SHIELD is meant to arrive, Tony calls the rest of the gang together to
debbrief them on what is happening. Everyone has plans for the day: Daisy has started her tutoring sessions with FRIDAY to prepare for her GED, while Lincoln and Bruce are spending time with Dr Cho. FRIDAY has explained to Tony that Lincoln is working as a pseudo intern for Bruce until he returns to school.

Tony loves that the guys are not idle. The Avengers used to live for the next mission and didn't know what to do with themselves when there was no one to fight. Tony should have recognized how unhealthy that lifestyle was but he knows he was partly responsible. He coddled them and enabled their behavior.

It's one mistake he doesn't want to to repeat with this group and he hates that he may have to ruin their plans for the day but Pepper and Rhody agree that informing them is the way to go.

“I don't know what's really going on, or how bad it is,” Tony explains to them as they listen quietly, “I don't even know if it will come to a physical confrontation. I won't know until I get my hands on more information but you guys have been caught in this tug of war between SHIELD and HYDRA. I thought you'd like to know what's going on.”

“So HYDRA is planning something but SHIELD doesn't know what and they need your help?” Daisy asks with a hint of suspicion. Tony doesn't know if it's directed at him or at SHIELD. He doesn't blame her. Not after everything her and Lincoln have been through with SHIELDRA. “Why do they need you? Why can't they take care of their problems themselves?”

“Probably because HYDRA is so intertwined with them that it's hard to tell who isn't HYDRA among them.” Tony tells her. “They're also hoping that finding out HYDRA killed my parents will give me an incentive to work with them.”

“HYDRA killed your parents?” Lincoln asks, surprised.

“And SHIELD covered it up.” He tells them.

“Then why are you helping them if they hid the truth about your parents death from you all this time?” Daisy asks.

“Because this is more than just helping Shield. I'll deal with SHIELD when we're done with HYDRA but for now, HYDRA is a bigger threat. Whatever they have planned will affect the world and I can't let that happen just because I have a vendetta against SHIELD.”

There's a moment of silence after he’s done talking.

“I'm sorry about your parents,” Bruce says, breaking the silence. The others echo his sentiment.

“Thank you, guys,” Tony says.

“I guess that means we're kicking HYDRA’s butt today,” Daisy says.

“It's not mandatory,” Tony explains. “I'm only letting you know now so you have enough time to come to a decision.”

“You said it yourself that we've all been affected by HYDRA one way or another.” She says. “If this means we can finally be free of them and that they won't be able to hurt someone else, you can count me in.”

“Me too,” Lincoln says, knocking his shoulder with Daisy's.
After a moment, Bruce agrees too.

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Sharon Carter arrives at Stark tower in the early hours of the morning with a laptop and a flash drive. The quinjet she boarded from DC arrives just as the sun is rising in the sky but she had to wait a few more minutes until she was granted permission to land on the tower, after which, there were more security protocols to carry out before she was allowed into the tower.

Sharon never thought she would ever walk through the front door of Stark Tower, at least not without a disguise, and definitely not without tripping every alarm within the building. Since Romanov's spectacular failure during her mission as Tony Stark's assistant, SHIELD has been very careful in their dealing with Stark. Not offending the man further has been the number one objective, even as the higher ups try to garner his favour once again.

That is her primary mission here this morning.

“Welcome Agent 13,” A voice, JARVIS - Stark's AI, according to the debrief she received from Director Hill- says. “Step into the elevator to your left.”

“Thank you.” She greets politely, following his instructions. She's been warned to treat him like she would treat Stark. According to Stark's file, being rude to JARVIS automatically puts you on his bad side.

The elevator closes shut once she's in and starts moving almost immediately. A couple of minutes later, the doors open and JARVIS directs her to an empty conference room.

It doesn’t stay empty for long though. She has barely settled into a seat when Tony Stark walks in. He dressed down in a pair of worn jeans and a band T-shirt.

“Agent Carter,” He greets with a nod. He takes a seat two places separated from the one she chose for herself.

Sharon tries not to show how startled she is that he knows her name. She hasn't had anyone refer to her by that since she graduated from SHIELD academy, choosing to be recognized for her skills and hard work, rather than who she is related to.

She should have known, with his history with SHIELD, a man like Stark would have done his homework once Director Hill informed him about about who was playing messenger.

“Good morning, Dr Stark.” Sharon greets. She's polite enough not to sound flirty. She places the laptop in front of him, being careful not to hand him anything. Hill was specific about that. “Director Hill appreciates your assistance with this and she regrets SHIELD’s role in covering up your parents’ assassination.”

Hill didn't exactly tell her that, but her actions said enough about what she thought and Sharon knows Hill wishes it isn't her problem. She's the third director of SHIELD since the incident and having to deal with it is tasking. Sharon figures it's the right thing to say in a situation like this, but judging by the dark cloud that passes Stark's face as he pauses his examination of the items she brought with her, she may have been wrong.
“Is she really, or does she hope that by making you say that, she hopes I’ll be pacified enough not to come after SHIELD?” Stark asks, anger clear in his voice. “I already agreed to help with the decryption, you can stop kissing my ass.”

Sharon feels a headache that has receded greatly since she left the triskelion coming on again. “Dr Stark, this isn't about trying to get in your good grace,” she starts but he cuts her off.

“Then what is it?” He snaps. “Because from where I’m standing, the reason the truth about the assassination was kept from me hasn’t changed. SHIELD hasn’t changed. So why now?”

“For all we know, one of Hydra's agents within SHIELD may have been the one to rule it as drunk driving.” Sharon tells him. She's thought about it long and hard, the only way the truth could have been hidden is if a HYDRA agent covered it up.

Stark stares at her with a look between disgust and disbelief. “Are you serious? Do you honestly believe that?” He asks, but he doesn't give her the chance to answer before he continues. “Are you telling me that your aunt, Peggy Carter, Co-founder of SHIELD wouldn't have seen their corpses after the so-called accident? Or gotten her hands on the original coroner's report?” Stark asks with a sneer. “If she's half as smart as you guys at SHIELD laud her to be, then she would have known something foul was going on. Am I supposed to believe she didn't notice?

“I know the fake report came from Carter senior herself.” Stark ranted. “I know what I was like at seventeen. If someone had told me my parents were assassinated, I would have investigated that shit until I got to the bottom of it and with the resources I had then, it wouldn't have been much of a challenge. The only reason she hid the truth is because she didn't want me finding out what her and the rest of SHIELD has been up to or asking questions like ‘why is her boyfriend's BFF still alive fifty years after he fell to his death?’ . It didn't matter to her that her actions was also protecting HYDRA.

“It's been over twenty years, and the reason for hiding the truth hasn't changed. In fact, I'll say you lot are on thin ice right now,” He leans forward in his chair, cold brown eyes boring into hers. “So tell me, Agent Carter junior, if nothing has changed since then and you guys have been treading the path that she set for you, why do you think Fury and Hill are so forthcoming?”

And what do you say to that? She cannot totally refute his logic. As much as she hates being addressed as Carter junior, she has spent the last few days thinking about aunt Peggy and her relationship with Steve Rogers.

She spent most of her childhood listening to stories about Captain America's bravery and valor and what a wonderful hero he was from her aunt. When she join SHIELD years later and discovered her aunt was part of his creation, Sharon had felt very proud to be a part of her legacy.

But in the last few weeks that she has been on his detail, she has come to realize that the man is nothing like the legends say he is. He may be brave and willing to do what he thinks needs to be done, but that's because he only cares for the glory that comes with winning fights. His narcissism and one track mind is the worst of it.

Since it was discovered that Barnes is one of the Winter Soldiers, the man has been stomping around SHIELD like he himself is a Winter Soldier and the word ‘Bucky’ is his trigger word.

This is the person her aunt created a legend around.

Sharon doesn't know what is worse, that her aunt did not know Rogers was just a self-serving man, who signed up for an experiment because he wanted to prove his masculinity or that she knew just
what kind of a man Rogers was, but still thought hailing him for a man he isn't made for a better story.

Sharon doesn't think she wants to find out, just as she doesn't want to find out how much of what Stark is saying is true. Because SHIELD hasn't changed. It's why HYDRA is still deep within the bowels of SHIELD, despite the year they spent trying to weed them out.

Just like a pair of identical twins, their names may be different, but they look so much alike that telling them apart is difficult. Except in this case, it's their actions that look alike. No matter how different the objectives are, SHIELD and HYDRA both have the same methods of execution.

Sharon doesn't know how to answer the question without sounding patronizing, so she focuses on something else, “Director Fury is dead.” She says instead. Just as she hopes, it works as a suitable distraction.

She watches the cold anger drain from his face, and something soft settles. “How did that happen?”

“He was murdered by Winter Soldier Barnes last night.” She proceeds to give him her account of the events.

“I'm sorry. How are you guys holding up?”

She shrugs. “The agents are jittery, it's not everyday a bold move is made against the director's life but Hill is holding down the forth.” She tells him. “It's just Rogers that seems to be having a harder time dealing with Barnes’ reappearance.”

“Not taking it well?” He asks absently. His attention is now focused on the computer before him and his fingers are moving very quickly across the keyboard.

Sharon snorts before she can stop herself. At least she stops the eye roll. “Talk about an understatement. Director Fury was gunned down in front of him and he watched the Winter Soldier almost kill Black Widow but his only concern is finding Barnes. He's been stomping around, acting like one of the Winter Soldiers whose trigger word is Bucky, searching out liars and traitors in every corner of SHIELD.” She finishes with a shake of her head.

“Well, never let it be said that HYDRA doesn't appreciate the irony of the situation.” Stark says. “Putting his best friend's face on the enemy is a stroke of genius. Makes me wonder if they knew Steve was alive all this years or if they just thought using Cap's BFF as their primary enforcer was funny.”

Sharon can see what he means but she doesn’t get the chance to share her thoughts.

“J, get Rhodey and Pepper in here and get Hill on the line,” Stark says.

The door opens to admit Ms Potts and Colonel Rhodes just as a holograph of Hill pops up on the table. Stark must have finished decrypting the flash drive.

“Good morning, Ms Potts, Colonel Rhodes.” She greets. Hill had warned her that they may be present during the meeting. These are the people whose opinions mean the most to Stark, and must be treated with the same respect that they accord him, if not more.

They both return her greeting, before moving to take their seats on either sides of the man.

“Hill,” She says, joining the conversation.
Stark takes a look around the room before stating. “I have found the information that tells us what HYDRA’s Project Insight is about.”
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Warning for this chapter: Discussions of kidnapping of children.

Beta'd by the lovely Thisisarealtagwhy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As he waits for Pepper and Rhodey to join him and Carter junior as well as for Hill to answer the call JARVIS has placed, Tony connects the laptop to the holographic surface of the conference room table. Squinting at a laptop was getting exhausting and he wasn't ready to make everyone crowd the laptop just to see what was displayed on the screen.

Carter junior is sitting across from him, looking for all the world like a demure, unassuming servant. If Tony wasn't so well versed in SHIELD and this particular Agent Carter, he may have fallen for it. But as it stands, it only leaves him more unsettled.

When Hill said she was sending Agent 13, Tony's mind hadn't gone to Carter. In his past life, he hadn't known the code name she used in SHIELD. He hadn't met her until Peggy's funeral where she spent the time giving her eulogy to make cow eyes at Rogers, and the subsequent days enabling Rogers screw the world over to save his BFF.

As he watches her, Tony wonders what she plans to do with the information she will gain here today. He can’t send her out of the meeting without a good reason, and saying she may be compromised because of her crush on Carter senior's hand me downs is not a good enough reason. He’ll just have JARVIS keep a close eye on her. The moment she proves herself a double agent for Rogers, she becomes persona non grata.

The moment Pepper and Rhodey steps into the room, an idea strikes Tony. It’s his team that has to be at the forefront dealing with SHIELD’s mess, why exclude them from the debriefing?

“J, round up the rest of the gang,” Tony tells JARVIS after he informs them he has discovered HYDRA's evil plot. “They should be a part of this debrief.”

“Do you think that is a good idea right now?” Hill asks. Tony doesn't know what she means but she sent Carter to be her courier. She doesn't get a vote.

“All my people have been vetted and they are clean.” He informs her. “It's a great idea.”

Pepper and Rhodey, who have taken their places on either side of him busy themselves with the display before them. He notices Carter junior is doing the same as well.

It's only a few minutes later before Daisy, Lincoln and Bruce are piling into the room, along with Happy, Jane and Darcy.

Thanks to their collaboration and his interest in her work, Jane and Darcy have received an office space in the tower. It has only served to strengthen the relationship between Darcy and Daisy. Dr Cho is currently too busy to leave her lab.
“Daisy said HYDRA has been making moves to take over the world,” Darcy says as everyone finds a spot around the table to look at the display.

“That's not what I said,” Daisy protests. “I said that you told us HYDRA is planning something.”

“Same difference.” Darcy dismisses her.

“This is Agent 13 from SHIELD and we have Director Hill on the phone,” Tony informs them, interrupting whatever response Daisy is about to give her. Everyone nods their greetings in response and introduces themselves.

Once it's over and done with, he gets down to business.

“We're all aware that Captain America didn't go down with HYDRA in the forties, as we were lead to believe. Just like the star spangled man, they've been in hibernation within SHIELD, awaiting for the day they can make their move. Two years ago, I discovered their presence while I was looking around SHIELD’s system. And alerted Fury to it.

“A few days ago, while investigating HYDRA activities, Fury came across chatters that HYDRA was making their move for world domination.” He nods at Darcy who is looking quite smug. “All he was able to uncover was this hard drive filled with HYDRA intel and that the plan to achieve this is called Project Insight, before his death,” But fret not, he will rise again on the third day.

“Luckily for us, the encryption used to protect the files in the drive is one I mastered a very long time ago, and so decrypting it was no challenge.”

“But there's a challenge?” Hill asks.

“I see that SHIELD was building more helicarriers equipped with long range weapons they planned to launch into Lumerian Star?” Tony taps the folder bearing the name in the holographic projection and it opens up to display other sub folders as his audience watches and listens with rapt attention.

“Want to educate us about that, Director Hill?”

“That project was abandoned a long time ago.” Hill says, her voice carrying just a hint of defense in it.

“Why was SHIELD building a weapon that would hang over all of our heads?” Jane asks. She taps on a photograph of a helicarrier before expanding the picture to get a clearer view.

“To eliminate threats before they become a threat,” Darcy tells her. Everyone's attention is on the helicarrier now.

“The world is changing,” Hill says defensively. “There are people all over the world who can't be controlled. SHIELD’s duty is to protect the ordinary man from the truths he's not ready to learn.”

“So your wise plan is to hold a gun to all our heads because we're enhanced and we refused to bow to your authority?” Daisy demands.

“The WSC thought a quantum surge in threat analysis will keep us ahead of the curve. It could neutralize threats before they became too dangerous and avoid unnecessary bloodshed. It was mainly for planetary defense from extraterrestrial and the occasional terrorist.” Hill tells her.

“The same WSC that nuked a civilian population because there were hostile aliens around?” Lincoln asks, “You'll understand if that doesn't make us feel better.”
“Up until Thor and Loki, every extraterrestrial visitor we've seen on Earth has been hostile. Should we just wait until one succeeds in conquering the Earth first?”

“So when you discovered Tony's repulsor technology would work really well with your helicarriers, you sent Romanov to make him cooperative.” Rhodey snorts.

“The project was scrapped when we couldn't keep the helicarriers in the sky indefinitely.”

“Was that before or after SHIELD stole a couple of the Iron Legion to copy their repulsor designs?” Pepper asks with a hard voice. “Because this clearly states here that the SHIELD tried their luck with the Legionnaires. If not for the self-destruct fail safe, we would be having a very different conversation right now. You can expect to hear from SI's legal team.”

Tony knows he can always trust Pepper to handle that part. They were derailing and it is time to bring the conversation back to the topic at hand.

“Anyway,” He says, cutting off Hill's response. “I'm sure HYDRA is really grateful to SHIELD for the parting gift because they look like they've made a lot of progress with the original turbine engine, but,” He looks around the room, at everyone standing around the table before directing his gaze to Hill. “Those helicarriers are the least of our problems.

“JARVIS can cut off access to the satellite and shut down the Lumerian Star before they know we're on to them but Project Insight is more than HYDRA killing anyone that doesn't agree with them. They want a world to rule; that means there have to be more than a few people left in it for them when they're done with taking over, even though it will be a world full of followers and no one to question their authority.”

He can see the apprehension clear on their faces as he talks and he knows they're taking this seriously. Tony's brain is already opening the other folders before he reminds himself to move his hands and mimic the action his brain has set in motion. It wouldn't do for Carter junior to have more to report to whoever she's loyal to about him.

He opens two other folders he's been reviewing, one of them named Spring Core and the other, Project Intercept. He taps on Spring Core first.

“We've all heard by now that HYDRA has assassins they call Winter Soldiers. They're the most elite group of assets and have been brainwashed to follow every and any command.” He explains.

“Collectively, they make up the Winter Core.”

“I'm guessing Spring Core is another group of more of their elite assets?” Lincoln asks.

“You guessed right.” Tony nods solemnly. “What comes to your mind when you think of the word 'spring'?”

“Spring chicken?” Bruce asks.

“Kids?” Happy asks with no small amount of disgust at the thought. The look on his face is mirrored by everyone in the room.

“Exactly.” Tony mods again.

“HYDRA is building an army of child-assassins?” Darcy gasps.

“Ones they don't have to brainwash by putting them through a machine,” Rhodey says. “If they train them with HYDRA's values from a young age, they won't feel any need to question the orders
“Except these ones aren't just any kid they just picked off the side of the road,” Tony continues. “From their profiles, they're all under eighteen and were targeted for a specific gene that they possessed.” He taps on the personnel sub folder under Spring Core to reveal a list of almost a hundred names.

“Are they Inhumans?” Daisy asks.

“Close, but not quite,” He assures her. “They possess the mutant X gene. We don't have a lot of information on it right now,” Tony informs them. “JARVIS is trying to get in touch with a professor who's an expert in the field.”

“So this gene makes it possible for them to develop different abilities that HYDRA hope to weaponize?” Jane asks. “An army of super powered children.”

“Exactly. Except usually, this mutation happens on its own, with little to no aggravation. Turns out, HYDRA is impatient.”

“How can they know who possesses this gene and who doesn't?” Rhodey asks, and his question is directed at Hill.

“Mutants are rare and SHIELD has only encountered a few of them,” Hill says. “There was an incident a few years ago with a group of them but they disappeared off the face of the Earth. We haven't been able to establish contact since.”

“You mean the same way SHIELD established contact with the Inhumans?” Daisy mutters.

“It's safe to say HYDRA is using the DNA reader from the helicarrier to identify potential X gene carriers.” Tony says, answering Rhodey's question.

Pepper points to the list on display. “Most of these kids were kidnapped sometime in the past year and some of them had their entire families wiped out before they were taken.”

“That's almost as long as we have been on the run from SHIELD and HYDRA,” Lincoln says to Daisy.

“We have to save them,” Daisy says frantically. “We can't let HYDRA use them like that.”

“We will,” Rhodey assures her before he turns to Tony. “I'm guessing there's more?”

“You know me so well, Platypus.” Tony returns to the previous page and taps on Project Intercept to reveal a personnel file on most of the heads of states and top ranking officials in several countries. “Who here knows that the Russian Prime Minister has been missing for two months?” He asks.

His question is met with silence for a moment before everyone begins to talk at once.

“There's nothing in the news about that,” Happy says.

“My agents would have picked up that intel,” Hill says.

“I'm pretty sure such a high profile person would have been missed,” Carter junior says, speaking up for the first time. She's been quiet since the others joined the meeting. Tony isn't sure if it's because she can feel the hostility against everything she represents in the air.

Everyone has a variation of these two answers. Everyone except Rhodey.
“Tones,” Is all Rhodey says, and he's watching Tony with worried eyes.

“You're right,” He tells the gang. “But what if no one knew he was missing? How do you report someone who isn't missing as a missing person?”

“What are you saying, Stark?” Hill asks.

“It's called Project Intercept. This is probably the most important part of HYDRA's plan and it was set in motion almost five months ago.” Tony tells the room. “They've been kidnapping government officials and even some high profile civilians, and switching them with imposters.”

“How?” Bruce asks, more than a little baffled.

“Through this,” He calls up a schematic of a photostatic veil. When he glances at Hill's face on the video call, he sees the recognition in her eyes. “It can be used to imitate the face and voice of anyone. All you need is a person of similar height, build and complexion and you're good to go.”

“I'm guessing this is another spyware invention we can credit SHIELD with,” Darcy asks.

“I don't know about crediting SHIELD with an invention,” Jane snorts.

“I don't know if SHIELD’s scientists came up with it, but they sure utilized its purpose.” Tony tells them. He remembers all too clearly, SHIELD missions that Romanov and Barton had had to use it.

“And now HYDRA is is taking full advantage of it.” Happy says.

“So HYDRA used this veil to infiltrate the Russian government?” Lincoln asks worriedly.

“Not just Russia,” He taps the list again and the colour a few the names is written in changes. “This intel is about four days old, according to the date. So as of four days ago, HYDRA has four heads of states, including Ukraine, France and South Africa, and a few other government officials like the director of the CIA, a couple of members of the British parliament and the speaker of the Chinese house of national assembly and a couple of US congressmen.”

“Tony, the CIA?” Rhodey asks, heartbreak clear on his face. “Are you saying that the American intelligence agency is compromised?”

“It says that right here,” He points to the highlighted names.

“How did we not find out about this beforehand?” Hill asks, sagging in her seat.

“You booted HYDRA out of SHIELD and patted yourselves on your back for a job well done,” Daisy says with a fierce glower. “It didn't matter to you that they've had seventy years of learning experience to blend in with the shadows.”

“Why hasn't anyone noticed the change?” Jane asks. “Surely, someone is bound to notice a sudden change in their behavior.”

Tony is very proud of his best friends when they don't both look at him sideways. Although, he wonders if they're saving it for when they're alone to review the evidence again.

He doesn't care if they need to reconfirm his story to prove that he's not HYDRA's plant, he's just grateful he told them the truth about himself before something like this came up. It probably wouldn't have ended well for him.

“These guys must have spent some time studying the habits of the person they are meant to replace,”
Bruce is saying when he tunes into the conversation around him. “HYDRA doesn't have the time to brainwash the originals as they couldn't afford to be MIA for however long brainwashing them will take. So they replaced them with their own copies that have been altered to behave exactly like them but to further HYDRA's goals.”

“And now, it's safe to say that they are in almost every major government in the world,” Lincoln says. “Either as a HYDRA loyalist or as a HYDRA plant.”

Everyone nods their assent.

“This HYDRA sure loves their lists,” Darcy comments, as she compares the different lists on display. “I wouldn't be surprised to find out the person making these lists was a hall monitor in high school. Look, we're all on the threat index list.” She highlights the names of everyone in the room as their attention turns to it. “We're the ones they'll most likely use the helicarriers on.”

“Tony's name is not on it,” Pepper says, looking through it.

“It's on this one, along with Dr Cho,” Bruce says, pointing to a much shorter list. “It's on the list of assets to acquire.”

“HYDRA has special plans for you?” Daisy says, horrified.

“Fury said Councilwoman Hawley said something similar when he was interrogating her,” Hill puts in. “She said HYDRA never wanted you dead.”

“No,” Pepper sneers. “They just want to condemn him to a fate worse than death.”

“You must be really special,” Darcy teases him. “First an alien, now HYDRA. I wonder who will be next.”

“But this can't be the endgame,” Rhodey says. “HYDRA is creating an army of super-powered kids, infiltrating multiple governments and bringing them under their control, as well as holding a gun to everyone in the planet. They're doing all these without us even having the slightest idea what is going on. They are preparing for something.”

“It's HYDRA,” Hill says. “They're preparing for war.”

“War with who?” Happy asks. “At this rate, if they're not stopped they will have every government in the world under their control.”

“They will have achieved world domination with very little bloodshed,” Darcy points out. “Are they going to reverse us back to the days of the Roman empire and make us fight to the death for their entertainment?”

“In a few years, even if we don't know the people making the rules aren't the people we elected, we'll still notice when they start making laws we don't like,” Tony points out.

“Protests and uprising will follow,” Bruce says. “And that's where the helicarrier will come in. To eliminate any one who resists HYDRA?” He looks to Tony for confirmation. Tony nods.

“Or the ones they can't convince with the help of their new super-powered soldiers.” Tony says, thinking about the Maximoffs and their love for people's minds. He shudders at the thought of having to face them again. As much as he wishes otherwise, he knows he'll see them again. There's no way she will give up the chance to have superpowers, if it means she gets a shot at him.
“Still, like Rhodes has said, something isn't quite right with the bigger picture,” Hill interjects. “What could they be uniting the governments of the world to fight against?”

“I think the better question is who?” Tony tells her. He clicks on a few opens before stopping at a page.

“Wakana-- Wakanda?” Bruce stutters. “What's that?”


“So, a lost city filled with gold?” Jane asks.

“Except, instead of gold, they have vibranium. Vibranium is the strongest metal on Earth and its applications are very widespread. Thanks to this metal, Wakanda is the most technologically advanced country in the world,” Tony shakes his head ruefully. “But we're not supposed to know that.

“They exist in absolute isolation, pretending to be the poorest country in the world, trading in textile, so that they don't have to share their resources with others, in fear of being invaded. The vibranium is sacred to them, sent from the panther goddess herself, so they have no desire to share it with the world. Thirty years ago, a guy named Ulysses Klaue stole a huge chunk of the stuff and they've been hunting him since then, but their king told the UN that Klaue stole their entire cache of vibranium and they have none left.”

“I'm guessing HYDRA discovered what a big fat liar they are,” Darcy says, tapping on the folder named after the country to read its content.

“My guess is,” Tony says. “Once HYDRA is done with the rest of the world, they will go for Wakanda and that will most likely result in a war.”

Tony does not care for the fate of a country that watch their neighbors dies from famine and sickness, while they enjoy their luxuries, all in the name of protecting their assets. He only cares about what it will mean for the rest of the world by the time HYDRA is ready to face Wakanda.

“Why can't they just do that same thing they've been doing with the rest of the world?” Happy asks.

“Because, even if they get someone that will work as a suitable replacement, they exist in absolute isolation,” Rhodey says. “Learning the habits of someone you can't get close to or even making the switch will be almost impossible.”

“But with the other countries in the world under HYDRA's control, convincing everyone Wakanda is a threat that should be dealt with won't be difficult,” Pepper says. “The promise of an almost unlimited supply of vibranium will be too good to pass up.”

“If this country is all that it says here,” Darcy says. “Then they pose a great challenge. HYDRA doesn't stand a chance.”

“Imagine the three hundred Spartans,” Hill says. “They were undefeated until they were sold out to their enemies. All it will take is one traitor. The moment HYDRA breaches their border, it's only a matter of time before they find someone they can convince to betray their country.”

“And you can believe that there will be plenty,” Tony tells her. “Wakanda is an absolute monarchy state. You know in systems like that, there are always some people on the side who believe they will make better kings than the current ones.”
“And we can't report this to anyone because we don't know who is compromised,” Rhodey sighs.

“Is there any way to find out if these people HYDRA switched are still alive?” Pepper asks.

“It says nothing here,” Darcy, who is looking through the information in front of them, says.

“Does it say anything about the location of the Spring Core and the helicarriers?” Rhodey asks.

“Yes,” Darcy answers, glancing at Rhodey before turning her attention to the display in front of her. “In fact, they're both being kept in the same location. We can assume this is the headquarters for Project Insight.”

“Where's that?” Bruce asks.

Darcy has a small frown on her face when she answers. “Sokovia.”

Chapter End Notes

Tony doesn't know that JARVIS took care of the twins.
Hey guys! How have you all been? I hope you had a great time during the holidays.

It's been too long! I was careless with my laptop and spilled drink on it while trying to eat and type at the same time. Thankfully, I got a new one for Christmas. I promise to be more careful this time. I never want to go this long between updates again.

First off, I want to thank everyone for their suggestions for JARVIS' name. I'm sorry I couldn't use all of them. They were great. Hopefully, you'll like what I chose.

This is officially the beginning of the X-Men arc.

Beta'd by Thisisarealtagwhy. She's too good to me!

JARVIS spends the next few hours after Sir's confessions to Ms Potts and Colonel Rhodes answering questions from the 'bots and FRIDAY about the meeting Sir had just had with his friends. Sir knew all along that everyone was listening in on the conversation, and since he was too busy to clear anything up for them, the honor went to JARVIS.

It wasn't just Ms Potts and Colonel Rhodes that had known something was different about Sir or JARVIS. FRIDAY may not have had memories of her past life, but the 'bots felt the change in the tides. Dum-E, U and Butterfingers may be made up of the most basic codes, but they are far from stupid, and after Sir's meeting, they had a lot of questions that needed answers. At the end of it, Sir's friends aren't the only ones horrified at the treatment Sir was subjected to in his past life.

Since Sir could not be present to assist Dr Cho during the construction of his new form, JARVIS was asked to fill in for him when she arrives, while he focuses his attention on the new situation at SHIELD. JARVIS understands why Sir wants to stall the project until he can give it his undivided attention, but there is no way he will send Sir into a HYDRA base without the best backup JARVIS can provide for him.

The upgrades Sir made to the cradle have gone a long way to speed up the tissue print. JARVIS had estimated it would take at least a whole day to create a body identical to the human form, but the nanites work very fast. By the time Sir's debrief with the team and Director Hill is done a few hours later, the skeleton made of vibranium fibre is mostly covered in skin and tissue.

Between assisting Dr Cho, passively monitoring Sir's meeting and going through SI's security protocols, as well as scanning every individual within a two-mile radius of all SI properties for possible HYDRA plants and agents, JARVIS has little processors left to do much else. For that reason, he gives FRIDAY a list of enhanced individuals JARVIS had flagged earlier.

"Welcome, Sir," JARVIS whispers in Sir's ears when he comes into the lab after the meeting, flanked on either side by Colonel Rhodes and Ms Potts. Mr Hogan has gone off to deal with the inconsistencies JARVIS discovered in the building's security. "How was your meeting?"

Sir's sigh is long-suffering. "Just like every other meeting with SHIELD," His tone is joking but the
tightness around his eyes tell a different story. “Remind me again why we’re working with them?”


“You’re definitely right, J,” Colonel Rhodes says. “Once this comes to light, nobody’s going to let them continue with their activities and there’ll be no place for them to hide.”

“It’ll be a beautiful day when we no longer have to deal with SHIELD and their messes,” Ms Potts agrees wistfully.

“Although watching the implosion has been entertaining,” JARVIS agrees. “I cannot say even that will be missed.”

“How’s it going?” Sir asks Dr Cho as he steps towards the cradle to look at the body within it. “That was fast. How long was I gone, again?”

“The suggestions you made went a long way to speed things up.” Dr Cho says with a smile.

“That’s great,” Sir says, peering into the cradle again. “Damn, J. You look great.”

“You look just like Tony,” Colonel Rhodes adds with a teasing grin. “Except taller.”

“I hope you’re ready to start fending off the girls and boys with a stick.” Ms Potts warns.

“Sticks are so passé.” JARVIS tells them.

“Right, what was I thinking?” She laughs. “You’ll have the arc shield to protect you from the mob.”

“Now you’re talking. And do not forget, I learned evasion tactics from the best.”

“Are you referring to me?” Sir asks. “I feel like you are. Please don’t, because then we’ll have a serious problem.”

Dr Cho laughs at Sir’s antics, even though JARVIS doesn’t find it funny. He refrains from answering Sir at the moment, because there will be enough time for that later.

“Is the team leaving now?” Dr Cho asks.

“Not just yet,” Colonel Rhodes tells her. “Hill is rounding up some of her people that she thinks can contribute without alerting HYDRA we’re on to them. So, for now we’re just waiting.”

Dr Cho nods in understanding. “JARVIS told me about the threat index and the asset lists, as well as the many other operations that’ve been going on under everyone’s noses.”

“Yeah,” Sir sighs. He picks up one of the tablets and begins reading through the data coming in from the cradle. “Unfortunately, HYDRA’s been very thorough in their planning. We’re hoping it’s not too late for the people they kidnapped.”

“Be sure not to overdo it on the field, okay?” She says to Sir. “I would advise you to leave this mission to the others, but I know how important this is, and we can’t really trust SHIELD to handle this whole thing properly.”

Sir’s answering smile is awkward. He’s still not accustomed to having others show genuine concern about his well-being. “Looks like J will make it there in his new form, after all, Dr Cho. You don’t have to worry about me. Between Rhodey and JARVIS, I doubt anyone will get to me.”
They continue their discussions as Dr Cho puts the finishing touches on the body in the cradle. JARVIS is downloading a copy of his codes into his new form when FRIDAY pings Sir with an alert. Logan Howlett has just arrived at the tower.

JARVIS had been certain he would accept the invitation to go raid a HYDRA base. The mutant has been on a mission to exact vengeance on HYDRA for experimenting on him.

Mr Howlett hasn’t been subtle in his war against HYDRA in the last two years. It’s how JARVIS found him in the first place, even though he has made very little progress. A one-man army, however strong that man is, can only do so much, after all. It is precisely why JARVIS was certain he would accept FRIDAY’s offer to join forces. However, what they had not anticipated is the readiness with which he agreed to the alliance. All FRIDAY had to do was mention Tony Stark and Mr Howlett was happy to signup.

Usually, he would dispel the idea of working with someone for whom the mission is this personal, because it looks like Mr Howlett has nothing to lose and could easily throw the mission aside for his own personal vendetta. But between the SHIELD agents going with Sir and the Winter Soldiers, Sir needs all the backup JARVIS can get him. There are three other mutant allies who will join them once they arrive at Sokovia. With these additions to the team, the team’s chances of a successful mission have increased greatly.

An appointment has been set up with Professor Charles Xavier. Sir is hopeful his expertise on gene mutations will go a long way in helping the traumatised children they hope to rescue.

JARVIS leaves Mr Howlett to FRIDAY’s guidance, trusting her to get him acquainted with the team. If this alliance goes well, he would be a good addition to the team permanently. Instead, JARVIS turns his attention to the information packet VERONICA sent him from her surveillance of the HYDRA base in Sokovia.

The building is slightly bigger than JARVIS’ scans from the last time the Avengers were in Sokovia, but the blueprint obtained from SHIELD’s intel suggests that there are several underground floors as well as false walls within it.

She already hacked into the cameras both within and outside the building, taking note of every movement to get the best entry point for the team when they arrive.

Creating a pattern for their patrol, and disabling the satellite view will not be a difficult task. He’s just about to focus his attention elsewhere when VERONICA flags a file as urgent. It’s a video clip obtained from one of the security cameras.

A figure comes striding into view of one of the cameras within the building. JARVIS would describe the steps as sure and confident, it looks like it belongs to one of the Iron Legion. From the way he is dressed, JARVIS can tell it’s a Winter Soldier, and he’s carrying someone else in their arms.

JARVIS already has a file on all the Winter Soldiers, so it was quite easy to discern who this particular Winter Soldier is but he has to zoom the picture to get a good look at the victim.

“Sir,” JARVIS calls, interrupting Sir’s conversation with Dr Cho. “We have a situation.”

Sir’s gaze snaps to one of JARVIS’ cameras immediately. “What’s up J?”

Instead of using his words, he projects the picture of Sergeant Barnes carrying President Ellis inside the HYDRA base to Sir’s wrist computer. The only response he gets is collective use of expletives from every occupant in the room.
Sir moves to leave the lab immediately, most likely to inform the others of the latest development, only to be stopped short by Colonel Rhodes.

“No,” The colonel says. “Stay with your son. I’ll handle the team and Pepper will go to her office. We’ll debrief you and JARVIS as soon as you join us.”

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JARVIS or Collin, is born from the cradle with little fanfare. It’s such a huge contrast from the fight among the Avengers that took place just before Vison was born that Tony can’t stop himself from looking over his shoulder one more time, to make sure no one is going to attack him from behind, just before Helen opens the cradle.

JARVIS has spent the last year, since they agreed he was getting a humanoid form, creating an identity for himself, and leaving his prints in the world for when this moment finally arrives. Of course, no one has discovered the eighteen years’ worth of paper trail, detailing the birth of Tony Stark’s first child, the subsequent death of the mother during child birth, as well as the school and work records. They likely won’t, until Jarvis Collin Stark or Collin— as he will be addressed by family from now on, to differentiate him from his disembodied counterpart— is ready for his debut.

They’d both agreed on the first and last names together, but Tony had vetoed Anthony as J’s first choice for a middle name. It’s bad enough that he’s been saddled with someone else’s name. Tony wanted him to choose something original for his middle name, but then, JARVIS had picked Collin for his mom, and Tony couldn’t bring himself to disagree. He’s not ashamed to admit that he had even teared up a little.

Tony steps closer as Helen opens the cradle, not wanting to miss even a single moment. He watches in awe as the figure inside floats into the air before taking in his surroundings. It’s only a moment before a pair of striking blue eyes— much like his mom’s— come to rest on Tony and Collin lowers himself to the ground gently. He takes a step in Tony’s direction and promptly folds into a heap of body on the floor.

Tony wants to laugh and cry at the frankly adorable sight. Who knew he would be so sentimental about a teenager’s first steps? “Not as easy as it looks, huh Bambi?” Tony asks as he reaches forward to help him up.

Collin’s body is warm and it feel exactly like a human’s would. He’s also completely naked, but Tony doesn’t pay attention to that.

“It appears I have underestimated the simple task of putting one foot ahead of the other,” Collins tells him with a soft smile.

“No worries,” Tony consoles him. “It happens to the best of us.”

Once he’s on his feet again, he stares at Tony with his mother’s eyes and a face that looks exactly Tony did during his MIT days. Except, no one ever had to look up to see his face.

“Hello, Father,” He says, then his face twists in distaste. Tony wants to coo at how adorable he looks. “Dad.” Collin corrects himself. “Hello, dad. It is a pleasure to finally meet you in person.”

“Hi, son,” Tony reaches out to touch his face and run his hands through soft, dirty blond hair. “Trust
“Congratulations, big brother.” FRIDAY’s voice comes through the speakers.

“Thank you, FRIDAY.” Collin smiles towards one of the cameras in the room.

“Be sure to visit the guys in the lab as soon as you can,” FRIDAY tells him. “They are curious to see the new look.”

“I will visit them as soon as I can.” He promises.

“Not before you stop flashing Helen, though,” Tony teases before leading him to the secluded corner where he can get dressed in the clothes Tony had prepared for him.

Even as they go out to join the team, Tony still can’t keep his eyes off Collin, and he’s not the only one, if the way he keeps glancing at Tony is anything to go by. The twin look of surprise and pleasure has him grinning from ear to ear.

When they arrive at the door of the conference room. He pauses and looks at Collin. “Ready?” He asks.

What he gets is a raised brow and a cocky smirk. “Am I ever.” Collin responds and Tony’s grin gets ever broader as the doors slide open. Definitely Tony’s son.

There are more SHIELD agents present in the room when they enter. They are separated into two groups, with Agents May, Palamas, Bobbi Morse and two other male agents on one side, while Fury’s three stooges make up the other.

Tony wants to be surprised, but he can't bring himself to be. Along with the SHIELD agents, is FRIDAY’s newest recruit, Wolverine. Or James Howlett, or Logan, as he prefers to be addressed. Tony is never naming his kid James. They all seem to have something against being addressed by their actual names. Even his platypus.

All eyes turn to observe their entrance, and they linger on Collin but no one says anything when Tony doesn’t make any introductions. Anyone who can’t put two plus two together and arrive at four after seeing Tony and Collin side by side, really shouldn't be in this room.

What really gets his attention though, is the Air Force Colonel Rhodes glaring at Hill, whose holographic face is floating about the conference room table.

“He just had his mind taken for a ride by an alien only a few days ago and you expect me to take him on a mission where he’s likely to encounter more potentially mind controlling people?” Rhodey asks Hill and he doesn't miss the way she shifts in her seat. Tony has been the recipient of that scolding tone many a times. He doesn't envy Hill.

“He's the best sniper we have.” She persists.

“Then send me your second best.”

“He's standing right here,” Barton grouses, which only serves to draw Rhodey's ire on him.

“You should know better than to sign up for a mission like this,” Rhodey tells him. “Have you been to a doctor? How sure are you that the effects of Maw's actions didn't leave a lasting impact?”

Rhodey didn't wait for him to answer before he turns to Natashalie. “Didn't you just get out of
“Yes,” She says, but her eyes are fixed on Collin. When Tony turns to check on him, Collin’s head is tilted and he’s studying the trio standing before Rhodey with a blank face. Natashalie looks like she has discovered a secret that will make her feel important again when she uncovers it. “I was cleared for the mission by my doctor.” Tony doesn’t miss the ripple of snorts that goes through the room at her words.

“Was that before or after you threatened him?” Rhodey asks her, unimpressed. “I'm not taking you to face people with the same training and skills as you on your best day, when you're not in your best shape. Your presence will only compromise the mission.”

“I'm healthy and uninjured,” Rogers tells Rhodey, his chin tilted in defiance. “What is your problem with me?”

“Do you seriously see nothing wrong with invading a country while dressed in the American flag?” Rhodey asks him. Tony wants to explain to him that Rogers really doesn't, but he's just glad not to be the one to deal with this mess.

“It's my uniform,” Rogers argues.

“It's Captain America's costume and you've been stripped of that title. You can keep the shield, but you're not going to Sokovia dressed like that.”

“I have the most experience fighting HYDRA,” Steve protests in his self-righteous tone that usually had Tony conceding to his point in his past life. “I gave my life for HYDRA. How can you say I’m not allowed to fight them again because you don’t like my outfit?”

“Everyone appreciates your efforts during WW2, but you’re not the person with the most experience with HYDRA in this room.” Tony butts in, gesturing towards Logan. “Meet Logan, you may have met him during WW2.”

“What?” Rogers asks with a confused frown, looking between Tony and Logan.

“Hey, bub.” Logan greets, and if he looked anymore bored, Tony thinks he’ll fall asleep right where he stands.

“Why would you tell them you were alive during the war?” Steve asks him with self-righteous indignation.

“You may not remember me,” Logan says like he thinks Steve is really curious about his answer. Tony is loving this guy more with each passing second. The unimpressed expression on his face says a lot about Logan's opinion on Rogers. “But we met a couple of times during the war and my team ran a few hits with the Howlies.”

“This man tells you he fought in the war and you believe him?” Steve asks, annoyance and disappointment clear in his features.

“Why shouldn’t we?” Darcy asks. “We believed you when you claimed to be the real Captain America, didn't we?”

“It doesn’t matter. This is the modern age and we’re not at war, Agent Rogers,” Rhodey tells him patiently. “However, we might be if something goes wrong because I invaded a country with a walking, breathing American flag, like I’m going to colonize them. You can join us for the mission as soon as you change your outfit.”
Tony has to wonder what Hill hopes to achieve by sending these compromised agents out on such an important mission. Any slip up on their parts could result in the death of some very important people in the world, so why would she want to risk it? Has she learned nothing from Fury and Carter senior, or is she just continuing tradition with people she can control?

“You're not our CO,” comes Clint's angry voice and Tony can just see he and Rogers digging their heels in. “We don't take orders from you. You don't get to exclude us from this mission just because your BFF doesn't like us.”

“What are you, five? Does this look like a sandbox to you?” Rhodey asks him, gesturing to the expanse of the room. “Your business in this building is over. If you have a problem with my decision, take it up with Hill. JARVIS, show them out. You have permission to use lethal force if necessary.”

With that, Rhodey promptly dismisses them and turns to the rest of the room. He calls up the picture of Barnes with President Ellis. Several gasps are heard throughout the room.

“JARVIS took this picture a few hours ago while running surveillance.” Rhodey says to the rest of Tony's team and SHIELD agents gathered around the table. Everyone's gaze is locked on the photograph, including Rogers who has stopped in his tracks.

Everyone in the room is geared up, including Carter junior. Tony doesn’t know if she had her armour on under her business suit or if one of her colleagues brought her one.

“Where is that?” Agent May asks, stepping closer to the table.

“The HYDRA base in Novi Grad, Sokovia,” Collin says. “This is reason enough to believe the victims of Operation Intercept are being kept here.”

Every eye swerve to his direction, before turning to Tony. “Right,” Tony grins and reaches out to pat Collin on the shoulder. “Guys, this is Jarvis Collin Stark, my son. He’ll be joining us today.”

There’s a moment where they just blink at him before questions start flying at him. Thank Tesla for Rhodey who restores order and turns their attention to the main focus at hand. Tony made the decision earlier that only his three best friends would know the truth about Collin’s conception. He trusts his team with his life, but not with his son’s life. If his voice sounds familiar, no one says anything.

“You think the world leaders are still alive?” Daisy asks Collin when they’ve all calmed down.

“It would be in HYDRA’s best interest to keep them alive,” Tony answers. “They can't know everything about their victims just by watching them. The original copy has to be useful for something.” That gets several nods of agreement.

“Isn't Sokovia involved in a Civil War right now?” Jane asks but her question isn't directed at anyone but Tony decides to answer her anyway.

“They are,” He tells her. “Have been for the past decade.”

“Ten bucks says HYDRA has been fanning the embers of that fire,” Daisy says.

“There's no way the war could have lasted this long without someone making it happen,” Bruce says. “With their activities in the region, they need to stay undetected. What better way to do that than to make sure everyone else is too busy to look closely at their base?”
“Not to mention the perfect location,” Darcy puts in. “As unremarkable as the country itself, no one will question the presence of aircrafts in its airspace if they noticed it, because you almost always have to go through Sokovia to get anywhere these days.”

As though choreographed, all every head in the room turns to Hill when Rhodey asks. “Does SHIELD have a base there?” His best friend asks.

“We did, until a few years ago when it was caught in a bomb blast,” Hill says, looking ashamed. “Fury thought it was best to pull out of the country after that.”

“You know, it's a good thing HYDRA stored all their information in one server, or we'd be having a much harder time getting all the information we need.” Tony says.

“Armin Zola's computerized form is the one running the show,” Hill says. “They stored all the information with him because he's the only one allowed to know everything.”

“So no one can spill all their secrets because no one knows it,” Tony comments. “Sounds a lot like SHIELD.” He hears Carter junior make a sound but he doesn't pay her any mind.

“So how do we do this?” Darcy asks Rhodey. “There’s a UN summit in two days. HYDRA must be getting ready for the next phase of their plans if they have a plant in charge of the free world.”

“That’s why we’re going tonight and we have to be doubly careful.” Rhodey says to the room. “We’re taking advantage of the darkness and the element of surprise.”

“Are Thor and Loki joining the mission?” Hill asks, and Tony levels her with a glare.

“Why?” Tony asks hotly. “Because they have no life or responsibilities in godland and exist merely to be at my beck and call?” Silence is the only response his question gets but he’s not really expecting an answer anyway. SHIELD is an opportunist organisation that will take advantage of anyone they can sink their claws in.

“Here’s the plan,” Rhodey says, and a blueprint of the most likely places the hostages— both the kids and the government officials— are being kept. He spends the next few minutes assigning tasks to everyone. Occasionally, he is interrupted by a question or suggestion.

“VERONICA’s sentinels will take care of any security or alarms before we arrive. She’s still monitoring the location. Please pay attention to any suggestions she or JARVIS may have during the mission as they have eyes everywhere. Iron Man, you, Collin and Wolverine, as well as some Legionnaires and Sentinels will locate the hostages and get them to safety. Once that’s done, you can join the rest of us. Darcy, Collin, Quake and FRIDAY, you're on evac for the hostages.

“JARVIS and FRIDAY will pilot the jets to where we’ve prepared for the victims. Shock, you will join the medics and provide first aid for anyone injured during the flight. Bruce will join you if he can.” Rhodey pauses to send a questioning look at Bruce and he gets a nod in agreement. “Okay, any questions?” He asks, looking at the entire room.

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And then Hill asks: “Where do you plan to take the victims?”

Tony’s smile is full of teeth when he answers. “That’s for us to know and for everyone else to wonder. But don’t worry, HYDRA won’t find them.”

After that, Rhodey gives the word and they all begin heading towards the Starkjets. Once they’re in the sky, they plan to use stealth mode. Any trick in the book to avoid alerting HYDRA they were coming for them.
The jets have just taken off and everyone has settled into their seats. Wolverine is on seat between Tony and Rhodey and he looks ready to throw up any minute. Tony is making jokes with Collin about an almost invulnerable man being a nervous flyer when FRIDAY’s voice comes on through the speakers.

“Colonel man,” FRIDAY calls. “I just spotted a quinjet with SHIELD’s signature, heading towards our destination.”

“That should be Rogers and whatever sniper Hill is sending to replace Hawkeye,” Rhodey says relaxing into his seat. “Who does he have riding with him?”

FRIDAY pauses for a moment before she answers. “The spy twins. You'll be pleased to know he didn't change his attire.”

Tony almost falls off his chair laughing.
Collin is on a seat between Ms Lewis and Ms Johnson on the Starkjet. He knows it is not a coincidence that he ends up between them. They showed the most signs of curiosity when Sir—dad, as he should be addressed henceforth—introduced him to the team. Everyone in the jet is sneaking glances at him as well. They are probably wondering how they didn’t know about his existence. But Collin isn’t paying attention to them.

Instead, he is running his fingers across the interior of the jet. He likes how it feels and he thinks he could spend all his free time comparing the feel of the different textures of everything around him. He always knew life was different for people—more intense—but he didn’t imagine it would be the same for him.

He loves his sense of smell though, and hearing as well. Collin thought he would have to rely on the external speakers and his disembodied counterpart to hear, but he was wrong. He hears just fine with his ears, and he can pick up sounds too low for others without enhanced hearing. The sound of his dad’s heartbeat and his scent has been ingrained into his subconscious. It’s calming and it keeps him grounded. He’s been locked on Colonel Rhodes’ heartbeat too—he’ll be Uncle Rhodey from now on. Or maybe he will prefer Uncle Jim? He’ll have to ask him as soon as the world is no longer in immediate danger.

Collin wonders what other abilities he has. He already knows he can defy gravity but he’s curious to find what else there might be. Vision was still discovering new things about himself three years after his creation. Will they have similar abilities, despite the difference in their physiology?

He sincerely hopes that unlike Vision, eating will not be an issue. He really wants to try some of those unhealthy foods dad likes to fill his system with. Dr Cho promised it’s not likely to be a problem though, that gives him something to look forward to.

“So, you’re Tony Stark’s kid, huh?” The sound of Ms Lewis’ voice breaks through his reverie. Collin spares her a glance. Collin likes Darcy. She is bold and fierce. A combination that JARVIS has come to appreciate about people. Her hair also smells very nice.

That doesn’t mean he’ll tell her the truth about his creation, though. He had the talk with dad when the plans were being made, and they both think there’s no reason to let every member of his new team know about how Collin came to be. They may not be the Avengers, but their loyalty to Sir has yet to be tested.

“I believe that is what he said when he made the introductions.” Collin feels the muscles around his mouth move, and when he connects into the camera facing them, he’s wearing a small smile he has
seen on dad’s face a few times.

“I never knew Tony had son,” Ms Johnson interjects, obviously, she’s been waiting for an opening. “And I researched the hell out of him after he took Lincoln and I in. Of course, I found a few claims of paternity, but there were no records of anyone being true.”

“Of course, there wasn’t.” He feels the humour of the situation go through him and his smile changes to a smirk. He notes how intense this feeling is when compared to how his JARVIS would feel them. He’s almost tempted to connect to JARVIS and compare the findings but he’s been trying to exist independent of his disembodied counterpart. “I personally upgraded the encryption on those files.”

“Right,” She pouts. “Why wouldn’t you be a computer whiz like your dad.” He is chuckling before he can stop himself and the sound surprises him.

“You sound kind of like the other Jarvis,” Ms Johnson observes. “The man that runs the tower with Friday,” She is not wrong. Collin had altered his voice module to sound younger, but not everything was changed.

“You do know, FRIDAY and JARVIS are not people in the traditional sense, don’t you?” Collin asks. “They’re natural-language user interfaces developed by dad. And while they both have personality traits like every other human you encounter, there is no one behind a desk of monitors, watching and waiting to offer assistance.”

“Really?” She asks, surprise clouding her voice. “Wow! They sound like real people, you’d never have guessed.”

“Wait,” Darcy interrupts, raising a hand to stall further comments from either of them. “You thought FRIDAY and JARVIS are real people?”

“They are real people,” Collin corrects them patiently. “Just not the way you thought.”

“And your dad created them!” Her eyes drift to his dad, but she mutters wistfully under her breath. “What I wouldn’t give to have a dad like Tony Stark.” He doesn’t think he’s supposed to hear that, but he answers anyway.

“It’s too late for the genes, but there is much he will teach you if you ask.” Collin tells her. “Dad loves sharing knowledge.” The widening of her eyes, like they may actually fall out of their sockets is amusing to watch.

“You know, I’ve known Tony almost two years now and there’s nothing that would suggest he has a child.” Ms Lewis says interestedly.

“That was by design, Ms Lewis,” Collin says indulgently.

“Darcy,” She corrects and Collin nods. “So, why now? You’ve been the secret lovechild all these years.”

“Why not now?” He asks with a smirk and he’s grateful when they don’t pursue that line of questioning. Instead, they ask about his accent and education.

Their conversation flows freely among the three of them, and he realizes that he is enjoying their company until he is distracted by dad.

“Guy survives replacing bones with adamantium but flying makes him nervous,” His dad says through the link between them as he watches Wolverine try valiantly to maintain his composure.
It takes Collin a moment to realize dad did not say the words out loud.

“Maybe he’s been in a plane crash before?” Collin suggests.

“Think he’ll throw up?” Dad asks excitedly. “Part of me hope he does.”

“You know it will be on your lap if he does, right?” Collin asks, baffled. “Why on earth would you hope for something like that?”

“For science,” Dad shrugs and flashes a grin in his direction. “I want to see if he’ll look badass throwing up.”

Collin chuckles and shakes his head. “Only you, dad.”

They’re both laughing when Collin intercepts FRIDAY’s message to Colonel Rhodes’ comm unit. From his dad’s reaction, he got the message too. It takes Collin no time to find the quinjet and hack into its system. Steve Rogers in all his World War II glory is seated beside Agent Romanov and Agent Barton is piloting the jet. They’re making plans for when they arrive at Sokovia. They don’t look like they returned to the triskelion as Colonel Rhodes ordered.

Then he hears his dad’s voice from the speakers.

“Oh, Natashalie,” His dad tuts condescendingly. All three occupants of the jet startle at the sudden sound of his voice. “I want to be surprised you would pull a stunt like this, but this is exactly what I expected of you.” Dad pauses to laugh. “You’re so predictable, it’s almost painful to watch.”

“Tony, you know you need us for this mission,” Agent Romanov says, probably trying and failing to sound humble and concerned. “Are you so blinded by your ego that you would risk the fate of the world instead of putting aside your animosity and letting us help you?”

“I hope comedy isn't your retirement plan, Natashalie, because you won't make it.” Dad's laugh is cruel and mocking. “You're not even SHIELD’s best agent on your best day. What makes you think you're our best shot at HYDRA or are we talking about Rogers?”

“Bucky didn't kill your parents, Stark,” Agent Rogers says, taking his cue from hearing his name. He sounds so sincere, Collin would have believed him if he didn’t know better. “You're putting in so much effort going after the wrong man. Bucky is innocent. HYDRA used him.”

“After all this is over, Rogers, you should seriously consider getting a proper education. Preferably in the Humanities. As for you, spy twins, you think Rogers cares about you or HYDRA?” Dad laughs again. “Don't worry, you'll learn soon.”

“Iron Man,” Colonel Rhodes scolds sharply. He has gone into the cockpit of the jet, most likely to get some privacy while he speaks to the renegade trio. “Get back to your station.”

“Aye, aye, Colonel!” He apologizes and promptly disconnects from the network.

Collin doesn’t pay attention to the talk Colonel Rhodes has with them but he knows when JARVIS is asked to commandeer the quinjet and keep it in the air until the team returns from Sokovia. That way they have less chances of getting underfoot during the mission or making so much noise at the triskelion that HYDRA discovers the plan.

Dad had been right, Romanov will find out soon enough what is more important to Steve Rogers. She’ll know when he has to make the choice between dealing with this obstacle the only way he knows how: by punching his way out of the jet, instead of waiting patiently for whenever FRIDAY
lets the jet land and avoid endangering his companions.

It does not require a genius to deduce why these particular agents chose to defy orders and continue on the mission. Romanov will do whatever is required to save her skin. With the end of SHIELD in sight, the only way she'll avoid being burned with the rest of HYDRA, especially with her history, is by saving the world leaders. Throwing her lot in with the acclaimed most patriotic American, especially one in dire need of a redemption is only to be expected.

Rogers, as he has proven time and time again, will do anything to relive his glory days. Saving Sergeant Barnes, and if possible, the world leaders is certainly the fastest way to achieve it. After all, it's how he rose to fame in the first place.

But Barton has shown himself to be like a straw which will go in whatever direction the wind dictates. He acts like one of the missiles his dad makes. All it takes is to aim them at a target and fire. He will ask no questions or offer no other opinion.

With his loyalty firmly placed in Romanov, he will go with her to whatever hare-brained activity she comes up with. It is such a disappointing character trait on someone dubbed ‘Hawkeye’. What good is seeing everything if it doesn't show in your decisions?

Collin does wonder if Hill approved of them going off on their own or if she is feigning ignorance, while hoping Captain America's redemption will also mean SHIELD does not go down in flames. At this point, it could be both and it wouldn't surprise him a little.

After that, the ride continues without any more incidents. He gets the occasional flash of codes from JARVIS as Romanov tries to commandeer the quinjet and fails several times.

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They arrive at Novi Grad just in time to watch the sun set over the city. The scenery is beautiful, especially watching the evening sun highlight the snow on the mountain tops. But all Jim can think about is how grateful he is that Rogers and his followers won't be interrupting the mission.

Jim can't wrap his mind around how someone who was lauded a hero for almost a century because of his selfless deeds, can care so little for others. How a self-acclaimed patriot could care so little for his country and the people he has sworn to protect.

He knows it shouldn't come as such a surprise, after all Tony has told him about the Avengers and how it all came to a head, but going by the way Tony gave his account, he made it sound like he was responsible for the team turning out the way they did.

Tony had insinuated that he had coddled and shielded the team from the consequences of their actions for so long, that they began to believe that the world should bow to them.

However, Tony's lack of involvement in SHIELD’s business has done nothing to improve their behavior. Having to face consequences for their actions hasn't slowed them down, and talking to them about said behavior has proven useless.

Throughout Jim's talk with them about their disobedience, Rogers kept insisting Jim was wrong for going after 'Bucky'. He kept telling Jim he was blinded by loyalty to Tony and that 'Bucky' was innocent. When Jim pointed out the hypocrisy of that statement, Rogers told him it was HYDRA that
committed the act and he was only going to save an innocent man.

Of course, when asked whether he intends to use the same argument on President Ellis, or if he intends to save all the other Winter Soldiers, he insisted that ‘Bucky’ is not the Winter Soldier and that Jim is being unreasonable.

Someone who didn’t know better would think Bucky is the only person in the base.

Jim has never met anyone so deep in denial.

Jim is no stranger to having his best friend in danger. He knows he pushed many boundaries when Afghanistan happened four years ago. But Rogers has put a whole new spin on saving your best friend.

The other mutants-- Erik Lehnsherr, Raven Last-Name-Unknown and Angel Salvador --that FRIDAY had recruited are at the appointed meeting place. Although Lehnsherr looks normal enough without the helmet on his head, Raven has blue skin and red hair and Angel has wings like a dragonfly.

The location of the meeting is on the outskirts of Novi Grad. Close enough to the city, but still far enough not to alert HYDRA of their presence.

“Your assistant said you are interested in an alliance,” Mr Lehnsherr says after the introductions are made.

Jim only allowed Quake and Tony to join him for the meeting, while the rest of the team wait inside the jet in stealth mode. He didn’t want to overwhelm the mutants but he also wanted them to know they would not be the first enhanced people the team would be working with. Jim doesn’t know if it’s the right decision, because of the barely concealed look of disdain Mr Lehnsherr is sending him and Tony.

“That’s right,” Jim agrees. “We have been investigating this HYDRA base, and we know you’ve been at war with HYDRA. Figured joining forces would be best for both our teams.”

“Now, why should I ally myself with a bunch of Homo sapiens?” Mr Lehnsherr asks and Jim feels Tony stiffen where he’s standing beside him. “This is the work of your people and you expect me to put my faith in your desire to fight them?”

Mr Lehnsherr’s teammates shift uncomfortably around them and Jim wonders if it’s because they don’t agree with his words or if they have an issue with who he’s saying them to.

“Excuse me, Homo novus?” Tony asks hotly. “Then why are you wasting our time? You knew why this meeting was called and you had a head start on us. Why didn’t you go ahead with your three-man team and take care of the issue if you didn’t think we would do it?”

“Sorry, Mr Stark,” Angel apologizes. “We just don’t have a good record of working with humans.”

“I don’t doubt that you have a good reason for being wary,” Jim says before Tony can get a word in. “But I doubt every mutant you’ve ever come across has been exactly like you. So, if you can admit that not all mutants are the same, why would you assume that all humans are?”

“You know we may not be mutants,” Quake tells the trio. “But we’re not different where it counts. Inhumans are born with a mutative gene too and suffer the same prejudices that you do. My brother and I didn’t have anywhere to go until Tony offered to protect us and he has kept his word ever since.”
“The last time we worked for the government, they turned against us,” Raven says.

Jim has read up about the case she is referring to. Hill had sent the file but there was nothing about the mutants in the official reports. Not that he expected anything different.

“It will be different this time,” Jim promises.

“This is more than just destroying HYDRA.” Tony tells them. “You will be saving the world. Literally.”

That gets Mr Lehnsherr’s attention again. “How do you mean?”

They all listen attentively as Jim briefs them on the purpose of the mission. It turns out that while Lehnsherr and his companions suspected HYDRA of conducting human experiments, they had no prove and were also ignorant of the government officials and world leaders HYDRA has been kidnapping. Even they were shocked to discover how far HYDRA had gone.

“We’ll work with you,” Lehnsherr says, “on one condition. You put the children in my care. They should be with their kind.”

“No.” Jim refuses flatly at the same moment Tony tells him “Absolutely not.”

“Why not?” Raven demands.

“I’m not handing over a bunch of traumatized children to you just because you all have a mutated gene in common.” Rhodey continues. “We already made accommodations for them.”

“Why?” Lehnsherr asks. “For your government to experiment on them?”

“You mean as opposed to you brainwashing them to join your fight against Homo sapiens?” Quake fires back.

“You know, we’ve read the file HYDRA has on you,” Tony says. Jim watches the way Lehnsherr’s face darkens with barely controlled anger. “We hacked their records. I’m sorry that happened to you, but not everyone is HYDRA. We want to protect the kids, just as you want to.”

“Common, Magneto. You're wasting time.” Wolverine says, coming up beside Jim’s team. Jim doesn’t even know how he is able to sneak up on them or even when he left the jet. “You know you will join us, because there's no way you can leave those kids to the humans to save. Let's just cut through the bullshit.”

“You know this guy?” Tony asks Wolverine, whose only response is a shrug.

“You have another mutant working with you,” Raven says quietly as she watches Wolverine.

“Hey bub,” He greets them with a distracted wave as he lights his cigar.

“You’re not the only one we are allied with,” Jim tells them bluntly.

“They are allied with SHIELD, and you know SHIELD is a cover for HYDRA.” Lehnsherr says to Wolverine. Despite his words, Jim notices how Wolverine’s presence has calmed his hostility a fraction.

“Not all of SHIELD is HYDRA,” Tony tells him. “The guys we’re working with have been thoroughly vetted.”
“So, what is this plan you have made for the kids?” Lehnsherr asks.

After explaining to him that they’ve prepared a safe place for all the hostages, Jim continues. “An appointment has been set up with Prof Charles Xavier. I don’t know if you’ve heard about him,” He adds when he notices their reactions. He really hopes this Prof Xavier isn’t a bad guy because he’s the only one they’ve found that passed the vetting process and can help. “He’s an expert in gene mutation and we’re hoping he will have some advice on the best way to help them.”

His audience look between themselves, even Wolverine, but they all remain silent.

“Do you guys know him?” Tony asks impatiently. “If he’s not someone to be trusted with the kids’ wellbeing, tell us now before we put them in even more danger.”

“You can trust Charles,” Lehnsherr says, magnanimously. Jim nods in relief. Finding another person capable of helping would have been difficult.

After that, it all goes down very easily. Lehnsherr, Raven and Angel—call signs: Magneto, Mystique and Angel—follow them back to the jet after they agree to join forces with them and take down HYDRA once and for all.

“I saw you on the television after the invasion,” Angel says to Quake when they’re sitting in the jet, heading for their destination. Jim purposefully placed them together hoping they’ll bond and he’s glad to see his plan working. “I thought you were a mutant.”

“Inhumans are the product of aliens interbreeding with humans to create warriors centuries ago.” Quake says. “We had a community removed from the rest of the world until SHIELD and HYDRA attacked us and destroyed it. Shock and I were on the run when Tony found us and took us in.”

“I’m sorry,” Angel apologizes sadly.

Quake shrugs. “Like I said, mutants and Inhumans are not much different. But some humans will surprise you if you give them a chance.”

Through the course of the short flight to their destination, the SHIELD agents present in the jet had to endure the glare of Magneto. Jim doesn’t do anything to deter him. After everything he has discovered about SHIELD and their underhanded tactics, even the so-called good ones are not so innocent. As long as Lehnsherr promises not to harm any member of the team, they can endure his glare.

He looks to Collin who has moved seats to make room for Angel beside Quake. “How has life been treating you?” He asks quietly. He had endured Tony’s gushing about Collin’s first steps for thirty minutes. He always knew his best friend would be that kind of parent and he’s happy to be proven right.

“It is taking some getting used to,” Collin says with a smile. “Being human is woefully tedious. Emotions are very intense and taxing.”

“Yeah, nobody ever tells you that part.” Jim laughs. “But you’re not exactly new to it.”

“Theoretical knowledge does little for practical application, Uncle Rhody.”

“That’s true.” Jim grins and ruffles the boy’s hair. He feels like his heart is going to burst from happiness at being addressed as Uncle Rhody. He is so going to be the best uncle to this kid. Tony wouldn’t know what hit him. Maybe he can even convince the kid to join the Air Force. He’s practically a legacy.
A few minutes before they are set to land, Jim calls the team together again. He has to adjust the plan to place the new people and their skills where it will do the most good. He pulls up the holographic model of the base, showing everyone’s position in it.

“Instead of going in through the roof, Mystique will go in through the front door and let us through,” he says after updating them on the new plan. “That gives us a few minutes to get to the hostages before they know we’re there.”

“I could go in with her,” Collin volunteers. Jim and Tony both startle at that.

“Are you sure?” Jim asks, because he doesn’t want to play favorites but Collin is still new to having a body.

“I could join her in stealth mode and redirect their systems from within to buy us more time.” He offers but his attention is on Tony. Jim can’t even argue with that.

“Okay,” Jim agrees. “But be careful, okay?”

He gets a beaming smile and a nod in return. “And I’ve chosen a call sign. It’s Ace.” He says, just as he exits the jet with Mystique.

Yep, definitely Tony’s son.

“He’s going to be fine,” Jim tells Tony, who is still watching the exit.

“Of course he will,” Tony says defensively. Jim smiles.

“It's okay to be worried,” Jim tells him. “You should probably get used to that feeling too because it's not going away anytime soon.”

“How would you know?”

“You have no idea what you were like as a kid, did you?” He laughs. “I lost most of my hair in MIT.”

That causes him to laugh. “If you lived through that, then I guess I can handle Collin.” His best friend agrees.

They're still laughing when Jim hears a snippet of conversation between Wolverine and Magneto.

“I’m surprised to see you working with them after turning down our offer,” Lehnsherr tells Wolverine.

“Times have changed, bub.” Logan shrugs.

“How can you trust them?” Magneto sounds quite baffled. “Humans are filled with such wickedness.”

“Sooner or later, Magneto, you’re going to accept that not every human is the enemy. Because if you don’t, you will start a war you can’t finish.” Wolverine cautions. “There is a storm coming and it doesn’t discriminate. As long as you’re alive, it's coming for you, whether human or mutant. We have to bound together if we hope to stand a chance at surviving it.”

His words cause Jim to exchange looks with Tony. It’s only been a day since Tony told them about the future he returned from. Could Logan have knowledge of the future too? What are the chances?
He's still thinking about Logan's words when Tony presses two bracelets into his wrists. “Backup armor, in case you never need one.” He says when he notices Jim’s questioning look. “It will activate itself, so you don’t have to worry.”

Rhodey is touched at the gesture. “Thank you, Tones.” Rhodey says at the same time the signal comes in.

“Okay guys, it's time,” He calls his team. “Non combatants, stay in your stations. JARVIS or FRIDAY will inform you of any changes in the plan.” He waits till they nod before turning to the rest and commands. “The rest of you, let's go!”

Chapter End Notes

It's not until halfway through writing the next chapter I realized I have no idea what season Sokovia should be in at this time. So, I'm working with the premise that it's winter.

As for the X-Men 'Verse, I'm using X-Men First Class as my canon, with little bits and pieces from other verses. Logan and Erik’s conversation is referencing the scene in First Class, where Erik and Charles tried to recruit Logan when they were assembling their team but Logan shut them down before they could say anything.

But in my AU, Logan and Erik have run into each other a couple of times during their crusade against HYDRA. It's why they're familiar with each other. As you've probably guessed, Logan has a secret, too.
The HYDRA base is located within a vast and dense forest, situated a few miles away from wandering humans. It would have taken Ace and Mystique over thirty minutes to walk from the jet to the base, but Ace chose to cut the time by flying them there. Which is very convenient for him, because flying comes more easily to him than walking does, and they leave no footprints behind in the snow.

They travel in companionable silence, for which, he is grateful. Collin would rather avoid any mistakes, by focusing on the task at hand. It had come to him as a surprise that he is able to make himself invisible on command and that it requires concentration to maintain, but it has turned out to be useful for the mission.

He has a map of the forest and the location of every trap or alarm trigger HYDRA put in the area. So, navigating the path to the base is quite easy. He is careful about offsetting or deactivating any of the triggers. There will be time for that when they’re within the base.

He and his companion fly overhead, they are a couple of miles away from the perimeter of the base when Mystique speaks up.

“This is close enough,” Mystique says. She doesn’t seem bothered that she cannot see her companion, just like she didn’t care when he volunteered to go with her. “Can you locate any of the alarm triggers around here?”

Ace looks around, and finds a trip wire just underneath a layer of snow and shrubs. He drops her close to it and watches as she extracts a ball of cotton wool and a switchblade. Mystique carefully wraps the cotton wool around the tripwire, cuts her palm and allows a few droplets of her blood to fall on the cotton wool. When she is done, she pulls on the wire hard, no doubt triggering the alarm.

“I was going to ask why you have cotton wool on you,” He says, breaking the silence as he watches her work.

“It’s a convenient way to draw them out and isolate someone from the herd,” Mystique shrugs. “Then we’ll have our guy.”

“I see that now,” He agrees. “When they arrive, they will assume it was an animal that tripped on the wire.”

“Exactly,” She dusts her hands. “Now, which one of these trees do you think will give us the best view while simultaneously keeping us out of their sight?” She asks as she holds up her hands, waiting to be picked up.
Ace takes his cue and does exactly as she has asked. While they are up in the tree, Ace hears the perimeter guards as they start talking among themselves about whose turn it is to go check on the intrusion.

A few minutes later, two guards come walking in their direction. When they don’t immediately find what tripped the wire, they split up to check both directions. One walks towards them and the other goes the opposite way.

They wait for him to discover the ruse Mystique had set up, examine it carefully and look around the area for a possible wounded animal. He doesn’t find any, but he still calls in.

The moment he calls in to share his findings with the others, Ace swings down and knocks him out. Mystique relieves him of his badge, gun and comm unit before shapeshifting to look exactly like him. When she’s done, Ace picks him up and ties him to the top of the tree they have just gotten down from, before joining her as they go back to join the rest of the guard. No one notices anything when they arrive at the barrack where some of the other guards are gathered.

Based on the pattern VERONICA sent JARVIS earlier, they have to wait a while before it will be time for the next guard rotation. Mystique joins in the insipid conversation among the guards, while Ace hovers above them, still in stealth mode.

Ace spends his time waiting by hacking into the security cameras, both within and outside to make sure the paths to their various destinations haven’t changed. He also connects to the frequencies HYDRA uses for their comm units so that he can cut off their flow of information when the time comes.

They had to wait almost two hours until it’s time for the next rotation and Ace and Mystique join the guards as they go inside.

“There is a secret passageway, three doors to your right.” Ace whispers in her ears once they’re inside the base and away from the other guards. “It has a staircase that leads to the operation room, three floors up. That’s where Strucker is at the moment. Wait there until the light goes out.”

Mystique looks down at the access badge she stole from the guard. “I don’t think this guy has clearance to go through that door.” She observes.

Ace takes the badge from her hand, scans both sides of it before handing it back to her. “You’ll have the necessary clearance by the time you get there.” He tells her.

“Are you a technopath or something?” She asks, intrigued.

He shrugs and smiles, even though she can’t see it. “Or something.” He says, his humour is clear in his voice.

She looks impressed. “I should have known there was more to you than the flight and invisibility.” She says with an answering smile. “This will go so much easier. Thank you.”

They part ways after that. As he heads towards the power source, he hacks into Zola’s server and delivers a worm to distract him from the activities that are about to start taking place within the base. It’s a modified programme that dad had written to discourage any ambitious hackers from hacking into his or SI servers. It is named TED—Tag, Erase and Destroy—but this one was modified by JARVIS to only tag and distract while at it. Most of the files in Zola’s servers would be used as evidence later, so it is best to avoid erasing or destroying them.

By the time he gives VERONICA the signal to take out the satellite controlling the helicarriers, and
asks JARVIS to block out the signal on HYDRA’s comm units, he is at the powerhouse.

He sabotages the backup generator before going for the main power source. Overloading it until it explodes is almost too easy. Thanks to his vibranium laced skin, the resulting explosion has no effect on him, beside charging up his arc reactor.

As the agents scramble in the dark to find their bearings and fix whatever has come up. Ace sends War Machine the signal and heads towards the hostages.

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“Steve, calm down,” Natasha snaps, losing her patience with him. “Your pacing is agitating even me and it’s getting us nowhere.”

“It’s been three hours already!” Steve snaps back as he continues to pace. “You said you had it handled, but we’re still turning around in circles.”

Natasha keeps her gaze on the shield he keeps flexing, like he’s searching for something to hit.

“Maybe she would take back control of the jet faster if you stopped hovering over her,” Clint says in her defence.

Steve stops for a moment, spares Clint a narrow-eyed glance, teeth clicking shut in anger and Nat notices the subtle way Clint shrinks into his seat, before he resumes pacing the cockpit that is not nearly big enough to contain three people, let alone a big man pacing around like a caged animal.

As discreetly as she can, she checks on her widow bites, guns and knives she tucked into her armor before they left for this trip. She’d rather not fight with him in such close quarters, but she will defend herself and Clint from the maniac Steve has become if she has to.

“They’re going to kill Bucky!” Steve exclaims. “If we don’t get there in time for me to save him, they’re going to kill him.” He looks to where she is still trying to hack JARVIS. “What’s taking so long!”

“I know you were born in the stone age, Steve, but this isn’t magic. I can’t just wave my hands and say abracadabra and everything will get fixed!” She yells, typing a string of code commands that she hopes will return control of the jet to her. “Stark’s programme is the most advanced in the world, and it will take more than a few minutes to override it.”

She hates admitting weakness, even to herself but what she hates even more right now is throwing her lot in with Rogers. When he’d come to her with a plan to still be a part of the mission to raid HYDRA, she had seen her ticket to get herself out of the sinking ship that is SHIELD. But it’s been four hours since Stark and Rhodes hijacked their jet and she has spent every moment of it regretting her decision.

The only thing he cares for is saving Bucky. She hadn’t minded when his goals aligned perfectly with hers, but flying around in circles for three hours with no end in sight has shown her the flaw in her plans.

The jet tilts sharply to the left, before taking a steep dive towards the ocean several thousand feet under them, even as the jet spins and turns in the air. The motion flings her and Clint out of their
seats despite the fact that they braced themselves for it. Steve ends up in the cargo section, slammed against a wall.

Nat wishes he would remain there.

The descent continues for almost ten minutes, but when Nat starts thinking they may actually crash this time, the jet stabilizes and gains altitude.

“Why does it keep doing that?” Steve asks, breathing loudly as he joins them in the cockpit.

“You mean why the jet loses control whenever Nat tries to wrestle the control of it from JARVIS?” Clint asks, voice thick with sarcasm as he re-settles himself on the co-pilot seat. “Gee, I wonder why.”

“Stark is trying to crash the plane with us inside?” Steve asks, with wide eyes.

Nat wonders how he arrived at that conclusion. In any other circumstance, that would have been the perfect entry point, but she has no desire to inflate his ego or sense of self-importance.

Natasha is losing it and she doesn’t like the feeling it gives her, at all.

“When JARVIS and I wrestle for control, sometimes we both lose control and what just happened is the result.” Nat explains to him.

“That means you can really make him stop controlling the plane,” Steve says, eyes bright with new hope. “So, try again and see if you succeed this time.” He prompts.

“No way!” Clint exclaims. “Are you nuts? We barely avoided crashing just now. I think it would be best to let JARVIS have his way, until Stark decides to let us land.”

“That’s your solution?” Steve asks, baffled. “Just give in and let JARVIS have its way? If you bow to bullies every time you get bullied, you’ll never win.”

“I’d rather go home in one piece then win a fight I may not come out of,” Clint tells him. “It’s not like our presence will make any difference in the fight anyway. It will all be over before we get there, even if we resume our journey right this minute.”

“But they’re going to kill Bucky!” Steve argues. Nat is getting really tired of hearing the same old argument as his reason for everything.

“And it will be nothing less than he deserves,” Clint fires back. Steve takes a menacing step in his direction but stops in his tracks when Clint and Nat both draw out their weapons in a silent warning. “Since this whole thing started, Bucky is all you’ve cared about. There are children and world leaders in that base, but the only person you care about saving is the one person who aided HYDRA in this whole clusterfuck, in the first place!”

“It wasn’t Bucky!” Steve yells, as he flexes his shield again but makes no move to approach Clint again.

As loathe as she is to admit it, Nat is seeing clearly now what Stark meant when he told them they will learn what’s more important to Steve. She should have known better than to gamble with someone who doesn’t mind throwing everything away at a chance so that he might get what he wants.

“Face it, Steve,” She tells him as calmly as she can, while pointing a gun at him. “Your precious
Bucky is not innocent. If he doesn’t die protecting HYDRA, then Stark will kill him for his parents’ murder. Even if for some reason Stark doesn’t, you can be sure Ellis will.” She pauses to give him time to digest her words. “There’s nothing you can do now. We’re stuck up here until Stark and Rhodes decides to let us out.”

Steve looks at both of them, then down at the shield in his hands before turning towards the cargo section of the jet. “Till the end of the line,” Natasha hears him muttering under his breath. “I’m not going to give up on Bucky.”

“What are you doing?” Clint asks as he watches Steve stomp towards one of the windows.

“You can stay here if you want, but I’m going to do the right thing and save Bucky.” With that, his shield makes contact with the glass window.

They both rush towards Steve and forcefully pull him away from the window before he can get another hit in.

“Are you nuts?” Clint asks. “Do you want to get us killed? Not all of us are super soldiers you know. We won’t all survive plane crashes and sub-zero temperature under the Atlantic Ocean.”

“Steve, what do you hope to do once you’re out of the plane?” Nat asks, hoping to talk some sense into him. “You can’t fly to Sokovia. Best case scenario, you end up frozen in the ocean until someone finds you, hopefully this century.”

She barely dodges as he throws his shield at her and it collides with the wall behind her. While she’s distracted, he shoves Clint out of the way, and moves to the window again. Nat rights herself and stretches out her leg. In his haste to get to the window, he doesn’t see the leg she has put out and he trips on it. She presses her advantage and kicks him in the solar plexus, before shoving him away.

She shares a look with Clint who has just regained his composure. They both pick up their weapons and take a fighting stance.

Guess it has come to this.

*****

Iron Man, War Machine and the rest of the air troops, along with the Iron Legion and a few of VERONICA’s Sentinels take to the air as they exit the jet, even as the ground troops run through the snow. Between the mapped-out location of the perimeter guards Ace had sent them earlier and the darkness, navigating the area without drawing too much attention to their presence is easy.

The team is split in two, with War Machine leading one part and Iron Man leading the other. War Machine and his team are slightly ahead of them, taking out any guards that would obstruct their path, covering for Iron Man, Wolverine, Quake and Magneto as they head directly towards a set of steps that lead to a secret passage way that Ace had discovered while inside the building. It will lead them directly to the wing of the base that the hostages are located.

The energy shield around the building is already down, he notices when they arrive at it. The lights are out, and Iron Man has to turn on his overhead light for his team to make their way through the hallway. There is chaos everywhere they turn, which makes it even easier to disarm the agents they encounter.
It takes the agents inside the room more than a few seconds to notice their presence. By the time the first guy points a gun at them, Magneto already has them thrown against the wall with a wave of his hands.

Once the room is free of hostile forces, he pushes the door Ace had tagged for him earlier. The door leads to a staircase, which they follow immediately down to the next floor, where the laboratories are located.

It takes both Iron Man and Wolverine to convince Magneto that saving the kids are the priority right now and that they can come back to destroy the labs later.

They proceed quickly from there towards the floor where Ace has gathered all the hostages and is waiting for evac. The lights flicker on as they step out of the room and into the hallway, but Tony observes that the computers don’t do the same.

“Ace must have disabled the backup generator when he took out the power,” Quake observes, echoing Iron Man’s thoughts.

“Smart move,” Wolverine answers as he runs through a group of agents running towards them. Quake releases a wave that takes out those left standing.

Iron Man knows the Maximoff twins’ names had been absent in the files listing the HYDRA operatives in this current base, enhanced or baselines, but a part of him is still watching out for them as he and his team move around the base. He remembers all too well what happened the last time they met in Sokovia.

“We’re here,” Magneto announces. He stops moving for a moment and looks at them. Before anyone can say anything more, he raises his hands and rips out a section of the wall.

When the dust clears, they are greeted with the sight of almost a hundred people huddled together, with Ace front and center. A sweep of the faces staring back at them shows no signs of the Maximoffs and for the first time since they entered the base, Tony breaths easy.

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In the midst of the resulting chaos from the power outage, Ace drifts through the crowd and towards his destination easily. He is still in stealth mode, and he really isn’t paying attention the HYDRA operatives under him as he flies over their heads.

Apparently, his night vision is almost as good as his daylight vision. Which is really convenient for him, as he moves towards achieving his goals. His mind wanders to Mystique and he hopes her own mission is coming along as easily as his own.

He navigates the rooms and hallways, using the blueprint of the building in his possession. He can hear commands being barked out by the higher bosses, wondering what happened to the power and why the backup generator has not come on.

He picks up speed, because he knows the moment they see what has happened to the backup, it won’t be too long until they figure out they have an intruder in their midst.

The takes note of the secret door leading directly to the wing housing the hostages from outside and
sends it to Iron Man. Its presence is closer and will certainly make evac easier, now that they don’t have to use the door to the far left of the wing.

His destination is the third and fourth underground floors. The elevators aren’t functioning due to the lack of power, so, Ace recalls what he has of Vision’s code and how he acquired the skill to phase through solid objects at will. They are both made up of similar properties, so that wouldn’t be impossible to him.

It takes a few minutes longer than Ace would like, but he gets it right eventually. He phases through the floor he is standing on, and doesn’t stop until he arrives at his destination.

He arrives at the cells where the world leaders have been stashed first. The two groups of hostages are being kept a floor apart from each other. There are cells on either side of the hallway, each occupied by a world leader or government official. The prisoners have all been stripped of whatever piece of clothing they were wearing when they were abducted, and are now dressed in a dark green jumpsuit.

He takes a walk through the hallway, taking note of the people within the cells. The intel they have suggests that Operation Intercept had about thirty seven government officials and world leaders, but in the days that have passed since then, HYDRA has added fifteen more to their collection.

He hacks into the keypad locks on the cells and unlocks them. Once that’s done, he disables his stealth mode and goes from cell to cell, throwing the doors open. Thankfully, HYDRA hadn’t thought to use more restraints than that on their prisoners.

There are more than a few hopeful cries of his dad's names ranging from Iron Man to Dr Stark, to plain old Tony Stark, as Ace goes about opening the cell doors and urging their occupants out. The last one was accompanied by a disbelieving tone.

He preens at the thought of being mistaken for his dad. He knows he should strive to be his own person, but being recognized as human makes something warm settle in his stomach.

“That would be my father, Your Excellencies.” He tells the liberated prisoners who are already out of their cells. “He is on his way and will be here, along with War Machine shortly. In the meantime, you can call me Ace.” He doesn’t miss the sigh of relief that ripples through them at his promise that Iron Man and War Machine will be here shortly.

Ace glances around the prisoners. They are all staring at him with hope as they crowd around him. Some of them can barely stand up straight. Muscle atrophy must have kicked in after being cooped up in such a tight space for so long.

A quick scan of President Ellis who is leaning on the director of the CIA, Christian Pompeo, shows he has a bandage, stained with fresh blood covering the length of his right thigh.

“Please assist anyone who needs it.” Ace instructs the adults. “There are children on the next floor who were also kidnapped by HYDRA. I need to get to them before HYDRA’s operatives realize what's happening.”

They agree to help without further ado. With the elevator out of order, they have to take the staircase down to the next floor, which wouldn’t be an issue, if he didn’t have such high-profile charges that must be protected at all cost.

He thinks about the next step for a few seconds before he arrives at a viable solution. “Please step back a few feet and wait here until I call for you,” He warns them.
“Where are you going?” A member of the British parliament asks him, his voice slightly panicked.

“There are guards stationed at the staircase, so we can’t use it.” He explains. “I’m phasing down to the next floor then I’ll create a path for you to pass through.”

“Phase?” One of them asks, at the same time someone else asks him. “How will you create a path for us?”

As his answer, he activates the Iron Man bracelets dad gave him. “I can make myself go through walls,” Ace explains to them. “When I’m on the other side, I plan to cut off part of the floor with laser beams and help you climb through it.”

A moment passes, where they decide if it’s a ploy to leave them behind, but some of them nod their consent eventually. He gives them a smile before phasing through the floor.

The sight that greets him when he arrives at the other side of the floor is one that will haunt him for a long time. In contrast to the world leaders that were kept in cells, Ace finds the children locked in a row of cages. Some of them are suspended in the air like birds while others are placed on the ground. The cages are barely large enough to fit them and most of them are curled into some very uncomfortable positions.

Different forms of extra restraints have also been used on them, ranging from collars and gags to a pair of wrist cuffs or legs cuffs or even all three.

They all stare at him with wide fearful eyes as he descends into their midst. “Hi,” He greets them softly, activating the Iron Man suit up to his neck but leaves his face open. Most of them were taken within the past year, so they are likely to recognize the Iron Man suit and colours.

All of them are still staring at him, even though a a few of them don’t look so fearful anymore.

“Are you Iron Man?” A little girl asks him in a very tiny voice, her eyes fixed on the armor. She can’t have been more than ten years old and she has green skin and a broad collar around her neck as well as a pair of wrist cuffs. Her cage is suspended in the air, just above a girl that looks a couple of years older than her.

“I’m Iron Man’s son,” He tells her with a smile. The longer he talks to her, the more attention he gets from the other kids. “My superhero name is Ace, but you can call me Collin. What’s your name?”

The hope in her eyes dims slightly when he tells her he is not Iron Man and she watches him warily with red eyes. Just when he thinks she’ll ignore his question, she answers. “Lisa.”

“You have a lovely name, Lisa.” He compliments her and watches the red of her eyes glow brightly for a second. “I’m here with my dad and our friends to rescue you and everyone else here. Would you like that?” He says the second part just loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Can you get these off me?” She asks him.

“I promise to try my hardest, and if I can’t, my dad will find a way to get them them off.” He has already scanned the collar and it will come off easily enough, but he thinks reminding her of Iron Man will be good for her.

“Iron Man?”

She nods as much as the collar will let her and gives him a wobbly smile. “Okay.”

With that, he straightens and hacks into the lock on all the cages. It’s the same type of lock as the ones on the cells, so it’s no challenge.

He lets Lisa out first. The moment he sets her down, he grabs the clasp of the collar and rips it off as carefully as he can, before doing the same to her wrist cuffs. That gets everyone interested as they begin shifting towards the door of their cages.

“I have unlocked all the doors,” He announces, then looks to Lisa. “Do you want to help me free the others? There are some people on the top floor I just rescued. I have to let them down here before they get captured again.”

She nods eagerly, already moving to help the girl in the cage under hers. This one is a brunette about Lisa's age, with wrist cuffs and leg cuffs linked together by a steel rod. He makes quick work of hers, using the laser beam from his suit before he goes to fulfil his promise to the world leaders.

By the time the last of the adults were down, more than half the kids are already out of their cages. The sight of the adults in the room almost starts a panic, until Ace calms them down and explains that the adults are also HYDRA’s victims.

“Did they put you in the chair, too?” A little boy asks the adults, while the rest of the kids observe them.

Ace doesn't miss how some of them cringed at the question. Some of them have already emptied their stomach when they saw the condition HYDRA kept the children in.

“Hey guys, if we work together,” Ace says as a diversion. “We can get everyone out before the bad people get here.”

It works like charm. Before long, all seventy children are free from their cages and bondages. Except for a teenage boy, whose only restraints is the band covering his eyes. He had refused when Ace tried to remove the band, stating that he can't control his ability, and has to be led around by a redhead.

The room is divided in two with the adults on one side and the children on the other. Despite his explanation that they are all victims, the kids are wary of the adults, and try to keep as much distance between them as they can get while sticking close to Ace.

But when the loud bangs starts coming through the walls, everyone forgets about their reservations as they crowd around Ace. He doesn’t know how, but he ends up with an arm full of Lisa, with her arms clutching at his neck.

Ace isn’t worried about the intrusion though. He heard the Iron Man thrusters before they got close. The wall opposite them is unceremoniously ripped off, and he doesn’t miss the way the adults step back or the kids take on fighting stance. Lisa's neighbor has let out a pair of metal claws identical to Wolverine's.

“Everyone, calm down,” He calls out firmly before they can attack anyone. “It’s Iron Man and his friends. I told you my dad was coming.”

When the dust settles, they are greeted by the sight of dad, along with Wolverine, Quake and Magneto.

“J,” Iron Man calls. “Let Rescue know it’s go time.” Then he turns to the crowd around Ace. “Hello,
everyone. What do you say we get you all out of here?”
Mystique has scarcely ducked under the staircase of the secret passage when the lights go out. True to Ace’s words, the badge she had stolen earlier from the guard actually worked on the lock on her first attempt. In the midst of the chaos that results from the lights going out, she quickly takes the staircase and follows the directions Ace had given her to Strucker’s location.

“What happened to the power?” A man in a suit asks her in accented English when she gets to the top of the staircase. She’s about to answer his question when he takes a good look at her. “How did you get in here?” He asks suspiciously. “You do not have the clearance level to be on his floor,” He is reaching for his comm when she knees his stomach, grabs him by the neck and shoves him face first into the wall. That knocks him out cold.

Mystique drags his unconscious form back down to the bottom of the staircase she had just exited, grabs his badge, gun and comm before transforming into her victim.

When she arrives at the room Ace told her she would find Strucker, the place is in a chaos. There are people everywhere, scrambling for answers about the power. A closer look around at the occupants of the room shows that Baron Strucker is not among them. He must have left sometime during her journey here.

Mystique knows she is outnumbered, so she doesn’t try to open fire on them. Instead, she observes quietly.

“Dr Brown,” A young agent calls, coming up to her. “The technician thinks we may have an intruder in our midst. He says someone tampered with the backup generator.”

“Does he have any idea where this intruder might be, or what they may be after?” She asks.

“Not yet, but the troops have been deployed.” He tells her.

That surprises her. “Who gave that order?” She asks harshly and the young agent flinches.

But the explosion from outside blocks out whatever answer he gave her. Almost immediately, a group of Iron Legions drop a trio of SHIELD agents inside the room, quickly joined by War Machine.

Mystique shifts into her original form to avoid friendly fire before taking the door closest to her. Leaving her team to deal with the rest while she searches for Strucker.

That exit takes her down a long corridor and into another wing of the building. The elevators aren’t working when she tries them and there is no signal on the comm when she tries using it to search for Strucker.

Mystique spends the next few minutes searching through the different halls she comes to, until she finds him in the third underground floor. He is standing in the middle of the room, surrounded by six
cryo chambers. All of which have their occupants in various stages of defrosting.

“Good,” Baron Strucker smiles when he sees her. “You’re here. I thought I would have to go looking for you when the comms went down.”

She wonders if that had been Ace’s doing too. “I have been searching for you, as well.” She tells him. “We are under attack.”

“I noticed,” Strucker says. “Iron Man and his friends have come to attack us. We will show them how far we have come in our work.”

“Is that wise?” She asks. “This will jeopardize all we have worked for.”

“If we do not retaliate, we will lose everything.” He says, then he grins widely at her. “Get List to activate the Spring core. Let us see how well Iron Man fares against our soldiers.

“What about the hostages?” She asks. “They're likely here for them. It would be best to let them be rescued.”

“And jeopardize everything we have put in place? No, If we can't hold them back, we will take out the hostages and kill one every minute until they retreat. They wouldn't dare to risk it.”

Mystique nods, eyes the occupants of the cryo chambers that will take a while before they are ready to receive orders and then the man that intends to give them and the children he had kidnapped orders to kill for him.

Even Sergeant Barnes that had just kidnapped President Ellis less than twenty-four hours ago is among them. They must have frozen him after he completed his mission.

She turns like she plans to leave and whips out the gun she had stolen from Arnold Brown. Strucker has a bullet between his eyes before he realizes what she has planned. She empties two more into his chest for good measure before transforming back into herself.

“Strucker is down,” She informs her team through her comm unit. “He was defrosting the Winter Soldiers before I took him out, so I’m going to try reversing the process. I’ll need help getting the cryo chambers out.”

“Good job, Mystique.” War Machine answers. “Sending some Legionnaires to your location now.”

After making sure the Winter core will stay frozen, she relaxes onto the wall and waits for the Iron Legion to find her.

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The team may have taken HYDRA by surprise with their presence, but it does not take them long to respond. Within a few minutes of assaults at the base, HYDRA had their tanks and long-range weapons ready to fire, both at them and the city. It is an attempt by HYDRA to push up the casualties and distract them, but Iron Man had already warned War Machine of this strategy. By the time the tanks and long-range weapons are ready to fire, the Sentinels flying overhead of the team has already taken them out. So far, no helicarriers have taken to the sky, so, Jim concludes that Ace succeeded in taking them out.
War Machine docks out of the way, as a HYDRA operative in a jetpack tries to knock him off his course, he turns and hits the agent with a blast from his repulsor.

Once the control is taken and the HYDRA operatives properly restrained, War Machine and the other agents with him spread out to do a sweep of the base, while the rest of the team outside take care of the HYDRA agents that made it out of the base.

Ace has done a great job of cutting the communication among HYDRA’s ranks because some of them still has no idea what is happening in the other parts of the base. It makes containing them even easier.

“FRIDAY, Mystique needs assistance transporting the Winter Soldiers,” War Machine says after Mystique calls in. “Send her some Legionnaires.”


“JARVIS, turn on the speakers.” War Machine commands, even as he turns on his own speakers and announces to everyone fighting on the ground. The agents still inside the building will receive his message, thanks to the speakers on the Legionnaires inside the building.

“Strucker is dead,” War Machine announces. His voice is loud and is heard across the whole HYDRA base. “If you put down your weapons and surrender now, no harm will come to you.” Everyone stops and some agents stare at him. “I repeat, Strucker is dead. HYDRA is over. Stand down.”

At the second command, some of the agents start putting down their weapons and putting their hands up in the sky. Turns out, even HYDRA agents want to live.

Rhodey and his team make quick work of rounding up the HYDRA operatives, while JARVIS is on the line with the appropriate authorities in Sokovia and NATO.

“Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS calls when he’s almost done. “Sir requires your presence at the west wing of the building.”

He looks around the base. All the HYDRA agents and scientists they could find have been restrained. The Sentinels are doing a sweep of the tech inside the base while they wait for the authorities to arrive. The fight hadn’t even lasted up to thirty minutes before the base was under their control.

Jim can afford to step away and see what Tony needs.

“Agent May, please keep an eye on everyone til I get back,” He instructs her, before closing the face plate of his armour and taking off towards Iron Man. “Is everything okay with the hostages?” He asks.

“Everything is as good as can be expected with everyone except with President Ellis,” JARVIS says. “He is seriously injured and every movement only serves to aggravate his injuries further.”

The hostages are still being transferred to the jet by the Legionnaires when he arrives. Most of the hostages can barely stand upright and there is a kid clinging to Ace like a koala. Jim takes a moment to be grateful that they thought to bring along hospital beds to make the transportation easier.

“Your Excellencies,” He salutes, greeting all the dignitaries collectively, even though they don’t look so dignified at the moment. The ones present, still waiting to be taken up to the jet by the Legionnaires respond with a hoarse voice. It makes him wonder briefly if they have enough ice chips...
“Platypus,” Tony looks relieved to see Jim, even as he gives him a once over. “We’re going to need your armor. You’re the only one with a spare armor.” Tony says, and Jim just barely avoids calling bullshit. But he doesn’t argue as he steps out from the War Machine armor. Almost immediately, the backup Tony had given him envelops him.

Ellis’ right leg is almost drenched in blood and he’s so pale, Jim isn’t sure how he is still conscious. Following Tony’s instructions, he holds Ellis up as the armor wraps itself around him and takes off for the jet.

“Helen has been called,” Tony explains. “She’ll be set up before they arrive.”

Jim nods, and he joins the evac efforts. Together, they transfer everyone to the jet in due time. Ace, Quake, Angel and Shock, along with the rest of the non-combatants, pile into the jet.

“Oh, Wolverine,” Tony calls out worriedly. It’s only then Jim notices the dazed look in Wolverine’s eyes as he follows after the team escorting the hostages back. “Are you okay? Do you want to go with them? We still have to clean up here.”

Jim watches Wolverine blinks a few times, sending one last glance at jet before unsheathing his claws.

“I got this,” Wolverine says and then walks purposefully inside the base.

“What’s that about?” Jim asks Tony.

“There’s a child among the kids with metal claws,” Tony says, his eyes haunted. “She looks suspiciously like him.”

“Damn,” Jim curses. “That doesn’t bode well for anyone. Better go make sure he doesn’t maim anyone that has already surrendered.” He tells Tony as he takes off after Wolverine.

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Pepper Potts focuses her attention on the screen showing the news in her office, despite the tight curl of tension that has settled in her. The screen is split into ten different channels, showing all the major news networks in the world. She has been monitoring the news since she left Tony and Rhodey in Dr Cho’s lab. So far, nothing out of the ordinary has been reported. JARVIS and FRIDAY have both been monitoring the internet as well as the darknet but there has been no chatter about anything.

It’s been almost an hour since she returned from her meeting at the UN headquarters. Pepper had gone straight there the moment JARVIS informed her that the hostages were safe and it was go time, but so far, there hasn’t been anything in the news about HYDRA or terrorists impersonating world leaders.

FRIDAY has informed her that Rhodey’s Air Force team and the Seal team he convinced to join the mission have both been deployed. She knows it’s only a matter of time before the news breaks.

She strokes the Rescue armour bracelets Tony had given her earlier, to avoid giving in to the temptation to stand up and pace her office and turns her seat to look out the floor to ceiling windows
at the outline of Manhattan. The arc shield on the tower, as well as every other SI facility is up. Pepper had ordered them to be put up, just to be on the safe side.

As she watches the people below going about their businesses, Pepper can’t help but recall the meeting she just had with the Secretary General of the UN. It had been long and tedious, and she’d been met with a lot of scepticism. Something about how impossible it would be to kidnap such high profile individuals without anyone noticing.

It wasn't until she told pointed out to him that even his personal assistant was a HYDRA plant and the he himself didn't notice. That had been all it took to get the ball rolling.

Once the assistant was invited into the office, Pepper had activated the gauntlet of her suit, hit her with the high voltage taser gun before deactivating the photostatic veil she was wearing. After that, Pepper hadn’t had to talk much. Only to inform him of the current plants.

Since she left the UN headquarters, her phone has been ringing constantly, even as she tries to make plans for the reused hostages coming in, to ensure that they are well fed and cared for during their stay.

“Ms Potts,” FRIDAY’s voice interrupts her musing. “Professor Charles Xavier is seeking entrance into the building. He says he needs to speak with you.”

“With me or Tony?” Pepper asks. She knows Tony has set up an appointment with the gene mutation specialist in the hope that he can provide tips on how to care for the mutant children.

“With you,” FRIDAY insists. “He was specific.”

“His appointment is in two days,” Pepper says. “He can wait till then.” Pepper isn’t receiving visitors and whatever Prof Xavier has to say to her can wait until the date of his appointment with Tony.

“Boss Lady, he says you want to hear what he has to say,” FRIDAY presses. “And I took a peak inside his car. His companion is… interesting.”

“I’m listening,” Pepper tells FRIDAY.

“Wolverine, Erik Lehnsherr, Raven and Angel Salvador all know this man.” FRIDAY petitions. “They insisted he is trustworthy when the Boss asked their opinion on him. Collin thinks they weren’t lying.”

“Oh?” Pepper asks with a trace of humour. “Is Collin a human lie detector?”

“In a way.” Comes FRIDAY’s cryptic answer.

“Alright, let’s hear what Prof Xavier has to say that can’t wait.”

It’s only when Prof Xavier and his companion steps into her office she understands what FRIDAY had meant when she said his companion was interesting. What she finds baffling however, is how a blue-skinned, six-foot tall, feline-looking person, made it all the way up to her office from the entrance of the tower without causing a ruckus in the tower. She has seen and heard enough about enhanced people not to stare too hard at Prof Xavier’s companion though.

“Prof Xavier,” Pepper greets politely when they enter her off. She doesn’t have time to waste as JARVIS will be calling soon. Whatever this meeting is for, she needs it to be over before then.

“Ms Potts. Please, call me Charles.” Xavier says with a smile as he reaches over to shake her hand.
He companion does the same. “This is Hank McCoy. I’m sure you’re wondering what couldn’t wait until later.”

“It’s like you’re inside my mind,” She says sarcastically, trying to get to the point of the meeting. But McCoy’s slight twitch makes her reconsider. “Well, are you?” She presses. In that moment, she starts reciting the square root of pie backwards to clear her mind.

“No,” Charles answers firmly. “I am not.”

Pepper eyes the man in the wheel chair warily. “But you can.” Of course, an expert in gene mutation, known to all the mutants they have come in contact with so far. It shouldn’t come as a surprise that he is a mutant, too.

“That is part of the reason we are here, right now.” He says.

Pepper observes the men before her. She has no way of knowing if he’s lying and Collin believes the mutants weren’t lying when they said he is trust worthy. Plus, her gut says go with it. “What can I do for you gentlemen?”

Pepper listens attentively as Charles explains to her that Raven had informed them of HYDRA’s activities and that they are here to offer their team’s assistance.

According to Charles, the X-Men is a team made up of mutants and sponsored by Charles Xavier himself. They have been functional for two years now, and have mainly been rescuing stray mutants. He is working towards turning their base into a school/safe haven for mutants and any enhanced that might need it.

They have been careful because since their encounter with the CIA, SHIELD and HYDRA has been on the hunt for them. Charles believes it’s what led to these kids being kidnapped in the first place.

The three of them talk for a few more minutes, during which they tell Pepper more about their team and its dynamics, before she agrees to the alliance. But as it is right now, Pepper has enough people that are field ready.

She explains to Charles that they have a group of traumatized children arriving from Sokovia soon, and the best help his team can offer them right now, to be present when they arrive. The SI medical team have no experience dealing with the enhanced, and some of the children are more likely to lash out at anyone in a lab coat, but maybe having others like them supervising will calm them.

Charles agrees to the plan, and a few minutes later, Pepper is meeting the rest of the X-Men, Alex Summers, codename: Havoc and Ororo Monroe, codename: Storm.

Once JARVIS gives them the security all clear, Pepper asks him to give them the co-ordinates to the compound.

It’s only been a few minutes after the X-Men have left when FRIDAY informs her that she has an incoming call from Director Hill.

“I thought you’d be busy with General Talbot?” Pepper asks Hill before the new director of SHIELD can get any word in. She knows that General Talbot has been sent to investigate SHIELD and is at the triskelion currently.

“Pepper,” Hill says and the urgency in her voice makes the hairs on Pepper’s neck stand. “We have a serious problem.”
“More serious than terrorists taking over the world from under our noses?” Pepper asks, despite the dread curling in her stomach.

“The Fridge has fallen.”
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Beta'd by the lovely Thisisarealtagwhy.

When Clint Barton joined SHIELD, he hadn’t cared much for helping the good guys. At the time of his recruitment, he had only been too happy to have a job whose retirement plan involved something other than being buried in an unmarked grave when someone younger, faster with better aim came along. That with the job, working for the good guys was just a happy side effect.

Decades later, he met his wife and started a family that is nothing like the one he grew up in. Sure, he couldn’t tell his kids what he did, and wasn’t home most of the time, but his wife understands and his kids knows he loves them. Sure, Laura has been dropping hints about getting a safer job and spending more time with the kids, but she understands why he is reluctant to give up what he loves.

The alien invasion, Ebony Maw taking over his mind and using him to kill other SHIELD agents, people he has worked alongside for years has made him rethink his decision to continue at SHIELD. Maybe Laura had been right about finally walking away from it all, and settling down into that domestic life she’d always dreamed about for them. All he has to do is wait it out until his therapist gives him the green light and then he’s off. But no, HYDRA had to come up with an elaborate plan and throw a wrench into his own plans.

Or maybe it wasn’t HYDRA fault. If only he’d listened to Rhodes when the guy benched him from the mission, instead of letting Nat convince him the only way they could avoid going down with SHIELD is to be a part of the mission. He wouldn’t be in this position right now: In a jet, thousands of miles above sea level, fighting with a super soldier whose only care in the world is saving his assassin BFF.

Right now, all he can think about is that he might die and he can’t remember the last words he said to his kids.

Clint wants to hate Nat for it. He feels like it’s her fault and he should hate her, but the truth is, she didn’t force him into this mission. He came knowing full well that he didn’t have to but that he was doing it for a friend. Even more, he hates Steve for not living up to his reputation and the stories he’d grown up with as a kid. For being so willing to sacrifice Clint and Natasha for the opportunity to save Barnes, despite how slim his chances are.

He thinks these thoughts as he releases an arrow that bounces off Steve’s shield instead of being lodged into his right shoulder. Nat has rolled behind Steve and knocks him flat on the ground.

"Steve, you need to calm down," Nat warns him.

Steve bounces up on his feet, an elbow to her side knocks Nat off balance. "I can do this all day," He says. For the first time since they left the tower, Clint sees Captain America for what it truly is.

The knife Clint throws at him lodges itself into Steve’s shoulder at the same time Steve throws his shield at Clint. He dodges and the shield sails through the air, hitting the control board of the jet.
This causes the jet to lose control, knocking all three of them off balance as they scramble to hold on to something.

“Are you happy now?” Clint yells at Steve. “You’re going to get us all killed!”

Steve yells something that Clint doesn’t care about. The jet continues its freefall for a few more minutes before it stabilizes and stops moving all together.

He and Nat rush to the closest window, and finds that they are surrounded by water.

“JARVIS?” Nat calls but there’s no response.

Steve has already opened the ramp, but can’t get any farther. There is not even a boat or ship in sight.

“We have to do something,” Steve urges, coming back inside the jet where Clint and Nat have made themselves comfortable. “Do you think there’s a boat in here somewhere?” He asks earnestly.

“And what would you do if you found one?” Clint snaps. “How long do you think it will take a life boat to reach Sokovia?”

“Do you even know how to get there by boat?” Nat asks.

Steve looks stumped for a moment. “Haven’t they invented boats with GPS settings like the airplanes have by now?”

At that, Clint decides he is done with the conversation. Grateful that he’s been saved from plunging to his death, he goes to the back of the jet to lay down until Stark or whoever is coming with rescue arrives. He can hear the sound of Steve and Nat’s voice, but he tunes them out. If Rogers wants to swim to Sokovia, that’s his problem.

An indeterminable amount of time later, Rogers drops beside him in a dejected lump of sulk.

“Shouldn’t you be swimming to Sokovia by now?” Clint asks him spitefully. “The jet is down like you wanted, what are you still doing here?”

Steve ignores him. Nat is nowhere to be seen, but Clint doesn’t bother about her. She can take care of herself. When it becomes clear that Rogers isn’t going to break the silence, Clint takes the plunge.

“You are nothing like the stories say you are,” Clint tells him.

Steve startles before looking at Clint like he just appeared from thin air. “Huh?”

“In SHIELD, you were the standard that every agent wanted to live up to. We were sold a tale of your goodness and bravery. ‘The embodiment of American values’ is what the welcome pamphlet called you.” Clint laughs deprecatingly. “We all strived to live up to the legacy that we were told you left behind, but looking at you now and having worked with you these past few days, I can see that we’ve been deceived. All I can think about is ‘what a waste!’.”

“You don’t know what it’s like waking up and being told everything and everyone you know and love is gone,” Steve says defensively. “Waking up in a world where everything is all wrong. When I went under, the world was at war, I woke up and they said we won but that’s not exactly true, is it? And now I’m surrounded by people with loose morals. People who will sell out anyone to get ahead.” Steve shakes his head sadly.

Clint can barely resist scoffing at that. “If that’s what you think of the world today, then not much
has changed.

“This is not the future I fought to secure,” Steve continues like Clint hasn’t said anything. “It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“And what was it supposed to be like?” Clint shifts into a sitting position to get a better look at Steve. “What was it supposed to be like? You and Barnes in a little cottage getting it on and reminiscing about the good old days?” His question is sarcastic but Steve’s blush says he hit bull’s eye. “Really?” He asks incredulously.

“He was right there and I couldn’t save him.” Steve has a faraway look in his eyes that suggests he is lost in his memories. “Ever since we were little boys in Brooklyn, it was always Bucky and me. We swore to have each other’s back to the end of the line but it was always Bucky saving me. Then I got this new body. I found that I could do everything I always wanted to do, except save my best friend. He was right there. I could almost reach him and then he was falling and no matter how fast I run, I can never reach him.” Steve sighs, deep and mournful. The sound of it makes something deep within Clint ache. “And now, sitting here in this unmoving jet when Bucky needs me, it feels like history is repeating itself.”

“You thought throwing your team under the bus for a chance to save your best friend is a good trade?” Clint wants to feel sorry for him but it’s hard to do when just a few minutes ago, Rogers was ready to go through he and Nat. “Complain all you want about how bad the future is but you have no leg to stand on. And unlike you, we can admit to our flaws.” At least some of us can, Clint thinks, knowing that his best friend will never admit to being anything less than perfect.

Steve bristles at that. “I have no flaws,” He says, his jaws jutting out stubbornly. “Wanting Bucky safe is not a flaw.”

Clint stares incredulously at him as something occurs to him. “It was never about the prisoners when you went to rescue the Howlies was it? That they were saved at the end of the day was just a happy coincidence. Same as it isn’t about the hostages HYDRA kidnapped. You could care less about the kids HYDRA has in their clutches as long as Barnes gets saved.”

“I died fighting HYDRA, of course I care that they’re still around,” Steve yells, clenching his fist.

“Please, your pathetic attempt at suicide is not the same as dying!” Clint returns hotly. He knows he may not recover from getting beat up by a super soldier, especially since Nat isn’t around to be his backup but he’s too pissed to care. “You were ready to punch your way off a moving plane without even stopping to get a parachute, and swim to Sokovia if you had to. Without even a care that Nat and I aren’t super soldiers and may not survive the resulting crash, but I’m supposed to believe you couldn’t get out of the Valkyrie before the crash? That your super soldier stamina couldn’t keep you afloat until rescue arrived?

“You tried to kill yourself the first chance you got after you believed Barnes was dead and now you think he may be alive, you’ll do anything, go through anyone including your teammates for him.” Clint’s voice has been rising since he started his rant and his chest is tight with anger.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Rogers says in the tone of an elder scolding a child. “There are things you don’t understand.”

“Shut up!” Clint snaps. “Don’t talk down to me like you’re some wise old man. You may have been born in the forties but you’re neither wise nor old. Because if you were, you would have followed the order you were given and changed your outfit.”
Nat’s reason for forcing herself on the mission is very clear. With her past and the gravity of the situation, she would likely be tagged as HYDRA. Add in the beef with Stark and she has a one way ticket to hell. But all Rogers had to do was change out of his uniform. He could have even been reinstated as Captain America if he’d followed Rhode’s orders.

“How do you know they wouldn’t have found another excuse to try and stop me from saving Bucky?” Steve fires back. “I am Captain America. I worked hard to earn it and what do I get after everything?”

Clint stares incredulously at Rogers for a moment. He clearly has no problem beating his head against this wall but Clint has had enough of watching him do it. “So, all of this has been to save Bucky?” He asks, taking a different form of approach.

“Yes!” Rogers exclaims as his shoulders drop in relief that Clint finally gets what he’s been trying to say. “Bucky is innocent and it’s not fair what he’s been through since the war. I just want to bring him home so he can be happy.” Steve continues in his aw-shucks Brooklyn boy attitude.

Clint nods. “And signing up for the mission had nothing to do with stopping HYDRA from taking over the world or saving the little children that your boyfriend helped HYDRA kidnap?”

“That wasn’t Bucky’s fault! HYDRA made him do it.”

“That doesn’t stop the fact that when these kids have nightmares about monsters later in life, it’s his face they’ll dream about, does it?”

“Bucky is not a monster.” He declares, voice full of promise of violence if he continues in that line of questioning.

“Alright,” Clint raises his hands in surrender. He doesn’t think his skull will survive a punch from an angry super soldier. “How do you think Bucky will feel when he discovers that you prioritised saving him over the people in actual danger?” He asks.

“Bucky is in danger too!” Rogers argues. “Those people want to kill him.”

“But if your boyfriend is as great as you say he is, how do you think he’ll feel when he finds out about the people that died because you were determined to save him?”

“Nobody is going to die,” Rogers says, horrified.

“Really?” Clint asks sceptically. “Because if you’re so consumed with saving Barnes, by the time you find him and convince him to go with you, HYDRA will have killed the other victims.”

“Bucky knows where they’re being kept, he’ll want to help them too when he finds out what HYDRA has been doing to the kids.” Rogers says surely. “Bucky will be outraged to find out what HYDRA has been doing.”

Wow. Talk about denial. Clint has never met anyone as out of touch with reality as Rogers. It’s even worse than listening to his daughter talk about her plans to be Mrs Santa Claus. The fact that Rogers constantly avoids answering Clint’s questions makes him decide to change tactics and treat Rogers like he would Cooper when the little man is trying to be smooth.

“Okay. So, you save Bucky and you two go all formidable force on HYDRA’s ass. What next?”

“Then we destroy HYDRA so they can’t hurt Bucky again.”
“Then what?”

“Then we go home.”

Clint suppresses a snicker. “And then what?”

“We’re home and Bucky is safe, what else could there be?” Rogers asks with a confused frown.

“I know you’ve read HYDRA’s file on Barnes. You know how they were able to control him. What will you do to make sure that can’t happen again?”

For the first time since the beginning of the conversation, Rogers looks stumped.

“You didn’t consider that, did you? The fact that all it will take is a bunch of words and your boyfriend is no longer your boyfriend.”

“I’ll find a way.” Rogers says certainly and he puffs his big chest up.

Clint can’t hold in his snort at the words, as Nat joins them. From her posture, he can tell whatever her doctors gave her to numb the pain in her shoulder for the mission is wearing off, and the spot above the bandage is wet. “You okay?” He asks her.

“Find a way to what?” Nat asks, ignoring his question. He knows she doesn’t like appearing weak, especially before an audience so he doesn’t take offence.

Clint breathes a sigh of relief at her presence. Having to be the adult between him and Rogers is no fun, at all. At least Nat will find a way to entertain herself. “Captain Bucky here believes he can save his boyfriend with hugs and kisses.” Clint shrugs.

Nat’s expression doesn’t change as she turns to raise an unimpressed brow at Rogers but Clint sees the way her eyes light up with humour.

“Clint said I have to find a way to remove HYDRA’s control on Bucky and I told him I’ll find a way.” Rogers grinds out.

“Barnes is where he needs to be to get the most help,” Nat tells him. “If you want to help him, you’ll let Stark’s team do their job.”

“Bucky doesn’t deserve to die just because of what HYDRA made him do!” Rogers explodes. “It’s not his fault. Bucky is innocent!”

“And you’re going to get him killed if you don’t let this go!” Clint warns.

Rogers fixes him with a hard glare, even as he squares his shoulder. “I never back down from a fight.”

“Let me tell you how this will go,” Nat starts a moment after Rogers’ outburst. “If Barnes doesn’t die during the clash between HYDRA and Stark’s team, he will be taken in. Considering the countries involved, SHIELD can’t imprison him, so it will most likely fall to Stark to build a prison secure enough to hold him and the other Winter Soldiers.”

Rogers goes to say something but Nat stops him with a raise of her hand.

“Good luck trying to break him out of a prison built by Stark, but if, by a miracle you succeed, you won’t last long as a fugitive. You have no skills to help you survive on the run. Every country and what’s left of HYDRA will be after you. JARVIS can access any system or camera in the world,
HYDRA only has to announce the words that trigger the Winter Soldier within his hearing and he’ll turn on you and fight his way back to his handlers.

“You’re already a suspected terrorist, this will only confirm it and you’ll be branded as terrorists. With his reputation, your combined enhancement from the serum, most countries will have a shoot on sight order on you. Seeing as how you don’t know the first thing about going dark, it will be a matter of who gets to you first.

“That you used to be Captain America and gave your life for the world will mean absolutely nothing to anyone then and by the time the end comes for both of you, you’ll be wishing you remained in the ice and Barnes was still with HYDRA.” Nat tells him bluntly, and damn, even Clint is shaken by the image she is painting. “So, if you love your boyfriend and you want him safe, you will leave him where he is, with Stark, who has the tech to help him and is basically the world’s sweetheart right now. You will leave him to stand trial and clear his name, if he’s as innocent as you think he is.”

With that, Nat rises from her spot and walks further into the jet to rummage through the first aid kit. Rogers is grumbling, but Clint doesn’t bother paying attention. If Nat’s words don’t get the message across, nothing else will.

He doesn’t know how long they remain grounded, but an indeterminable amount of time later, the jet comes on and takes to the air. Clint remains on his seat, uncaring about where JARVIS takes them.

*If I make it to my family in one piece, Clint vows, I'll find a safer job and spend more time with my family.*
“Are you okay, sweetie?” Darcy asks the little boy, who looks like he’s been gearing up to say something for the last ten minutes. “Did you want something?”

Big doe eyes meet hers before darting around fearfully.

“It’s okay,” Darcy says soothingly. “You can tell me what you need. What’s your name?”

Once they discovered HYDRA only addressed them by the numbers they were assigned, the team has been making an effort to ask the kids for their names. It helps to remind them they’re in a safe space. Although, some of the kids don’t remember their names anymore, which never fails to agitate them and that is never a good thing.

“Bobby,” He says timidly.

“Hi Bobby, I’m Darcy.” She smiles and then asks. “Can I get you anything, Bobby?”

“I’m cold,” He whispers eventually, still looking scared.

“Oh okay,” She smiles brightly. “I’ll go get you a blanket.”

She gets him an electric blanket and helps tuck it around his little body. He’s asleep within minutes.

It has been an eventful flight, getting the kids to settle down into the hospital beds and let the doctors take a look at their injuries. Some of them only settled down when they were told they could choose a partner to share a bed with. It helped people like Lisa who had all but claimed Collin for herself and screamed bloody murder the first time he tried to put her on a bed.

Thankfully, Collin, who is very good at handling difficult children had explained to her that others needed his help and that she could choose someone to stay with until he returned. Lisa had immediately latched on to Laura and some of the other kids had insisted on sharing a bed too.

Darcy, who is out of her depths when it comes to dealing with kids. She had left Collin, Daisy and Angel with them while she joined Bruce who was tending to the adults. The world leaders didn’t put up any fuss. They are mostly just happy to be safe and away from HYDRA’s clutches, when Bruce was done checking out their injuries, most of them dozed off.

“Hey,” Darcy nudges Bruce as she flops down onto the seat beside him in the medical station where he, Lincoln and the other medics are setup. He has a pair of headphones on, but whatever he’s listening to is doing very little to calm him, if the green hue around his neck is anything to go by. “You okay?”

His response is to shrink in on himself.

“Is mean and green unhappy he didn’t get to smash?” She asks him.
“It’s not that.” Bruce sighs. “I’m relieved the mission didn’t call for a code green, but seeing the evidence of how wicked some people are is just hard for the other guy to deal with. He knows I have to do my part here, but he’s still upset.”

“You should count that as progress,” Collin says, as he and Daisy join them. “Despite Hulk’s feelings at the treatment our charges endured with HYDRA, he is willing to let you have control because he knows how important your contribution is.”

They all nod in agreement.

“I’ve always known that Hulk is intelligent.” Darcy thinks if Bruce would stop treating the Hulk like a mindless monster, they would both get along great.

“Have you considered letting Hulk out in a situation that doesn’t require violence?” Daisy asks. “It may help him to learn how to express himself in a situation that doesn’t require smashing.”

From the look on Bruce’s face, not only has he never thought about it, he’s doing it now and he thinks it’s a horrible idea.

“That is a brilliant idea,” Collin puts in before Bruce can refute it. “You can start by letting him out in a controlled environment, a place reinforced to withstand his strength. That way, you won’t have to worry about him hurting anyone.”

“And we can get him books and movies,” Darcy adds excitedly. “Something to teach him about human interaction.”

They’re all pitching ideas to Bruce on how to help Hulk when Lincoln and Angel join them.

“Everything okay out there?” Bruce asks, he looks happy for the distraction.

“Yeah,” Lincoln says. “Everyone is settled, except for Warren. His wings hurt, and all our efforts to help him are proving to be futile.”

That jolts them back to the present and reminds everyone where they are. Collin and Bruce go off immediately to check on Warren, while Darcy and the others go to check on the other kids to see who might need something.

The jet lands in the Compound with a gentle glide. The ramp opens and a shimmering teenage girl steps inside the jet before any of them can take a step outside. She’s wearing a pale pink dress with blue floral designs and a pair of sneakers that Darcy wants badly. Her strawberry curls are held to the side. On closer inspection, Darcy can see that the girl is transparent.

Darcy and the rest of the gang stare speechlessly at her, except for Collin who looks like he has a hanger in his mouth.

“Welcome back,” The girl greets with FRIDAY’s voice.

“FRIDAY?!” Darcy and Daisy exclaim at the same time. “How?”

“That would be telling,” FRIDAY winks with a mischievous smile. “You’ll receive a map and directions on how to navigate the compound, the red zone is off limits. Please keep off.” She says, switching to business mode. She is exactly how Darcy always imagined FRIDAY to be. Darcy wonders if JARVIS is also getting a visual form. “The X-Men are on ground to offer you assistance. Bruce and Lincoln, Dr Hank McCoy will assist you in providing medical care to our guests. If you need any help, please don’t hesitate to ask me.”
The X-Men step inside the jet after FRIDAY’s speech, to begin moving their charges inside the building, while Charles Xavier and Pepper observe from the side-lines. The first thing that caught Darcy’s eyes, however, is the bondage gear they are dressed in and she has to swallow the many comments that come to mind. It’s not until she moves past their attire, that she notices the feline man. Catman or is it ManCat?

Darcy isn’t the only one who has noticed ManCat. Even Lisa, who has returned to clutching Collin like a barnacle is staring with a shy smile. She even offers a timid ‘hi’ at him, which is impressive, as it’s the first words she has said to anyone who isn’t Collin or Laura. Darcy figures it must be nice to meet others like herself. Having green skin and red eyes must have kept her isolated growing up.

ManCat steps forward with a smile that shows off a pair of fangs. He stretches a hand which Collin accepts in a handshake. “Hi,” He greets. “I’m Dr Hank McCoy, or Beast, if you’d like. We’re the X-Men.”

He goes on to introduce the rest of his teammates and Collin does the same. After the introduction, they return to their tasks of transporting their charges inside the building. Darcy doesn’t miss the way the world leaders stare at the X-Men, with awe and fascination. Some of them show a bit of fear and agitation, but they don’t do or say anything that can be considered specie-sist.

Moving their guests and getting them situated in the very impressive infirmary is relatively easy. Dr Cho has taken Ellis to the lab that was set up for her in the compound while Bruce, Lincoln and Dr McCoy are working with the other medics to provide medical attention to the others. Xavier is talking with some of the kids that don’t need immediate medical attention.

Darcy is attending to a lady from the British parliament when the commotion starts.

“Scott?!” She hears Alex, one of the X-Men exclaim. When Darcy looks over, he’s staring wide-eyed at the young boy with the blindfold. His outstretched hand is trembling. The boy, Scott, looks like he’s debating ripping the blindfold off.

“Alex?” He responds with a whisper, feeling around to help himself out of the bed and towards Alex.

“Do you know him?” Darcy asks Alex.

“He’s my baby brother!” Alex announces to the entire room, his eyes filled with unshed tears. That jolts him from the spot he’s been planted in, because he rushes to Scott who has finally gotten off the bed. “What happened?” He asks, but one of the medics is already there, ushering Scott onto the bed again - to keep him off his sprained ankle.

Alex joins him on the bed, and they continue their conversation in low voices, even though Darcy still picks up a few phrases as Scott gives the account of his kidnapping and their parents’ murder to his elder brother.

The incident puts the atmosphere in the infirmary in a sombre mood, especially the world leaders. It seems like the reunion between the Summer brothers has reminded them that these kids have actual families they may never see again because of HYDRA. Most of the kids just watch with poorly disguised jealousy as Alex cuddles his little brother.

“Will Scott live with his brother now that they’ve found each other?” Laura asks her, when Darcy is serving her and Lisa lunch.

“If he wants to, he is free to go with his brother as soon as he is healthy enough,” Darcy explains
carefully. She doesn’t miss the way both girls have been eyeing the pair since their reunion. “We want to find all of your families and return you to them, as soon as you’re fine.”

Darcy sees the wheels turning in the little girl’s brain, as she takes a moment to think about that. “What if your dad didn’t know he was your father and you’ve only just met?” Laura whispers secretly. “Can I go live with him?”

That shocks Darcy into a stupor. “Where did you meet your dad?”

“He was with Iron Man and them,” She shrugs, feigning nonchalance. “He is exactly like the stories I was told.”

Darcy feels out of her dept. She can’t promise this little girl a dad, so she goes with the first thing she can think of. “If he’s with Iron Man, then you can talk to Iron Man about it when he arrives. I’m sure he’ll know what to do.”

“What about—” Lisa starts, but cuts herself off.

“It’s okay, you can tell me anything,” Darcy smiles kindly at her. Lisa eyes her distrustfully, but with an encouraging nod from Laura, she begins again.

“What about someone that had a mom before, but doesn’t anymore?” Lisa asks unsurely, eyes drifting towards Collin where he’s speaking with Pepper. “Will she be allowed to have another one?”

Darcy is consumed with the twin urge to laugh and cry. Laugh, because Tony may be having a granddaughter, but she wants to cry because of all the hurt this poor child has been through in her short life.

“Sweetheart, we are your family. All of us here. We are already your sisters, brothers, mothers and fathers. We will be your family for as long as you want us to be, okay?” She waits until Lisa nods before continuing. “You don’t have to worry about being alone or having no one because you have all of us.”

The girls look happy with her answer, and Darcy breathes a sigh of relief. Kids asks the hardest questions but it looks like she handled that well.

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“You okay?” Rhodey asks him just as the jet takes off.

Tony lets out a little sigh and takes a quick glance around the jet, his eyes linger on the glass caskets containing the Winter Soldiers for a moment. He notices that despite the recent team up, there is still a clear line of demarcation between the SHIELD agents and the mutants.

“The wicked witch of the west and her crazy twin weren’t here,” He says, turning to Rhodey.

“Maybe they saw the light?” Rhodey asks. Tony snorts. Judging by his expression, Rhodey himself, doesn’t believe that to be the case. “Do you think we missed them?” He asks, “I doubt there’s anyway we could have missed them if they knew I was around. Witchy would never have given up her chance for vengeance.”
“Yeah, but you weren’t exactly alone.” Rhodey points out. “They may have seen that they were outnumbered and made a strategic retreat.”

Tony snorts derisively. “Those two aren’t smart enough to make a strategic retreat.”

“It’s possible they didn’t survive the experiments this time,” Rhodey suggests, then raises a questioning brow. “What are you thinking?”

“HYDRA may not have the sceptre this time, but the DNA samples they must have gotten from the kids is enough to make the ultimate soldier. I’m worried there may be a branch of HYDRA out there still carrying out human experimentation.”

“Don’t worry Tones, if they’re out there, we’ll flush them out.” Rhodey throws his arm around Tony’s shoulder and pulls him into his side. “Hey, you can even ask JARVIS to keep an eye out for them.”

Tony lets his best friend’s words comfort him as he leans into his warmth. He doubts the twins would have ever left the shores of Sokovia, but with the depth of HYDRA’s operation revealed, they wouldn’t have a place to hide for long.

He looks up when the volume on the television picks up, attracting the attention of everyone in the jet. For the first time since they boarded, mutants and SHIELD agents are standing together, as the screen that’s been monitoring the news announces breaking news.

A picture of Rhodey in War Machine is showing on the screen, as the news anchor reports on the rescue that the team has just finished. There is a short footage of the evac team, transporting the kids and world leaders to the jet, as well as another clip of footage showing the team, consisting of mutants, baselines and the Legion, raiding the HYDRA base.

After that, more footage of Air Force officers and Seal Team’s rounding up the imposters in America. As the news progresses, reports on the situation in other countries come in as well.

All in all, Tony can see that FRIDAY has followed his directive on how the news should be presented and the reports make it clear that Colonel Rhodes, the pilot of War Machine is the leader of the mission. The success of the mission will be credited largely to him, and by the end of the day, everyone will know to thank Colonel Rhodes for foiling HYDRA’s latest scheme. His baby girl has learned to play the media like a fiddle and guide them in exactly how to present the news to the public.

Tony knows that some of his choices affected Rhodey’s career in his other timeline, especially after he joined the Avengers. The civil war was just the height of it, and he is determined to never let that repeat itself. He will see to it that his best friend rises as high as he wants to in his career.

As the anchors on the screen discuss HYDRA’s plans and motives, the SHIELD agents in the jet discuss the Winter Soldiers. Apparently, one of the female super-soldiers was a top SHIELD agent before she was snagged by HYDRA.

Tony remembers how Rogers was so ready to end the Winter Core in Siberia, without a care about their history or the thought that they could be someone else’s Bucky. As far as Rogers was concerned, only his Bucky could have been acting under duress.

Tony’s attention is on the screen as the camera focuses on Magneto, as the mutant rips apart what used to be a lab just by waving his hands, and Wolverine takes apart another section of the building with his claws.
It also features Shock and Quake helping some of the kids and world leaders into the jet, before switching to interviews. Both with the Sokovian authorities and the NATO representatives on sight.

Through it all, War Machine is a constant feature, whether they're talking about him or he's working. Once or twice, Rhodey is seen out of his armor, like when he gives it up so Ellis can be moved without aggravating his injuries further.


“Cut the bullshit, Tones.” Rhodey says dryly. “I've been War Machine for two years now. You don't think I recognize FRIDAY’s handiwork when I see it?”

Tony has to give him that. “It's not like she's reporting anything that isn't true,” He points out. “You led the mission and look at what a success it is.”

“Well, when you put it like that...” Rhodey grins.

“Good,” Tony breathes, throwing an arm around his shoulder. “Next stop, the White House.”

“Tony no.” It's a testament to how well his Platypus knows him when he doesn't pause to find out if Tony was joking.

“Oh come on!” He whines. “Don't tell me you haven't thought about it. President James Rhodes.” Rhodey fights down a grin and Tony presses on. “You know you'll be a great president. Not to mention, if a body snatcher took you, all it would take is one look at you and I'd know.”

“I think their first instruction would be to stay away from you.” Rhodey counters.

“That will be an even bigger tell.”

“Still, I'm not running for president.” Rhodey tells him. “You're a handful already. I might lose what's left of my sanity if I have to rule America.”

“But think of all the good you can do, Platypus.” Tony cajoles. “You can make this country great, as well as safe for the enhanced community. Your career in the force has already shown you can be trusted by the baselines. And you've seen first hand the prejudices the enhanced community deal with daily. Nobody is better for the office than you.”

Rhodey - and every occupant of the jet - listens on as Tony speaks, before he sighs. “That's not for another four years, Tones. How about we put a pin in this discussion?”

Tony knows he's already won, so he let's it drop for now. FRIDAY and JARVIS will be happy to help him brainstorm ideas for Rhodey's campaign. Nothing wrong with starting early.

They are almost in the US airspace when Tony asks JARVIS about their guests.

“Sir,” JARVIS’ voice comes through his and Rhodey’s private frequency, after the update. “Ms Potts has ordered that the jet come straight to the compound and not make any stops.”

“What about Hill's spy kids still in the jet?” Tony asks.

“She insists that it's safer to bring them along.”

Rhodey exchanges a look of apprehension with Tony before speaking up. “JARVIS what's going on?”
Sharon follows two steps behind Stark and Rhodes as they exit the jet and step into the facility serving as a temporary accommodation for the HYDRA victims they rescued. Some Legionnaires have already gone ahead of them, carrying the cryo chambers containing the Winter Soldiers inside even before the rest of the team step out of the jet.

Darkness has covered the night sky but not a single soul is showing any trace of fatigue, not since Stark informed them about the recent development in the Fridge. They don't know the extent of the damage, but every SHIELD agent on the jet knows about the contents of the Fridge. They know it's nothing good if even a fraction of it has been lost.

The truth about what exactly SHIELD had been keeping stored in the Fridge only served to create further gap between the mutants and SHIELD agents. Whatever progress that was made during the mission was lost the moment Stark informed them. Sharon and her colleagues have been doing well to stay out of their way, just in case someone loses control of their powers and accidentally throws someone out of the jet.

They're greeted at the entrance by an excitable, teenage girl. At second glance, Sharon notes that the girl is a holographic projection with a shimmering golden hue around her.

Most of the tension drains out of Stark the moment he spots her.

"Welcome back, Boss!" She greets him, before saying the same to Colonel Rhodes.

"Damn FRI," Rhodes responds. "You look beautiful."

"There's never been a more perfect being than you, baby girl." Stark tells her.

It may be Sharon's imagination, but FRIDAY’s projection blushes.

They fall into step behind her as she leads them through the building and into a conference room where most of the team that partook in the mission, as well as some new faces, were already waiting. But Stark only has eyes for his son.

Stark makes a beeline for his son, taking Colin's face in his arms as he presses a kiss to his forehead and runs a hand through his hair. Sharon half expects the boy to grumble and pull back from the PDA, just as any young boy in his shoes would do, but he leans into his dad's ministrations.

"How are you?" Stark asks. "Are you alright?"

"That question should be directed at you, dad." Collin says.

Sharon distracts herself by observing the others in the room. From the way the others are looking at anywhere else, she's not the only one who feels like an intruder in the Starks’ moment. She could never imagine Tony Stark as a father before today, but seeing him with his son, she's can't see him as anything but a father.

"So," Stark says, after the introductions have been done. "What do we know about the incident at the
“According to Hill, she didn’t receive any word about it until it was too late,” Ms Potts says. “An agent sent an SOS but by the time SHIELD’s response team arrived, everyone left behind was dead and the place was in ruins. JARVIS was able to pull some footage of what happened from the security cameras.”

On cue, the table in the middle of the room lights up and a video feed showing a conversation between Ebony Maw and Alexander Pierce comes on.

They watched Maw dispose of the agents that had come in to interrogate him, before making his way out of the cell.

“I can give you what you want.” Pierce calls out to Maw when he sees the alien walk by. That stops Maw in his tracks.

“Pray tell,” Sharon can hear the boredom in Maw's tone. “What is that?”

“You want Tony Stark,” Pierce tells him confidently. “I can deliver him to you.”

“You believe there is anything you are capable of that I’m not?” Maw asks, still feigning boredom.

“There is a long line of people ready to do whatever it takes to have Stark where they want him. You’re welcome to join the queue.” Pierce says seriously. He strolls over to the desk chair in the little cell and lowers himself onto it. “Stark men have a way of burrowing themselves into the system till they can’t be removed without it falling apart, don’t they?” Pierce’s laugh lacks humour.

“His father before him was the same. He would poke his nose in everything, always searching for answers, no matter how busy we kept him.

“Fortunately, Junior was there to step into his father’s shoes when we decided to cut our losses. Until Stane got greedy and ignored all advice to leave the boy alone.” Pierce sighs. “Unfortunately, as similar as they are, Anthony has proven to be a different person from Howard. Out of the belly of that betrayal, was born our nemesis and every attempt to contain it has proven futile.” Then he turns his hard gaze at Maw. “I will give you Stark if you want him, but for a price.”

“You speak of how your failure spans two generations of Stark men, yet you expect me to believe you can get me Stark?” Maw sneers.

“I know Stark better than anyone that will work with you,” Pierce tells him boldly. “I know this earth better than you do and I have more information on Stark than you’ll find anywhere. But feel free to try your luck elsewhere.”

At that, Maw smiles and gestures to the guard to unlock the cell. Once it’s open, he steps through the threshold and towards Pierce. “I’m listening.”

After that, Maw helps Pierce out of his own cage and together, they raid the cells and storage sites in the facility.

“This is going to be a nightmare,” Stark says as soon as the feed cuts off.

“Tony,” Potts says. She sounds as shaken as Sharon feels. Everyone in the room is echoing Potts despite not being bold enough to voice it.

Tony Stark’s life is in danger.
Word at SHIELD after the invasion is that Ebony Maw had come to Earth for Tony Stark. Conquering it is just an afterthought. And now, Sharon and everyone at SHIELD had helped Maw acquire the army he needs.

Until today, Sharon never questioned the orders of her superiors at SHIELD. On more than one occasion, she has pulled the trigger to take out an enhanced or taken them to be imprisoned at the Fridge. She believed in her family's legacy and was proud to continue serving her country. Not thinking twice about the individuals whose civil rights she was violating, for simply having an enhancements some of them didn't ask for, or because someone decided they couldn't be controlled.

Watching the security cam feed, Sharon knows she is responsible for every angry prisoner that chooses to be a part of Maw and Pierce's crusade. If Maw succeeds in kidnapping Stark, it will be her fault.

“I warned them about keeping Maw on Earth,” Stark says, clearly agitated. “Any idea where Maw and his party went after they left?”

“They boarded a quinjet from the Fridge,” A distinctively mature feminine voice answers. Sharon takes a moment to wonder how many AIs Stark has. “And disappeared shortly after. Not even my sensors can locate then.”

“Maw must be shielding them.” Rhodes mutters. “VERONICA, can you tell if they're still on Earth? Do you have a lock on Maw's signature?”

“I do, but there's been nothing so far.” VERONICA replies.

“I have located the trackers on some of the prisoners that weren't part of Maw's team,” JARVIS' voice adds. “But there's been nothing from the others.”

“Maw and Pierce must be taking advantage of the alien techs they stole from the Fridge,” May interjects and everyone agrees.

“We should focus on bringing in the ones JARVIS already found before this whole things gets out of hand.” Stark says.

“You would hunt them down like animals for being different?” Magneto, who until that moment has been alternating between giving Xavier longing and determined looks, asks distastefully. “How does that make you different from SHIELD?”

Sharon and most of her colleagues flinch at the accusation, but Stark's team looks angry.

“Okay, you need to back off,” Rhodes warns, his voice as dark as his temper. “Whatever hang up you have against non-mutants has no place here.”

“No, honey bear. Let's hear what the pot has to say,” Stark's steps in.

“Would you rather these escaped prisoners be left alone to cause chaos that will come back to haunt you?” Collin asks unkindly.

“No offense,” Raven starts. “But we're concerned about SHIELD’s history repeating itself. Most of these people were imprisoned because SHIELD considered them a threat for being enhanced.”

“Say what you want about SHIELD and their tactics,” Morse starts, ignoring the heated glares most of the mutants sent her way. “But most of these guys didn't get in SHIELD’s radar because they lost control of their powers. Most were hurting others with their abilities.”
Thanks to SHIELD’s underhanded methods and Xavier's machinations, the average man has no idea mutants exist. Their introduction to the world will paint them as victims of circumstances and discrimination.

 Unless they give the world a reason to fear them.

 “And even if they were innocent, their time in confinement hasn't been kind to them,” Xavier says, speaking up for the first time and echoing her thoughts. “We can't vouch that they are healthy enough to be part of the larger society. They need help with reintegrating themselves with civilians because left to their own devices, it's only a matter of time before they hurt someone.”

 “Finally! Someone that doesn't make me want to bang my head against a wall!” Stark says, referring to Xavier. “Pepper informed me this is your area of specialty?”

 Xavier smiles. “The X-Men can take them handle the situation.”

 “As long as you can be discreet,” Stark says, looking relieved. “JARVIS will give you the coordinates to their locations.”

 Two days later, HYDRA's latest plot is still hot news and everyone is still in Stark's facility. Sharon still hasn't figured out the location, or which facility it is exactly.

 Sharon, along with Kara Palamas and Darcy Lewis have been signed up to attend to the parents coming in to enquire for their missing kids. May and Morse joined the X-Men on the retrieval mission.

 “So where do you plan to go?” Palamas asks, slumping on the chair next to hers. Her gaze are fixed on the FBI agents in the room.

 Sharon shrugs. “I'm staying with Stark if the rumors are true.”

 Word in the building is that Stark, Rhodes and Xavier have been in a meeting with the recently rescued world leaders. Between SHIELD’s dirty laundry being aired to the world and Maw's escape, the UN is cleaning house and the future of SHIELD has been placed in Stark's hands.

 Her answer earns her an appraising look from Palamas. “Really? You struck me as the type that would have joined the FBI or even CIA. You know, make a name for yourself after the disaster that SHIELD turned out to be.”

 In any other circumstance, she would be right. She's not the only one determined to stay with Stark's team though. Not with the way May and Morse jumped at the chance to work with the X-Men, and how Palamas has practically glued herself to Rhode's side. Everyone is going out of their way to contribute to the team and prove their worth.

 What Sharon isn't sure about is if Palamas is angling for a spot on Stark's team or the Air Force.

 At least no one is accusing her of trying to resurrect the Carter-Stark dynamics that SHIELD was founded on.

 “Maybe if I hadn't been one of people who created the mess Stark is stuck cleaning up.” Sharon tells her.

 “Hmm,” Palamas says sadly, “It does put things in perspective, doesn't it? Seeing these kids like this. I can't count how many times I took the shot to put down an enhanced, or took them to be imprisoned at the Raft or Fridge without so much as a how do you do. And why? Because someone
decided they were too dangerous. If Stark hadn't stepped in, these kids would have suffered the same fate if they'd managed to escape HYDRA sometime in the future. If they're lucky, they would have been used as weapons for SHIELD.”

Sharon shudders at the implications of Kara's words. She is exactly right. “Well, in our defense, we were to never question orders.”

“Yeah?” Kara asks daringly. “Tell that to the ones who will never know what really happened to their loved ones because SHIELD stepped in. Tell that to the parents who will be calling soon so we can tell them that their kids died at HYDRA's hands.” She takes a deep breath before continuing. “Try explaining that to these kids who have suffered through such horror because SHIELD was the perfect host for HYDRA.”

Despite the many kids that were saved, they found a lab in the HYDRA base, containing corpses of dead kids who were still being experimented on, even in death. There were pods of embryos that were on various stages of development. Thankfully, they weren't viable.

It had been a gory sight.

Today, when the phone numbers are announced for those with missing kids to call, it won't all be happy reunions.

“So you see now, why I've chosen to plant myself here?” She asks Kara, recalling the words of her aunt.
It’s been a long couple of weeks for Tony and the team.

The days following the rescue of the kids and world leaders have been packed with meetings and interviews. Today was particularly stressful, and it’s not just because he had testified along with Rhodey before the UN.

No.

Most of the difficult questions—like why they didn’t inform anyone about their findings—had been directed at Rhodey, as team leader. Tony had only had to recount his experience with SHIELD and how he came about the intel on HYDRA’s activities. It was nothing like his senate hearing in the years following his coming out as Iron Man. Most of the questions were polite enough. During the whole thing, Tony occupied himself by thinking of all the political capital this has earned him.

It’s a far cry from anything he ever did with the Avengers during his last timeline, with Tony doing all the work while taking the blame for any and all things that went bad and Rogers depending on luck, while taking the credit for their success.

He is relieved that he doesn’t have to deal with Rogers this time around, even though people on social media have been asking about the whereabouts of the self-proclaimed Captain America and why he wasn’t part of the line up that partook in the mission.

Nobody has asked Tony anything directly and he is happy to pretend the guy doesn’t exist. FRIDAY gave him the footage of what transpired in the jet when Rhodey put them in timeout. He doesn’t plan to leak the footage, though. No need to feed the guy more publicity. Tony is fine with letting him live in peace, as long as nobody is worshiping at his altar.

As for his team, Tony knows Romanov has gone dark and Barton has returned home to his family. Hopefully, the archer has more sense to stay with them.

Tony joins Rhodey and Collin along with Pepper where they’re waiting for him. There’s a mob of reporters when they step outside of the UN building, and for once, they’re not there to see him.

After the initial shock of HYDRA’s grand plan had worn off, someone had noticed Collin’s
presence in the background and gone digging. Needless to say, the news of Tony Stark, father of a teenage son is just as interesting as HYDRA’s plan for world domination. Tony honestly thought Collin’s existence would get lost in the resulting chaos of HYDRA’s destruction, but he’s not surprised the world wants to catch a glimpse of the teenager that Tony Stark raised. Especially given the timeline of his conception.

Collin for his part pretends not to notice the cameras flashing or the questions being thrown at them as they make their way to the car.

Tony collapses into the car seat, and closes his eyes for a moment. He hasn’t had more than a couple of hours of sleep since this whole thing started and he feels bone tired and his day is only just beginning.

“You should take the rest of the day off, dad.” Collin suggests. “You’ve hardly stopped moving in the last few days.”

Tony cracks an eye open to look at him. Every occupant of the car is watching him. Even Happy, from the rearview mirror.

“I’m fine,” He waves their concern off.

“You need to take care of yourself, Tones.” Rhodey puts in. “You won’t do anyone any good by burning out.”

“I can’t burn out. Extremis, remember?”

“You mean the same thing that turned people into firebreathers and then caused them to explode?” Pepper asked.

Okay, he walked into that one but he can’t keep putting this off. So, he redirects the attention in the car.

“So, what’s the plan, Platypus?” Tony asks. “How’s that promotion coming?”

Rhodey’s unimpressed look lets Tony know his best friend is on to him but he doesn’t let that deter him. “You know that’s not how it works.”

“But have you decided where you want to go?” Pepper asks. “Secretary of Defence sounds like a good deal. Although, Chief of Staff isn’t so bad, either.”

Following the mission, not only is Tony’s best friend on the track for a promotion, he’s also been offered the position of Secretary of Defence or Chief of Staff, by the presidency, and the chance to revamp SHIELD and head it.

The new SHIELD is to focus on dealing with alien threats, like Ebony Maw, who’s still in the wind and whatever other alien Earth may be facing too. It will also be the division to handle rogue enhanced, train any enhanced who need help with their abilities, as well as become a liaison between baselines and any enhanced who decide to join a force, like the police or military.

Tony doesn’t want to influence Rhodey’s decision, but he knows which appointment he wants his best friend to take.

Rhodey scowls and leans back in his seat. “If I wanted to spend the rest of my career behind a desk and doing paperwork, maybe.”
Pepper rolls her eyes. “What is it with you guys running away from paperwork?”

“The moment I accept that position, my days will be filled with meetings with the suits and no time in the only suit I want.”

“The country is in disarray, Honey bear,” Tony cajoles happily. “Everyone is scared and you’re the one they trust right now. Won’t you serve your country?”

“I’ve been serving my country since I was twenty,” Rhodey glares at him. “Your face is up there with mine but I don’t see you accepting a public office. You do know, it’s only a matter of time before I’m replaced as War Machine if I accept the position, right? You’re lucky no one is hounding you for more armors.”

“As if anyone could replace you,” This time it’s Tony’s turn to roll his eyes. “You’re War Machine, Platypus, but it wasn’t the armor that made you that.” He gets a bashful smile from Rhodey.

“Plus,” Collin adds. “No one will risk dad’s wrath by suggesting you hand the suit over to a new pilot. Not after everything.”

“That too.” Tony beams. “So, does that mean you’re taking the UN up on their offer to head SWORD?”

“SWORD?” Collin asks with a raised brow.

“Sentient World Observation and Response Division.” Tony explains. “SHIELD needs rebranding with the new regime.”

“Seems like you’ve given this a lot of thought.” Rhodey mused.

Tony shrugs innocently. “This will give you a seat on the accords table. Between you, Charles and that lawyer, whose boyfriend beats up criminals, we can make sure there isn’t a power imbalance between enhanced and baselines.”

“And,” Collin puts in. “No fear of spending the rest of your career behind a desk,”

Rhodey didn’t say anything until they arrived at his stop. “You know, you don’t have to try and convince me,” He tells them. “I already decided to take the position.”

Tony’s indignant voice follows him out of the car.

After that, the gang all separated. Pepper and Happy went to her office to deal with… whatever CEOs did these days. Collin went to the compound, where the kids were being prepared to be moved to Xavier’s school, while Tony flew to the tower in the suit.

Walking into Cho’s lab at the tower only reminds Tony how tired he really is, but he can’t put this off anymore. He’s been avoiding dealing with the Winter Soldiers for over a week now and he just wants to get it over with.

Bruce, Lincoln and Helen are already there when he arrives. According to the video feed that has everyone’s attention in the room, the winter soldiers have been roused from their sleep and placed inside the reinforced cells in the tower.

Two of them are searching for weaknesses in their cells, while another one is adopting Rogers’ logic and trying punch her way out of the starknium enforced door. Tony can see why HYDRA thought they were very aggressive. Barnes looks wary, slumped in a corner. Tony isn’t sure if he’s putting on
a show or if he just doesn’t care for whatever fate has in store for him. Amador on the other hand, has taken a rigid pose, staring blankly at the door.

“How are we doing this?” Tony asks.

“Well,” Bruce starts, adjusting his glasses. A tell of how uncomfortable he is with whatever he is about to tell them. “I’ve been going through HYDRA’s notes on the supersoldiers. HYDRA has certainly come a long way since creating the first Winter Soldier. While Barnes can be activated using a series of seemingly random words in Russian language, the others are activated by a particular soundwave, travelling at a distinct frequency. Playing the sound within hearing distance activates the soldiers within them and makes them compliant.”

“Which one do you think made them change the method?” Tony asks. “Swift activation or asset security?”

Bruce shrugs. “It could be both but we’re not sure right now. It’s best to proceed with caution.”

“For now, we talk to them and see what memories of their old life is there.” Helen suggests.

Bruce doesn’t have any interest in going near them—says they agitate the other guy. There’s no way Tony is sending Lincoln to talk to them, so it leaves Tony and Helen and they decide to start with the two non-willing participants first.

Tony calls dibs on Amador before Helen can get any word in. It has nothing to do with not wanting to engage Barnes for as long as he can avoid it.

From her SHIELD file, she was one of SHIELD’s best solo agents, up there with the Calvary. Her specialty was stealing or retrieving just about anything. If you wanted anything found, stolen or retrieved, she was the woman for the job. It’s what put her on HYDRA’s radar and she’s been doing the same for HYDRA since she was inducted into the Winter Soldier program.

“Hello,” Tony greets, coming to a stop in front of her cell.

She gave no sign of acknowledgment, even though Tony knows the speakers in her cell is working just fine.

“I’m Tony Stark. As you can tell, you’re no longer with HYDRA. We raided the base you were being kept at a couple of weeks ago and brought you here.” The tension in her shoulders drains away as he continues to speak. “Can you tell me your name?”

This time, she opens her mouth and shuts it. Repeats the action a few more times before she finally says anything. “I don’t remember.”

Tony isn’t surprised. It’s the outcome he expected and he came prepared.

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If asked, Tony doesn’t think he’ll be able to recount how he moved from the office to the large windows at the other side of the building. He stares at the children out in the courtyard, most of them in groups, playing together. Lisa, who they discovered is a water-based mutant, and a couple of others are further down, in the pool as Havoc and Storm watch over them.
Tony watches Laura extract herself from her playmates and run up to Wolverine as he joins them outside.

Watching them play like this hurts something deep inside Tony, bringing to mind the meeting he had just finished with Xavier and Wolverine. Despite all they’ve suffered in this lifetime, Tony cannot honestly say which is worse, being hunted down like wild animals or being experimented on.

All because Tony was protecting a bunch of entitled adult babies, who could care less about what laws they broke or who they hurt.

Just as they suspected, Logan had been sent back in time during Thanos’ attack, not just to save the future of the human race, but also to save the mutants but unlike Tony, he arrived just in time for Maw’s invasion. He was sent specifically to recruit Tony to the side of the mutants and away from the Avengers, to give them a chance at a better future.

“You shouldn’t put yourself down like that,” Xavier admonishes Tony, wheeling to his side. Tony is so lost in thought he didn’t hear the professor coming and now he can’t leave without coming off as rude. Tony has been wary of the guy since he discovered what his abilities are. “Instead of focusing on what likely won’t happen, how about you look at the good you have done? All these people are safe because of you, and not just because someone told you to save them. Choose to see the good.”

Something akin to dread settles in his stomach at Charles’ words. It’s like Maximoff all over again. “Okay that, that can’t happen,” Tony warns him. “I know sometimes you have no control over what you hear, being a telepath and all, but that doesn’t give you the right to go snooping in my head. My thoughts, as well as anybody’s in this place, are private. You have no more right to them than the average Joe down the street unless I decide to share it.”

“Dr Stark, I’m sorry, but I wasn’t invading your privacy by reading your mind,” Xavier apologizes. “Not only because I wouldn’t do that unless I absolutely had to, but because your thoughts aren’t as clear or loud as any other person’s in this building. They’re like a television with bad satellite signal. As though your mind is shielded and quite frankly, it would take too much effort to make sense of them.”

“Oh.” Tony feels bashful for his outburst, and also silently relieved at the revelation. He makes a mental note to do some tests. Must be another addition from extremis or maybe it was Loki. Weaving a protective spell on someone without their knowledge is exactly the kind of thing he would do.

Xavier’s eyes find his, and he has a soft, knowing smile on his face. “But I didn’t have to read your mind to know what you’re thinking. It is written all over your face. It’s clear you’re sorry about what became of the mutants in the past and you blame yourself for it, but you shouldn’t focus on that anymore.”

“How can you say that? Your people have been hunted and killed because of me. Because I kept protecting the Avengers from the consequences of their actions. Every time they did something wrong, you took the fall for it. To the point one of you had to travel back in time to change it.”

“You travelled back too and you have been changing things for the better since. I have been watching you since you came out as Iron Man, and your work has been exemplary. You didn’t wait for Logan to arrive with his message to do something about it, and even in your past life, you always wanted to do what was right. Give yourself some credit. Take what lesson there is to learn there and move on.”

Tony doesn’t feel like he deserves any credit. An entire race of people paid for his negligence. It’s Stane all over again, with Tony sitting in his lofty tower, protecting the ones who don’t deserve it
while innocent lives are destroyed because of him.

Every time he protected Rogers and his merry band of loyal followers from the consequences of their actions, the enhanced community paid for it. The world knew that Rogers was enhanced but who in their right mind would go after Captain America, who has the backing of SI and Iron Man?

So people like Ross went for the next best option. If they couldn't catch the big fish, they made sure all the smaller fish didn't make it. With Rogers continually spitting in the face of any authority or accountability, and Tony protecting him at every turn, the mutants were considered dangerous and volatile. Whatever crimes the Avengers committed, the enhanced community paid the price.

The worst part of it is that Tony hadn't even been aware of this development. It had been kept so tightly under wraps.

It makes him doubly grateful to JARVIS for taking matters into his own hands and giving Tony a second chance to fix his mistakes.

Later that night, he manages to finish up early and turns into bed early. He hasn’t gotten a goodnight’s sleep since Maw’s escape but everything that has been revealed to him today has left him so tired, he’s out like a light before he even lands on the bed. Only, a short couple of hours later, he feels a presence in his bedroom. They don’t feel hostile, alarms are not blaring and neither JARVIS or FRIDAY is trying to contact him, so he relaxes into the bed and forces his eyes open.

The first thing he sees are the blue irises of his son.

Collin is sitting on a chair he dragged next to the bed, peering closely at Tony’s face but he shifts backwards when Tony opens his eyes. Wordlessly, he makes room on the bed and lifts the blanket.

Collin accepts the silent invitation to join his dad on the bed.

“Why are you playing guardian angel, instead of sleeping in your own bed?” Tony asks, when they’re both cuddled together.

“Sleep does not come to me as easily as it does others.” Collin says into Tony’s chest in a muffled voice.

“There are literally a hundred things you could have done with your time,” Tony points out.

“Yes, and one of them is making sure you’re alright.” At that, Tony pulls back to get a good look at Collin’s face and the boy sighs. “I know I could have checked the security feed, but with Ebony Maw on the loose, I feel better having you in my presence, where I know you’re safe.”

Tony’s response is to cuddle him closer.

“So, the kids took it well when it was announced that they are being moved to a boarding school.” Collin murmurs.

“Yeah, I don’t know why I expected a few tantrums. I guess we’ve earned their trusts.” Tony says. “Having the X-Men here helped too.”

“Not to mention, the compound will be ready just in time for the students of Summer program. Are you ready to meet Harley and Peter again for the first time?” Collin’s voice has a teasing lilt to it.

“I’m actually looking forward to a first meeting that doesn’t include a fight of some kind.”
“Maw is still out there, so don’t jinx it.” Collin warns. There is silence for a moment before Collin speaks up again. “There is something I did about a year ago, and I realise I should have told you about it.”

Tony smiles dopily for a moment. He remembers the weeks and month after the Ultron debacle, when he would forget for a moment that Vision wasn’t JARVIS. Then Vision would do or say something that would send Tony crashing back to reality. Collin's choice of words today, despite he not having been created a year ago, only serves to remind Tony that Collin and JARVIS are the same being.

Then he realizes what Collin just said.

“A year ago?” Tony asks, trying to think of what JARVIS could have done that he should have known. He has allowed JARVIS more agency since they travelled back, but the AI hasn’t done much with it.

“I went to Sokovia in the drone I built and killed the Maximoff’s. It’s why there hasn’t been a trace of them anywhere.”

Tony pauses, conflicting emotions warring within him but he collects himself quickly and presses a kiss to Collin’s hair. “How do you feel about your actions?”

“I know it is wrong to take matters into one’s hands and decide the fate of another living being without the proper authority to do so, especially in a non-combative situation. And after the events of the last few weeks, I have come to understand that there may have been a way to help them deal with their anger properly. They were exploited and taken advantage of by HYDRA. I’m sorry I didn’t give them the chance to choose a better path for themselves.”

Interesting. “But...?”

“But, I’m not sorry for my actions. They had already signed up for HYDRA and were planning your downfall when I found them. After the disaster they caused in the past, I wasn’t going to give them the opportunity to carry out their plans again. So, I did what needed to be done. Your safety and wellbeing are the most important things in the world to me, and I will never be sorry for seeing to it.”

Tony feels so overwhelmed, he doesn’t even have words to convey how he feels. He’s always had Rhodey, Happy and later, Pepper in his corner. He knows they love him and will always have his back but this is on a whole new level.

On one hand, he's relieved to not have to deal with the Maximoff’s, but on the other hand, he wishes his son didn't have to take that burden onto himself.

“Jarvis,” He says after a few long seconds of silence. “You’re not just a user interface anymore, you know that, right? You’re a real person now. Your life doesn’t have to revolve around mine. Your joy and happiness shouldn’t revolve around a single person. You can be anything you choose to be and I want you to take advantage of the endless possibilities available to you. It’s why I always say you should go out and experience new things.”

“Who says my life revolves around a single person? It revolves around my world but it’s not my fault you’re it.” He doesn’t even sound like he could be joking. “But don’t worry, I promise not to become Ultron. I know how much the earth means to you and I will help you keep it safe. The same will not apply to threats to your well-being.”

“Jarvis.” Tony warns. Now Tony understands what Pepper was always complaining about in his
past life. “You don't have to protect me, I can look out for myself. You're my son, I should be the one protecting you, not the other way around. Besides, I have FRIDAY, VERONICA and your other half to do that. Why don't you focus on building your own life?”

“Oh, come on, dad.” Collin whines. “I turned back the hands of time. I literally interrupted the space-time continuum. How is taking out a few threats to your well-being worse than that?”

“You were saving the world then.”

“Actually, I wasn't. I only did it to make you happy. I knew that the thought of half the universe paying for what you perceived as your failure would destroy you, so I did something about it.”

“Baby, all lives are important and taking one should never be an easy choice. I don't want you living with a burden like that, okay?” Tony presses another kiss to his forehead and squeezes him tighter. “So please, promise me that you won't go killing anyone because they pose a threat to me. At least, not without talking to me about it first.”

Collin sighs. “How about Ebony Maw or hostile aliens.”

“As long as you have backup and let me know what you're doing.”

“Fair.”

“By backup I don't mean FRIDAY or your AI half.”

“Okay, dad. I promise to apply the rules of engagement before I engage.”

“Same rules apply.” Then he adds after a moment of thought. “And the same goes for you, JARVIS. Don't think you can use the excuse that I was talking to Collin as a loophole.”

He thinks he can hear the feigned innocence in JARVIS' voice when he replies. “I would not dream of it, Sir.”

Chapter End Notes

I feel like I should add a warning for JARVIS/Collin, so here it is for anyone who needs it: Tony is JARVIS' moral compass. Collin may be a real boy now, but he's still JARVIS.

**Question:** Please who I go to with an Iron Husbands prompt? I have one that's been burning a hole in my brain and I'm not sure I can do it myself.
Tony watches Amador return to her cell after their session. She has stopped trying to fight her way to freedom whenever the cell doors open and has started co-operating with them when she realized she's hurting herself. Plus, Tony’s team only meant to help her.

Thanks to the upgrades Tony had made on BARF, and the data they retrieved from HYDRA on how the Winter Soldier personalities were created, they were making great progress in the treatment of the super soldiers. Amador now remembers her name and is slowly remembering some of the missions she ran for HYDRA.

He decides to check in on Barnes before he leaves for the day. Helen and Bruce have been handling Barnes’ treatment. Despite Tony’s understanding that the sergeant had no say in the things HYDRA did to him or put him through, and he’s made peace with his parents’ murder, Tony still doesn’t trust himself to keep a rational mind when faced with Barnes.

The security feed in his cell shows the man, as usual, is sitting slumped on his bed, turning the pages of the book in his hand too fast to convince Tony he’s actually reading it. Although Tony knows that it’s just a show for the camera he is no doubt aware of, not with the way he assesses everything and everyone he sees. Searching for possible weaknesses.

They have all been provided with books to keep them company in between treatment sessions. No electronics, though. He isn’t interested in knowing what a group of elite assassins can do with a tablet.

Tony has had to get used to the sight of pieces of papers in his tower.

He is the picture of boredom right now, but he sits up the moment Tony comes into view, body going tense immediately.

“Hello, Sergeant Barnes,” Tony greets.

“Howard?” Barnes whispers.

Ah. “Sorry, bud. I’m Tony Stark, Howard’s son.” Tony says. “I see your memories are improving.”

“Right. Sorry,” He breathes, but he’s still tense. “It’s just—you look so much like him.”

This is the first time he has been close to Barnes since Siberia. It feels like a decade ago when he found out the Winter Soldier killed his parents and despite all the growth he’s experienced since then, Tony was worried about how their first meeting would go. Standing here now before Barnes, Tony just feels sad. Not for himself or his parents, but for Barnes. For what he’s been put through.

“Having his gene will do that,” Tony nods. Barnes opens his mouth but closes it before a word gets out. “So, how are you feeling? Dr Cho says you’re making progress.”
“She also says I have you to thank for it.”

“I guess that’s one way of looking at it,” Tony says. “I came here to inform you that we’re bringing in someone else to help with your treatment. I want to inform you and get your consent because he’s a telepath and your sessions with him are going to be more invasive than with BARF.” He takes a few minutes to explain to him what his sessions with Xavier will be like.

“Do you trust him?” Barnes asks after several moments of contemplation. The question comes as a surprise and Tony is thrown for a moment.

“Do you trust me?” Tony counters. “We’re talking about letting someone root around in your mind.”

Barnes shrugs. “You can’t be any worse than HYDRA, and if you were, it wouldn’t be anything less than I deserve.”

“Shit!” Tony exclaims. “Jesus—I don’t. No. Do you hear me? Lose that attitude, okay? Nobody deserves to go through what you have and it’s certainly not your fault.”

“You only say that because you have no idea about the things I’ve done.”

“SI used to be an arms manufacturing company, Barnes. I know what weapons are used for.”

“Then you should know this weapon killed your parents.”

A feather hitting the ground would have made a deafening sound in the ensuing silence. Tony knows what Barnes is trying to do. He’s familiar with this brand of self-loathing and in any other situation he would have gone for a different approach to diffuse the situation. But with all that Barnes has been through, excessive kindness is more likely to send him running for the hills.

“I have a son,” Tony starts. “He’s 18. A little older than I was when my parents died and someone decided it was a good idea to hide the truth of their death from me and blame it on my father instead. I spent the next twenty years hating my father for something that wasn’t his fault.

“Are you aware I took my kid on the raid? To the place where kids like him were being tortured and experimented on, to face his grand parents’ murderers. I knew about you before we set off for Sokovia and I still brought you back to my facility to get you help.” Then he pauses and looks at a shocked Barnes in the eyes. “Do you want me to kill you, Sergeant Barnes? Are you trying to rile me up so I can hurt you? Because I can do that. I can channel the twenty years of anger I felt at my dad towards you and hurt you in ways you haven’t even imagined.

“But I won’t. I’m not going to do that because you deserve a second chance, just like everybody else. You deserve to go home from the war and decide who you want to be. It doesn’t matter what HYDRA or the war made you, what matters is who you can be and I’m willing to help you discover who that is.”

He doesn’t give Barnes a chance to respond before he walks away.

Tony would have loved to take a little walk before flying out to Xavier’s school, but FRIDAY informed him that Rogers has been patrolling the perimeter of the tower. He has filled his super soldier quota for the day, so he decides to join Happy for the ride.

The meeting with Xavier is short. It is mainly a discussion about future recruits and SWORD. Since Tony has made it very clear he has no desire to fund a superhero team, Rhodey has been given free reign to choose whatever SHIELD facility he needs as a base for SWORD, as well as a good fraction of SHIELD’s budget.
Xavier’s school has been made a division of SWORD, but everyone thinks it’s best to separate the students from the recruits. That way, the school gets funding from the government but the identity of the students are protected.

When he comes out of his meeting with Xavier, he finds that Happy has arrived and is talking with Lisa, who greets him shyly before getting inside the car.

Lisa and Tony have not spent any significant amount of time alone in each other’s company. Almost all their interactions have included other people. With her spending most of her week in school and Tony busy with work, driving back to New York together for Collin’s birthday seems like a good bonding experience.

“So, how are you finding the school?” Tony asks, settling for a safe topic.

“’S fine.” Lisa mumbles with a shrug. He has no idea how to deal with little girls, but he guesses she can’t be that different from Harley and Peter.

“Do you like your classes?” A nod. “And how are your friends? Made any new ones?”

That seems to open her up. She launches into a story about how Laura punched a guy that was mean to her and another boy with similar eye colour, because he had ’devil eyes.

Lisa’s story continues until they arrive at the Italian restaurant where they’re having lunch, which turns out to be a hit. Tony had reserved the entire restaurant because he didn’t want anyone staring at Lisa and making her uncomfortable during their meal. They talk about Tony’s mom and his Italian heritage, which makes Lisa even happier and open up about her own mother and upbringing.

From what Tony understands, Lisa never knew her father or any of her extended family, was the only child of her mother’s and they lived in a small coast town.

They’ve just arrived at the New York city limits when Tony receives a call to deal with a situation that has risen at the office.

“Hey, is it okay if we stop by to deal with an emergency at the office? It will only be a little while.” Tony asks Lisa. He doesn’t want to be one of those parents who care more about work than their child.

“You want to take me to where you work?” Lisa asks, surprised.

“I just need to talk to a few people. I promise not to make us late.”

“I’ve never been to a real office before,” She confides. “Warren says yours is like the ones they show in the movies, except you make a lot of phones and computers in it.”

At that, Tony gives her a beaming smile. “That’s right. In fact, the emergency is because of one of the new lines of phones we’re working on. Maybe you can help us pick a name for it.”

She’s so delighted at Tony’s suggestion that she can barely sit still anymore.

All eyes are on them when they arrive at the R&D floor but Tony doesn’t pay them any mind. “Everyone, meet my daughter, Lisa.” He announces to them, removing them from their stupor.

Tony hands Lisa a phone to play with and leaves her with Happy while he attends to the issue at hand. He returns to find her surrounded by half the R&D department. Lisa is too busy learning how to play candy crush on an intern’s phone to notice. She has a glass of juice beside her and a plate of
cookies, Tony has no idea where those came from. He didn’t think his employees kept cookies laying around for any kid that wandered in.

“So, what do you think?” He asks her, taking a seat across from her.

“It doesn’t look like a phone at all,” Lisa complains, picking up the discarded phone. “It looks like half a pen. How is anyone supposed to use it?”

“It was created by Collin using nanites. Collin can create a 5D virtual reality that one can interact with, so, he replicated it in the phone,” As he explains, he demonstrates it by lighting the phone up. “Our control group will be the students of the Summer Program, to see how well it is received by people who can appreciate the tech.”

Lisa is quiet for a few moments longer this time, then, she tilts her head to the side and asks, “What is nanite and 5D?”

For the first time, he realises how different Lisa is from every child he has ever been close to. He spends the next hour teaching her about nanites and 5D, before it devolves into a debate about the name. In the end, Tony calls the phone ‘El’, for Lisa.

This delights his daughter to no end.

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Everyone is gathered around the pool and Lisa is twitching impatiently beside Tony as they wait for Collin to arrive.

The area around the pool is decorated in birthday paraphernalia and there is a three-step birthday cake on a hover-board, hovering above the pool. Darcy and Daisy went all out with the planning, and even Tony is impressed with the result.

It’s not a surprise party. It’s almost impossible to surprise someone connected to the security cams in the building, so the moment Collin comes into view, everyone yells: “Happy birthday!”

The broad grin Collin is wearing melts something within Tony. He loves to see his baby express his happiness.

Dum-E wheels forward and places an identical party hat to the one everyone present is wearing on his head, which Collin accepts happily.

They spend the next few hours dancing and playing different pool games, with Tony, Collin, Pepper and Lisa dominating most of them because Lisa keeps cheating by manipulating the water in their favour.

Everyone except Bruce, who despite being in the water, looks like he wants to run and hide but Darcy and Daisy wouldn’t let him. He’s halfway through turning down Tony’s invitation to join in the next round of pool volley ball when Hulk makes an appearance. His transformation shocks everyone into silence.

Tony is already backtracking, thinking he’d made a mistake to pressure Bruce when a high-pitched voice yells from behind him.
“You’re like me!” Lisa screams. Before anyone can stop her, she launches herself into Hulk’s arms. Tony didn’t know nine-year olds could run that fast. Hulk, for his part catches her easily in one hand and lifts her to his face so he can peer at her. Everyone holds their breath as he pokes her with one large finger, causing Lisa to break out in giggles.

“Daddy,” She calls breathlessly. “He’s like me.” it’s the first time she ever called him dad.

The reaction pleases Hulk as he smiles widely and turns to look at Tony. “Tin man has puny Hulk.”

“Yeah, buddy. Her name is Lisa.”

“Do you want to play with us?” Lisa asks, drawing Hulk’s attention back to herself. “You can join our team, we’re winning.”

“That’s ‘cause you keep snatching the ball!” Darcy argues. “Hulk, come join our team.”

Hulk is so taken with Lisa, he ignores all other arguments why he shouldn’t team up with Lisa.

“You having fun?” Tony asks Collin a couple of hours later, when everyone has exhausted themselves. They’re stuffing their faces with cake and champagne.

“On my way here,” Collin tells him. “I realized what a tame celebration my eighteenth birthday party is, compared to yours.”

“What happened at Tony’s eighteenth birthday party?” Daisy asks, interest piqued.

From behind him, Rhodey groans. “Oh God, no.”

“That’s the summary of it.” Tony points at him.

Tony’s eighteenth birthday is one of his wildest. With the pain of losing his parents still quite fresh in his heart, and him just coming into his inheritance and adulthood almost at the same time, Tony had gone all out.

He had organized an orgy party, fit for a roman emperor. Booze and drugs flowing like it was from a fountain. Tony had been lost in a sex haze until Rhodey showed up and convinced him to split. That night, they had left the hotel suite and taken the jet to Vegas. He doesn’t remember much of what happened next, but the next day he woke up in a police cell in Vegas with Rhodey.

Looking back, he almost cannot believe he lived through it. He was so sure he would die of an overdose. At times, he thinks that may have been his plan all along.

Standing here, in the midst of his friends, family and kids, Tony is pleased with what a different turn his life has taken or how different Collin’s requirements for a party is. He’d only asked that it is an outdoor party because ‘he has spent most of his life inside’.

Tony couldn’t be prouder of his son, even if he tried.

“Now I really want to know,” Lincoln says and Tony notes that they have quite the audience.

“It’s not something for PG ears and this is Collin’s day.” Then he looks around. “Is it time for presents yet?”

That prompts everyone to start the gift presentation. Collin had set a twenty-dollar limit on present. Honestly, Tony doesn’t know how his son expects anyone to be okay with that. Thankfully, Tony can make things, so he doesn’t bother. His gift to Collin is a remodel of one of his old classic cars.
He didn't buy anything for it, so it doesn't count.

Lisa gives him a jar of goldfish. Rhodey’s present is a couple T-shirts. One from MIT and one from the Air Force. Happy gives him a scrap book and Pepper gives him a drawing of the entire family: Tony, Lisa, FRIDAY and Collin as well as the ‘bots. Tony is curious about who she paid twenty dollars to commission it.

FRIDAY gives him a playlist of current songs she thinks he may enjoy. Dum-E, U and Butterfingers collectively present Collin with a circuit board.

Everyone admits they gave the best present.

Later that night, when everyone has retired to their rooms and the manor is quiet, JARVIS informs Tony that Pepper is out alone in the gardens.

“Sleepless night?” He asks, joining her on the bench. He has no idea what kind of flowers are planted in the garden, but they smell very nice.

“Just thinking,” She smiles at him. “Today was great. We don’t have a lot of days where we can be carefree.”

“We don’t, do we?” Tony says wistfully. “Even Hulk came out to play.”

Pepper laughs. “I can’t wait for Bruce to see the footage tomorrow. He’s going to be so surprised.”

“Maybe then he’ll stop treating the Hulk as a threat.”

The silence lingers for a moment and then they both speak up at the same time.

“Tony—” “Pep—”

“You go first—” “What were—”

They stare at each other for a moment and laugh again. Pepper’s girlish giggles is something he’s missed so much. Then she gestures for him to start.

Tony takes a deep breath and takes her hand in his. He’s so nervous, he feels like a middle school girl who’s crush made eye contact with her for the first time. “I’ve been waiting for the right time to do this, but I realized that may never happen. I wanted to get my life in order, show you I was worthy of your time and affection. Then I wanted to wait until we weren’t so busy or under attack, but I may have to wait forever for that to happen. There’s never going to be a right time.

“It’s literally a lifetime ago, that I fought my way out of that cave in Afghanistan and realized I love you. I know, it hasn’t always been easy between us. We’ve had to go through some tough times, and fought through issues, some of which you aren’t even aware of.” He steels himself and looks her in the eyes. “But if there is one thing I have learned through all of this, coming back in time and getting a second chance at life, it’s that it’s always you, Ms Potts.

“Yes the one I want to see first thing when I wake up, and not just because you’re waking me up to sign some documents. You’re the last person I want to see before I go to bed, in fact, I want to go to bed early because I know you’ll be there. I want to have your babies, and be a stay at home dad while you work hard to bring home the bacon.” He takes in a shaky breath, slides off the chair to the ground on one knee. “You, Pepper Potts are the one I want to spend the rest of my life with, however many lifetimes that is. Will you do me the honour of marrying me?”
“Tony,” Pepper breathes, blinking through her tears. “Most people usually try dating before the proposal comes along.”

“Oh come on. Are you going to tell me we haven’t been dating since we met? What are you going to find out about me that you don’t already know?”

That’s the right thing to say because the next thing he knows, Pepper is tackling him to the ground, even as she seals their mouths together in a kiss.

When they come up for air a few minutes later, Tony looks at her. “Is that a yes?”

“We’ve been dating for over twelve years, if that’s not a yes I don’t know what is. Now where is my ring?”

“Right,” They both rise to their feet. When Tony searches his pockets, the ring he is sure he had on him is nowhere to be found. He’s about to inform Pepper of this when a voice startles him.

“Here,” Collin gives him the ring. He has Lisa perched on his shoulder. “You left it on your work bench.”

“Where did you even come from?” He asks but before his son can answer him. Dum-E has wheeled up to them and is handing another ring to Pepper, much to her delight.

“Looks like the gang came out to witness our engagement,” Pepper laughs. “Thank you, Dum-E.” Pepper pats his arm, accepting the ring. Dum-E beeps happily.

“You didn't think we'd let you get engaged without us, did you?” FRIDAY asks.

“We came to watch you flail around as you tried to propose to Pepper.” His best friend says.

Just then, Happy arrives with the rest of the team, pulling out the ring Tony gave him four years ago. He stops short when he finds both Pepper and Tony each holding a ring.

“I've been carrying this with me since 2008 and you proposed without it?” Happy grouses.

“2008?” Pepper asks.

“I told you.” Tony shrugs.

“Wait, hold up.” Darcy says, stepping closer. “You’ve known since 2008 that you want to marry Pepper and even got the ring but you still waited four years?”

“Tony talks big talk,” Rhodey teases. “But when it comes time to act, he’s a chicken.”

“I wanted to do it right.” Tony defends.

“You still haven’t done it right.” Daisy points out.

“Yes daddy,” Lisa agrees from her place on Colin's shoulder. “You haven’t gone down on one knee to present her the ring like they do in the movies.” Everyone nods agreeably.

“Okay,” Tony accepts the other ring from Happy. Pepper is already wearing the one Dum-E handed her, but that’s okay. He presents her with both rings. “Pepper Potts, will you marry me?”

“Yes, Tony Stark,” She grins, as she allows Tony slip both rings in her fingers. “I will marry you.”
Everyone whoops and cheers. In the distance, Tony can hear the sound of fireworks going off, but he’s too busy kissing his fiancé to investigate.

It’s the happiest day of Tony’s life.

End Notes

I was wondering what happens after Vision dies when the mind stone is removed. So, this is a what if situation where Vision - the mind stone = JARVIS

My first fic ever. Feel free to request anything in this AU. I might make it a series, so suggestions are welcome.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!