**Never Too Late**

by **benthe2nd**

**Summary**

It took Tony a shield to the chest (again), being left heavily injured without any way home in an abandoned Hydra Bunker in fuck-knows-where, Siberia, and some pain-and-cold induced introspection to finally come into the best conclusion:

You want to do something right? Do it your fucking self.

A.K.A. How the entirety of Infinity War can be avoided if Tony would just get his head on the game instead of moping over some stray teammates.
Full disclaimer that this is my first ever fanfiction work. Also full disclaimer that English is not my first language. Also full disclaimer that, while I will try my hardest to remain unsalty, I am still very very salty about "sometimes my teammate tells me things". Why? Because I totally agreed on Steve on that one when I first watched AoU. Tony should've informed someone else about building something as big as a global defense system. I thought Steve was a little... condescending to Tony about the whole thing. Should he be mad? yes, it's justifiable for him to get pissy a little. But seriously? Tony didn't tell you about his own personal scientific project. Yes, it would've affect the whole world when it was finished, but in essence it was still very much his intellectual property. YOU didn't tell Tony about the murder of his parents, something that you KNOW he very much deserves to know. Hypocrite, much?

ANYWAY. Avengers and all the characters, names, etc. does in no way belong to me. Please do point out any grammatical mistakes or any inconsistencies in the narrative. I'm still new to this, and I don't have anyone to beta or proof read it for me, so I have to do it myself.

Enjoy!
A Frosty Introspection

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Abandoned Hydra bunker, Siberia, Russia)

Sub-zero temperature is not beneficial for a human body.

_Huh. Who would’ve thought?_ Tony mused bitterly

The painful, biting cold was just starting to turn into an alarmingly numb sensation when his line of thought finally, _finally_, snapped back from outraged _why?!_ to resigned _oh well_. And to be completely honest, Tony wasn’t quite sure if that was supposed to be comforting or disturbing. Well, let it not be said that Tony wasn’t a practical man; if he’s got to dissociate himself from his raged and betrayed “ego” (_to borrow_Nata… - no, Romanov’s words_) to survive, then so be it.

It’s not his first ride in the build-or-die kind of rodeo, and Tony wasn’t delusional enough to think that it would be his last. So he started with the basic of all basic: checking the inventory. Power is down, main reactor torn apart, the badassium (_which is still a better name than starkium, by the way_) core might still be salvageable, but the arc reactor as a whole is definitely out for the count for now. And F.R.I.D.A.Y…. She had been disconnected, hopefully she’s got enough sense to alert… who?

Tony cursed silently. Rhodey (_oh god, Rhodey…_) was most probably still out cold in the hospital (broken spine, might never walk again… no. NOT going there. Yet.) And the Spiderling (_Jesus, did he really just took a fetus to a battle?! Without telling his unusually attractive hot aunt?! What is wrong with him?!_) was a no go. No way in hell he’s putting that kid into any kind of danger on purpose anymore. Na - Romanov is so out of the question. Tony’d sooner stab himself with a pen than trust her with his anything for the third time. The King (_king? Prince? What even is his legal title?) was out of the radar. His motive was all revenge anyway, Tony doubted the young monarch would care enough to check on him. Then that would leave… Vision. God, Vis… Tony hoped his… creation? Child? Grandchild? Nephew? Was okay. He was so _young_, definitely too young to experience heartbreak. For a being of pure logic and intelligence, he sure was very forgiving… maybe _too_ forgiving. Must have got that one from Tony, then. Well, that’s got to change now.

Oh well, so he couldn’t rely on anyone on his team… not exactly news there. Tony should have realized that since the Mandarin episode. Nobody but Rhodey (_oh god… Rhodey…) was there for him. Not after he was declared dead. Not after he got out of the surgery room. Hell, even _Bruce_ fell asleep when he tried to reach out. Was it so hard to believe that Tony was just trying to vent to
someone that maybe, just maybe was his friend? Okay, so him laying on a sofa with Bruce on another couch across him was a little bit therapy-like. But come on… Was Tony that low on Bruce’s opinion that he thought Tony was using him as a substitute therapist?

*Fine, Tony thought bitterly. I’ll just do everything my goddamn self then.*

If you want to do anything right, do it yourself, right?

Tony might have gone without waiting for the council’s approval, but that didn’t mean he was going against the Accord. The emergency clause wasn’t perfect, but it was sufficient to justify his excursion to god-knows-where, Siberia; especially since he’s got enough sense to at least notify the Russian Aerospace Force before breaking the sound barrier above the snowy landscape. Maybe the Russian Air Force will notice that he got in but never got out? Tony could only hope.

Meanwhile though… Tony have to check his… numerous injuries.

Massive headache: concussion, multiple concussion even, judging from how bad his head was hurting.

Numbness on his extremities: frostbite… not good. He’s got to move fast before he lost his ability to make something, anything to help him get out of the Hydra bunker.

Shortness of breath, chest pain: broken sternum (or a fake one at least) for sure. A few ribs too... Tony prayed his lung wouldn’t get punctured when he got up. That would suck.

His whole body was aching, but Tony had made mark I under a much worse condition.

So Tony picked himself up from the broken, dead armor and limped his way into the cryo chamber where he witnessed the biggest lie of his life. No time to spare for sentiment and wistfulness, Tony began to dismantle the ice boxes, trying so hard to ignore the dead winter soldiers. The parts he cannibalized from the chamber was enough to make an emergency reactor housing and case for his chest-plate and fix his jets and repulsors enough for an emergency trans-continental flight. It helps that he managed to pick the lock of the bunker’s tool-shed, so he wasn’t limited to the small tool-box he always carried around in his person.

Dragging the dead armor pieces to the (slightly) warmer tool-shed was a work of miracle, one that left tony dangerously winded and shaking from exhaustion. Broken ribs was *not* fun. By the time he managed to drag the armor and all the necessary parts to the tool-shed Tony was tired, aching, and his fingers was starting to turn into an alarmingly blue-ish shade. Tony closed the shed’s door, trying (a little vainly but, still,) to preserve what little heat he could.

Tony started to twist and fiddle and pound some metal scrap into a semblance of a plate, his tired mind wandering while he let his hands do the disturbingly familiar routine. Without any mentally
stimulating upgrade to install, Tony instead focused on things and people he needed to take care of once he’s out of the bunker.

_Rhody_. His best friend, oldest friend, in fact. The one who took care of him ever since he was just a scrappy, tiny kid at MIT, getting bullied daily because he was just too smart, too young, too loud, for people to stand. Rhody who, despite Tony’s best attempt at self-destructing, despite the numerous disappointment he inflicted to Rhody, despite all the time Rhody snapped and get mad at him for his childishness, his irresponsible antics, always came back to take care of him. Always got his back, always proud to be Tony’s best friend, his brother.

He’s going to be okay. Tony swore to himself. _If he’s not then I’ll MAKE him okay. I’ll fix my Rhody - I’ll fix my brother._

_Pepper_. The love of his life. The one woman he couldn’t live without. Too bad he realized too late just how much she meant to him. Too bad he was just so bad at emotion and feelings to be a good man for her. To show just how much he loved her. Too bad he just couldn’t keep his promise to get better for her, to take care of himself first, to _grow up_ and be an adult for her.

No, Tony interrupted his own morbid thought. _I’ll come back to her. I’ll apologize, I’ll beg, I’ll grovel if I have to. I am not losing her. Never again._

_Happy_. Everyone knew that man was just as emotionally constipated as Tony was. Happy, with his dry humor, his carefully maintained aloofness to hide all the embarrassing affection he felt towards his friends. And Tony just played along, didn’t he? So glad to finally find someone he can keep his public mask on while still being genuine friends. So glad to finally find a friend who show affection the easiest the same way as him: constant ribbing and friendly quip.

_Have I ever actually said how glad I am to have him as a friend? _Tony mused, well, I’ll just tell him that when I met him after this; might make him fluster and blush a bit, too._

_Vision_. The sometimes painful remainder of JARVIS. What was left of his… self-made friend? When he made JARVIS he used the human Jarvis’ imprint, voice set, mannerism; Jarvis’ virtual DNA if you will… and as much as his family paid for Jarvis’ services, Jarvis was Tony’s closest approximation of a dad. Not a father that would be what Howard was (…_I blamed him for mom’s death for, what? Two decades? He was a major dick, but he deserved so much better… FUCK Rogers._) Vision was made of what was left of JARVIS after Ultron tore him apart - does that make him JARVIS’… son? Human Jarvis’ grandchild? Tony’s nephew?

_God, I’ve distanced myself so much from him all his existence._ Tony internally grimaced. _Looks_
like absentee uncle is a thing now... I hope I still have a chance to fix that.

That spider-man kid... Spider-kid? Underoos? Peter... Peter Parker, that’s his name. Tony stopped working for a second to cringe at his own idiocy. He brought a 15 years-old hyperactive fanboy of his into an all out battle with his ex-teammate. He, unwittingly, employed the service of a child soldier. All while lying to the kid’s legal guardian. Granted, Tony wasn’t expecting “team cap” to not hold their proverbial and literal punches at all like that. Tony was under the impression that Rogers would at least hold back a little. But really, Tony should have known better.... Would Rogers really realistically hold back? After Bucharest? After Germany? The red-white-and-blue tinted glass was lifted all too late it seems....

I’ll make it right. Tony promised, I’ll explain myself to his aunt, I’ll help him explain to her about his powers, I’ll keep him from making the same mistakes I made with that palladium poisoning. He’s going to be better than me, he’s going to make his own mistakes because he’s sure as hell going to avoid mine. Bonus point if I can get the kid to meet Harley. They’re going to hit it off, I don’t know why I don’t think of that sooner.

And Harley.... 3 years of knowing him have been good for him. Tony could honestly say now that his relationship with the spunky kid from Rose Hill, Tennessee was... enjoyable. The kid’s smart, mouthy, brave (a little on the impulsive side, but who am I to judge), what’s not to love, really. Maybe Harley was the reason why Peter caught Tony’s attention so much from the moment they met. Both of them were little balls of genius brains trapped in bodies too small, too young for anyone to take seriously. Both courageous to the point of borderline idiocy. Both seemed to genuinely like him. Which, of course, returned sentiment.

But while Peter was shy and prone to stammering and babbling (kind of like me pre-M.I.T., now that I think about it), Harley was never afraid of ‘saying it like it is, Tony.’ The boy seemed to suffer from a curious lack of brain-mouth filter. Not that Tony could fault him, being a genius did that to people sometimes: ‘brain too fast. Mouth cannot compute, error, error.’ He would know, of course, he’s a genius who went through puberty too, once. Hell, he still did that sometimes, and he’s inching towards 50 now.

I wonder if Harley watched that airport mess already. Jeez, I am the worst role model in the world, I swear. Kid better not go all wild west on that guy, what’s-his-name, E.J.? I’m so hacking his phone after this. ‘Not illegal if I don’t steal his social security number’, right, Harley? Your words, not mine.

The thoughts of the people he still hold dear made his fingers twist this very stubborn wiring with renewed determination. Yet, with every hopeful plans for his loved ones, new worries about the obstacles back home kept on popping out into his psyche like mushrooms after a storm.
Ross. The U.S. Secretary of State was upgrading from the power-hungry general that hounded his... teammate into the dangerously unstable law-maker that was just begging to be knocked down a few pegs. Alright, Tony could understand “team cap” (team crap?)’s apprehension about having to work with ex-general Thunderbolt. But did that excuse their giant 'FUCK YOU' for the people of 117 sovereign nations who were simply demanding their due rights of protection against their unreliable, self-declared protectors? No. The Accords might not be perfect, and the Council might contain some bad apple like Thaddeus Ross, but the will of the people of democratic, sovereign nations of the earth was clear: accountability, integrity, and dependability. And if “team crap” couldn’t be bothered to listen to the demands of the people they said they wish to protect because they couldn’t get over Ross’ cooties…. Well, Tony didn’t need them to depose Ross after all…. If Ross was under the delusion that Tony visited his ex-teammates just for Rogers' location then “Mr. Secretary” was in for a surprise. Why would Ross let the world’s most dangerous hacker in to the secret supermax prison where he, presumably, detained team crap’s personnel without following the proper protocols, where he, undoubtedly, hide almost (if not all) the evidence to all his illegal experimentation on human (and super-human) subjects, past present and future, was beyond Tony. Even during Tony’s flight to Siberia he still received the snoop from the multiple cutting-edge bugs he implanted during his visit. By the time he got back home, Tony would have all the evidence in the world to bury Mr. Secretary Ross in his own prison for decades, at the very least.

Still, Ross has proven himself to be one slippery bastard. One without reservation to resort to violence at that. Tony would need to be in top shape, not only legally, but also physically to confront him. Unfortunately with all the injuries he suffered and was still suffering (Tony’s fingers were positively blue now), Tony was afraid that to attain that level of physical well-being, he’s got to resort to a… very specific method.

Damnit, Pepper would blow a gasket (or an armrest) when she heard about this.... But looking at his frost-bitten fingers, he was positive that without extremis, there WOULD be a permanent damage. And Tony refused to sacrifice his ability to create for the backstabbers that called themselves heroes.

Tony tried to fill his brain with all sort of ideas and equations for his version of extremis, hoping in vain that it would block his mind from the inevitable side effect of such tampering on human genetic.

How it would turn him too closely into the very being that had left him in this situation in the first place.

* * * * *

Several hours later, Tony, body shaking and swaying and shivering from exhaustion and cold, finished his repair on the armor. Nobody came, which meant either nobody was moving to help
him (deliberately or otherwise) or they were still searching for him (unlikely, since he hadn’t moved from his last known location.)

Well, there’s no use in guessing and fearing the worst, so Tony simply donned his patched armor, flipped on his mask and watched with cold-numbed anxiety as the HUD flickered to life and F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s (slightly panicked) voice crackled in his ear.

“. . . OSS?! Boss do you copy?!”

“Hey baby girl.” Tony answered tiredly.

“Scanning for immediate injuries.” F.R.I.D.A.Y. ignored Tony’s greeting in favor of checking her boss’ level of physical injury. Tony simply winced at the report he undoubtedly would receive soon.

“Boss, I detected several injuries with almost 100% chance of having a permanent effects. Including the frostbite on your extremities and compromised lungs from your broken ribs. You also suffer from a severe head trauma and concussion, rapidly worsening hypothermia and hypoglycemia, I also detected that your heart is in an even weaker condition than it was before. As per protocol ASCLEPIUS, I have supplied both Dr. Wu and Dr. Cho with the details of your injuries. I also took the liberty to inform both Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes about your position. Both are currently on video call to discuss about the best way to retrieve you. Shall I update them with your medical situation?”

At this Tony, weak and exhausted and in pain, simply answered, “sure, baby girl. Tell them I’m going extreme.”

F.R.I.D.A.Y. answered after a brief pause. “Are you sure about that boss… maybe you should wait for Dr. Wu and Dr. Cho’s Medical opinion on the matter?”

“No, F.R.I.D.A.Y., I’ve been thinking about it. Tell Dr. Wu and Dr. Cho to prepare the extremis version 4 and the cradle.”

“... Done boss. Incoming call from both Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes.”

“Not now, F.R.I.D.A.Y.. Ignore it, tell them I’m sorry and get the Spiderling home.”
“Boss…”

“I have a splitting headache, my innards are in scramble, and my fingers are falling off, literally. Not now.”

“Very well. Call ignored, message received.”

“F.R.I.D.A.Y, do you still have the footage of what happened here?” Tony asked after a beat of hesitation.

“I have the recording taken from the suit’s camera, boss. Should I take the footage from the bunker’s security camera?”

“Yes, copy the recording and delete the original. Same with that… tape. Save everything in my safe server.”

“Done boss. Should we head home now? Your injuries are most severe.” F.R.I.D.A.Y’s voice was hesitant and unsure. Under other circumstances, Tony would be overjoyed over this display of authentic emotion shown by his latest A.I…. but needs must.

“sure baby girl. Daddy’s real tired. Take me home.”

“Gladly boss.”

The Iron Man armor began to take flight, taking his pilot away back to home.

“And F.R.I.D.A.Y?” Tony asked, voice barely a whisper.

“Yes boss.”

“Thank you.”
“For you boss, always.”

Tony swore he cried a little before he lost consciousness.

(St. Elisabeth-Krankenhaus, Leipzig, Germany)

Colonel James Rupert Rhodes was one of the U.S. Air Force’s best and brightest.

People seemed to easily forget the latter in favor of his, simply put, stellar career as an Air Force Pilot. A soldier, a fighter. They tended to look and him and Tony together and quickly assign Rhodey with the “brawn” part of “brain and brawn”, overlooking the fact that Rhodey was an MIT Aeronautics Engineering graduate. A literal rocket scientist. And hell if Tony hadn’t used that punchline multiple times before.

With that thought, Rhodey woke up with a start.

Alone.

Why was he alone?

Where was Tony?

Frantically, Rhodey reached for the bell button near his bed, only to suddenly notice the lack of feeling in his legs. He stilled. Rhodey remembered everything, of course… he remembered his fall… remembered his best friend cried for him.

Tony.

With renewed fervor he reached for the red button and punched it. A few minutes later, a nurse hurried inside to explain to Rhodey in a what he already knew and had already began to accept.
Broken spine. Permanent paralysis.

But the nurse didn’t say anything about the one thing, or rather, person he really wanted to know about.

So he asked, “where is he?” And wow, did his voice just cracked. Although whether it was from disuse or from his utter, primal fear for his best friend, his little brother, Rhodey didn’t know. “Where is he?” Rhodey tried again, clearer, although still just a touch better than a rasp.

The nurse, evidently new, judging from his youth and the sudden spike of German accent in his stuttered response when faced with Rhodey’s unconventional question, tried again, “Colonel Rhodes… sir, your spine -”

“I’m an Air Force pilot, god damn it! I know the risk! Where’s my best friend?! Is he okay?!“ Rhodey exploded.

He knew even before he lost consciousness when he hit the ground that something was going to be broken permanently.

He knew from the height and the velocity of his fall, from the angle at which the War Machine armor careened towards the earth, from the way his heavy armor prevented him from righting his body into a proper free-falling position, from the utter panic and terror in his best friend’s voice, screaming for him as said best friend raced downward in a futile chase to catch him.

In the few seconds between his call for help and his crash landing, Rhodey had made peace with his imminent permanent injury… in whichever form it would take. He’s practical like that.

What he didn’t get was the fact that he was alone in the hospital room. That didn’t make any sense. He didn’t expect his family from Philly to come and visit him on the drop of a hat… after all it was Rhodey himself that had made sure that every time he get into the hospital he was the one who would tell his family about the severity of his injury, baring death and 24 hours unconsciousness.

But even then he never woke up alone in a hospital room. Either Tony, Pepper, Happy, or any combination of those three would always wait in his room. Tony, for all his poor attempts at grouchiness and fake nonchalance was never able to stay more than 3 hours outside of Rhodey’s room whenever he got hospitalized (which was way less often than the other way around.)
Tony could never hide the underlying fear and concern in his eyes whenever Rhodey was bedridden. Tony would always make sure that either Pepper or Happy would get in the room and stay before he (hesitantly, always hesitantly,) walked out of the room, looking back at Rhodey at least once every 5 seconds as if he was making sure that Rhodey was still alive.

So to wake up in an empty room in a hospital was understandably a jarring experience for him. Especially since the last time it happened…

“Please tell me Tony is still in the U.S.” Rhodey whispered meekly. Unable to hold back the memory of the first time he woke up in a similar situation: hospitalized during his search and rescue mission when Tony got kidnapped in Afghanistan.

That was the only conclusion possible: Pepper would be swarmed by SI’s inventors and the media, demanding her explanation on Tony’s disappearing act. She wouldn’t be able to leave her office, only able to check on Rhodey using voice or video call. Happy would be the only one left to handle Tony’s search party during Rhodey’s absence; and Rhodey would nag and beg Happy to just leave him and go search for Tony already whenever he stay in the room for more than 15 minutes.

“…Colonel Rhodes, I’m so sorry… but Mr. Stark flew to Siberia in pursuit of Captain Rogers and the Winter Soldier about 12 hours ago…. His A.I., F.R.I.D.A.Y. was cut of from her connection with the Iron Man armor almost an hour after that…”

Rhodey couldn’t even bring himself to listen to the nurse after that. Too numb and too scared for his best friend’s life to care about anything else.

“What do you mean cut off? F.R.I.D.A.Y. is always connected to Tony’s armor.” He replied hoarsely, already aware of what that fact implied.

“I am not privy to the details, sir… but I must insist you stay in the bed and rest to avoid further damage to your spine. Even now a search and rescue effort has been conducted to retrieve Mr. Stark from - ”

“Call Pepper.” Rhodey interrupted coldly

“I’m… sorry sir?”
“Call Pepper for me god damn it! My brother is MISSING! His A.I is disconnected which means his Armor is either out of power or destroyed or it’s in the god damn space! Call Pepper now or so help me-”

“Sir, I must insist you calm down before you aggravate your injuries further. I will see what I can do about the call, but you must stay put in bed in the mean time.” the nurse tried in a strained voice.

“Fine, but make it quick!”

Rhodey was going to find his best friend. And if he had to level the entire Siberian tundra to do it… then by God he WILL save his brother, spine or no spine.

* * * * *

“Rhodey!”

Pepper looked... well she looked awful.

Still beautiful, don’t get him wrong. Her blazer unwrinkled, not a single hair out of place. Not surprising, of course. Pepper was, no mater what the media said, the woman who earned her way to the top of Stark Industries with skill and competence. No, she did not get the chair because she was pretty; she got the chair while looking pretty. And no, she did not get appointed CEO by Tony Stark because he dated her. Even if their relationship never progressed to anything beyond friendship, Tony would have still trusted Pepper with the CEO seat.

But still, for all her carefully maintained composure, Rhodey could see the way her right index finger tap her table incessantly. The way her eyes are loaded with the weight of lost, the way her shoulders, usually held with a casual confidence, now squared unconsciously, ready to snap a moment’s notice.

Pepper was breaking down in silence.

“Pep… where’s Tony? Have you found him? Where’s his last location? Have you send anyone-”
“Siberia, no, we have his coordinate but it doesn’t point to any landmark on any map, and no, I *can’t* send anyone because *Ross* refused to give any clearance for any rescue mission.” Pepper’s mouth went dangerously thin on the last one.

“What?! What the *fuck* is his problem?! The recipient country’s government is the one who gives clearances! Can’t you take this to the council?”

“I can’t! Ross is cockblocking me and the whole council is on fire because *Rogers* threw a hissy fit!”

There was a time when Rhodey, like any other child who was born and/or raised in the United States of America, admired and aspired to be just like the legendary captain. Hell, he was the reason Rhodey strove so hard to be a soldier at least twice the captain’s caliber.

Never in a million years would Rhodey imagine to see the Captain America act like a *toddler* in a temper tantrum. Even Tony’s debauchery filled days were easier to handle than this… monumental fuck up.

Tony’s temper tantrums were always limited in their destruction range: himself and anything inside the room he exploded in. When he emerged from the room he would always lead with an apology, followed immediately by an attempt to fix the room and anyone who he accidentally hurt, and then, after every damage has been sufficiently fixed and/or mitigated, he would disappear to his workshop for hours or days, depending on how much he regretted his actions. A self imposed time out, and a productive one at that.

Rogers’ temper tantrum, meanwhile, destroyed a tunnel, a UN official building, and an airport, followed immediately by avoidance of law. All the while broadcasting about how right he was and how wrong and evil the accords was because the United Nations was apparently a government now, and a corrupt one at that.

All these done outside on the United States. While wearing a flag of a spandex as a uniform and bearing a shield painted red white and blue.

Sure, there were some points in the accords that gave Rhodey the jibbies. Mandatory DNA sample? Tracking bracelets? Indefinite detainment without trial? Yeah, no thanks.
But even Rhodey could see Ross’ fingerprint on all the suspiciously fascist regulations. The rest of the accords actually made sense and was very much sane and reasonable.

And the whole thing was *amendable*.

Rogers could just protest by holding a press conference and bat those baby blues while crying the world a river about “human right violation” and “right to privacy and equality before the law” and *voila*, amendment signed and sealed.

*But nooo… he just got to knowingly break multiple laws on multiple sovereign nations, all of which are known accords supporters.*

*This* is the greatest strategic mind in history? Yeah, no.

“I can try to-” Rhodey said finally before he was cut by F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s Irish lilt.

“Ms. Potts, Colonel Rhodes, I have reestablished connection to boss’ suit.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes? No? Maybe? I don't know... I got the whole idea in my head, but Chapter 2 is still about 150ish words in by the time I post this one... so I guess I'm kind of open to suggestion? And like I said, any grammatical error, any weird inner speech (I'm still learning with that one), any inconsistencies, tell me and I'll fix it. See ya!
Here, have some Pepperony feels.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

(Pepper’s office, SI Headquarters, Los Angeles, California)

Three days.

It has been three whole day since F.R.I.D.A.Y. announced Tony’s survival. Three days since the patched up Mark 46 landed awkwardly on the Stark Tower’s landing pad, revealing shortly after that the unconscious, beaten down form of his pilot. Three days since Dr. Wu had to perform an emergency surgery on Tony to stabilize him, landing him in a coma with 7 finger tips and 6 toes amputated, more than half his lung capacity gone from the pneumothorax, concussed brain, crushed sternum, and rapidly deteriorating heart.

Rhodey had insisted on being transferred to the tower’s medbay the moment F.R.I.D.A.Y. announced Tony’s arrival and subsequent surgery. He was then put in Tony’s room a few hours after the surgery. Happy had told her that the colonel had wept and tried to stand up to walk to Tony’s bedside. He couldn’t. Happy had had to physically restrain Rhodey from literally crawling on the floor before he’d gave up and just dragged Rhodey’s bed right next to Tony’s. Happy hadn’t commented on anything else, but she could still hear his voice breaking a little every time he said Tony’s and Rhodey’s names.

Like yours doesn’t, she thought. Because it was easier to focus on how her and her friends’ voices break then on how two of the most important people in her life are now bedridden for indeterminate amount of time. One permanently paralyzed, while the other might never wake up without getting shot with a super serum wannabe version four-point-oh.

She gritted her teeth at that thought. F.R.I.D.A.Y. wasn’t allowed to say anything about what happened in Siberia, but she did send an armor back to retrieve a severed metal arm and Captain America’s shield. Shield whose bloody edge match the length of the scar in Tony’s chest.

She had to release a public statement about how she didn’t know the details, but Tony Stark is now in a coma, and all evidence pointed to Steve Rogers’ involvement in his injuries. Harley Keener showed up unannounced at the tower about 24 hours after the release of the statement. By bus,
alone. His mother almost called the police because he didn’t tell anyone he booked a bus ticket to New York on a school day. Harley hasn’t left Tony’s room since he’d sobbed against Tony’s right hand. Or what’s left of it, anyway.

Tony had told her once about how he introduced himself as “the Mechanic” to Harley during the Mandarin/A.I.M. fiasco. The unsaid implication of the state of Tony’s hand had made Pepper hop on a jet to the tower when Happy’d told her that Harley wasn’t going to leave and was unresponsive to both his and Rhodey’s attempt to get him to do anything but to call his mother.

“He’s still the mechanic, finger tips or no finger tips,” she had said while hugging him the poor boy. “He’s got a plan for this, believe in him.”

Harley, ever the genius, had stared right into her eyes and asked, “Is he going to explode too?”

Pepper had realized then that everyone in that room had been hurt by extremis in some ways or another.

“Dr. Wu and Dr. Cho said he has been working on extremis for some time now. They said it’s almost perfect.” She had answered, despite her mind screaming, *lies! Lies! He never tested this new strain! No one knows if it’s ever going to be safe!*

“How perfect are we talking about? 12% more chance of not blowing up in his face?”

Pepper had understood then why Tony had taken such a liking for this boy.

Happy’s ringtone had then interrupted whatever retort Pepper had prepared. “Mr. Parker?” She had asked him, a little redundantly.

The spider-man (*not even a man yet, legally*) had been constantly contacting Happy since they got him home from Germany. The kid came once, after Pepper told the exasperated Happy to just let him into the tower. But he just took one look at Tony’s fragile body, not even noticing Harley that had stared at the spandex-clad teen, hung his head in shame, and left the room running. The boy called Happy’s phone the next day, asking for her, and promptly stuttered a self-deprecating apology.

“It’s… It’s all my fault, Ms. Potts,” the boy had said dejectedly. “Mr. Stark… he gave me one job
to do and… and I screwed up. I screwed it all up. It’s all my fault. I’m so so sorry Ms. Potts.”

Pepper couldn’t even get him to believe that Tony wouldn’t fault him. Knowing Tony, he would’ve felt bad even bringing the kid into the fight. But Peter insisted on apologizing, so Pepper had to accept, if only to give some peace of mind.

Pepper had been hoping the same tactic would work on Vision, but clearly the android was hell-bent on making amends, judging by how he had taken a post outside Tony and Rhodey’s room with Happy. Both seemed to like one another well enough after spending some time guarding the door while glowering (in case of Happy) and staring unblinkingly (in case of Vision) at any foreign visitors.

Pepper sighed.

Life seemed to be having a blast toying around with Tony, and she was getting angry at the unfairness of it all. Tony was a good man. A little irresponsible, yes, but what else could you expect from a genius who grew up with a father who ignored him on the best days and yelled at him on the worst? When you grew up in such an environment, all the while having camera and mic shoved right down your nose everyday from the day your parents announced your birth, could you really grew up not developing some sort of defense mechanism? And that’s not mentioning all the tragedies that blotted his life, starting from the death of his parents.

People should just be grateful Tony had decided to become a superhero instead of a supervillain instead. Not that either would be acceptable for Pepper, as both would entail an ungodly amount of danger and mortal threat for the man she was desperately in love with. How ironic was it that her inability to see him getting hurt and his inability to stand by while others suffer were the reasons why they failed as a couple. He just wanted to be a good person, and she just wanted him safe.

Pepper thought Tony was ready to let go of his dangerous job after he blew up all his Iron Legion after she saved him from Killian. And to be fair, he did keep his promise and stay out of the field. Then of course, as if prompted, S.H.I.E.L.D. turned out to be having an infestation problem, and instead of dealing with it discreetly and smartly, they decided to drop the whole thing (literally) and left Tony to deal with the aftermath. Aftermath that ended with Ultron.

To this day Pepper still couldn’t forgive herself for not acknowledging Tony’s severe PTSD and paranoia properly. She knew all the symptoms, she noticed all the trigger, hell, she was intimately familiar with Tony’s method of dealing with his mental illness. But when Tony started to sleep better, Pepper addressed it as Tony healing instead of Tony exhausting himself to sleep. When Tony said he was “talking with someone,” Pepper thought he had meant a therapist - not Doctor Banner. And when the Iron Legion was turned into a new year’s firework, she really thought Tony was done preparing for whatever it is that he saw beyond the portal.
She did _not_ anticipate Ultron, and despite her believing Tony when he told her that he had shelved the project because it wasn’t working, and that the program wasn’t even ready for interface and came online on its own, that he _hadn’t meant to kill all those people_, Pepper still dumped him afterwards. She had felt like shit, but she was _furious_. She couldn’t handle Tony’s new brand of mental illness (can we even call this PTSD still, or do we need to make a new name?) and she told him that they ‘needed a break’. Tony took it like a champ, stepping down so graciously that Pepper wished he had done the exact opposite.

Because angry and frustrated Tony meant he was dealing with the issue, however unhealthily. But the 2 minutes silence followed by a soft kiss goodbye on her cheek meant he was resigned, and thought that Pepper leaving was the appropriate punishment for him.

Pepper had told him that she didn’t know what happened, but she believed that he wasn’t the villain. She had told him that it was her that was simply unequipped to deal with all those mess, no matter who’s at fault. She told him that it wasn’t permanent, that she just needed time to process everything. She told him that she still loved him.

Tony just smiled sadly and said, “I know Pep… I know.”

She had wanted so badly to shake his shoulders and scream _do you?! do you really?!_ And yet she’d stayed silent. She had let him hugged her one last time before he’d walked out the door, looking back at her with lips bitten.

They hadn’t touched each other since that day, and now, Tony’s only hope of ever waking up from his coma was something that she _knew_ he was dreading the first time he needed to use it to take out the shrapnel in his chest. He had spent so much time modifying his own strain of extremis not in fear of exploding (although that was also one of the concerns), but because he didn’t want to finally get Afghanistan out of his body if the price was becoming even remotely close to a super soldier.

Tony never told her the details, but anyone could see that Tony’s father was very fixated on Captain America. Howard Stark never made his endeavor to find Steve Rogers’ body a secret, so everyone knew that hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars (before the inflation) was spent in vain because a certain genius couldn’t let go of the past. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what kind of measuring stick Howard Stark had used to torment Tony in his childhood.

The thing was, Tony wasn’t ashamed of acknowledging the fact that Captain America was his childhood hero. Pepper was almost certain that one of the reasons why Tony had tried so hard to impress Steve Rogers. Because despite their obvious incompatibility with each other, Tony still harbored a deep-seated respect for him. The bitterness of his failure to measure up to Captain
America in his father’s eye simply pushed him to wanting to be better than Captain America in his own way.

And as if the fates weren’t cruel enough, they were all now left in the dark with the only logical assumption that it was Captain America himself that broke the invincible Iron Man.

Pepper closed her eyes and massaged her temple. It seemed like she’s in constant state of headache these days. The press was hounding her, the board was on the brink of mass panic, Vision retrogress from having human emotion to ignoring anything and everything resembling emotion in a disturbingly Stark-like fashion, only more robotic. Even the kids’ moods seemed to be deteriorating. Peter still called everyday, sounding more and more depressed every time Pepper heard him, while Harley was refusing to talk about anything but extremis V.4, and his mother was at her wit’s end trying to get him to come home. Pepper, Rhodey and Happy had been trying their best to console the kids, but it was hard to reassure someone that things were going to be alright somehow when they themselves didn’t believe it to be true.

Because the truth is extremis was not a cure-all that would magically fix Tony. Both Doctors Cho and Wu had explained to her that while extremis had come a long way from the vile virus that turns human into living bomb, it was still a volatile substance with no real guarantee of a 100% success rate.

Both doctors had told her that the 4th incarnation of extremis (the 2nd being the stabilized version not unlike the one in her own body, and the 3rd was the one that Tony had used to take out the shrapnel) was supposed to be a last ditch effort, tailored by Tony to fit his own physiology. In theory, the virus should integrate with his DNA with less than 30% chance of rejection. But obviously there wasn’t any possibility of real life testing, seeing as the intended recipient of the virus was somewhat limited in availability. All the data gathered was theoretical at best, and an educated guess at worst. The only certainty that they had about extremis version 4 wasn’t even a welcome one.

“It’s going to be excruciating,” Dr. Wu had said, to which Dr. Cho had nodded her agreement.

She’d said, “He will be in pain during the integration process, which would take about half a day to complete.” She’d took a deep breath as if she’d had to brace herself. “The main concern here is that the extreme pain will send him into a shock. With how weak his heart is now, we’re afraid he’s not even going to last long enough for extremis to fix his heart.”

Pepper had been left stunned. She had expected Tony to defy death yet again. She had been expecting a second chance to make things right with Tony. She had been waiting for her turn to tell Tony, really tell him, how much he meant to her. She had wanted to tell him how in love she was
with that kind, smart, stupidly reckless guy. How she wished she was a stronger woman, strong enough to keep a supernova of a man in her heart without balking out.

She had not expected to be given mere 3 days to ‘make whatever peace you could’ with Tony.

“It’s a 50/50 chance now, Pepper, even with extremis,” Dr. Cho had said kindly. “Either he makes it or he doesn’t. If he does though, we can assure you that, physically at least, he will be as good as new.”

But Pepper couldn’t care less if Tony couldn’t grow his fingers and toes back. She didn’t care if she had to take care of him for the rest of his life because he wouldn’t be able to get up from his bed. She certainly didn’t care what kind of physical shape Tony would be in. She’d still love him all the same.

Because Pepper didn’t fall in love with Tony because he was filthy rich (he was) or because he was handsome as the devil (he also was). She fell in love with Tony because she noticed one day when she was his P.A. that he had secretly set up a separate fund for the education of SI employees’ children. She fell in love with Tony because on their 3rd date Tony had ditched her to rush into a burning 3-story tall building because a mother had screamed about how her baby was still in her crib on the 3rd floor. She fell in love with Tony because, no mater how much Tony tried to convince her that he wasn’t any good with kids, he’d always make the time for his younger fans. Always indulging them, encouraging them to be curious, be kind, ‘see that puddle over there? Hop on it! You’re all only gonna be kids once!’

She fell in love with Tony because even if he put his asshole-of-the-year mask almost religiously, always insisting that ‘yes, people, ‘tis I: the very privileged, very rich, white American man with no moral and no heart’, always thinking the worst of himself while parading as the biggest narcissist in the northern hemisphere, Tony would always lower the mask around those he deem undeserving of more assholery in their lives.

To his employees he was a stern, but understanding boss. To the distressed, he was that stranger that offered his help. To children he would always be the kind, mischievous adult that their parents couldn’t argue with. To his friends, Tony was a good, kind man that the world seemed to like to knock down.

Pepper took a deep deep breath, and look at the clock displayed on her monitor. Another deep breath, and she stood valiantly, and crossed her office towards the door.

No time for anymore delaying, Tony needed her now, even if he wouldn’t be conscious through his
And heaven would freeze over before Pepper willingly abandon Tony ever again.

Chapter End Notes

So... This one's not as long as the previous chapter... In my defense, this one focuses on all the Pepperony goodness that y'all craves.

I was half asleep when I wrote about 3/4 of this, so I ((know)) i make a mistake there somewhere...

So tell me when you spot one... I'll edit it as best as I could.

See ya!!

Edit: ALSO. In this fic, Harley is younger than Peter. I mean... CW happened a year (?) after AoU... which itself happened around 2 years after IM3. Harley looked like he was around 9ish, 11 at most then... and one of the wikis outright mentioned him to be "pre-teen". This puts him around 12-14 at the event of CW, compared to Peter's 15.

I don't have the precise age yet, but I'm thinking maybe as-young-as-possible (and yes, that does sound disturbing) Harley for this... I mean Ty Simpkins is 6 years younger than Tom Holland, so I guess Marvel'd want to put their characters' age somewhere close to that range? Idk... Tell me what u guys think tho... Maybe help me with some headcanon of your own? Cya!
Harley to the Rescue

Chapter Notes

An Iron dad fic without Peter getting *whumped*?! in THIS economy?!!
INCONCEIVABLE!!!

I'm so, so sorry for what I am about to do.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Stark Tower’s Medbay, Manhattan, New York City)

Harley stared blankly down at Tony’s empty bed, unable to pay Pepper’s consoling words any attention. It all seemed surreal to him; Avengers broken in half, Captain America going against the law, Tony, of all people, standing up in favor of said law, Tony in a coma because said Captain “allegedly” assaulted him, and Tony not waking up unless he’s treated with extremis. Extremis that, according to what Pepper had told him and Spider-man (Peter Parker?) just an hour ago, was going to be just a 50/50 shot at best.

Don’t forget the ‘excruciatingly painful’ part, the very unhelpful part of his brain reminded him.

Tony was moved to another room as soon as everyone had had a few minutes with him... well, with his unresponsive body, at least. Everyone had gone in and out of the room with tear-streaked face (or tear soaked mask, in Spider-man’s case) but Harley, who had opted to take the last turn, was very sure he had depleted his tear reservoir for at least another lifetime or two.

He couldn’t bring himself to cry even if he had tried. And he didn’t. He just stared at Tony, blinking like an owlet, trying to reconcile the pale, Tony-like body lying on the bed, with the impish, sometimes-panic-attacked man that he had come to see as a father. Not that he had ever say it to Tony... in part because he knew how allergic Tony was to anything that involves “emotion”. Mostly, though, it was because he was embarrassed at how easy it was to replace his sorry excuse of an absentee father, with Tony, who had swore to stay, and did so for the 3 years they had known each other.

Harley has never regretted anything as much as the fact that he may have lost his chance at telling Tony how grateful he was to have another shot at the paternal figure things. In hindsight, if Harley
had actually said what he’d wanted to say since the day Tony turned up with a table full of Hawaiian Pizza and a new home theater system, custom-made by the Mechanic himself, the worst thing that could’ve happened was Tony breaking out in hives. Proverbial ones, at that. The only thing that would’ve been hurt was Tony’s composure, because Harley knew Tony was too good to hurt his feelings, even if Tony didn’t feel the same way he did. And Tony certainly has been acting in a very father-like fashion to him and his family.

Harley’s brain was already conjuring the images of all the times the Iron Man armor hovered outside his bedroom window because ‘the board meeting was boring, Keenster, now make me a sandwich and show me that science project of yours.’

“You know I’ll just keep telling you to make your own sandwich, right?” He had said.

“Make your own gosh-darn sandwich, dad,” was what he had wanted to say.

Or that time when his family’s bill was paid for the next 6 months, and his mom’s bank account went up a few hundred dollars when she told his sister that she couldn’t come to the parent-teacher meeting because she’s got a double shift.

His sister and mom had said nothing and just hugged the living crap out of Tony the next time he dropped in. Tony’d then claimed that he was covered in hives for 3 days.

Harley just wished he had sucked it up and join the hug.

Or even that one time Tony threatened a Paparazzo for taking a picture of the both of them eating burgers in a hole-in-the-wall diner that Harley liked.

“Leak his face,” Tony’d whispered angrily, while not-so-subtly adjusting his gauntlet-watch, “and you can say bye-bye to your career for the rest of your miserable life.”

Harley had hugged him then. Said thank you, and all. It was beyond awkward, but for the first time in his life, Harley had felt how good it was to be hugged back by your dad.

He shook the thoughts out of his head then. It felt too close to a goodbye, even in his head, and he just… couldn’t. He could not say goodbye to Tony. So he tried to listen to Pepper’s voice instead.
“... is going to be alright, Harley… please believe in him. He would’ve sassed you until you graduate if he sees you like this - ”

“Like he’s not sassing me daily already,” Harley said with scratchy voice.

“Oh, sweetheart, thank god you’re back… We were all so worried,” Pepper gushed, eyes all red and puffy. Harley winced at that.

“I didn’t go anywhere Pepper… I’ve been here all day.”

“Well I would’ve been happier if you’d taken a walk or something…. You were sitting here, but your eyes were so empty… we were afraid you’re having a shock, Harley,” she explained kindly.

“I’m sor - hold up. Did you say ‘we’?” Harley balked at the implication.

Pepper didn’t even try to look apologetic. “Yes, Harley. We. I called your mother when you weren’t giving me any response. She’s en route here, ETA an hour and a half.”

Harley jumped from his seat, shocked. “Pepper! Her boss already gave her a warning for missing a double shift the other day! She can’t miss another one!” he insisted.

“I’ve already taken care of that. And your school as well…. This is a one-off, so don’t expect me to cover your school’s absence leave ever again, you hear?”

“I… yeah…. Thanks Pepper,” he said finally, casting one last look at Tony’s still empty bed before getting up.

“Stretching your legs?” Pepper asked hopefully.

“Mhm… hey, where’s everyone?”
Pepper sighed at that. “Rhodey is at his PT, Vision is taking care of some paperwork for the Avengers, Happy is… with Peter.”

Harley couldn’t help but noticed how she’d hesitated on the last part.

“Peter… he’s getting worse isn’t he?” he asked warily.

Pepper’s silence was answer enough. But before Harley could ask more, Happy barged into the room. The man spared a look at Harley’s direction, looking marginally more pleased that he’s now up and about.

“Pep, I think you should’ve called Parker’s aunt instead. He’s got it so bad, you’d think he was in the room with Tony right now,” Happy grumbled.

But Harley couldn’t focus on how unhappy Happy looked. His mind kept on playing Happy’s words on repeat. ‘Like he was in the room. Like he was in the room.’

“What floor is he on? Peter?” he asked, almost afraid of the answer he might get.

Happy looked at him, puzzled, “45th, why?”

Harley gulped. If he was right… “He’s got super senses.”

Happy just stared at him confusedly… before exploding in a very creative chain of swear words. Harley had to stop him before he decided to do something stupid like shaking some senses into Peter.

“Let me talk to him,” Harley said calmly.

Happy eyed him skeptically, “No offense, kid… but you weren’t exactly in a better place yourself not an hour ago.”
“I know, right! It’ll be great. Just us, two very depressed teenagers talking about feelings and emotional trauma,” Harley quipped, already leaving the room and walked towards the elevator, ignoring Pepper and Happy’s call.

In his head, he knew that, logically speaking, being a little down about some bully at school was a lot different than being depressed and self-destructive because your mind somehow convinced you that your hero is down and possibly dying because of your fault. Hell, Harley would’ve bet his weekly allowance that Peter was also picked on at school just like him on top of all that.

But still… he couldn’t just leave Peter on his own device like that…. Harley knew first hand how it feels to be drowned by your own brain… and it didn’t help that his brain’s got more imagination than average kids his age. Harley couldn’t just stand idly by and watched Peter self-destruct like that. He might not be able to help save his hero this time… but maybe he could save this new one that Tony seemed to kinda approve.

*(Empty Office, 45th Floor of Stark Tower, Manhattan, New York City)*

Peter knew that what he was doing wasn’t healthy.

Intellectually, he knew that nothing would’ve been gained from doing what he was doing. He didn’t need to stay there alone (well, Happy had been there with him… but he left, probably got tired of getting ignored by Peter. Everyone got tired of him eventually.)

Peter knew that if he was so inclined, F.R.I.D.A.Y. would update him with Mr. Stark’s… survival. Information regarding the “untested procedure” Mr. Stark was going through was classified, yes, but the A.I. has been cleared by Ms. Potts to divulge to him whether or not Mr. Stark survived whatever treatment it was that he’s undergoing.

Peter did not need to torture himself by sitting there in silence, listening to the screaming and wailing that Mr. Stark made upstairs.

One particularly ragged howl made him flinch then, and it had felt like he was being stabbed. Repeatedly. In the same spot. Peter couldn’t even bring himself to care about how disturbing it was that he knew how it felt like to be stabbed. That one had been difficult to hide from Aunt May.
You don’t get to complain, his brain said. Not when it’s your fault Mr. Stark’s up there in pain.

He wanted to cry, but his own thoughts wouldn’t even give him that mercy.

Your fault! your fault! All Your fault! You got one job and you botched the job! Mr. Stark told you that it was going to be dangerous, but you didn’t listen! You watched the news, you knew what Captain America had done to those task force officers, but you were too busy fanboying! You got the shield and instead of throwing it away, you wasted time saluting your opponent! You said you were trying to impress Mr. Stark, but look at what you’ve done! No, you don’t deserve any relief. If Mr. Stark is in pain right now, then so should you.

So he stayed. Each of Mr. Stark’s cries of pain a knife to his chest. Peter wondered if it was possible to die of self-hatred.

Peter’s whole frame was trembling now, but he didn’t care. He was too busy running every possible should-haves and could-haves, too busy inculpating himself to care about trivial things like himself. Too busy to notice Harley standing at the door, looking at him silently until he spoke up.

“You know Tony wouldn’t want you to do that to yourself right?”

Peter looked up with a start. Out of all the people staying for Mr. Stark, Harley was the one that he was least expecting to talk to him right now. The younger boy hadn’t talked a lot with him. He mostly kept to himself by Mr. Stark’s bed, holding his hand or just looking blankly at the room’s walls. Judging by how worried Ms. Potts, Colonel Rhodes, and Happy were, Peter would say that he wasn’t usually that quiet.

Harley seemed to take Peter’s silence as an encouragement, somehow, because he was now walking closer before sitting down a few feet away from Peter. He appreciated it… Happy had been trying his hardest… but he was clearly forcing himself to not appear too uncomfortable with the physical contact he had been initiating with Peter. Not that Peter himself was comfortable enough with the man for that kind of personal space infringement, either.

But Harley seemed to understand all that without even asking. He just sat there, looked at him carefully, staying silent for a while. It was… nice.

“I mean… I tried that self-deprecating stuff once before…. He didn’t appreciate it. He thinks he’s
the only one that’s allowed to hate himself,” the boy shrugged.

Harley had said that with such… familiarity. Peter felt another unknown sting in his chest that didn’t have anything to do with the screaming Mr. Stark still let loose from his locked chamber upstairs.

“You know listening to him wouldn’t actually do anything but making you feel terrible, right?” Harley continued.

“You… you knew?” Peter asked, not sure whether he should be surprised or chastised… which was a weird feeling, considering the boy was at least 3 years younger than him.

“Yes, sure… I mean… you’re sitting here in a silent office, right underneath Tony’s super secret room, while having super hearing and looking like someone is butchering your puppy and is broadcasting it live on national TV. Not that hard to make the jump,” Harley answered easily, evidently pleased to hear Peter talking, finally.

“I…” Peter started. Only to realize that he really couldn’t explain what he had been doing without sounding… whiny about it.

“If you say something along the lines of ‘It’s all my fault’, I’m gonna have to stop you there,” said Harley. “It’s not your fault. Stop punishing yourself for the mistakes of half a dozen stupid adults. You didn’t smash a vibranium shield through Tony’s chest, Captain America did.”

“If I had just thrown the shield away when I snatched it, there wouldn’t be any shield to smash Mr. Stark’s chest with.”

“What? You’re gonna throw the shield discus style while yelling ‘YEET!’?” Harley deadpanned. Peter couldn’t help but smile a little at that.

The smile quickly sobered up though, and when it did, Peter sighed and averted his eyes. He could see why Mr. Stark’s taken a liking to Harley. He’s smart, and very kind. He could probably match Mr. Stark’s banter toe to toe instead of floundering and stuttering like Peter had done. And most importantly, Harley hadn’t fucked up like he had.

Harley deserved Mr. Stark’s trust and friendship. Peter didn’t. Not then, and certainly not now after
he had betrayed the trust that Mr Stark had given him.

As if prompted, Harley looked pointedly at Peter and said, “Stop that.”

Peter flinched. How did he -

“No, I can’t read mind, and if I can I’m pretty sure I’m gonna ask first,” Harley answered, completely contradicting his own statement. “I just have… a lot of practice with… uh… mental health stuff. Got a few issues myself… helped Tony a bit with his, not sure how much of a help I had been though.”

Harley shut his mouth with a snap. Looking a little sheepish. “Sorry about that,” he said. “I babble when I’m stressed.”

Peter surprised himself with a weak laughter. “Yeah, me too,” he agreed quietly before scrunching his eyebrow quizically. “You… helped Mr. Stark? Did… does he have, like, PTSD or something?”

“Yeah, he does…. I thought he’s gotten better since the Mandarin incident - that’s how we met, I triggered him twice, he was a wreck - anyway, it seems like his PTSD got worse around Ultron… I don’t know what happened, but he was… acting weird. Like… even more paranoid than he had been during Mandarin. Which doesn’t make any sense, It was about 2 years after the portal in New York…. Even if he had relapsed, I don’t think it warrant that level of… I don’t know… fear? He was… he was suddenly so scared of whatever it is that he saw out there. And, well… - ” Harley shut his mouth sheepishly again, “I’m babbling again, huh… eh, whatever, you look better already, so….”

Peter blinked at him, suddenly noticing that he wasn’t particularly paying attention to Mr. Stark’s screaming anymore. For one messed-up second he was afraid that Mr. Stark had stopped screaming prematurely because… oh, no there it was. Peter flinched as the painful screaming breached his hearing once again.

“Aw, c’mon… we’ve been doing so good and all…. Tell you what, let’s get outta here. Sounds to me like you already know that all this? What you’ve been doing to yourself? It’s not rational. So let’s just… trust Tony to pull it off, OK?” Harley pouted at him, discarding all the tiptoeing attempt and just cut it to the chase. Once again Peter was pleasantly surprised by how appreciative he was to this 12-years-old boy that seemed to know Mr. Stark really well.
“C’mon, Peter… I can call you Peter, right? My mom’s coming in less than an hour now… if I can bring Spidey with me, my mom would probably not fuss over me too much…. C’mon, Please?”

Peter had been told by people (May, mostly) that he’s got a very convincing puppy eye face. But this? The face Harley was making? This was next level.

Peter snorted at that, got up to his feet and offered his hand to Harley. “Want me to bring the mask too?”

Harley’s beaming face was definitely worth the sleeping legs from sitting too long on the floor.

*He seems like a good person, Peter thought. No wonder Mr. Stark likes him.*

(Dark Corridor, 45th Floor of Stark Tower, Manhattan, New York City)

Happy twitched his mouth in satisfaction as the two boys finally walk out out to the elevator. He’s got to admit, he was a little skeptical about letting Harley took care of Peter. Kid’s only 12, no way in hell was he going to let him waltz in on a very depressed teenaged superhero without supervision.

Well, he can definitely say now that his fear had been largely unfounded. Harley was on a mission, and he succeeded. Happy had been told by Tony (in private) about how proud he was of Harley for literally stopping Tony’s panic attack on it’s track on the phone. Happy had just been largely mystified at how easily Tony admitted that he’s had a panic attack.

The Tony Stark, that didn’t tell any of his closest friends that he was dying of heavy metal poisoning, was proudly and openly telling him, Harold “Happy” Hogan, that he’s got a panic attack in a downright cheerful tone.

All Happy had heard while Tony chattered away was: ‘Look at this kid! He’s so gosh-darn amazing! Took care of me so good, this kid! Damn, I’m so proud of this random kid I met in Tennessee.’

Tony Stark was using his own usually-self-perceived-weakness as a tool to brag about a scrawny kid whose house he broke in to.
But even then, Happy hadn’t been convinced that it wasn’t a fluke. Until a few minutes ago.

Peter Parker had looked positively dead. And Happy had been totally ready to call in his aunt to step in. They were all lucky Harley had stepped in. The kid’s a wonder.

I hope his mom’s going to let that kid here more often, Happy mused as he walked to the elevator to help Vision with his paper works. He could do Tony some good. Maybe open him up a little bit more too… obviously those 2 already care a lot about each other. Huh, wonder if Tony ever thought of Harley as his own…. For all his daddy issues, Tony’s always been a little soft on children, these two even more so than usual.

The elevator dinged, and he heard F.R.I.D.A.Y. announced his arrival.

“Mr. Hogan, it is good to see you again. May presume young misters Parker and Keener have been properly consoled?” Vision queried politely.

“Yeah, Harley snapped out of it on his own… I think he might be bottling it up. He got Peter to talk too, you know… I think they’re best buds now. And for the last time, Vis… just call me Happy.”

Vision nodded amicably, “I am very pleased to hear that… Happy. I must admit, I was worried to see both of them so… withdrawn.”

Happy was just opening his mouth to agree when F.R.I.D.A.Y. notified them on an incoming call. From one ex-General Thaddeus Ross. Vision shared a quick worried look with him before asking F.R.I.D.A.Y. to pick it up.

“Stark! I don’t know what game are you playing with your posses, but I swear to god, if you have a hand in their escape - ”

“Mr. Ross, good afternoon to you too. I know not of this escape you are talking about, but I assure you, it is very improbable for Mr. Stark to ‘have his hand’ on anything, seeing as he is physically unable to even stay conscious,” Vision answered succinctly, voice hard and cold as steel.

Ross growled, “You and your creator can’t fool me with some ‘poor wittle me’ act, android. You will track down and re-capture my prisoner or else - ”
“Your prisoner, Mr. Ross?” Vision cut again, seemingly in no mood to play nice with Ross. “When the proper order has been ratified by the Accords Council, we will review said order, and deliberate on whether or not we will take on the mission. As per protocol.”

“You Dare - ”

“I dare, Mr. Ross. Now if you do not posses the appropriate order from the Council, I suggest you restrain yourself from hounding the Avengers, else we might view this as an act of intimidation from the Secretary of State himself, and file our complain through the proper channel. You will not like the paperwork that entails.”

“Testy today, android?” Ross sneered. “Looks like Stark’s finally going to bite the dust huh? No wonder you’re so cranky today.”

Oh that did it.

“Don’t count your chickens, Ross,” Happy hissed at him, “Tony’s not going down so fast, not even from some lost fingertips. Good fucking day. End call.”

The room fell silent then, at first, Happy thought it was from the shock of his frankly out of character outburst. He didn’t care. That smarmy bastard dared to mock Tony after he made sure Tony didn’t get the help he needed. Happy would happily blow him of twice over and cussed him a few curses more.

Then it occurred to him just what he had said to Ross in his anger. About Tony.

“Oh, shit,” he whispered.

“Indeed, Happy.”

Happy had never heard the Android using such a conflicted tone.

Chapter End Notes
Yup, like I said, I'm sorry... for the whump (Forgive me, people, for I have sinned),
for the undoubtedly disjointed narration (I'm playing with the characters today, maybe
too much), for the possible grammatical and technical error... But I'm not sorry about
the cliff hanger. Kinda.

It's going to be important later you guys... It's a plot device, I swear.

btw, I decided to just go ahead and make Harley super smol. But he's kinda a badass
don't you think? Should I update the tag?

See ya!!
Wake Up, Make Up

Chapter Notes

Hey! Sorry for the long update! I was on vacation in Thailand, and it was beautiful and magical and god damn ((scalding)). My back is still peeling, and my hair is brown now. It's supposed to be black. But It's OK!! the place was magnificent, and I can't wait to come back there someday!

Here, have some Pepperony moment to make up for the 2 weeks absence.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Tony’s Extremis Chamber, Stark Tower, Manhattan, New York City)

When Tony woke up, for the first time in about 3 decades (give or take), his body felt good. Well, except for his throat. It felt like an electric sander and an industrial-grade grinder just used his throat as a showdown arena.

*What in the name of hell just happened.*

And suddenly, memories of 12 hours of pain and screaming almost jolted him out of his stupor.

Oh, wow. Okay, *that’s* why his throat was so ragged.

Dimly, Tony wondered how that kind of pain didn’t just stop his then compromised heart. But then again, Tony’s always been too stubborn for his own good. Perhaps his body was stubborn enough to stay alive out of pure spite and luck. If he didn’t know any better he’d say some form of higher-being was making sure he stay alive no matter what, for some unknown cosmic reason or two. But that would just be ridiculous.

So, just like he had done in Siberia (and it looked like his brain still decided to give him a panic attack from that thought), Tony tried to calm down and asses the situation.

The memory told him that extremis was a success. At least, from what he could tell. His restrained hip, but freed limbs meant that he was still locked inside the special chamber he designed to withstand the explosion from a failed extremis-host integration. F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s silence meant that
he probably have a few minutes still before she called…

Who?

Rhodey? He knew he went through a coma for a period of time before he was injected with extremis, but he didn’t know how long. Was Rhodey out of hospital yet? Was he okay? Damn it… if anything happened to him… no. Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to open that hypothetical can of worm just yet, so he didn’t.

Well, Pepper and Happy’s got to be here, at least… right? Happy was still the head of SI’s security and his bodyguard, technically, while Pepper was… well, she had been his girlfriend. They did… take a break from their relationship, but… she’s still his friend, at least. Right?

Tony didn’t want to imagine a life where Pepper would drift away from his life. Girlfriend or not, Pepper was one of the very few people in the world (now even fewer) that he would trust with his life. If she wouldn’t take him romantically ever again, he would settle for a friendship without any hesitation. It’s going to hurt, of course, but he was ready to pay any price to stay as close as he could with Pepper.

Unable to reign In his emotion any longer, Tony opened his eyes.

Only to be assaulted by the sight of all three of his oldest friends… and more.

“Tones…?” Rhodey said as leaned in as far as his wheelchair allowed, and hugged him, hard.

Happy broke down almost immediately after that. The man knelt beside Tony’s bedside and joined the hug. Followed by Pepper, who was spectacularly failing at holding her tears back.

Tony couldn’t find his own voice. He looked around the room, seeing the sobbing heap on his left side. The tremulous smiles of Harley and his mom. The gaping Peter Parker, alternating between swaying on the spot like he wanted to join the hug, and clenching his fist like he was trying not to cry. Even Vision was there, too. Hovering a little further back from the group, smiling sadly.

“whuh…?” Tony stammered dumbly.
“What? You expecting to wake up alone Tones?” Rhodey joked, even if his voice was suspiciously wet.

“Uh….”

Hannah Keener quirked her mouth lightly. “Are we sure we’re not going to scan his head? He’s being pretty incoherent.”

“Hey!” Tony protested. “Don’t pick on the injured!”

Peter, the little twerp, let out an audible sigh like he’d been honest to god worried about Tony having a brain damage.

Tony narrowed his eyes towards him. “I find your lack of faith disturbing, Spider-ling.”

Harley let loose a watery laugh at Peter’s indignant ‘Spider-man!’ and leaped into Tony’s bed and cuddled him.

What?

“Um… Harl?”

“…nk you,” the boy mumbled.

“Har… ley?” Okay, maybe Tony’s brain really was short-circuiting a little bit. Was Hannah snickering?!

“Thank you,” Harley said again, softly.

Tony blinked, confused. “Uh… yeah, sure…. For… what, exactly?”
“For staying,” Harley confessed. “For not leaving me too.”

Harley’s words felt like jabs to his gut.

‘I’m not going to leave, Harl,’ Tony remembered promising to Harley once. ‘I’m staying with your irresponsible angst-filled teenaged butt until you tell me otherwise, OK?’

‘But you’re irresponsible too, Tony,’ Harley had said.

‘Yeah, I know…. Good thing I’m an adult so I can order you around anyway.’

Without even thinking, Tony felt his arms lifted for the first time, and suddenly he became very aware of how weightless Harley’s body was on top of his, and how… powerful his arms felt. Carefully, Tony wrapped his arms around Harley’s bony frame, feeling how the boy was shaking minutely.

As confidently as he could manage, Tony rubbed soothing circles on Harley’s back. Apparently he was doing it right, seeing as Harley tightened his arms around Tony and buried his head deeper into the crook of Tony’s neck.

“I never break my promises, do I?” Tony murmured into Harley’s ear, and just received a head shake in return.

“Good, glad to know we’re still on the same page,” Tony smirked and looked up to see Peter and Vision standing (or floating, in Vision’s case) awkwardly.

“You know… since I’m going to break out in hives and possibly die from my allergy to emotion and tears anyway, you two might as well join the hug.”

“I think I would like to take that offer, Mr. Stark,” Vision smiled wanly, floating to his bedside to join the hug.

“Tony,” he corrected gently, “and the same goes to you, Arach-kid, no more “Mr. Stark” business. Call me Tony and join the cuddle-pile before Hannah throw you in. She’s dying to take a picture
“You know I will, Peter,” Hannah remarked cheerfully. “Now go hug the man, or else.”

Peter shuffled awkwardly for a few seconds before visibly steeling his nerves and join in the group-hug by Vision’s side.

God, his shaking is even worse than Harley’s… I wonder if the kid’s blaming himself for all this cluster fuck.

“Peter,” Tony began, as gently as his still ragged throat can manage, “you know I don’t blame you for anything right?”

“B…but…. Mr. Stark, it really was -”

“Nope. You did good, kid. All of us would’ve get squished if you didn’t bring down that bug-dude,” Tony interrupted. “But that’s besides the point. I shouldn’t have brought you to Germany in the first place, kid… and for that, I’m sorry.”

Peter shook his head adamantly. “I join in on my own, Mr. Stark, you didn’t force me to.”

“It’s Tony, and yes, I kind of do, actually. I wasn’t really going to tell on your aunt, but, still… that was a pretty jerk move from my part…. Speaking of your aunt, by the way…” Tony trailed of, not really sure how to best break it out to the kid that he was making him spill to his aunt.

Apparently he didn’t have to though, because the smart boy already made that leap for himself. “No! No no no no… I can’t tell Aunt May, Mr. Sta - Tony. I already told you… she’s gonna freak out, and then I’m gonna freak out… and… and….”

“Whoa, calm your eight-limbs -”

“I don’t have that.”
“Shush. Calm your eight-limbs and think for a second here. Do you honestly expect your aunt to stay in the dark indefinitely? No. Sooner or later, she’s going to find out, and then… depending on how long you’ve been hiding this from her, your problem’s going to be bigger than it has any right to be.”

Peter fidgeted nervously, looking anywhere but at Tony’s eyes. “Mr. - Tony… I can’t… I just - She’s going to - ”

“Peter, you don’t think I’m going to sic you on your aunt alone, right? I’m coming with you. I have a lot to apologize to your aunt too.”

Peter paled even more, if that was even possible. “Tony, no! She’s going to kill you!”

“Well,” Tony sighed, “in her defense, I brought this on myself. I’d prefer to not be killed, but I can understand her need to assert her justified opinion on me.”

“No, Tony… please, just - she won’t… she doesn’t understand the stuff that I do… the stuff that you do…. You can’t just - ”

“Then it’s our duty to bring her up to speed, right? Peter, she deserves to know about this. Especially since I already involved her nephew on a potentially dangerous situation without her consent! You’re a minor, kid… this kind of stuff falls under her jurisdiction.”

“I… I don’t…. ” Peter seemed to be at lost, eyes wide in a telltale of an incoming panic attack.

“OK, look,” Tony said finally, deciding to spare Peter the nervous breakdown, “you don’t have to do it now. Take your time, I know it’s a big decision. No rush, I got a lot to deal with after this anyway.”

Before Peter could vocalize the gratefulness in his face, Tony noticed Happy wincing slightly and Vision looking away for a fraction of a second.

“Uh… something I should know about, guys?” Tony asked tentatively.
‘Yeah, Tony… about that….’

Tony narrowed his eyes at Happy. The man wasn’t the one to stutter or mince words, so seeing him so unsure about what to say was a little suspect. But Vision, bless his logically inclined mind, said with an air of alarming apprehension, “Tony, we need to talk…. It’s about Mr. Ross.”

* * * * *

“So what you are saying is,” Tony said finally, “that Ross is not only a pain in my ass in general, but also a pain in my ass that is actively trying to stay that way?”

Vision looked trapped between a grimace and a wince. “That would be a very… expletive-filled summary, but yes. He is most decidedly going to… "ride on your ass", as they say.”

Tony let loose a long suffering sigh. He’s got to play this even faster than he had first intended.

“Alright then, F.R.I.D.A.Y., initiate protocol These Snitches don’t Get Stitches, post haste.”

Both Harley and Peter choked on their spit at that.

“What?” Peter asked weakly.

“Oh lord…. Tony, that one’s so old! Get a newer meme for the love of Tesla,” Harley chortled.

“Wow, rude. Hannah, ground your son. Peter, stop choking. I’d rather not piss May off any further.”

“Did… did Iron Man just say… snitches get stitches…?” Peter short circuited.

“I said ‘this snitches don’t get stitches’, Spiderling. Pay attention.”
“What does the protocol do, Tony?” Pepper said, ignoring the ‘spider-MAN!!!’ cry Peter belted out.

“Other than releasing all of Ross’ dirty laundry to WikiLeaks? Making sure I’m not detected as the one doing the leaking, for one… Hacking into the UN Accords Panel and put in all of his overstep of the accords for all to see for the other… A bunch of different stuff, really… I’m not expecting anything to really stick, I just want to distract him while I come clean to the panel about my… enhancement.”

Tony cringed at the last part. Prepared as he may be about having super-strength, it really didn’t erase the fact that body image was something that he never had to struggle with. Not even after Afghanistan when Yinsen’s got to dig a hole in his chest before having said hole stuffed with a miniature nuclear reactor. It looked like having buffed up was giving him the exact opposite reaction it would give any other person.

Objectively he knew he didn’t look that much different. A little younger, maybe. Face smoothed out, hair thickened out just a little bit. He hadn’t looked this playboy-ish since 2008. The muscles he gained from working odd hours in his workshop and piloting a full metal armor were still there, simply more sculpted, more there. He was still… on the lower spectrum of average height. Not that he was complaining, Tony was used to being one of the shorter guy in the room, he didn’t need excessive posturing to gain the room’s attention. Unlike a very certain someone, Tony didn’t suffer from any Napoleon complex.

And yet… despite retaining most of his physical feature intact, he couldn’t’ help but to feel a little disgusted by himself. The extremis regrew his lost finger tips and renewed his old ones, making them smooth and soft. Looking down at his hands, he’s forced to rethink if losing his fingers was really worse than having this weird unused hands that he didn’t even recognize as the replacement.

And that wasn’t even mentioning all the crazy power-ups he’s got now. Honestly, that was the one thing that threw Tony off the most. Never in his life has Tony been more unwilling to be equated to Captain America, and acquiring super-strength was definitely not the right step to do it.

But if it kept him alive, could he really complain all that much?

“Tony?” Pepper cajoled softly. “Are you serious about telling the whole panel about this?”

That jolt Tony out of his reverie. “Yeah, I can’t afford being seen as going behind the accord’s back. I’ve got to push for some amendments about the registration of super-powered individuals, but it’s still not here nor there. The clauses and points Ross slipped in are all infinitely more
dangerous than obligatory record keeping, so they’ve got to go first…. To do that, Ross has to go out of the picture. Any signs of me not complying with the accords to the T is going to get me in so much trouble… especially now.”

“You’re using an awful lot of singular first person pronoun there, Tones…. You know we’d like to help, right?” Rhodey, who up until then was largely silent, told him gravely. Pepper reached for his hand tentatively, as if echoing the same question wordlessly.

Tony furrowed his brow at that and turned his head to Hannah with unspoken request. She nodded once and started to herald the younger audiences out of the room with some difficulties, seeing as one of them was doing a koala impression on Tony, while the other was adamantly insisting that he was ‘grown up enough to listen to the plan, c’mon Mr. St - Tony… I can help!’

“Peter, please… just… go to your Aunt and… I don’t know, prep her for the bomb, maybe?” Tony told the whining teen tiredly.

Seeing the opening, Hannah tried to shake Harley off of Tony. “Harley, baby, I left your sister with Mrs. Johnson when I went here to get you…. She misses her brother, you know?”

Both boys looked at each other in defeat and shuffled out of the room dejectedly under Hannah’s watch. Dear god, there’s two of them now. Rhodey, the traitor, smirked a little at Tony’s exasperated face.

“Right, the tater tots are out, so now spill,” Rhodey said after the boys disappeared from view.

Tony fidgeted and looked down to his lap. Biting his lips, he said, “If I’m telling the panel about extremis, they’re going to ask why such a procedure was necessary.”

Pepper stiffened in realization. She tightened her grip on his hand, and gently asked, “Tony… what happened in Siberia?”

Tony could feel all the rage, all the fear and betrayal that he’s been bottling since Siberia came bubbling out in a rush of panic and terror. His hands started to shook as the room faded out until he’s once again trapped in his broken suit in the Siberian cold. No way out. Alone.

Only to be broken by a foreign warmth that blanketed him from the inside, somehow. He blinked
owlishly and stared at Vision’s unblinking stare.

“Breathe, Tony. You are not there anymore. You are in Manhattan, New York City. Outside temperature is no longer below freezing point. You are safe.”

Blinking some more, Tony wondered dimly if Vision was tapping into the stone in his forehead’s power to stave off his incoming panic attack.

“Yes. It would seem that I am capable of such action now.”

Wait, did he say that out loud, or…

“Yes, Tony. You did say that out loud. Reading into one’s mind, even if I could do so, is something that I’d rather not do without the express permission from said person,” Vision answered seriously, although Tony could hear the note of amusement in his smooth voice.

“I… - thank you, Viz.” Tony croaked, squeezing Pepper’s hand to calm down her fretting.

“Boss, you don’t have to - ”

“It’s OK, Hap. Got to tell you guys sooner or later. Just… just promise me that whatever you see here doesn’t get out. Not just yet.”

Everyone in the room nodded their acquiescence.

“Right, uh…. Fri? Could you… you know, the videos…?” Tony mumbled at the security camera.

F.R.I.D.A.Y. was uncharacteristically silent for a minute before she finally agreed. “… Yes Boss.”

(Tony’s Extremis Chamber, Stark Tower, Manhattan, New York City)
Taste of bile was filling up Pepper’s mouth. Her hands were shaking and she could hear blood rushing frantically in her ears. She wanted to close her eyes, cover her ears, block this horrifying footage playing relentlessly on the holographic screen floating in the middle of the room.

_How dare they,_ Pepper’s mind distantly wailed. _How could they do this?!_

On screen, Captain America was insisting on the Winter Soldier’s innocence. Somewhere deep inside, Pepper could begrudgingly agree with the liar. But all she could see in that moment was the red haze of pure rage. Rage that turned completely into shock and then grief when she saw the cause of the wound in Tony’s chest just a few days ago.

The footage turned into a low quality security tape with no audio near the end. The angle was off, and the image pixelated, but the scene shown on screen was powerful enough to silence the whole room. For a whole 5 minutes.

Vision was the first to break, turning sharply to face the rest of the group before he notified them all about his slipping control on his powers and the gem in his forehead. He then phased down the floor, not bothering to use the door. Happy gripped the armrest of his seat viciously, eyes blazing with murderous anger, while Rhodey was trembling on his wheelchair, growling too low for Pepper to hear, but she caught snippets about ‘that motherfucker’, and ‘blast him dead’.

Pepper herself couldn’t move from her spot. Her mind went blank, and she continued to stare at the empty space where the holographic screen was floating a minute ago. She didn’t even realize she were crying and shaking like a leaf until a hand reached for hers and tugged her down to the sofa. It was Tony. Because of course Tony was worried _for_ her. As though he didn’t just re-watch his parents’ murder. As though he didn’t just relive the betrayal of his childhood hero. And she simply broke down.

She reached one shaky hand after the other towards Tony’s midsection, only to hesitate midair. Before she could take the move back and use her hands to cover her crying face though, Tony simply reached back and pulled her into his embrace. Like he was comforting _her_. She knew it should be the other way around, Tony was the one who got beaten up by _two_ super soldiers after having more than 3 decades of his life turned upside down. _Tony_ was the one who found out that he was worth less than the truth for Captain America. Yet it was Pepper who broke down sobbing into Tony’s chest, clutching his shirt desperately.

“Shh… it’s OK, Pep…. I’m okay now, see?” Tony soothed, carding his fingers through her hair just the way she always liked it. She cried even harder, more because of shame this time.
“No… no Tony, no. You… you almost died! He almost killed you! He lied to you! You’re - ”

“Not dying anymore. Come on Pep, walk it off. I’m alive now, Rogers didn’t kill me. Hell, I was the one who threw the first punch. Not that he didn’t deserve it. But I’m okay now, Really!”

Pepper couldn’t take it anymore. Tony sounded so cheerful, so calm. But she could smell the fake in his voice; he was in pain, and it wasn’t the physical kind. “You’re not okay!” she snapped.

“Tony you were dying less than 24 hours ago! Your body is healed now because we were forced to inject you with extremis! Damn it, Tony! Rogers almost took away your life so you traded it with the one cure-all you refused to take because you didn’t want to be him!”

Tony fell silent at her outburst, and she knew she hit a mark. And yet Tony’s next words startled her all the same. “I don’t care.”

“What?”

“I don’t care, Pep,” he said, completely serious. “I still have a lot of things to finish. A lot of people to take care of. I’ve been neglecting you, all of you, for so long. I’ve been a shitty friend, and an even shittier boyfriend, and I’m so fucking sorry.”

“What?” Pepper asked again in disbelief. Both Happy and Rhodey echoed her sentiment and protest.

“No no no, shut up. I am sorry, OK?! Hap, when’s the last time I thanked you for sticking up with all my bullshit? Platypus, when’s the last time I ever told you I’m the god damn luckiest brat in the world for having you babysitting me since I was 14? Pep, Jesus, I don’t even know where to start with us! You just wanted me to be there for you, to stay safe for you, and look at what I’ve been doing! I’m a god damn mess, alright? You guys are the best things that’s ever happened to me, and I took you for granted! And if taking extremis meant I get to make it right, if I could just get one last chance to make amends, I’d take it. I swear I’d throw away whatever piece of humanity left anytime, because you all deserve so much better than what I’ve been giving you.”

Pepper was speechless. In her defense, so was the other two men in the room. Is that… really how Tony view their relationship? Their friendship? A constant failure on his part?

“Boss….” Happy trailed off, sounding completely lost.
Rhodey, however, was not. “So what? You don’t throw away “I love yous” every five minutes? Big deal, Tones! You might not say it all that much, but you damn well show it with your action. And that’s what matters.”

“Honey Bear, I just - ”

“You just want to give even more than you’ve already done. I know, Boss. We all do. And here’s me saying that you don’t need to say jack shit for us to know you love us.” Happy interjected.

“What he said,” Rhodey finished smugly, ignoring Tony’s floundering. “Tony, you haven’t failed me. I know you think you’ve never been enough, never done enough. But you are… and you did. You’re my best friend, you crazy, have been for almost half a century now. You think I’d stick around if I don’t actually like you?”

“I… well, you’re all good people…. You’ve gotta have your own reason to stick with me,” Tony mumbled, abashed.

Pepper reached out and cup his cheeks in her hands. “Tony, relationships are two way streets. You can’t take all the blame in this…. Not when I’m the one who was too much of a coward to stand by you when you most need it.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “No no. Pep, you already put up with so much of my fuck ups, you just asked me to lay off a bit and I can’t even do that much…. Shit, Pep, if I failed to give you the one thing men should give their partners, then you should leave me!”

Tony cast his eyes down and bit his lower lip. By then, Pepper was standing squarely in front of him, not saying anything in lieu of waiting for Tony to drop the other shoe. From the corner of her eyes, she could see Rhodey and Happy sneaking out of the room, but all she could care about at the moment was how Tony was starting to look at her eyes, visibly steeling himself.

“Pep… I can’t ask you take me back,” Tony said finally, and Pepper felt her heart caving in. Tony must’ve seen her crushed expression, because he hurried to flutter his arms uselessly. “No no no, Pep, please, it’s not - it’s not like that… - ”

“It’s okay, Tony….” she said bleakly. “I was the one who left you… if anything, I should be the one asking you to take me back. But… but I won’t. I don’t have that right anymore, Tony. I - ”

Pepper blinked. “What?”

“What do you mean…? You… you want to ask me…?”

“To take me back, Tony? Yes, of course I want to. I want that more than anything. But, Tony - ”

“Yes.” Tony blurted out.

“Stop talking over me!” Pepper griped.

“Don’t care, Pep. Yes. God, I missed you. One more chance, Pepper… give me this one more time, please….”

“Tony… I…. Jesus, at least let me apologize properly first.” Pepper didn’t even know what to feel anymore at this point. There’s fear of screwing up again, there’s sadness at how Tony was acting as if Pepper was a gift that he has to fight for instead of a wishy-washy girlfriend that run away when things got too rough. But most of all… she felt hope and happiness. She looked at Tony’s eyes that echoed her own hopes and fear for the future. Tony’s eyes that shone with silent plea for her to come back to him.

Well, Pepper’s always a softie for this man. Slowly, she walked into Tony’s space, reached for his hands and looked at him dead in the eyes. “If you’d be willing to forgive me for leaving you… then, yes. Yes, I’d like us to be together again.”

Tony laughed wetly and flung his arms around her, holding her close. Pepper closed her eyes, and let herself get lost in how free Tony’s laughter sounded.

“Don’t know why you think you have anything to say sorry for, Pep,” Tony whispered between his laugh, “but if you’d forgive me for giving you so much headache, then I’d say we’re even.”
Pepper tightened her hug, and mumbled into Tony’s shirt, “We’re going to a couple counseling.”

“How about this? Want to help me find some therapist for my multiple mental health issues in the mean time?”

“Anything for you too. Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“Yes, That will be all, Miss Potts.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry again for the late update... Hope you like this one!!

c'ya!
The Game is Afoot

Chapter Notes

Time for the plot to thicken a little, don't you think?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Tony’s Office, New Avengers Facility, Upstate New York)

Tony clenched his right hand on the edge of his desk, pointedly ignoring the cheap plastic flip phone that was laying mockingly in front of him. Rogers’ letter was starting to smoke, scrunched up in his trembling left hand.

How dare he?! Tony thought scathingly. What kind of apology even is this?!

Tony took a deep breath and, with great difficulty, let go of the almost burning letter. He’s going to need that later. He folded his hands in front of his face, closed his eyes and tried not to start a fire in his office. Or the whole building, for that matter.

He’s been trying to practice controlling his new powers ever since he woke up. But between designing and trying out new braces for Rhodey’s legs (and secretly finding out a new concentration of extremis to maybe kick start the healing process,) fanning out the media fire on Ross, and trying to placate Peter’s very pissed off Aunt, Tony couldn’t really find the time to do much about his extremis other than recording the extend of his new powers and reporting it to the council.

The Accords Council had accepted his new enhancement surprisingly easily, and Tony guessed it would be because of his report about Rogers’ betrayal on Siberia to the council. Just the enough amount of initial reluctance, request for the videos to be kept out of the public, and admission that he’d rather not have the masses know about the tragedy so soon after he himself first found out, and Tony became the golden boy of the Accords Council practically over night. And the best part? He didn’t even have to lie or manipulate anyone with false grieve to achieve that.

He would rather not have to do a press conference about his parents’ murder anytime soon, that much was true. But, should push comes to shove, he wouldn’t hesitate to throw Rogers under the proverbial bus. Literal one, too, if he was being honest with himself.
He’d told the council as much, stating that they all would need the public’s approval if they were to successfully revamp the accords and salvage the Avengers Initiative. The majority of councilmen and women had been charmed by his ‘dedication to accommodate the wishes of the people of the world’. Up to that point, the whole council was in agreement that the Accords, while in need of several heavy revision, must still go on. How were they going to do it, however, was a whole another problem entirely.

Russian Councilman, General Baranovsky was very vocal in his insistence to ‘completely erasing any good image of Captain America from the public.’ Romanian and Sokovian delegates were more than happy to echo the sentiment, with the rest of European delegates trailing after, albeit a little more politely subtle. It was strange, seeing the whole Europe agreeing on a matter unanimously, EU membership be damned.

In contrast, both ASEAN and PIF member states had already came up with proposals for their own respective teams of enhanced individuals and intergovernmental organizations build around said teams, all under the jurisdiction of the Accords, and they were all quite happy with leaving the rogue Avengers be for the time being. Both ASEAN and PIF had claimed that the two proposal were unrelated to each other, but judging by the suspiciously similar layout of both proposals and the mischievous wink Councilwoman Moore had sent to the general direction of smirking Councilman Sinaga, Tony called bullshit on that. He estimated a join operation of ASEAN’s AERA and PIF’s PIERA in about 2 months after their implementation. Hell, even their acronyms rhymed.

The African delegates had been floundering without the leading voice of Wakanda. Their absence had been the subject of scrutiny during the hearing, but ultimately the Council had decided to accept the excuse of ‘civil and political unrest due the death of the Late King T’chaka.’ As it was, the continent seemed to be divided between the Europe’s trigger happy stance and South East Asia, Australia, and Pacific Islands’ more “move on and forget” approach. Both Nigeria and South Africa had been crying for blood during the hearing, while the more politically unstable countries had refused to bring more unnecessary conflict into their midst.

During the whole deal, the US hadn’t been able to do more than observing. Tony’s leak on Ross’ illegal deals had unsurprisingly incited the media’s wrath, but he was still a major political powerhouse with multiple unpaid favors from powerful figures around the globe. As of now, he has only been stripped from his seat in the Accords Council by the majority of vote, but the US Government still hasn’t bent down to public’s demand to take down Ross and put him in investigation.

Tony was under no delusion that Ross wouldn’t fight with ferocity of a cornered animal now. And Tony was doing his best to goat the public opinion against him as subtly as he could. Ross was notorious for using captives and hostages when desperate, and Tony was unwilling to endanger what little family and friends he’s got left by painting himself even brighter target-red.
Tony sighed tiredly. He was starting to feel like the kid from a Home Alone movie; forced to set up traps and clandestine plots to bring down the big bad of the year. He was stretched thin and reduced to using the subtlest method, and Team Cap’s involvement on the “Civil War” (as the media put it) didn’t help his situation in the slightest either. If anything, they just gave Ross an even bigger pool of kids to kidnap from. Both Barton and that Lang guy were fathers (would you look at that… absentee fathers! Surprise!) and their families were all in danger.

Tony had sent drones to the Barton Farm to look for trouble, and so far, his facial recognition software has only been decoding known S.H.I.E.L.D. operatives snooping around the premise. The drones he’d sent to the Langs’, however, had been found broken from the inside out: cables snipped, circuits blasted off, and power cores detached. Tony suspected Dr. Pym hadn’t brought back just the Ant-Man into the fray. S.H.I.E.L.D. data dump mentioned “the Wasp” alongside Pym’s Ant-Man, and Tony’s got a few names for the possible inheritor of the technology. One stood out in particular, and he’s been planning on approaching her in due time.

So that’s two families with at least some form of defense against Ross. Tony’d already tracked down Wilson’s living relatives down to an uncle that lived in fuck-knows-where, Louisiana. Drones had been sent, and once Tony finished restarting the Iron Legion project, a few suits would be dispatched to each household incognito. Same treatment went to Rhody’s family in Philadelphia, albeit with Mama Rhodes’ explicit permission and blessing after she politely refused his offer to house the family in either the Avengers Facility or Stark Tower for maximum safety.

Said offer had also been refused by Hannah Keener (and by May Parker, although Tony mostly assumed her refusal from all the screaming and tongue-lashing she gave him the last time they met.) Hannah had insisted that nobody knew about Tony’s friendship with the family, and assured Tony that they’d lay low until Ross has been taken out. Even Harley was conflicted about the idea instead of jumping at the offer like Tony had thought he would.

“I don’t really mind transferring to a school here in New York, Tony,” Harley had said, “but Hailey really likes her classmates. She’d be sad if she has to move.”

Tony hadn’t the heart to press the issue afterward. So he just sent out even more drones than usual, hoping that Hannah’s effort to stay anonymous would be enough to fool Ross. Somehow, he was glad that May didn’t want anything to do with him at the moment, even if that meant reduced contact with Peter(reduced even more after May refused to allow Peter out “spider-manning”.) At least the boy and his Aunt would be safe for now.

Tony glanced down at his wrist watch. Still a few hours left before his and Pepper’s scheduled couple counselling. Inwardly, he was wondering when had he became this model of healthy relationship and mental well-being that went to couple counselling and therapies willingly. Only a few weeks ago, Tony would’ve laughed at the notion of him on a shrink’s couch talking about his fucked up psyche.
The playboy’s all grown up now, Tony mused. Only took me four decades.

Casting his glance back at the sorry excuse of a burner phone, Tony steeled his resolves. He was done sheltering them all from their own mistakes. “Fri? Track him down.”

F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s answer sounded gleefully smug. “Already done, Boss. I’ve taken the liberty to triangulate his current and former positions, and match them with the flight manifests from and to those locations.”

Tony felt his mouth tugged into a smile. Seemed like his baby girl was growing up too. “Oh? Let me guess, he’s not with his whole team now?”

“No, Boss. Names are changed all the time, but only one male and one female are accompanying him right now.”

“Wilson and Romanov then? They did like running around together searching for dear old Bucky back in the day. With my dimes, too, if you can believe it,” Tony said airily.

“I’m still on the process of computing his insolence, Boss. I’ll let you know when I’ve finished processing the idiocy,” F.R.I.D.A.Y. deadpanned.

“Ah… the sass! You know, one Irish poet used to say that sarcasm is a mark of one’s intelligence, baby girl.”

“Said poet must’ve never had the pleasure of meeting me, then, boss,” answered the A.I.. “As I recall, he also said that sarcasm is the lowest form of wit in the same breath. I took full offense.”

“attagirl.”

“If I may, boss? The position of Captain Parasite and his two entourage is easy to track. But it seems like I can’t even find the rest of Team Crap on any of the flight manifests. So far, all the names in the flight back to the first one from Entebbe International Airport, Uganda to Amsterdam Airport Schipol, Netherlands checked out as legitimate people. Should I be concerned?” F.R.I.D.A.Y. inquired.
Tony mulled it over. The first known flight was from Uganda, out of all places. Could a handful of American with only one black man to blend in the African nation really pass through an airport security? Let alone purchasing a pair of burner phones to be sent to Upstate New York?

“Boss?” F.R.I.D.A.Y. nudged. “Should I check all flight manifests happening that day?”

“Yeah, you do that, F.R.I.D.A.Y.. Looks like our renegades had help for the first few steps from a certain cat.”

“Checked Boss. Two unidentified males and one unidentified female boarded a different flight to Brussels. The female went on alone to a flight to Edinburgh, Scotland and stayed there. The two males went together to Washington D.C.. Only one male boarded a flight to San Francisco after that, I lost the other male in D.C.,” F.R.I.D.A.Y. recounted.

Tony’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline at that. “Huh, what do you know. Looks like Barton is still a spy at heart. Went through the long way home just to hide his farm’s address. I wonder if he’s already there by now.”

“Checking boss, although I doubt he’s going to show up if he doesn’t want to. Dumb as he is he’s still one of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s best graduate.”

“Touche.”

“What about Scott Bang, Boss?”

Tony outright guffawed at that. “Now, now, F.R.I.D.A.Y., there’s a little girl out there that bears the unfortunate name, let’s not make fun of her too, alright?” he said before sobering up. “And to answer your question, I don’t think it’s either of our problem now. The Bartons and Langs got their daddies back, one was sponsored by whatever is left of S.H.I.E.L.D. and the other by Pym. Let’s just say we keep up the recon just in case they decide to stick their toes out of line again.”

“Got it, Boss. What about the rest?”

“Maximoff’s trying to lay low now, I think. Just keep an eye on her location, be ready to report her
to the council if she makes something go boom again. As for Barnes….” Tony trailed off. Multiple therapy session and intensive B.A.R.F. therapy allowed him to approach the subject with less touchiness. He was aware now that continuing to blame him for his parents’ death wouldn’t be much different from how Wanda Maximoff continued to blame him for creating (allegedly) the weapon that killed her parents. But god knew it still hurt to remember how he blamed his father for something that wasn’t his fault.

Tony hoped Rogers’ dreams were filled with his dad’s face. Tony wasn’t the only one that he wronged by hiding Howard and Maria Stark’s murder from their son.

“... Rogers probably left him in Wakanda. Good call, maybe their tech could erase those trigger words for real instead of relying on Rogers’ power of friendship.”

“How much of this are we going to report to the Council, Boss?”

“Playing the hardball aren’t you, Fri? Let’s see…. We tell them Rogers send me a care package and we use it to track him down. We’ll use the “we might use them later” card and convince the Rogers hating council members that we can track them down easily at a moment’s notice. That should keep them appeased enough.”

“Even if we’re telling them to ignore Team Crap’s vigilantism?” asked F.R.I.D.A.Y. skeptically.

“We can only sniff out their location, Fri. It’s not like we know what they are actually doing there. Just leave them be for now, we have an international document and a superhero team to revamp.”

Her disapproval was palpable enough through the silence in his office. “… Very well, Boss,” She answered finally. “I don’t think they are worth your silence, Boss…. But - ” she stopped suddenly.

“Fri?” Tony called, alarmed.

“... Boss…? I think you should see this,” F.R.I.D.A.Y. said hesitantly.

Wordlessly, she fired up a holographic projection of a news on a website. A news with the title of: ‘IRON MAN’S SON DISCOVERED?’
Harley’s face, much younger than he was now, stuffed with the burger from that hole-in-the-wall diner they both secretly liked, smiled at the also younger Tony in the picture.

Tony was thankful that he decided to pace around away from the desk with the letter and burner phone, because the very second he saw that picture, the air around him combusted with enough power to char the floor.

Distantly, he cursed himself for not deleting the picture after it got taken. He fucked up, again, and now a boy has to pay the price. His boy.

Harley…!

(Rose Hill Middle School, Rose Hill, Tennessee)

“Target sighted, ready to engage.”

“Do it.”

She disconnected the line and pocketed the phone inside her dark washed jeans. And she thought smarmy politicians couldn’t hit a new low. Oh well, it wasn’t like she had any moral high ground to stand on either. Here she was, stalking a 7th grader for said smarmy politician. Did she say stalk? She meant kidnap.

Not her proudest moment, but hey, whatever keeps that bastard Ross from her baby brother. If she had to be a monster to keep him safe, so be it.

Besides, the kid’s Iron Man’s son. Supposedly. Probably. That man have been sidestepping pregnant and single moms the day he turned 18, for him to suddenly claim fatherhood for a boy? Weird. But biological son or not, Tony Stark was obviously very fond of this kid. All she had to do was grab the boy, get him to Ross’ basement because apparently he couldn’t get any creepier, and then skedaddle the fuck out of there and let Iron Man bring justice to Ross’ ugly mug.

If all went well, the kid would be unharmed, Stark would kill Ross, and she’d get her brother back.
Easy.

She approached the target, and Jesus, he’s already swarmed by the press. Poor kid. She almost felt better about what she was about to do. At least where he’s going, these vultures wouldn’t be able to come close.

“Hey! Hey! Back off the kid! You want to keep your job, stay within 500 feet away from this kid. Mr. Stark’s order,” she shooed the reporters and journalists and cameramen away with her best official-sounding voice.

She tackled and pushed more bodies out of her way, fished a fake SI ID card from her breast pocket, and knelt in front of the dazed looking kid.

_Do it for him. Do it for him. Do it for him_, she chanted in her mind.

“Hi Harley, My name’s Tracy from SI’s security department. Mr. Stark asked me to grab you away from here and get you to your family in our safe house near here. He’s told you already?”

“N… No? Where’s… where’s Tony? What about mom and Hailey?”

She scrunched her eyebrow in a faux confusion. “He hasn’t? The situation must be more demanding than he made it sound…. Listen, Harley, more of these people are approaching, we gotta move now before we’re forced to use more inconspicuous method. SI law suits can only do so much.”

True to her lies, the reporters who had been chewed out by the possibility of facing the wrath of Tony Stark were already inching back in closer by the second. The kid must’ve been scared shitless, because he quickly agreed and latched on to her proffered left hand.

Well, the less fuss the better. Report said this kid’s a smart one with a healthy dose of distrust of stranger. But she knew from first hand experience just how much fear can impede one’s judgement.

Her nifty emotion projection was helpful, too. She’d like to stay clear from the mind whammy
categories, but emotion projection was fair game, for her. After all, a good public speaker could make the whole room feel the way they want them to feel just using their words.

And she just happened to be better than the best without even opening her mouth.

*I'm coming, Cassi. Wait for me.*

Chapter End Notes

Oh.... you think I'm done with Harley?

NEVER!!!! MUAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA

I am *so* sorry.

And yes, I made Harley's whole family's initial HK. Sue me.

C'ya!
The Kidnapped Boy

Chapter Notes

Looks like Tracy's not the most popular gal right now... Well, hope this one explains her backstory for a bit, because she's definitely getting a redemption arc.

Unlike someone that I know.

Also, I tried to reconcile this fic with Homecoming, but I really couldn't. It's going to be very non-compliant with that movie. Just a heads up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Ross’ Safe House, Nassau County, Long Island, New York)

"Are we here yet Miss Tracy? Where’s my mom and sister? Why’s Tony still not contacting me?" The kid, Harley, asked incessantly. Turned out, his confusion and skepticism won out against the fear that curbed out his strings of questions not an hour ago.

Cassidy’s babbling face assaulted her face, superimposing the kid’s. A fresh wave of guilt almost made her keel on the spot. All those time spent in the Chopper with the kid, feeling his confusion and foggy shock, was making her soft.

Do it for him. Do it for him. Do it for him.

“I’m so sorry, kid,” she said finally, pointedly not looking at him. Hearing, rather than seeing, the sedative dart that was shot at him. But even in her mind, she could feel his shock, anger, and fear from her betrayal. They tasted like Cassidy’s when Ross’ men came for them after they’ve been sold out.

She gritted her teeth and glared at the hallway, where the devil incarnate himself was standing, looking disgustingly smug. Confidently, she stepped forward, only to have a dart shot at her as well. This time, she did keel over from the wooziness, not noticing Ross’ men putting cuffs and power suppressing collar on her.

“What the fuck do you want from me Ross?! You asked for the kid? There! Give me my brother,
now! We’ve got a deal!” She roared, Trying to sound as intimidating as possible when she couldn’t even stand up on her own.

“If I were you, Ms. Crowley, I’d have a little brother that I would want to watch my tone for,” Ross sneered slyly. “And if you’d look back to our agreement, it was your brother’s freedom for the Stark’s kid. Heard anything about yours there?”

Tracy snarled and opened her mouth to retort, but another sedative dart was shot at her upper arm. And everything went dark.

(Parkers’ Apartment, Queens, New York City.)

Peter’s eyes widen at picture on the TV.

_Harley?! How?? Didn’t he say Tony already took care of that picture?_

Beside him, his aunt looked almost as shocked as he felt. “Isn’t that the Harley boy you told me about?”

“Yeah, that’s him May. Hold on, I gotta call him,” Peter answered as he scrambled to find Harley’s name on his contact list. Gently, he didn’t need any more cracks on his screen from accidentally tapping too hard.

The ringback tone kept on sounding from the speaker, but Harley didn’t answer. Undeterred, he tried to call him again. And again. And again.

“May! He didn’t answer the phone! Oh my god, what if something happened to him? What if he’s hurt? What if he’s - ”

“Calm down, Peter, maybe he just put his phone on silent? He just got outed as Stark’s kid, he’s bound to have some stalkers on his phone.”
May’s got a point… but Peter wasn’t buying it. Something was wrong… very wrong. “May, I… Can I call Ton - ”

“You will not,” his aunt hissed, evidently still very pissed off at Tony. She was adamant about him stopping being Spider-man, and according to her, that included having no contact at all with Tony Stark. Not that it stopped him from sneaking out of his room wearing his old suit, of course.

“Please, May…. Something’s not right here, I just know it…. Please, let me call Tony to check for me. I owe Harley for helping me, May… you gotta understand,” he begged.

Aunt May chewed her lips, mulling it over for 3 long minutes. “Fine,” she said finally, “but you put that on loud speaker.”

Peter hurried to call his mentor, thanking May profusely.

The call was answered almost immediately. “Kid?”

God, Tony sounded so tired. And angry. Peter was almost afraid of asking him about the one thing that undoubtedly caused said fatigue and anger. “Hey, Tony? Mr. - Tony? This is Peter… Peter Parker? Spider-man? I… uh….”

Peter cursed his awkwardness inwardly.

“Slow down, kid. Is this about Harley?” Tony cut to the chase.

“I… - yeah. Yeah, I just saw the news…. Is he - is Harley okay, Tony?” he asked, still stammering, to his own dismay.

Tony fell silent, and Peter felt cold sweat running down his back.

Oh no.

“Peter… Harley’s missing. Someone kidnapped him.”
"So… you’re kidnapped too now, Ms. Kidnapper?"

“I will end you kid.”

“Touchy subject?”

“Your face will be touchy after I’m done slapping it.”

“Okay, okay. Yesh.”

Tracy sighed and closed her eyes in defeat. The now-familiar feeling of embarrassment and self-loathing flared even hotter inside. She knew that Ross was not someone to trust. But shit, this is a new low, even for him.

“So….”

“Look, kid, I’m sorry I kidnapped you, OK? Said it once, said it again, now shut it. Please.” The sympathy she felt for the kid was slowly evaporating with every childishly petty remarks the boy gave.

Even without her powers she knew how smug the kid must’ve felt, and she couldn’t even deny him the fun. She did kidnap him, after all, and she wasn’t proud of the fact. She did the deed under duress, that’s not a lie. In fact, she’s sure that she could win the case in court, if that ever happened. But did that make what she did right?

*I’d be lucky to even make it to the court room after Stark’s done with me.*

“Why are you even here, though? Aren’t you, like, Ross’ lackey or something?”
She’s going to smack this boy, handcuffs be damned. “I’m not,” she spat. “He’s got my brother
locked up, said he’d let him go if I ‘napped Stark’s kid. Sucks for me for not reading between the
line.”

Miraculously, that shut him up. For 30 seconds. “I’m sorry about your brother,” he said, sounding
completely sincere for once. “You think he’s still here somewhere?”

The thought of her brother made her heart clench a little. “I don’t know,” she admitted, “he said
he’d let him go. But he could be lying through his teeth for all I know.”

“I’m sorry,” Harley said again. “I mean, it’s still a dick move, kidnapping me, but… I’m still sorry
about your brother.”

Tracy winced. “Yeah, thanks. Got a little sympathy left for me, though? Gonna need it in about a
few hours. Your dad’s gonna murder me for this... not that I’d blame him if he does, but still….”

Harley looked stuck between a blush and a frown. “Tony’s not… I’m not really… you know….”

“You’re not his kid?” she blinked. “Sure look like one.”

The poor boy stammered and blushed even more at that. That was almost… cute? “I’m blond,” he
mumbled finally. Seriously?

“Ever heard of recessive gene, boyo?” she clucked in disapproval. “You’re not that blond
anyway…. Besides, that’s not what I’m talking about.”

“What are you talking about, then?” he pursed his lips. Perhaps aiming for challenging, but with
that blush on his face, he just managed to look like a grumpy toddler.

“The pap’s pic, kid. For a guy known to be the biggest asshole on the continent, he sure looked all
soft and fatherly with you.”
Wow, okay, that's one hell of a blush over there.

Shaking her head, she decided to look around the basement instead of indulging the embarrassed boy besides her. What she saw made her furrow her eyebrows. There’s a ventilation shaft up on the ceiling in the corner of the room, but the ceiling’s way too high for her to reach, and there’s no chair or desk she can climb in the room. The door was solid metal and looked very heavy. No doubt reinforced to withstand conventional weaponry. Not that she had any here.

She sighed. She knew she couldn’t just give up. Cassidy needed her. Locked up or not, he’s still a wide-eyed 10-years-old with a superpower that was much more conspicuous than hers. If (and it’s a big if) Ross did let her brother go, she knew she told him once to run back as fast as he could to the general direction of their home in New Jersey. But who knew what kind of state his brother was let out in? What if Ross let him out with a suppressor collar attached? Her simplistic escape plan for him was hanging on the fact that he could run faster than a sports car with his powers fully engaged.

How’s he going to survive New York’s midnight without his powers? Without her?

Tracy felt Harley’s stare from her side. “What? Mommy never taught you it’s rude to stare?”

Harley snorted, “Yeah, no. That’s a power suppressing collar right? You have some kind of superpower to escape?”

“Even if I get this off, I don’t think I can mind bend the door to open up,” she sighed. “Mental power’s not exactly the most useful in this situation.”

“Mental power?” Harley asked, hesitant. “You didn’t, like, mind rape me to get me here, right?”

“I still have a few morality left in me, kid. I used emotional projection on daily basis, but mind whammy’s just for a select few to use. Besides, you would know if I use my power for something that big, trust me.”

Harley seemed to trust her words. Probably because she’s currently unable to use her powers to make him believe her. Or maybe he’s just naive like that.

“How far can your power reach? Can you, like, make an illusion or something? Just mind control?”
he asked.

“Gee, kid… I don’t know? Depends on what I’m using my power for I guess? If I want complete control I’ve got to be in the same room, at least. And illusion? What? Like the ones that can be seen by cameras too? I don’t know, never tried. Maybe? What good would that do anyway? It’s not like I can take the collar off.”

Instead of answering, Harley simply lifted his hands up. Separately. Tracy blinked.

Smirking, Harley rifled through his shirt sleeve and pull out a bent hairpin.

“Well, would you look at that. Not as helpless as you look, are you?” she said, impressed.

Shrugging, Harley started to work on her handcuffs. “Tony told me once about the time he first got kidnapped when he was 5. He said the dumb ones look down on kids, so they don’t search the body.”

“Started the escape gig early, didn’t he? I thought Afghanistan was a one-off. Must be why media never caught his kidnapping until then,” she said, rubbing the feeling back into her wrists. That was fast, the kid’s good at this.

“Nah… that’s because his dad was a dick. ‘Wouldn’t want a heir that couldn’t even escape 2 bits kidnapper by himself’, Tony said,” Harley recalled as he moved to open her collar.

“Wonderful. The man got an example of what kind of bad behaviour to avoid when your kid got kidnapped. I really am gonna die, aren’t I?”

Harley huffed behind her, finally finding the keyhole hidden there. “You know, I don’t think he’s one to kill indiscriminately like that.”

“Ten Rings’ vanished, that guy Stane’s dead, and no one can find big enough remains of that Killian character to bury. So you tell me what’s he gonna to me.”

Harley hesitated. He kept on fiddling with her collar, staying silent the whole time. Who’s bright
idea was it, anyway, to secure a high-tech superpower suppressing collar with lock and key?

“He’s… gonna be mad, yeah. But… I think I can talk him down for a while, just so he can listen about your brother. Just don’t… like, appear to argumentative or something. I mean… at least you didn’t deny what you did was wrong, right?” Harley answered finally, letting out a small ‘whoop’ of victory when he finally disengaged the collar.

Tracy huffed. “I don’t think he’s going to wait long enough to blast me to pieces, shorty. Besides, I don’t really think I should just go scot-free for this. Hostage or no hostage, I still kidnapped you. I don’t think you should like me too much. What kind of self-respecting hostage let his kidnapper, who’s got a mind control power, out of her bindings?” She cricked her neck and added as an afterthought, “Nice job on the collar, by the way.”

Harley chuckled a little. “Who said I like you, lady? We’re just on the same boat here. So why don’t you make yourself useful now and go try some illusion or something?”

“Watch it, kid. I don’t need my powers to smack you,” Tracy said, grinning.

“Child abuse!”

“Shush.”

“Shushing.”

(Parkers’ Apartment, Queens, New York City.)

“May!”

“NO!”

“You don’t understand May, I have to - ”
“Peter Benjamin Parker, You will *not* go out and put yourself in harm’s way!” May’s eyes shone with the dangerous sort of gleam that always made Peter shut up and put up in the past.

But not now. Not when a life was at stake. Harley’s life. “Please May… Harley might be in danger right now, he’s alone, and he’s scared…. I *can* help save Harley, May. I got the power to do it now. If I just stand by and let anything bad happen to him… that’s gonna be my fault. Please. I’ll just stick around Queens, Nowhere too far, I swear.”

May looked pissed. The last time she used this glare, she aimed it at Tony and the man shriveled under it. *Tony fucking Stark* was cowered by his aunt’s death glare. He almost felt smug for not giving in under the same threat.

“You listen to me now, Peter, and listen carefully. You do *not* owe anyone your help. There is a fine line between altruism and idiocy, and you have been crossing that line ever since you put on that stupid pajamas you called suit,” Aunt May was breathing heavily, anger and pain clearly outlined in the thinness of her lips and the tightness of her jaw. “You want to help? You call the police and step the fuck out of their way. Jesus, Pete, the world’s not gonna blame you for not putting yourself in danger!”

Peter dropped his head wistfully. He didn’t want to use this card, but his aunt wasn’t going to budge. “Aunt May… I love you, and I *am* sorry for doing this to you…. But you should know… I’m not going to stop being Spider-man. With or without your permission, I will still go out there and do whatever I can to help. You can let me have the suit Tony made so I can be safer… or not. I’ll just make another web-shooters myself and head on out.”

Aunt May gaped at him, nostrils flaring dangerously and eyes burning so viciously, he was surprised she didn’t start to smoke from her ears. Distantly, he remembered the video of a boy coming out as gay to his parents MJ showed him because she needed ‘a crying face model for practice’. The parents ended up kicking the poor boy out of his own home.

Peter sweated nervously. He was starting to regret his wording choices, but May, surprisingly hung her head in defeat and chuckled sadly.

“If Ben’s still here, I’d strangle him for teaching you to be so self-sacrificing.”

Peter scooted closer to May’s seat and took her hands in his. “No, May,” he murmured. “You’re the one who taught me how to be kind.”
May’s eyes filled with tears, but she her smile spoke of pride and love. “Stay safe, honey. Call Stark, make sure you get all backups you can get. Don’t go to far, and be back before midnight.”

Peter smiled wanly at his aunt, feeling stupid for his previous worry and fear. “I larb you, Aunt May.”

“I larb you too, sweetheart. Go, your suit’s in my wardrobe. Don’t forget to call Stark, see if he’s already sending out search parties.”

“Will do, May!” Peter shouted as he ran to her room.

*It’s going to be a long night, Peter thought. Better get going. Harley’s waiting.*

(New Avengers’ Facility, Upstate New York)

“Damnit Peter, I thought you were just looking for Harley out there!” Tony was definitely having an aneurysm one of these days.

“I was, Mr. S - Tony! But there was an explosion! And those people’s got some alien tech! And then there’s this flying guy, and then he just - he just swooped down like a monster, and he picked me up and he - he - he took me up a thousand feet and just drop me! What if they’ve got Harley too?” Peter babbled, voice a little winded and shivery as he wrung his mask dry. “How’d you find me? Did you put a tracker in my suit or something?”

Tony sighed. “I put everything in your suit, including this heater,” he said nonchalantly as he turned on the heater in Peter’s suit.

Peter moaned in appreciation. “Whoa. That’s better… thanks.”

“What were you thinking?!”

“It’s just - one day Harley got outed and kidnapped, and then suddenly there’s people selling alien
tech on the street, and now there’s a - a - a super villain or something flying around? Mr. - Tony, you’ve gotta admit that’s a little weird! The guy with the wings is obviously behind all of this! I gotta take him down!"

Tony could feel his temper starting to flare. Not a rare occurrence, now, after Harley went missing. “Take him down, now, huh?? Steady Crockett, there are people who handle this sort of thing.” Damn, that came out a little mocking. But Harley’s still missing, Peter almost got killed because his parachute failed, now the damn kid was insisting to put himself in even more danger. It’s a miracle he hadn’t melt anything yet.

“The Avengers?” Peter asked quietly.

Tony felt a sharp sting in his chest. “No, no, no. This is a little below their pay grade.”

“Anyway, Mr. Stark, Tony, you didn’t have to come all the way out here. I had that. I was fine.”

“Oh, I’m not… here.” Tony flipped the legionnaire’s mask up. “Thank god I finished the legionnaire already or you would be toast right now.”

Tony adjusted his remote control sunglasses, thanking whatever deities up there that had made the new sensor-motor implant compatible with his now-enhanced physiology. “Look, forget the flying vulture guy, please! If he does have anything to do with Harley, I’ll take care of him myself, he doesn’t, then let the police and FBI handle him!”

“Why?!”

“Why?? Because I said so!” Tony yelled. That’s bad, he didn’t want yell. His dad liked to yell, and although he knew his dad meant well, he still couldn’t help feeling resentful even years after his last scolding. So he took a deep breath and spoke again with a pointedly calmer tone, “Stay close to the ground. Build up your game helping the little people, go around look for clue about Harley. Can’t you just be a friendly, neighborhood Spider-man?”

Peter’s face scrunched up. “But I’m ready for more than that now! I could help Harley!”

Tony flipped the legionnaire’s mask down with an air of finality. “No, you’re not. You want to help me find Harley? How about you make sure I don’t have to find you too at the same time,
“That is not what you thought when I took on Captain America!”

Tony clenched his teeth at the name. “Trust me, kid, he wanted to lay you out, he would have. I would know.”

Peter flinched and looked down guiltily. Tony couldn’t help but feel a little bad for flaying the kid like this. Both of them were quiet now, and it was awkward as all hell.

“Listen to me, you come across these weapons again, call Happy. If you find anything else that you find suspicious, something you think have anything to do with Harley, call me. I’ll check it out, and if I think it’s safe enough for you, I’d call you in.”

“Why Happy?”

“Because I called in the FBI and I need someone I can trust to coordinate with them.” Tony heaved a heavy breath. “You know, it’s never too early to - who’s there?!” he said suddenly when something moved behind the monkey bars Peter was sitting on.

Peter whipped around to where the legionnaire was training it’s repulsor, and clumsily put his mask back on.

The shape stopped suddenly in fright, and peaked slowly around a tree to reveal…

“It’s a kid,” Peter breathed dazedly.

“You’re a kid,” muttered Tony to himself, zooming in on the new kid’s face, only to be shown the myriad of bruises and cuts not just on his face, but all over his skinny malnourished body.

Tony felt bile coming up from his throat. What kind of monster could’ve done that to a kid?!

The poor kid was swaying on the spot, lips trembling from the cold and fear. “You - you’re Iron
Man and S - Spider-man.”

Peter seemed to be jolted out of his daze. He walked slowly, with the confidence that he didn’t have out of the suit. “Hey, buddy. Are you alright? Who… who did that to you?”

Fat tears started to stream down his little face. Hiccuping, the boy fell down to his knees, unable to hold his own weight. “Help me…. Please help me…. My sister… they’ve got my sister, please… you gotta - you gotta save my sister!”

“Peter, the kid’s going to a shock. I need you to make sure he’s alright until I get there. ETA 3 minutes.” Tony called another armor and let it wrap around him before he jet out of the window in a hurry.

On his HUD, he saw Peter trying keep the kid warm without touching any fresh wounds. “Hey, it’s gonna be alright…. C’mon don’t cry, please? Tony what do I do? He’s crying now.”

“You think I’m more experienced with little humans than you, kid? I don’t know… ask his name, or something?”

“Hey… buddy? Kid? You have a name? Your sister’s? Do you know who took your sister?” Peter was starting to babble again now. Tony sped up even more.

“C - Cassidy,” the boy sobbed. “My name - My name’s Cassidy Crowley….”

“Alright, Cassidy.” Tony tried to lower his voice to soothe the crying boy. “Do you know where your sister is? Who got him?”

Surprisingly, Cassidy nodded at him. “I just… I just ran away from there…. I - I heard them talking about someone… they - they were calling someone about… about my sister and, and a boy? He’s got - he’s got a funny name. Like a motorbike.”

Tony’s blood ran cold.

“They said… they called their boss… Ross.”
Well? Hope you can at least begin to forgive Tracy now.... She's trying, really, she is.

I made her with the intention of contrasting her character with Steve's later in the story. So I made it so her situation got a bit more pressing (with her brother literally kidnapped and tortured if she doesn't comply... kinda like Bucky in that sense), and made her realize that what she did was wrong, regardless of how unwilling she was when she did it (unlike *someone* that we know)

Dw, Tony's not gonna be as quick as Harley to forgive and forget. But I want him to be able to show mercy where it's due. Again, making some parallel to how he's going to at least acknowledge Bucky's... partial innocence, at least, in his parents' murder.

Hope you like where I'm taking this story! C'ya!
Peter stared at the fidgeting boy in front of him, mouth hanging open a little. Absently, he heard Tony’s sharp inhale broadcast from the Legionnaire armor at the mention of Ross’ name. No doubt that three minutes ETA was going to be fairly inaccurate now.

Called it, he thought as the Iron Man zoomed into view, flying faster than ever.

Peter still felt a few remaining twinges of irritation from his last bickering with Tony, that much was true. But between Cassidy’s increasingly wobbly legs (Peter had to help him sit on the ground before he fell down at one point,) and Tony’s new, very sick cool armor, he couldn’t help but gawk.

Harley had told him before about the new armor Tony had been building to work with extremis. Neither one of them had actually seen the armor, but Harley’d been raving about the all new design. Seeing the armor in person was a whole another experience all together: The new suit was slick and streamlined, even more humanoid than Tony’s previous ones. The paint job was darker, more menacing. Blood red and dark gray, with black lines connecting the multiple smaller arc reactor to the one embedded in the chest plate. A stark (Peter’s been waiting to use that pun for almost 8 years now) contrast to his usual hot rod and gold with the glowing blue circle center piece.

The armor looked so cool, Peter was barely holding back his nerdgasm.

Mercifully, Tony solved that problem easily by slipping out of the armor and strode to where Peter and Cassidy were sitting on the ground. Peter could see all the tenseness and the barely repressed stress practically oozing out of his body. It was a wonder how he kept his face from anything other
than a gentle calming smile.

“Heya. Cassidy, right? I’m Tony, Tony Stark.”

Peter propped the boy by his back as he swayed on the spot to nod at Tony, earning himself a slight smile of approval from the older man.

Do not preen. Do not preen. He told himself sternly. Obviously, his traitorous face decided to blush instead.

“You OK, Cassidy? Not gonna lie, you don’t look so hot right now,” Tony continued when he didn’t receive further answer.

“Ye - yea… I’m just… wobbly?”

“You sure? Spider-man here’s going to take you to a safe place, we can look at your wounds there, OK?” Tony said while Peter nodded, already thinking about ways he could make some sort of baby sling with his webbing.

Cassidy, however, was having none of it. “But - but… - what about my sister?! Please… Mr. Stark, she’s all I have left…. I - ” he choked before breaking down crying, clinging to Peter while he sobbed.

If peter wasn’t so flustered himself, he would’ve laughed at Tony’s helplessly confused face.

“Hey… hey, come on now…. I’ll save your sister, I promise. Cassidy? Come on, squirt, we need to treat those bruises and cuts, yeah? Come on…. Pete? A little help?” he rambled.

“Uh… I’m not good with crying traumatized kids either? Should we take him to the tower? Maybe Miss - Pepper, I mean Pepper… maybe she can help?”

Tony frowned a little, looking at the still sobbing Cassidy, now effectively cradled in Peter’s arms.
Jesus, did Ross starve him or something? he thought when he felt bones poking at his ribs.

“Kid…? It’s gonna be okay, I promise. You can go to my tower with spider-man while I go save your sister, capisce? I just need the address. If you don’t know, I’ll take some general direction, anything you can remember,” Tony tried again.

Miraculously, Cassidy calmed down a little and mumbled into Peter’s suit, “…Nassau.”

Wait, what?

Tony blinked. “Nassau… as in… Nassau County?! Kid, that’s 40 minutes drive from here!”

Peter winced. Same, man… probably could use a little less yelling, though.

The boy fidgeted in his arms, nervous, so Peter held on tighter, just the way he liked it when he was having a break down. “I… uh…. I run fast.”

Huh. Could the boy be… enhanced? Like him? He looked worriedly at Tony, who was now looking at Cassidy, deep in thought.

‘he’s got a funny name. Like a motorbike,’ Cassidy had said. Harley.

Peter knew that every hero’s got their own blind spot, and Harley happened to be one of Tony’s (and one of his, too, come to think of it…. Even Ned didn’t know about Spider-man, and Ned’s his best friend.) Both of them were compromised when Harley got kidnapped, but Tony was doubly so.

Still… something was wrong. Very wrong.

Why would Ross, of all people, ever let an enhanced kid run away without tailing him? Why would he keep the enhanced boy in New York City, of all places? And he got Harley, too? So shortly after Harley’s relationship with Tony got thrown out to the public?

Tony looked determinedly at Cassidy. Another time, and Peter would’ve been excited to see that
look on Iron Man’s face. That’s the look that promised action and butt-kicking; Iron Man was going to save the day!

But all Peter could feel now was dread. Either Tony was too compromised to recognize the trap, or he’s seeing it, but just didn’t care enough about the trap.

“...Tony, no. It’s a trap.”

“Strike one, kid. No Star Wars reference until you got Harley back to geek with.”

“I’m serious, man! You can’t go alone, it’s a trap!”

“You think I don’t know that, kid?! I don’t care! Look at what that monster has done to this kid! You think he’s going to hold back on Harley?” Tony yelled, eyes all wide and manic. Peter felt a shiver running down his spine.

He’s slipping.

Peter had to say something. He can’t just let Tony go while he’s like this. “Tony, please… think about what would happen to Harley if Ross get the better of you as well…. You still don’t have any clearance from the council to storm Ross’ house. If you got captured… it would be Siberia all over again!”

Tony flinched back, still breathing hard. Extremis ran faint golden under his skin. Peter shifted a little at the sight it, trying to move Cassidy a little further away, in case Tony lost it completely. Peter tried to be subtle about it, but it seemed like Tony still caught the movement. His eyes widened in what looked like hurt to Peter, and he felt a little bad about it. But Tony stopped glowing after that, so he’d take it as a good surprise instead.

The older man took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment. “Sorry about that. That was… I don’t even know how to justify that. I’m… I’m sorry.”

Peter sighed with relief at Tony’s genuinely contrite face. Phew, crisis averted. Nice one, Parker.
“Right! So… uh… we go back to the tower?”

Tony gave him a look. “No, you go back to your house. It’s almost midnight, and I don’t want to piss off your aunt again. I’ll take it from here, Spider-man. Thank you for your help.”

Peter groaned. Right, curfew. The joy of being a minor. He considered resistance for a second, but the look on Tony’s face wasn’t one that was willing to compromise. He sighed. “Are you gonna need help with Cassidy, though?” he couldn’t help but ask a little hopefully.

Tony chuckled and beckoned the silent legionnaire. “Fri, Evac mode. Destination New Avengers Facility.”

Peter watched, mouth wide open, as the armor folded into a capsule-shaped shuttle. Even Cassidy stopped crying to gawk at the red and gold…

“Spaceship!” yelled Cassidy excitedly.

Tony smiled indulgently. “Well, I don’t know about the “space” part, I’m not there yet. But this one’s taking you to the Avenger’s base. You’ll stay there for a while, at least until we get your sister out. Sounds good?”

Cassidy nodded, and with Peter’s help, got into the rescue pod.

Damn, this thing is so cool.

Tony and he exchanged a goodnight, and then he was swinging through the night again.

Only to be reminded rather rudely that Ned was supposed to come and have a sleep over that night.

Damnit, I knew I forgot something.
As it turned out, Tracy really was able to make an illusion of sort.

The flower that she’d conjured was very much visible to both of them, so there’s no doubt that it could be seen on camera too. A little fiddling and tinkering with the fake-rose later, she’d succeeded in making the flower smell like a real one too.

Really, the only problem with the illusion was that, while they could feel a touching sensation from coming in contact with it, the fake-rose was definitely not tangible. Harley’s finger had slipped through the petals when he tried to touch it, and the fake-rose instantly vanished.

Well, she was new to this part of her power, so he was impressed nonetheless.

They’d debated the merit of making a huge mess just outside the house, to make Ross and his men think they’ve managed to escape. Tracy shot that idea down after reminding him that even if Ross’ men were stupid enough to left the house empty, they still couldn’t open the door from the inside. Not with the door not having any keyhole for Harley to pick.

So Harley made up another plan involving invisibility, loud noise, and a fake hole in the wall. Tracy shot down that too. Saying that they’re underground, no one would believe a hole opening to the outside from below the ground.

“Well you make a plan, then, if you’re so smart.” Harley was not sulking. Nope.

Tracy, the smug bastard, was smirking. “Come now, shorty. Don’t pout. Why don’t you stop thinking about explosion, and start small for a change.”

OK, so he was pouting a little. Sue him, she was annoying. “So you do have a plan. What’s the point on making me do all those thinking then??”

“Hey, don’t look at me. You’re the one who rambled, I didn’t make you do anything.”

Harley grumbled in response. “Fine. Tell me about your plan, then, O Crafty One.”
Tracy grinned a little sheepishly. “Still getting there, actually.”

Harley groaned and did a very epic face-palm, and Tracy still had the gall to snicker at him.

“To be fair, my plan’s kind of hedging on your dad busting Ross’ ass. Hopefully he came with reinforcement, though. I don’t know about you, but a bunch of people with something to block my power sounds like a prepared bunch.”

“Wait, what?”

“Uh… yeah, hadn’t mentioned it yet. I’ve been trying to get a read on those bastards. Nada.”

“Shit. What about your brother?”

Tracy’s face scrunched up. “OK, first of all, watch that mouth. And no, I can’t feel my brother.”

“You think Ross let him go?”

“…You know what? I think he did. For some ungodly reason, I think he really did let my brother out.”

That… didn’t make any sense. By this point, Harley couldn’t believe in the fact that Ross would be capable of doing anything remotely honorable, let alone altruistic. Unless…

He felt blood rushing away from his face. “Oh shit.”

“Told you to watch your goddamn mouth, shorty.”

Harley was too preoccupied with horror to even care. “Tracy…. Shit, we gotta get outta here, now! This whole thing is a trap!”
Tracy lift one eyebrow at him. “Duh. Why else would he take you? He wants Stark, and you’re the best bait for that.”

“Don’t you get it?! He’s got me as a bait, yes. But why would he let your brother, an enhanced minor, go if not for him to lead Tony here?”

That seemed to flick the switch in Tracy’s head. “Oh god…. the power blocking, you think it would work on Iron Man armor??”

“Ross wouldn’t bother power-proofing this house if he doesn’t plan on standing his ground here. And with me being kidnapped… - ”

“ - He’s not going to think straight,” Tracy finished, horror-struck.

“Shit… shit… what do we do??” Harley panicked.

Tracy looked at him carefully, brows scrunched in thought. “I think I got an idea. How much do you trust me?”

“Not a lot.”

“Good,” Tracy said, eyes glowing blue as she used her powers.

(San Francisco, California)

Rechecking his human disguise for the 10th time in an hour, the Vision walked (still a somewhat awkward movement to emulate convincingly) towards the nondescript cafe. Immediately, he scanned the whole premise, looking for both his… associate and potential trouble. In light of current events, Vision found it appropriate to use the alien power resting upon his forehead for a more thorough scan; detecting malicious intention within a quarter mile radius.
Satisfied with the lack of traitorous intent, he nodded at the shoulder length haired woman, sitting on the table for two in the back of the cafe. The woman, very obviously used to hide any uncouth expression from her face, blinked twice at his… more humane appearance.

“Good morning. I do apologize for my tardiness,” he opened smoothly, pointedly avoiding her name per their agreement to meet anonymously.

The woman shook her head elegantly, standing up to offer a hand shake. “I was in the area, so I came early.”

Nodding, but offering no further small talk, the Vision sat down. “I believe you have reached a conclusion regarding my proposition about the Accords?”

“I have.”

“And?”

“I would like to propose a counter offer.”

Raising his eyebrow, he answered, “And what would that be?”

Expression controlled, the woman pushed a document towards Vision. “If I sign, and by extension, help safe Mr. Stark’s son, I would like him to help me safe one of my own as well.”

The Vision deliberated. Such must be the way a renowned businesswoman such as Ms. Potts and his associate operate. A tit for tat, as they say. “While I can understand perfectly of your reasoning, I would like to remind you that what you ask of me is not something that I can answer in my capacity as a legal signatory of the Accords.”

“As a friend of Mr. Stark’s, then? I am not asking you to go behind his back and agree on his behalf… I simply ask for you to give me a chance to talk with the man himself on this.”
Vision’s hesitance must’ve been perceptible to her, because she continued speaking without waiting for his response. “I understand that my… friend hadn’t shown a goodwill towards Mr. Stark from the get go, nor do my family’s history with his endorse any faith that I won’t betray him as soon as the opportunity present itself. But I implore you to see beyond the mistakes men around me had made. I am not my father, regardless of my relationship with him. I am a businesswoman first and foremost; I understand the importance of unlikely partnership, and frankly, I need his help as much as he needs mine right now.”

“Which is to say that neither one of you are desperate enough to provide sufficient reason to work together?”

The woman smiled. “I believe so, yes. My help would not provide him anything more than convenience, as would his for me. I would like to think that I am cutting him a good deal, considering that his need is a little more desperate than mine right now.”

This must be why Colonel Rhodes (and his name still cause regret to sting him, even after the man had absolved Vision from the fall that took the pilot’s mobility,) insisted on not “pissing Pepper off”. The offer was equally beneficial for both parties, and the woman hadn’t lied when she told him that Tony’s need was more pressing than hers.

Yet it still felt like his side was the one paying the heavier price.

*Needs must. Tony would not take the initiative to reach out while he is still so heavily compromised.*

“I will present your proposal to Mr. Stark. I cannot, however, guarantee that he will say yes,” he said at last.

“Will you present it in the way that is the most likely to be well received?” she challenged.

“I will present it in the way that is the least argumentative while still retaining every possible aspect of honesty.”

The woman nodded, satisfied. “I wouldn’t expect anything less. Thank you.”
The Vision was quick to reply before his associate could stand up. “Would you be comfortable with waiting outside the room while I break the news to Mr. Stark? I believe he would appreciate the haste should he accept your counter offer.”

Raising one elegant eyebrow, the woman answered, “Does this mean you are confident that he would most likely accept?”

“I believe that, just like you are not your father, Mr. Stark is not his. I believe that he would be able to see this matter in an objective light, given the chance.”

The woman simply nodded and shook his hand in agreement. The Vision was hoping that he was not making a miscalculation as they walked out of the cafe and head to the airport.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you like that one.... And please, for the love of god, don't spoil anything in the comment section. I've been avoiding the internet this past week because Hope is bae and I've been waiting for her to kick ass since 2015.

At least wait until tomorrow if you want to blurt out some spoiler my way, I'm going to watch the movie (finally) later today.

And thank you for the kind words you all sent. I'm staying save and happy, hope you guys are, too. :’))

C'ya!
WARNING!!! There may be some spoiler of sort for Ant-man and the Wasp in this chapter. I waited a week or so, but in case you haven't watched it yet...

It's not a lot, but better be safe than sorry.

Also, Homecoming canon are officially out of the window now, sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

(New York City Class C Airspace)

Getting his mind away from the tunnel vision he’s been having ever since Harley’s kidnapping was an achievement that Tony wished he could claim for himself. As it stood, however, he owed Peter yet another debt. Naturally, he paid him back by being a dick and yelled at the kid.

Howard would’ve been so proud.

But that’s neither here nor there. For now, he had to start doing this the right way, and stop doing the impersonation of Captain America’s latest handiwork. Really, his only saving grace during all these shitshow was the fact that he, at least, didn’t cause any civilian casualty and property damage. Yet. Pepper deserved a pampering night or two for bringing him to a therapist, but let it not be said that his emotional maturity was still a work in progress.

“Talk to me, baby girl,” said Tony once both the armor and the rescue pod stopped ascending.

“Talking, Boss,” answered his A.I. cheekily.

“Lower the sass, young one, there are little ears around. Notify the council, tell them the enhanced boy will be under the avengers’ protection until anyone remotely associated with Ross is taken out. And call Vision, I need backup.”
“Done, and done. Would you like me to play some Mozart for your little ears?”

_What do you know, she might just be even more expressive than J was._

“Ha ha. Why don’t you go ahead and check that boy Cassidy’s vital? Send ‘em over to whoever doctor’s standing by in the facility’s infirmary.”

“Vitals checked. Doctor Rodriguez has been notified, the wee tyke’s going to be in good hands when we land.”

For the first time in a few hours, Tony felt the knot of worry that was squishing his heart began to loosen a little. Oh, he’s still very much mad with worry for Harley, but Peter’s words seemed to flick his switch back to compartmentalizing mode. Now all he could afford to feel was the cold, biting rage for one particular soon-to-be-deposed Secretary of State.

_Motherfucker’s going to wish for death after I’m done with him._

“Oh, and tell the FBI to step it up before a certain red-and-blue spandex-clad spider show them up,” he added when Peter popped back up in his mind.

“You don’t think Peter’s going to sit this one down, Boss?”

Tony scoffed. “Have you _met_ the boy?”

“Touche. And Boss…?”

“Yes?”

His baby girl actually hesitated before she finally answered, “I think Vision will be bringing in a certain someone that he believes can help with our… situation.”

Huh. That’s… unexpected. “Oh? The Council actually agreed with him looking for recruits?” he asked, pointedly ignoring the wince he had to give at the reminder of how Vision was forced to do
the right things all by himself because Tony Stark was a dysfunctional mess.

“They did, Boss. This one, however, might not be… pleasant for your blood pressure.”

Tony sighed, “Are you talking about our competitor from San Francisco?”

“That’s her,” F.R.I.D.A.Y. confirmed.

“Well, let’s see what Pym Industry has to offer then.”

(Parkers’ Apartment, Queens, New York City)

“Mr. Parker, I hope you know that you are calling at 12.30 in the morning.”

Oh, yeah. Midnight. That’s a thing.

“I’m so sorry Happy, it’s just…. I need a little help right now.”

Happy’s sigh turned into a static noise that made him cringe. “Fine. What’s up?”

“Uh… I just got back from patrol. Did… did Mr. Star - Tony told you? Um… they’ve got this alien tech - ”

“Yeah, he told me already, kid. And the FBI. Get to the point, I need to meet with them first thing in the morning,” Happy cut impatiently.

The entire situation was so ridiculous, Peter was tempted to laugh out loud. Here he was, hiding in the toilet from Ned, calling Happy because he wasn’t sure how to deal with his best friend knowing about his… nighttime activity - no, that came out wrong….
Aunt May had promised him that everything was going to be OK, and really, he was somehow relieved that he didn’t have to lie to Ned anymore. But on the other hand, Ned was very… excitable. Peter couldn’t even count how many times Ned had tried and failed to give him a surprise without blurtting it all out at least a few hours before the actual surprise.

Mrs. Leeds and Aunt May took care of his birthday surprise after the first 3 attempts.

How much time did Peter have until Ned ask him a question about Spider-man in public? He’s already having his “internship” with SI floating around the school, for god’s sake. He didn’t need another rumor about him being anything other than the nerdy, goody-two-shoes, absolutely ordinary Peter Parker. Especially not with one Eugene “Flash” Thompson around.

Which led him to this situation: risking Happy’s unhappiness (he should probably stop) to whine about his teenage angst.

“My best friend saw me changing out of the suit,” he said after a good inhale or two.

He could almost hear Happy’s blinks of confusion. “So? You want me to make some NDAs for you or something?”

“What? No! I just… I don’t know, I need moral support, I guess?”

“Moral… - ” Happy sighed louder and mumbled something about strangling Tony and ‘where’s that kid when you need him’. “Alright, I’m no Harley, but I’ll try just this once.”

“Wait… Harley?” Peter asked, confused, before comprehension dawned on him. “You saw it!”

“Don’t worry, your super embarrassing almost-Stark-bromance bonding session’s safe with me.”

“Almost… - It’s not - Happy!” he scrambled, already distracted.

Happy snorted. “The kid dragged you to his mom like you’re a stray kitten he wanted to keep. Face it, Parker, he’s adopted you.”
“Wha... I don’t… - ”

“You are. You’ve told May about this? Tony?”

Still taken aback by the implication, Peter stuttered yet again, “Uh… May, yeah, I told May.”

“Not Tony?” Happy teased. Peter almost missed the aloof, I-don’t-get-paid-enough-for-this man that accompanied him in Germany.

“No, I already messed up big time tonight, Happy. Kinda shouted at him too… I don’t think it’s a good idea to bother him for something like this,” he said, a little dejectedly.

Happy seemed to catch his tone, though. “Well, you did try to chase a laser gun wielding gang with nothing but a spandex on. You could’ve wait until Tony upgrades your suit to be laser-proof, but noo….”

“Alright, alright, I get it already,” Peter mumbled mulishly.

He get a chuckle for his trouble. “You know you can tell him, right? Between you and me, Pep and Rhodey’s been betting on how long it would take until Tony cave in and start visiting and inviting you to his lab once every other week.”

Peter gasped. “His LAB?! No way! That’s… that’s…. No way, he’s not gonna let someone like me in his lab.”

“I was the one who dragged equipment for a MIT-standard chem lab last week, kid. Last time I had to do something like that, I picked Harley and his sister up 2 weeks later.”

Peter was… speechless. Which was concerning because he never shut up. Finally, though, he gathered enough brain cells to answer. “W - well, he might actually need a chem set for himself?”

“Oh please, that man can build another CERN facility if he wants to.”
Peter cleared the growing lump away from his throat. “What… what about Ned? My best fried, I mean, that’s his name, Ned. I told him to not say anything, but….”

“This Ned kid, is he the one that told people you have an SI internship?”

“Wait, you knew about that??”

“I’m the head of SI International’s security, Parker. I do my job every now and then.”

Peter winced. “Oh. I’m so sorry, Happy, I didn’t mean to cause any trouble. It’s just… - ”

“It’s fine, kid,” Happy interjected. “It’s bound to happen sooner or later. Listen, it’s late, just go to sleep and get ready for that decathlon thing you got going on. Tony will take care of Spider-man if your identity ever comes out, you just make sure that friend of yours doesn’t run his mouth off too much. I don’t know too much about the accords, but I heard it’s still pretty fragile right now. The last thing we need is your identity coming out before we have something to protect minor enhanced.”

“Uh… yeah, of course.” He didn’t even want to know how Happy (and Tony, by extension) knew about him being in the decathlon team.

“And please, for the love of god, do not engage the laser wielding DIY falcon. Wait until Tony upgrades your suit, then you can do some reconnaissance, but that's. it. Good night, Mr. Parker,” Happy closed the line without waiting for Peter’s response.

“… Good night, Happy,” Peter said finally to no one in particular.

Well, let’s hope this one goes better than my “internship”.
By the time Cassidy finally slept, it was fast approaching dawn in New York. Between the worry for his sister and the adrenaline rush from the flight, the boy was even more hyper than Harley on a sugar high. Tony was almost sorry for Doctor Rodriguez, who had looked like he could use even more sleep than Tony, and he’s been awake for almost 35 hours now.

With Cassidy asleep, however, Tony still couldn’t find it in his heart to lay down to rest too. Instead, he made it a point to search for anything and everything he could about how Ross kidnapped Harley. He even hacked into all the news outlet in Tennessee. Which let him to the discovery of a certain blonde-and-tall cheerleader-like young woman that looked eerily like Cassidy walking away with a shell-shocked looking Harley.

Shit. Does this mean…. Ross, you sick bastard.

Tony groaned out loud, irritated. From what Cassidy’d told him, this Tracy girl seemed to be quite the competent young adult: no-nonsense but snarky, opinionated and tact, able to sense hostile intention within 600 feet radius…. He shuddered at the parallel to another sibling with quick brother and weird sister that had messed with him (and continued to do so in the case of the sister) in the past.

He’s been suspecting a biased opinion from the boy, but the sentiment was true nonetheless. A 22-years-old fresh graduate young woman with no parents or guardians and a 10-years-old brother was bound learn how to take care of her brother and herself first. A young woman in her place with weird superpowers and Ross on her heels, however.

Could he really fault her for doing Ross’ dirty work? Especially with her brother evidently tortured and/or experimented on?

Hell yes, I can, said the vengeful parental part in him.

December 16th 1991, reminded the annoying voice in the back of his head.

She wasn’t even brainwashed! the asshole-Tony roared.

Get Rhodey in Cassidy’s position, see what you’d do, righteous-Tony retorted.
Tony banged his forehead on his desk, hard. He was so tired and sleep-deprived that his own mind was squabbling with itself. Or maybe that’s just how his extremis-enhanced brain deal with emotional baggage now: by making him lose a screw or two.

A smooth voice jolted him from his daydream, “Tony… good morning.”

Blinking, he looked up to see Vision half-phased through the wall with only his head sticking out. “Hi Viz, a little bit too early for morning, Don’t you think?”

“It seems so. Have you rested?” the android asked, smoothly stepping all the way into the room.

“No. No, I don’t think I can rest until Ross’ an oily smear on the ground and Harley’s save with his increasingly panicking mother and sister.”

“I think you will need yourself at full capacity for that, Tony,” Vision reproached, sounding so much like Jarvis, both human and A.I. when he did so.

Sighing, Tony answered noncommittally “Yeah… I’ll think about it. Where’s the guest, Viz? Please don’t tell me you just told a lady to wait outside?”

Vision froze on the spot. “I… believe I might have done so. Would you like me to call her in, Tony?”

“Yeah, let’s hear her.”

Seeing his wan smile, Vision cocked his head to the side, falling silent for a minute. “It’s good to have you back, Tony,” he said finally.

Tony shook his head and chuckled. “Thank Peter for that. Boy’s a magic worker when he’s not being an idiot.”

Vision smiled in agreement and turned to open the door. A brunette in smart blazer and heels stood
in front of it, looking very much battle ready despite the tightness in her face and eyes.

“Mr. Stark, I apologize for bothering you at such an hour. My name is Hope van Dyne, you may know my father, Dr. Hank Pym, the creator of the Ant-man suit,” She said calmly, striding purposefully inside.

Tony could definitely appreciate her professionalism. “Pleasure to finally meet you, Ms. van Dyne. I am under impression that you have a… question of sort regarding the accords?”

She nodded. “Yes. I believe you understand that my father and myself are under heavy scrutiny now because of the involvement of Scott Lang in Germany. As of now, the status quo is relatively stable, but we fear that with the inevitable trial and sentencing of Mr. Lang, both my father and I will be implicated to be an accomplish, at the very least.”

*To the point, nice. I can deal with that.* “And you want to know if you can avoid that by agreeing with the accords?”

To his surprise, she shook her head. “Not quite. We already know that we can avoid legal problems by, rightfully, throwing Mr. Lang under the bus. Believe me, Mr. Stark, my father’s already got half the mind to do it, if not for the fact that doing so would cost more than just Mr. Lang’s freedom.” She paused, eyeing whatever minute changes in his expression Tony was willing to let show. “He’s got a family, Mr. Stark. An ex-wife with her fiance… and a small daughter, not even a pre-teen yet. If we openly condemn Scott for acting against Pym Industries as well….”

“His family will be eaten alive by the media,” he finished, feeling another surge of anger at the injustice of it.

“Precisely,” she said simply.

To some extend, Tony could understand van Dyne’s situation. Right now, she (and her dad) were stuck between saving their own asses, or throwing innocent bystander to the fire. He supposed with Pym Industries’ resources, it would be easy for them to give Lang’s family a new identity and a new life somewhere far away from all this mess. But was that the life that an innocent girl deserve? To live a false life, far away from her father?

Tony leaned back and studied the woman’s face carefully. “And now you want to… what? Sell your service to the devil, so to speak? So Lang can turn himself in without you and your dad in the
“In a sense. Me being an avenger, or at the very least an accords-sanctioned enhanced would clear Pym’s name from Scott’s mess without us having to outright attack him. Bonus point if we can make sure the news about me overshadow that of Scott’s sentencing,” she agreed, eyes gleaming with determination. “Make no mistake, Mr. Stark, I am prepared to be a fugitive if that means keeping Cassie and her family safe. It’s not optimal, considering both me and my father are busy with a… project of sort, that requires much of our attention. But if we have to finish that project on the run, so be it. We already have plan for that contingency.”

Oh? I wonder what that old guy is planning now. Shrinking tech, check. Enlarging tech, check. A quantum tunneling next, maybe?

He shook himself out of his reverie. "Well, I’m obligated to point out that the document you’re about to sign is one that you need to respect and support even after Scott Lang gets his possible house arrest.” van Dyne lifted her brows just a tiny degree at the mention of house arrest, but Tony soldiered on. “The target of your first operation, if you sign, would be the Secretary of State, Thaddeus Ross. I recently stumbled upon the witness of his crime, and with the council’s green light, we’re going to storm the castle today. However, you must keep in mind that what you’re offering is not a one off deal. After this is done, you will still be required to report to the council. Whether or not you accept further mission as an approved signatory of the Sokovian accords, I will still expect you to respect the document and the 117, now 122 countries that signed it.”

Van Dyne nodded. “I will. I don’t plan on pulling a Black Widow on you or the accords, Mr. Stark. I wasn’t implying that I don’t agree with what you stand for, I’m simply pointing out that I don’t need to put myself in the front line with you either.” She looked at him dead in the eyes. “I don’t need to sign this document to agree with it, but I choose to sign regardless. The motivation that tipped my scale was, admittedly, rather self-serving, but you can be assured that I am not a woman of flimsy loyalty. My first priority will always be the people that I care about the most, that much is true, but isn’t everyone’s? I promise you that should there be a situation where I have to choose between my loved ones and my duty as an enhanced, I will find a way to uphold both instead of abandoning ship as soon as I can.” She smiled minutely. “You can see me doing just that right now.”

Despite everything, Tony could hear the conviction in her words. He couldn’t tell if this is all going to blow in his face later, but right now, he needed all the help he could get. As far as he could tell, Hope van Dyne was a different woman than her father. She seemed to be more aware of the consequences of her moves, and was willing to play the hardball. Almost begrudgingly, Tony admitted that he could trust her with a child’s safety, including Harley’s.

“Alright,” he said finally.
“So we’re in agreement? You help us, we help you?”

Tony didn’t even hesitate to answer. “Deal.”

_The things I’d do for you Harl… hold on tight, kiddo, I’m coming for you now._

**(Ross’ Safe House, Nassau County, Long Island, New York)**

“We got an incoming. The council just issued a hostage rescue mission. Iron Man’s coming, Boss.”

“ Took him long enough. Prepare the EMPs. Let’s see how well he fights without his beloved armor.”

“Affirmative.”

Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross looked out of the window with a winning smirk on his face and an energy gun he… appropriated from a certain black-market dealer in his hand.

“Think you’ve got the best of me, Stark? Just you wait. Let’s see how well you can grow your limbs back after I shoot them off one by one with this baby.” Taking aim, he shoot the gun at a severed metallic arm hanging on the wall.

Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross grinned maniacally as the arm disintegrated into a puddle of bubbling alloy on the floor.

*I’ll have my revenge, Stark. Just you wait and see.*

Chapter End Notes

A little disjointed, I know. Sorry. Ya boi just got prescribed a new antidepressant and this one makes it hard for me to focus.
Sorry for the long update, by the way... There's not a lot of spoilage for Ant-man here, but still... I don't know how much spoiler is too much. I read spoiler before watching the movie ever since Infinity War, so I don't think i'm good judge for that.

C'ya!
Pepper stepped out of the elevator with her heart firmly lodged in her mouth. She’d wanted to come visit the Keeners as soon as she heard about Harley’s sudden disappearance yesterday, but the flood of voice messages and emails left on her personal number and email account about Tony’s supposed son had left her stranded in her office until a few hours ago. She’d jumped into her personal jet with a weird sense of déjà vu. Like father like son, it seemed like Harley also had the capability of giving Pepper enough headache to last a lifetime in one day without making her care for him any less.

She couldn’t even begin to imagine how Hannah and Hailey must’ve been feeling right now.

Steeling her nerves with a deep breath, she called out at the woman staring out of the window, “Hannah?”

The mother whirled around to face her with a start, and Pepper winced at the sight. Hannah had bags under her eyes, dark against her too pale skin. Her hair was frizzled, and her eyes wide and unseeing.

“How, Pep,” she croaked.

Walking slowly so she didn’t spook the other woman, Pepper answered as lightly as she could, “You look like you could use some rest.”

She get a bitter laugh for that. “I tried, believe me. It didn’t work.”
“Let’s get you to the couch, anyway. You’re swaying.”

Hannah sighed tiredly and followed her to the couch. They sat there for what felt like an eternity, before Hannah finally broke the silence. “You know, Tony actually offered for us to stay here for a while before all of this happened.”

Pepper took Hannah’s hands in hers. “He’ll come back soon. Tony’s a father on a mission, Hannah, he’s not going to fail.”

“I know.”

“Doesn’t make the worry go away, huh?”

Hannah chuckled tearfully. “No, it really doesn’t. How did you even deal with it? When Tony was gone?”

“I’m not sure. But I can swear I stopped feeling anything after the first few hours,” she admitted.

“Cool. How do I do that?”

“Come down with me to SI’s PR department, we can work until we drop.”

They piped down once more after that, just enjoying the company despite all the worry. Pepper didn’t even realize it when a little girl poked her head into the living room. “Mommy? Peppy?”

Both of them looked at the sullen looking Hailey Keener, now hedging uncertainly in the doorway. Pepper smiled at the girl’s nick-nickname for her. She didn’t have the heart to tell her that her first name wasn’t actually Pepper. Besides, she kind of liked the sound of it. She didn’t like the heartbroken look on the little girl’s face, however. That kind of sadness had no place in such a young life. She shouldn’t have to worry about her brother’s safety because some power-hungry madman decided that subtlety was overrated and bring children into his beef with Tony.

“Hi, sweetie,” Hannah said, opening up her arms for a hug.
The girl went in and hid her face in her mother’s embrace. “Mommy, is Harley home yet?” she asked in a muffled voice.

Pepper’s heart broke a little bit more. She reached out and pet Hailey’s hair when her mother could only shake her head sadly. “Tony’s on the way to save him now, sweetheart, just wait for a little bit more, OK?”

She felt Hailey melted into her touch. “Is Tony OK now?”

“Why wouldn’t he be?” Hannah asked as she rub her daughter’s back.

Hailey shrugged. “Harley said he was real sick.”

“Well, he’s all better now. Harley will be too.” Internally, Pepper debated the merit of Tony’s “Rated R for Violence” protocol. She would’ve wanted to know if the man that have been taking care of her family for 3 years almost died.

Hailey, blissfully unaware, continued to snuggle into her mother while Pepper continued to play with her hair. After a while, they heard the girl making a soft snuffling sound and smiled to each other.

“Be right back,” Hannah said as she stood and took Hailey to her room.

Alone, Pepper surveyed the penthouse. Tony’d gotten it customized even before this whole mess started. Actually, Pepper was pretty sure Tony’d cleared the whole floor for this very purpose back in 2014. Not that he would dare broach the subject to Hannah, or anyone else for that matter. Thankfully, Hannah seemed to understand the sentiment, and the insecurity behind it.

A moment later, Hannah came back in with a small glint of hope in her previously dead eyes. “What can I do to help?” she asked promptly, all traces of the despondent mother from earlier seemingly vanished.

Who was Pepper to not show the same kind of resilience in answer?
“We are working on the aftermath of all this mess.”

Hannah nodded in understanding. “About Harley being Tony’s son?”

“That. At this point we can either continue the radio silence like we’ve been doing, flat out deny the rumor, although I think both Harley and Tony would be kind of sad if they had to do that, or… well…”

“We can tell all those hungry sharks that I already put Tony as my next in line for Harley and Hailey’s guardianship. Hell, we can tell all of them how I overheard Harley sleep-talking once about his “dad.” Somehow I doubt he was dreaming about that bastard I married once.”

Hannah’s voice came out angrier at the mention of her ex-husband, so Pepper gripped her forearm in sympathy. “You know there’s no coming back from that one. People won’t just be coming for Harley, they’ll come for the whole family. They’ll call you his mistress and that you’re using your kids to get close to him. They’ll snoop around Hailey, just so they can get a snoop at her brother. There’s no privacy for anyone even remotely associated with the name Stark.”

“Then it’s time for them to learn some goddamn manners. I don’t care if Tony is the golden goose for international media, nobody deserves their privacy infringed without consent. Especially not my children.”

Pepper eyed the glimmer of rebellion in Hannah’s unflinching gaze. This is the woman who raised two of the best children Pepper had ever met, each in their own ways. She is the one who tempered the fire in Harley and taught him to be both brave and kind. She is the one who slowly eased Hailey out of her shyness and taught her that she never needed to get stuck playing second fiddle to anyone. This is a woman who took all of life’s beating and none of it’s bullshit, just like she wasn’t going to take any from some paparazzi and two-bit reporters.

“You’re ready then?” Pepper asked redundantly.

“I am,” Hannah answered without missing a beat. “Point the way, Miss Potts.”

(15 Miles Above Ross’ Safe House, Nassau County, Long Island, New York)
“You ready, van Dyne?” Tony glanced at the now battle geared Wasp.

“Ready,” she answered, standing in the doorway of the new stealth jet he designed. “Jumping down in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.” She jumped out head first, wings retracted.

Tony watched as van Dyne plummeted straight down to the earth. “5 seconds passed, you’re at terminal velocity.” he reminded.

“Deploying wings.”

“Don’t break your neck, Ladybug. Here comes the sensor range.”

“Shrinking down. And it’s Wasp, tin boy,” she snarked back, disappearing from view when she shrink down to the size of an actual wasp.

“Semantics, Tinker Bell. Mind the pigeons on your way down. ETA?”

“5 minutes. How’s the hacking doing?”

Vision, who had been silent for most of the flight, piped up, “The firewall itself isn’t too terribly complicated. However, it seems like they are using some kind of barrier to physically protect their main server.”

“Wait, what?” van Dyne asked in alarm. “May I remind you all that I’m currently falling to the ground at more than 100 miles per hour and still speeding?”

Vision quickly turned his head down and the gem in his forehead flared alive. “The barrier exists only in the server room, Wasp. You can proceed with the plan.”

Apparently Vision also had a long range energy reading device installed with the snazzy jewel. Nice.
“You think you can read the energy signature from this high up, Vis?” he asked.

Vision inclined his head at the question. “I don’t know. I’ve never attempted something like this before. If I could, it may take a while to do so.”

“Do it anyway. I’ll take care of the hacking for now.”

Tony got right back to work, suddenly very aware of what would’ve happen if he went storming in like he had intended. Ross somehow acquired a technology strong enough to resist both F.R.I.D.A.Y. and Vision’s attempt at hacking, practically overnight. Tony didn’t even meet a single shred of resistance the last time he tried to hack him.

But why now? And why here? If he really had something he needed to hide so bad, why put it right in the line of fire? What was it that Ross was planning?

“Boss, incoming call from Spider-ling.”

Tony looked up blearily. “Pick up, Fri… wait. Shouldn’t that kid be in school??”

“It’s Saturday, Mr. Stark. Tony, I meant Tony. No school today? It’s Peter, by the way. Peter Parker, Spider-Man?”

He huffed, not sure if being amused was appropriate considering the situation. “Yes, Peter. I know. What’s up, we’re kind of a few minutes away from infiltrating Fort de la Ross.”

“Oh, wait, what?? No! Mr. Stark, Tony, I just… uh… I found some more of those weapons. Those guys from last night must’ve dropped it when they ran, so me and Ned… that’s my best friend, by the way. Wait, I didn’t tell you. He found out about Spider-man last night too… long story. Anyway, we ran back to look for any dropped weapon and… Ross’ men came, Tony. They were looking for the weapons too.”

Tony let loose a very creative set of expletives. “That dickhead! Wasp, change of plan, look out for traps and some more weapons other than ye olde mounted guns. I’m about 90% sure he’s got his grubby paws at some sort of energy field containment, too. Explains why we can’t hack his server. Be careful, we don’t know how to disable this tech without blowing it up yet.”
“Roger that,” she answered curtly.

“Good job, kid. I’ll even ignore the fact that you bring your fellow fetus with you on an alien explosive hunt. For now.”

“Wait! Tony, that’s not even my fault! He followed me out, and… and… - ”

“Kidding, kiddo,” he said, ignoring van Dyne’s muttering. “But seriously, get out of there. Stat. Ross’ a little testy these days, I’d stay away from him if I were an enhanced teenager with secret identity.”

Peter hesitated suspiciously. “Um… About that….”

“Kid,” Tony breathed, feeling the beginning of a headache forming already, “please don’t tell me you followed Ross’ underlings here.”

“Uh…” Peter hedged.

“Tony, I detected movement heading towards the target. It’s Spider-Man,” Vision cut, oblivious to the pulsating vein in Tony’s temple.

He groaned out loud. “Fri, you’re supposed to be keeping tap on that kid!”

“Apologies, boss. It appears the tracker in the Spider-Man suit has been deactivated. Forcefully.”

“Kid!”

“I’m sorry! It’s just… Ned was curious, and we were just checking the code! But then I saw the protocol, I’m not a baby, Tony! You can’t just spy on me and call it ‘baby monitor!’”

Damn it, his brand spanking new jet was not a good place to self-combust. “Well, apparently the
baby does need to be monitored even more, so the name fits, no?? They are there to keep you safe, Peter! You can’t just…. Ugh, fine! F.R.I.D.A.Y., temporary lift on Spider-Man’s training wheel protocol. Override code, TS-435 - ”

“The training wheel protocol has also been forcefully deactivated, boss. Do you want me to enact the tattle-tale protocol instead?”

Tony wondered if it was possible to feel this strange combination of seething frustration and surprised delight at knowing his (admittedly handicapped) code had been hacked by a pair of high school sophomores. “For the sake of this mission, Mr. Parker, I will ignore all of your very questionable decision these past 12 hours for now. But May will know everything. Protocol tattle-tale, Fri.”

“Wait! No! Tony, I’m already grounded!”

“Then you shouldn’t have hacked a multi-million dollar suit so you can sneak around behind my back doing the one thing I told you not to do. F.R.I.D.A.Y., brief the suit’s A.I. with our game plan and make sure this boy he doesn’t get caught in the cross-fire.”

“Sorry to cut this short, guys, but you are not going to like what I just found. A few dozen EMP grenades, 10 Chitauri-augmented turrets, and at least 5 men armed to the tooth with some sort of laser weaponry. That’s just the entrance, by the way,” van Dyne reported glibly.

“Fuck. Okay, ignore that for the moment. Try and find the proximity sensor, we can’t get in with that thing on.”

Vision, still focusing his gaze downward, added in, “I believe I picked up the sensor’s location. It’s on the eastern most side of the building, third floor.”

“Copy that. By the way, tell your ward to hide for a while. I just flew by a grunt saying something about someone spotting Spider-Man.”

“Oh… alright, um…. Who is this again?”

“Code name’s the Wasp, Spider-Man. Picture Ant-Man, minus the ants, but with wings and blaster.”
“So Ant-Man but better? Gotcha. Whoops, okay, we’re good.”

Tony sighed again, this mission could not go any slower. “How’s the sensor doing, Wasp?”

“Give me a sec… alright, sensor’s down, you can jump in now.”

*Finally.*

“Right, Kid, you sneak in and try to find Harley while we trash he party. Do *not* get caught. If anyone spots you, use the taser web.”

“*Taser web?!!*”

“One of your new five-hundred-something web combination, check A.I. for more details. Wasp, try to disable the weapons, I don’t think Mr. Secretary took basic power coupling 101 in collage. See if you can find the central switch to all those defense system.”

“I suspect the force-field to be protecting just that, Miss van Dyne,” Vision added, “and according to data, my powers could be used to disable that barrier. If I may, Tony?”

“Yeah, you go right ahead. Here, I fiddled with S.H.I.E.L.D.’s photostatic veil a little, this should make you invisible for half an hour,” he answered while tossing the android a translucent looking cape of some sort. “I’m calling it “the invisibility cloak,” as soon as I could convince Rowling to let that one slide.”

Vision simply nodded and draped the cape around him before he dropped down from the plane.

*Ready or not, Teddy, here I come.*

*(Ross’ Safe House’s Back Entrance, Nassau County, Long Island, New York)*
“Right, Karen, where do I go?”

“Spongebob… really, kid?” Tony snarked.

Peter groaned, almost missing Karen’s direction. Hacking the suit was a really bad move on his part, and the only excuse he could give to himself was that he needed the validation that Peter Parker was not, in fact, a baby. So he asked Ned to help him hack Tony’s coding. Not his greatest moment, but he felt a sneaking suspicion from the name “training wheel” that Tony intended him to maybe someday hack into the suit and unlock the full potential.

Still didn’t make Tony act any less pissy about it, though. “Tattle-tale protocol”? really? He’s in so much trouble when he got home.

“X-ray scan detects 5 armed guards, Peter. I recommend dropping on them with the taser web from the ventilation shaft.”

“Got it, thanks Karen.”

He started to crawl through the ventilation shaft, thanking DNA for his smaller stature. When he reached the metal bars of the opening, he used his fingers to pinch away the nut and bolts that held it in place, and macgyver his web to create some sort of pulley to lift it up noiselessly. He felt really good about himself when Karen congratulated him for succeeding with less than 10 decibels noise emission.

Webbing himself down, Peter took aim at the five grunts who were still blissfully unaware of the… infestation. Peter flicked the web-shooters expertly, flinging 5 strands of webs, crackling with electricity.

They all drop like Ned after a Star Wars binge-watching.

“Oh, shoot! Karen, please tell me you didn’t set the electricity to Thomas-Edison-kills-an-elephant.”

“No, Peter, I did not set it to 6,600 volts. Not that your suit produce that much electricity, of
course,” she said in her perpetually cheerful voice.

“Okay, where do I go from here.”

“Head west, there’s an emergency exit that will lead you down to the basement.”

He blinked. “Wait, he put his hostages in the *basement*?! How creepy can this guy be??”

“I found no data regarding the quantification of a person’s creepiness. However, the general consensus on social media seems to range between “irredeemably evil” and “I can’t believe the president picked this dude as the State’s secretary.” The staircase is to your left.”

He skidded on the floor and stumbled through the emergency exit door. “Yeesh, a little warning next time, will ya? How many guards are down there?”

“Detecting 15 armed guards. Would you like to engage Enhanced Combat Mode?”

“Enhanced Combat Mode? Yeah!”

“Activating Instant-Kill,” she chirped as the HUD turned laser-red.

“No, no, no, no, no, no, no…! I don’t wanna kill anybody!” he panicked.

“Deactivating Instant-Kill.”

“Instant-Kill? Really?” he griped and shoot a web to swing downstairs.

Only to land face first on the second landing.

“What the hell just happened? What was that??”
“You jumped off the landing, and landed on your face,” she reported like she just mentioned the weather.

Grumbling a little, he looked up and tried to shoot more web to the ceiling. The web, however, came out in a burst of webbing balls instead of the usual strands. “What’s wrong with my webshooters?”

“Rapid-fire is the default for Enhanced Combat Mode.”

“Why would I need - oh, wait. Can you make load the web-balls with electricity?”

“That combination is called stun web. Would you like to use it?”

“Whoa, Tony really overdid it…,” he breathed in reverence.

“Tony also happens to be able to hear you, Spider-Baby. How’s the infiltration doing?” the man’s voice came ringing back.

“Oh - yeah, hi…. Uh, it’s going… - ” Peter cut off as he flipped through the air and showered the ground below with balls of electron-filled sticky web before landing in a crouch. “ - good. Just nailed them all, actually.”

“Good job. Get Harley out of there, ASAP. I’m razing this place to the ground as soon as the weapons are down.”

Peter shot out even more webbing to the groaning men on the floor. “Uh, yeah. Cool. Let me just….” He rammed the solid metal door with his shoulder.

Ouch.

“Why is it not breaking??”
“It’s 10 inch thick solid steel door. You’ll have to create more momentum.”

Gulping, he stepped back even further and prepared to make a jump to the thick metal door. Just before he could fling himself, however, Vision’s voice came ringing from the com.

“Wasp and I have breached the force-field. All security system is down and out.”

Shoot.

“Show time,” Tony said, voice full with cold malice.

Shoot.

Peter launched himself full speed ahead.

(Ross’ Safe House’s Control Room, Nassau County, Long Island, New York)

Secretary of State Thaddeus Ross looked around at the destruction left behind by the Avengers. His lips curled in a sneer. First that meddlesome Spider sneaked around his captives, then the android and that new woman shut his place down from inside out, and now Stark turned his house into a shooting gallery?? Stark wasn’t going in alone like he was supposed to. In fact, he didn’t even deign to show himself until all the defenses are down. Coward.

He stormed ahead, fingers clutching his gun. Very well, you think you’ve won? I’ll show you, you worthless mongrel!

He stopped at the hallway leading to his basement. Spider-Man was still busy flinging himself at the door, trying futilely to break it open. Fool, he’d show that bug how it’s done. Taking aim, he shot a powerful beam of purple energy…. which would’ve hit him dead, if he didn’t yelp and jumped out of the way at the last second. As it was, the bug was only grazed before the whole section of wall and steel door behind him exploded in a wave of heat and seismic outburst.
The force of it threw the squealing pest well behind the Thunderbolt, knocking him out cold when his mask-clad face hit the other side of the room, just outside the the emergency exit. That kind of force should’ve killed a normal human, but it seemed this particular freak was harder than the rest. So he shot down the retaining walls and ceiling all around the little spider, burying him under the weight of falling debris. Shame, he could use some more data from freaks like him. He would have to dig him out of there after he dealt with Stark, but that’s not something he should be worried about right now.

He turned around and, with a maniacal grin on his face, stepped into the newly blasted hole in the wall. Stark’s son was now cowering in the far corner, away from the bloody, mangled body of that Crowley girl. Well, it’s her own fault for walking around so close to the door, wasn’t it? He just hoped the explosion didn’t mash her brain.

“Hello there, sonny. Why don’t you come over here, nice and quiet so I won’t have to shoot your legs off and drag you myself, hmm?”

Stark junior trembled and cried.

(Ross’ Safe House’s Front Entrance, Nassau County, Long Island, New York)

If he wasn’t on the mission trying to save his kid from a maniacal villain with serious control issues and anger management problem, Tony would’ve been having fun trashing Ross’ pad. The new Mark 48 was showing off its prowess as his strongest ever armor (until he finished Hulkbuster Mark 2, that is) by literally tearing down the place brick by brick.

The additional arc reactors weren’t just for show; the armor is now faster and stronger than ever. He actually had to reduce the power output of the repulsor blasts to about 15% to avoid killing anyone. His new physiology made it even easier for him to do maneuvers that he couldn’t before. He even threw in some nanotech modules in the left forearm and back sections for good measure; just to see how that works for further implementation.

Tony didn’t even try to hold back the snort of amusement he got when a guard pulled out a Chitauri gun from a defunct turret and pointed it at him, only to be faced with an even bigger shoulder mounted blaster assembled by the nanites in his back plate.

“My gun’s bigger than yours,” he said, casually dropping the modulator’s output to a menacing gnarl.
The guard dropped the gun and walked backward slowly with his hands raised tentatively in the air.

“Good call,” he quipped, already training the blaster to the other remaining guards still standing.

Before he could threaten them as well, however, an explosion sounded from below him and Peter suddenly yelped through the com in panic and pain.

“Pete?!”

Distantly, he heard Vision and Wasp voicing their alarms, but his brain was filled by the sickening crunch he heard from Peter’s end.

“Peter!” Tony yelled again as a second explosion rang through the whole building, bringing down the floor and wall to the ground below. “Shit, Fri! Connect to Peter’s A.I!”

“Connecting. Heartbeat detected, boss, but it’s faint.”

Tony swore, “X-ray. See if we can blast our way there with unibeam.”

“There, 4 meters to your right, at 80° angle.”

The main reactor in his chest started to glow, while the other, smaller ones in the back of his hands, his shoulders, back, and ankles relayed their power there, making the black lines connecting them all shine reactor blue. The resulting blast created a high-pitched whining sound and a perfectly circular beam of energy that burrowed all the way past the actual basement.

“That’s our way in, people. I’m gonna need backup.”

“Affirmative. Vision and me will retrieve Spider-Man, you go deal with whatever caused that explosion.”
Tony sped down the hole instead of answering, praying that his suit would be enough to keep Peter from getting crushed under the rubble. He righted himself sharply near the ground and, with a lot of difficulty, ignored the mass of destruction behind him to march right into yet another hole in the wall.

The sight of Ross holding his boy at gunpoint stopped him dead on his track.

“Hello, Stark,” Ross sneered with a crazed glee in his voice. He used both of his hand to angle a Chitauri handgun against the back of Harley’s head, showcasing a glowing wristwatch that generated an almost translucent energy field around him.

When Tony’s shoulder pad twitched in an aborted attempt to reveal the minigun hidden underneath, he nudged his gun closer still to Harley’s head. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I see even a single twitch in that fancy armor of yours, you can say good bye to your dear son.”

Tony growled. “Let him go, Ross. Mommy never told you to pick someone your own size?”

“Funny, I wanted to say the same to you. You’ve bitten a bit more than you can chew, Stark. And now you’ll pay for that.”

Harley, pale and trembling from fright, fidgeted against the gun. His Harley, the boy who blinded an extremis soldier with the flash grenade Tony gave him, was shaking like a leaf and crying so much he couldn't speak a single word. Tony felt his blood boil. Literally.

“And don’t even think about using whatever freakish power you injected yourself with,” Ross added hastily at the sight of steam rising from the Iron Man armor.

The silence that followed was uncannily tense. Neither Vision nor van Dyne dared to speak through the com. “What do you want, Ross?” Tony gave in finally, after a particularly miserable whimper from Harley.

“What I want,” the man snapped, “is you to call your attack dog off and get the fuck away from me. For good.”

“Let Harley go, then we’ll talk.”
Ross barked out a laugh. “As if. The boy comes with me, Stark. See it as an investment of mine. Do what I want, or else kind of situation, I’m sure you’re familiar.”

Tony gritted his teeth and snarled, “And I’m sure you’re familiar to what happened to the last person who attempted that with me.”

Ross’ answering smirk was cruel and spiteful. “Oh yeah, I am. But the last man who tried that didn’t have your son at his mercy. I do.”

Harley stilled at that. Fear suddenly was drained away from his small face, replaced with a sort of grim determination that Tony was fearful of.

“Harl, no, please,” he begged.

“I’m sorry, Dad,” Harley answered him forlornly, eyes wet with tears.

_Dad…. He called me Dad_, a small part deep inside his heart rejoiced.

Yet the rest of him screamed in silent pain as Harley twist around and made a move to grab the handgun trained on him.

Ross pulled the trigger, and Tony’s world fell apart as the headless body of his son slumped down to the ground.

Chapter End Notes

[TRIGGER WARNING; SPOILER AHEAD]

Decapitation of a major character.
Tag won't be changed for... a number of reasons. I'm sorry.

And yes, I rip off dialogues and scenes from Homecoming, I'm shameless like that.

C'ya!
In which Ross’ Arc concludes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

(Ross’ Basement, Nassau County, Long Island, New York)

Everything moved in slow motion.

Ross’ face twisted in an astonished rage. Van Dyne screamed. His blood boiled. Harley’s body kept on falling, and falling, and falling.

His world shattered piece by piece, ever so slowly.

He watched wordlessly as his boy hit the ground, blood seeping out around him like a macabre halo. He watched as Ross pointed his gun at him. He watched himself raised his own repulsor in answer, as if he was having an out of body experience.

Maybe he was. Because the whole thing was just impossible.

Harley couldn’t be dead.

Not Harley.

Not now when they just started to acknowledge the fact that maybe it’s okay for Tony to think of him as his own son. They just started to hug more, hang out together more, had tea parties with Hailey more. He had just gotten his act together and actually addressed the elephant in the room that, yes, it was okay for him to have all these protective, paternal instinct for a child that had no familial tie to him at all.

They were supposed to be hanging out with Pepper, Hannah and Hailey next weekend, for god’s
And now Harley’s dead.

He ignored F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s pleading for him to stop overloading the arc reactors with extremis’ heat, yelling that the reactor boosting system wasn’t ready for extremis’ maximum heat. He didn’t care. His reactors could meltdown and blow up in his face for all he cared, his armor would contain the explosion. He only wanted to inflict as much damage as possible to Ross, in the shortest possible amount of time. If that meant he had to use an experimental technology that could potentially cost him a few limbs, then so be it. He’d grow them back by the end of the day, anyway.

The reactors started to rapidly turn golden in color, the blistering light spilling over to each other, turning the black bright gold. Steam rose from the iridescent lines that ran along the armor, and the smaller reactors in the back of his hand, shoulders, back, and ankles creaked in protest. He shot his repulsor just as Ross started to pull the trigger. The usual whining of the repulsor turned thunderous as a searing blast of light was spewed from his palm. The discharge pierced through Ross’ force field like a knife through butter, and the gun was gone before it could be fired.

Ross dropped the melted remain of his gun’s handle, eyes now wide in fear, and Tony felt the dark, vindictive glee that came with it. He knew that right now, even his creaking reactors incite terror and exude vengeance. Right now, the glowing, steaming armor was the most powerful thing in the room, and he was controlling it. Right now, Iron Man wasn’t just an avenger, he was the avenger - and he would have his revenge.

Suddenly, van Dyne grew full size in front of him and knocked his arm upward, making him miss his next shot that was intended for Ross’ head. The surprise caught him off guard, which gave Vision the time to phase a hand through his helmet and touch his forehead.

“I’m sorry for what I am about to do, Tony,” the android whispered through the haze of anger and pain… and suddenly all his rage vanished, giving way for a crushing, unrelenting grief instead.

Tony slid down to the ground like a puppet with its strings cut. Van Dyne didn’t waste any time and immediately turned back into action, leaping through the air and knocked Ross into the far wall. Vision hovered uncertainly in front of him, clearly torn between comforting Tony and… Peter.

“Peter,” Tony muttered between his sobs. “Save Peter.” Vision began to nod, but suddenly the pile of rubble behind them shifted with a loud groan, revealing a very distressed, very dazed Peter.
“Peter!” Tony yelled in alarm, armor already retracting away while he moved quickly to intercept the stumbling teen.

“Hi, Tony…” he mumbled.

Cursing, Tony patted around Peter’s body, trying to gauge which bones he had broken. His ribs definitely felt tender, and so were his legs and arms. But the most concerning was a horrible scorch wound in his left shoulder. Even with his suit protecting him, Tony could still see how the skin underneath was starting to develop a severe case of blistering. He shuddered to think what would happen if Peter was wearing one of his pajamas instead.

Peter, who had been shuffling and protesting weakly suddenly whispered in horror when he managed to look past Tony’s shoulders, “Oh god.”

Tony stiffened, not ready to came back to his full-blown grieving yet. “I know… I know, Peter, I’m so sorry…. Just - just don’t look, okay? We’re… gonna be fine.”

Peter shuffled around even more. “What are you talking about?! That’s Cassidy’s sister over there! She’s bleeding all over the place, Jesus!”

Wait, what?

Both Tony and Vision who had been fussing over Peter, even van Dyne who was busy tying Ross up looked back at Peter’s cry. The scene that played out in front of them made them all gape like a fish out of water.

There at the floor, bleeding from a hole in her stomach, was Tracy Crowley.

Acting on instinct, Tony raised his left arm and shot a blob of nanites at her abdomen, plugging the wound shut.

Van Dyne, still gaping, slammed Ross’ head against the floor hard when the man decided to use the distraction to struggle out of the hold. “But… but how?”
Peter already leaped into action, stumbling along the hallway. “Who cares about how that happened?! She’s dying! Oh my god…. And where’s Harl - oh, never mind, there he is.”

Tony felt his heart thumping against his chest almost painfully. For one second too long, he hesitated - afraid to open the sealed box to see if the cat was really alive or dead. But this wasn’t just some kind of hypothetical cat, it was Harley.

If by some chance Harley was still alive, he’d take it. He had to.

So Tony scrambled back into his own legs and chased after Peter, who was kneeling beside a familiar body, partially hidden by the wrecked doorway.

When he saw Harley, whole and not bleeding, just laid there like he’s sleeping, Tony didn’t even feel his knees hit the floor. He simply reached out shakily at Harley, desperate to feel the warmth of a living person in his skin.

“He’s… he’s okay, Tony…. Karen said he’s got no injury, just a little dehydrated,” Peter murmured softly, pressing his finger into Harley’s pulse points.

Tony breathed out a hysterical laugh. “What about yours? Karen said anything about that, kid?”

“Well, she told me the suit was too damaged to do self analysis… so….”

“Scan him, Fri,” Tony sighed.

“Multiple laceration, 5 broken ribs, fracture in both femurs, left radius, and right humerus. Major injury detected in left shoulder, 3rd degree burn. Minor concussion detected. Recommend immediate treatment.”

“What about him? Keener, right? Is he drugged or something?” van Dyne asked carefully.

“I don’t believe so, Ms. van Dyne. Young Harley’s sleep is not natural and is psychically induced.”
It is, however, not… malicious in nature. I think it is save for us to let him rest for the moment.”

Tony nodded succinctly and picked Harley up and held him close to his chest. “Right. Let’s get out of here, then. Vision, Wasp, you take Ross and that girl to the jet. F.R.I.D.A.Y., send in the legionnaire and let the MP know it’s going to help with evacuation and search and rescue.”

“I just finished the fabrication and assembly of the second Mark 47, Boss. Would you like me to send that one as well?”

“Yeah, they’re gonna need a lot help evacuating this whole place.” Tony looked at Peter. “Come here, kid. I’m not making you walk with a bad leg, let alone two.”

He could almost see Peter’s flush through his mask. “I’m fine, Tony! You don’t need to - Hey!”

Tony ignored Peter’s cry of protest and moved Harley to his shoulders fireman style to pick Peter up in a princess carry. Despite the vehement objection against the treatment, Peter was remarkably compliant.

Idly, Tony found himself thanking the additional power extremis granted him. He would’ve pulled a muscle or two if he attempted something like this in the past. But for now, he was just happy to haul these two children home - even if he was sure that he’s going to have a nightmare or two tonight with Harley and Peter playing the main roles.

(New Avengers Facility, Upstate New York)

Rhodey was babysitting the Cassidy boy when General Lesley of the United States Air Force called him. To be honest he wasn’t supposed to be this surprised at being contacted by one of his bosses. For all intents and purposes, he was still a Colonel for US Air Force - legs or no legs. He was yet to be discharged, after all.

“Good morning, Colonel Rhodes,” the man said through the camera.

“Good morning, General,” Rhodey answered, standing at attention with the leg braces Tony made for him.
The general looked at them approvingly. “I presume Mr. Stark had achieved yet another miracle?”

“These braces? Yes, I suppose it’s an innovation in biomedical engineering realm… but Tony’s already bugging me about alternative treatment to completely reverse the damage in my spine.”

“Why don’t you take it, then?” General Lesley inquired curiously.

Rhodey smiled. “Because I can’t in good conscience take even more privileges my friendship with Tony provided. These braces are the prototype for a new line of prosthetic and mechanical assisting devices that SI will begin producing sometime this year, so, in a way, I’m paying Tony back by being his guinea pig. But the alternative treatment he offered me wasn’t something that can be comfortably released to the public anytime soon. Something so miraculous would ruffle more than a few doctors’ feathers.”

The other man nodded sagely. “I understand. That was wise of you both, and I commend you for your tact in handling this, both professionally and emotionally. I take it your prognosis has changed? Your medical file just came in, and it says here that with proper treatment and therapy you will eventually be able to regain full mobility in about 10 months time.”

“That’s true, General. It looks like Tony’s braces enable people like me to gain access to a wider arrange of physical therapy…. That’s one more reason why he was so eager to open that new SI Medical Branch soon.”

“Good, I’m very pleased to hear that, Colonel. I’m not going to lie to you, the Brass had been discussing the possibility of having to let you go and give you an honorable discharge, and none of us were really happy to do that.”

Rhodey inclined his head politely at that. “Because of War Machine?”

“That is certainly one of the main factor,” General Lesley agreed. “Right now, US’ standing in international world is… less than ideal, so to speak. Not only did half of the Avengers, a majority American team of superheroes, defected and became terrorists, the one who lead the charge was none other than Captain America himself - complete with the Falcon by his side.”

Yeah, Rhodey could see why US army was hit harder than the rest of America because of that. “I suppose I’m the only US soldier slash superhero left to maintain the imagery, huh?”
General Lesley chuckled a little. “I told you, didn’t I? Letting War Machine Armor go would be a suicide bombing to a deserted building, PR wise. But even more than that, we are reluctant to let such an outstanding member go without at least a diagnosis from a more renowned expert. I’ll be frank here, Colonel, we were prepared to make up whatever new position in our upper echelon just so you can stay and serve with your experiences on the field, both in and out of the War Machine armor.”

Rhodey’s eyes widened. That was… unexpectedly nice of the Brass. “That was incredibly generous of all of you… thank you. Although I suppose that won’t be necessary now, would it? I would be field ready in no time, so no further adjustment should be needed.”

“Needed, maybe not. But one additional idea caught… and we decided that we really do want the change to happen. Colonel, United States Air Force has decided to revive Project EXO-wings under the agreement with the Sokovia Accords Council. Two new soldiers have been thoroughly selected and vetted to be the users of said wings: EXO-8 Harrier, and EXO-9 Peregrine. You, as the pilot of the War Machine Armor have also been selected for a promotion to the rank of Major General, and would thus act - outside the mandated accords operation - as their Commanding General.”

Now, Rhodey was not a person that could be easily left gaping like a goldfish, but that was exactly what he did: gape like a dumb goldfish outta the water bowl. “…Sir, that’s… that’s a lot of information to absorb.”

General Lesley outright laughed at his astonishment. “I bet. The two new pilots are not up to discussion, since they both are now ready for field operation. Your promotion, however, would only come into effect once you agree to it. Without the promotion, you would still hold a higher rank than both of the newcomers, since they are both Majors. But they won’t report to you outside the Accords’ business, which would be a hassle for us since we’re looking into the possibility of turning this arrangement into the blueprint for a new division in US Air Force.”

Schooling his expression and posture back to disciplined professionalism, Rhodey answered, “I see…. However, I will have to at least inform the rest of the Avengers about this first before I can agree to anything, sir. I am the first one to know, am I?”

“You are. And I think it would be best for you to be the one that break the news to the team…. Harrier and Peregrine would, of course, sign the Sokovia Accords, but we wouldn’t feel right to impose new members to the Avengers without their approval. I can assure all of you, however, that their track records are nothing short of stellar. They are both intelligent, driven, and most importantly competent in and out of the field. We handpicked them with the latest incident in mind, so there shouldn’t be any chance of them acting out the way Wilson did.”
Rhodey nodded and saluted the General when he indicated that their conversation was over. “Very well, General. I will report back to you as soon as possible.”

“Thank you, Colonel. Good day.”

The line cut, and Rhodey sat back down heavily. Tony was going to be in for a surprise when he came back.

As if prompted, his cellphone rang with Tony’s special emergency tone.

He picked up quickly. “Tones? What’s up?”

“Hey there, Platypus…. Is the kid with you? Cassidy?”

Rhodey blinked confusedly. “Uh… no? I’m in the meeting room, an Air Force General just called me.”

“Huh, wonder what they could want…. Alright then, I need you to do something for me, Rhodey.” Tony’s voice took a more sedate, careful tone on the last part.

“Course, you crazy. What do you need?”

“We found both Harley and Tracy Crowley. But she got badly injured during our scuffle with Ross. I’m gonna need you to distract him for a few hours until Cho can stabilize her enough for her to have visitors.”


Rhodey could hear the wince in Tony’s voice. “Yeah, a lot happened, but all in all that went quickly. Harley’s okay, just asleep. Peter… well, he’s wounded too… not as bad as Crowley, but….”
“Damn…. Right, how long do you need him distracted?”

“12-ish hours. Think you can manage that long?”

_Oh hell, nah._ “Tony, I’m good, but that’s pushing it. Tell you what, I’ll keep the kid preoccupied until you get his sister in the ER, but after that, we rotate. Deal?”

“Ugh, fine,” Tony groused. “I’ll call Pep and Happy too. It’s going to be a long day.”

Rhodey chuckled. “Just do it like you did with Harley and Peter, and you’ll be fine. Just be careful not to adopt him on accident.”

Tony sputtered indignantly.

“See ya!” Rhodey ended the call with an unholy amount of glee.

He got up with a whirl of his braces, still chuckling to himself. Things were finally looking up for all of them. The Accords were garnering support left and right with every amendments pushed forward. The empty ranks in the Avengers were slowly getting filled back in. Ross was caught, waiting for his punishment. Harley’s safe and sound. Peter wasn’t too badly injured. Tony was getting better by the day, and Rhodey would walk again in less than 10 months.

What could go wrong?

__(Undisclosed Location, South America)__

Natasha read the newspaper title out loud, “AERA and PIERA Debut Joint Mission a Massive Success.”

Both Steve and Sam kept silent. It has only been a few months since the debacle in Leipzig, and already they could see the cards falling all around them. The Accords get amended, more and more countries voiced their support not only by signing the document, but also by gathering enhanced
personnel and made their own teams of Superhero.

As far as her simple comrades were concerned, those new teams were nothing but a passing trend, some sort of new arms race between the nations.

But she was a spy, the best one there ever was. She knew that it meant something else: that Stark’s camp had been in the right, and the world had started to grasp that.

More and more country signed into the accords by the day, hoping to gain protection and help from one of the teams of superheroes regulated by said accords. Which meant that the range of her team’s already restricted movement would be further strained the more they let this go.

It rubbed her the wrong way to think that Stark single-handedly inspired these changes. She was sure that the “civil war” would leave him incapacitated and placid, which meant free-range ground for her and her team. But no, like a phoenix (or perhaps a cockroach) he rose from the ashes and made her job even more difficult than necessary.

Why that man couldn’t just leave the hero’s job to actual heroes, she didn’t know.

By the news about Thaddeus Ross that kept on popping every once in a while, however, she figured that it must be because of some sort of guilty conscience of his that always made him obsessively look for a fix and solution. This time, however, she wasn’t anywhere near him to direct hose obsession and guilt into a healthy, productive behavior.

That would have to change.

She shifted her voice to a more playful, sultry tone. “Well, can’t have these newbies show us up now, can we? Here, all the intel I found about these guys’ hideout. It’s pretty small, shouldn’t be too hard for just the two of you to clear.”

Steve looked up at her and frowned. “What? Why? Where are you going?”

She already checked her pack and weapons. Her bites were in need of some fixing. Perfect timing. “I have some business to take care of. Should help us with our next missions.”
Sam nodded complacently just like he always did. “Okay, if you’re sure. What kind of business, though? Is it gonna be dangerous?”

Natasha gave him her cockiest smirk. “I feel kind of bad having to leave you boys to this, actually. I have a feeling I might actually have a little bit of fun where I’m going.”

Without waiting for further response, the Black Widow slunk out of their hideout.

In her hands, she hold the information she gathered about the latest news about Tony Stark. His “son.” She knew better than most, of course. Tony Stark did not, in fact, have any biological offspring. Which was surprising, considering his promiscuous past. She was starting to belief that Stark was barren - especially with his tendency to get so soft around other people’s children, like that Spider-Man he recruited.

This Harley Keener boy was no different. A pet project of Stark’s, dotted on like his own son because the former playboy wasn’t about to have one of his own.

According to her sources, the paparazzo that leaked the picture was actually bribed by Thaddeus Ross himself. Which meant that this boy, declared missing 15 hours ago by Tennessee Police Department, was now in Ross’ hands.

What better way to ingratiate herself, and by proxy, her whole team, to Stark other than handing him his pretend-son on a silver platter? Or maybe dangled him above his head for a while, made sure he remember this time, who’s in charge.

Oh, well. Details. She never had any patience for that sort of stuff. The mission wasn’t something that needed any detailed planning, anyway. She didn’t even need to bring any back-ups. Not that she had any to spare, Steve and Sam were busy with their mission, Lang had sold his freedom to Pym’s mercy, and Natasha wasn’t stupid enough to ask Clint for his help with such a delicate procedure.

Acquiring this boy’s trust implied subtlety, and a guy who ranted about Tony Stark the Devil Incarnate every other hour was definitely not one for the job.

No, Natasha had to do this one herself. Not that she had any worry about anything going wrong, of course. Ross was slippery, and no one in Stark’s rooster had any capabilities like hers. They wouldn’t be able to find the boy in time without her help.
She chuckled inwardly. This was almost *too* easy.

Chapter End Notes

So many feedback on the last chapter! I wonder why? :)

So this is the end of Ross’ arc. And because it's arc finale, I thought maybe I should try wrap up a chapter without a cliffhanger.

But then I also think that fuck that. I do what I want.

Also, remember that part where I promise I'll go easy on Team Cap?

Yeah, no. I lied. Fuck them, Fuck Russos, and Fuck MCU canon. I'm bringing in the bashing.
Domesticity and the Eye of the Storm

Chapter Notes

Iron Dad! Pepperony! Slight team cap bashing!

I'm indulging myself with this one, so I hope you can excuse the blurry, hand-waved details.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Outside of Ross’ Safe House, Nassau County, Long Island, New York)

When Natasha set her foot on American soil for the first time in months, she hadn’t taken into account the possibility of having to waste more time evading airport security officers. She was very sure that her passport, visa, and ticket was as legit as they could be, and the only thing missing from “Nicole Robinson’s” life story was the record of her actual life. No social media account, no friends and family, just a bunch of documents that said that she was a 30-years-old Canadian lawyer on a vacation.

And yet, here she was, skulking in the shadow because the whole airport was on a red notice alert.

She could only think of one person that would track her movement and change of identities so constantly that a simple border crossing would trip this many alarms. Well, an A.I., to be exact, but F.R.I.D.A.Y. wouldn’t do anything that was not Stark’s explicit commands... right?

Unless F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s also gone rouge like Ultron? Yes, that must’ve been it. Stark wouldn’t take such an antagonistic action against them. As far as he knew, they were still teammates - families - that just had a nasty disagreement. Stark must’ve ordered his A.I. to track them just in case they needed help. Somewhere along the line, the program interpreted the order differently, or just outright disobeyed her “boss” and decided to try and bring down the earth’s mightiest heroes.

Typical Stark. So incapable of competently doing a good thing that he messed up such a simple task. She wondered why Fury was so insistent on bringing Stark to the Avengers Initiative instead of just conning him out of his resources and technology, like they did with his father. It’s not like one of their agents couldn’t be trained to pilot the Iron Man armor, right? James Rhodes was the perfect example of that.

Natasha sighed and peeked out of her hiding. It didn’t look like the securities would go away
anytime soon. Their stubbornness of searching the whole airport without thinning out to the city solidified her suspicion. She’s under surveillance.

The damn A.I.’s probably having fun toying with her. But she wasn’t called the black widow for nothing. Stark’s pet computer wanted to play the waiting game against her?

*Bring it on.*

(New York C Class Airspace)

Harley woke up to the feeling of 2 different sets of hands playing with his hair. Which was usually not something that he’d let someone else do, because what kind of self-respecting human being pets other people?

But the hands on his head felt really nice, and he was really sleepy. Maybe if he didn’t move, they’d just think he’s still asleep?

“we all know you’re awake, Harley. You can stop with the sleeping beauty act.”

Or not.

Well, whatever. The owner of the voice could put it all in a bag and throw it out of the window, because Harley did not care how oddly comforting his voice was. He was snug where he was, and he wasn’t going to move.

He heard a second voice stifle a choked out sounding snicker. “Is he… is he *pouting*?”

*How dare –*

He gritted his teeth and soldiered on. Right now, he wasn’t even that sleepy anymore. He’s just going to refuse waking up out of sheer pettiness and spite.
The first voice outright laughed. A deep, throaty, warm laugh, and instantly Harley understood why that voice comforted him even more than the hands playing with his hair.

“Dad?” he rasped out before he stiffened when both hands suddenly stopped moving.

Crap.

“Uh… I meant Tony! Yup, definitely… ugh, god, I’m so sorry - ”

Tony cut him off with a hug. Which felt so good and warm, and something inside him melt a little because the last couple hours was just so freaking scary.

Harley hugged him back, and he felt relief rolled out of his Dad in waves.

Harris Keener left when Harley was 3. That’s 3 years of him interacting with his biological father, and Harley honestly couldn’t remember much. Only some occasional glimpse and pieces of a drunken, angry man that gambled all his (and his wife’s) money away.

Tony Stark broke into Harley’s garage when he was 9. That’s 3 years of him debating with himself whether or not he should call Tony ‘dad’ altogether, because he definitely felt infinitely more loved by Tony than his own father. Now, 3 years later, Tony’s embrace answered that question for him.

“It’s OK. I don’t mind. I love you,” it said

Tony didn’t say anything, but he didn’t need to; his hug about screamed of acceptance, love, and care, all at once.

“I love you too, dad,” he whispered. Because it’s nice to return good sentiments, even if it was non-verbal.

“I… um, hate to ruin the moment, but… you’re both kind of squishing my broken femur?” the second voice painfully said.
Harley sat back up so quickly his head spun. “Peter?! What the… how?? What happened to you??”

Peter looked *awful*. He wasn’t showing any skin besides his face and his *very* badly burned shoulder. But his whole posture was wrong… too stiff - like it hurt him to just stay awake.

He smiled wanly, looking a little bit sheepish. “I kinda got buried by a secretary of state? It’s like meeting the president… just a little more psychotic.”

Guilt rushed through Harley like a plague. “Oh, god…. I’m *so* sorry Peter. I -”

Peter shook his head. “I didn’t get hurt because of you, Harley. I got hurt *for* you. There’s a difference.”

“That’s even worse!” he gaped, horrified.

“How? I chose to go and save you from Ross, even though Tony told me no -”

“Damn right you did,” the man in question mumbled testily.

“- And I chose to go in anyway, knowing that Ross’ armed with some crazy alien tech. I knew the risk and I took it. No regret, man. I’ll heal, and you’re safe, that’s what matters.”

Harley snapped his jaw shut, feeling out of depth all of a sudden. He was pretty sure he’d said something like that to Hailey once when he got beaten up by some kids in their neighborhood because he mouthed them off for teasing her. But… that’s different, right? She was his little sister, so of course he went all protectively dumb all the time for her. Peter, however….

“How does it feel being the younger sibling in distress for once, Harl?” Tony teased gently.

Both Harley and Peter snapped their head to him at once. On the corner of his eyes he could see Peter rapidly turning red with his mouth hanging open. “I… he…. What’s happening right now?”
Harley floundered.

“What’s happening right now, Davidson, is you’re being fussed over by two people who have absolutely no blood relation with you at all, but love you like family. Now shut up - Peter please close your mouth - and hug us, you crazy brat.”

Now it was Harley’s jaw’s turn to drop down like an idiot. But he reached out to Peter and Tony anyway, and pulled them in. Tony went in willingly, while Peter just hugged back weakly with a shocked expression in his now close-mouthed face.

“What did just happen?” Peter asked feebly.

Harley felt Tony’s eye roll on the top of his head. “I just answered that, Pete. Keep up.”

Peter began to fumble with his words again, and Harley decided to change the subject for the greater good. “Where am I?”

“In my jet, a few minutes away from the compound.”

“And… Ross? You caught him?”

Something dark and angry crossed Tony’s face for a split second, and chill ran down Harley’s spine. “Cuffed and muffled because he pissed van Dyne off.”

Harley would’ve been lying if he said that the little bit of information didn’t send a smug sort of giddiness through him. “Nice. What is a van Dyne?”

“Van Dyne is the nice woman that helped me rescue your bratty ass, so maybe show a little gratitude? Thank you.”

“Oh… OK, sorry.” He looked back at Tony carefully, waiting for his Dad to mention the elephant in the room. His face was carefully blank, however, so Harley had to breach the subject himself. “And… Tracy? Is she…?”
Tony’s lips pressed down even tighter, if that was even possible. “She’s… alive.”

Harley felt his eyes widened with dread. “Dad… no, oh god, you didn’t - ”

“I saved her life, actually,” Tony sniped through clamped shut teeth. “Ross shot her when she pretended to be you. Unfortunately she didn’t undo whatever juju she used to make herself look like you, so I had to watch my fucking kid lost his fucking head!”

The whole jet fell silent afterward, and Tony scrunched up his nose in regret. “Shit - kids, I… - ”

“He shot her? In the head?” Harley said quietly.

Tony shook his head fervently. “No. He shot to where your head should be, which was where her upper stomach was. She’s going to make it… probably.”

Peter who had stayed silent during the whole exchange let out a shaky breath. “Is that why you were…”

Tony threw his glance away. “I saw him, Pete. I saw Ross blast Harley’s head off, and I just… - ” Tony’s voice cracked and Harley swore he saw a tear fell down his cheek in a rush. “ - I lost it. I watched you got murdered and I lost it, Harl. I almost killed him, and honestly, I’d do it again in a heartbeat. But van Dyne and Vision stopped me, so I just…."

Tony was full on trembling now. His eyes were glassy and unseeing, and Harley just knew that he was going through another panic attack - because of him.

Tentatively, he peeked at Peter and reached to Tony’s shoulder, letting the other teen take the other one. None of them said anything. They just sat there in silence, until Tony lifted his hands and rest it on their shoulders too.

“I’m going to give my therapist a raise after this,” he joked weakly.
“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” Harley said while he chewed his lips nervously. “She was just supposed to try and get a clear shot to take Ross out…. But then the door just exploded and I just… blacked out.”

“She knocked you out. Swap place with you and disguised you as her corpse.”

“Oh….”

Tony sighed. Look, kid. I already know about his brother, and - ” Tony held out a hand when Harley perked up at the mention of Tracy’s brother, “ - to some extend, I understand why she did what she did.”

“Wait what did she do?” Peter asked confusedly.

Both Harley and Tony stilled and looked at each other uncertainly.

“She, uh… well, she’s the one who took me here.”

Peter’s eyes bulged as he inhaled sharply. “But - Why?!?”

“Remember Cassidy?” Tony hedged.

“Oh god, they tortured him, didn’t they??”

“Illegally and unethically experimented on him, but yes. I think she was forced to kidnap Harley via her brother.”

Peter looked like he might puke. “Oh god,” he whispered. “Oh god.”

Harley looked at Tony imploringly. “Dad, please, you gotta help her - for Cassidy, if nothing else…. I know she screwed up, but she’s not a bad person. Just… just give her a chance to tell you her story, OK? I’m not asking you to bail her out or anything, just… try to listen.”
Tony sighed wearily and tipped his head back. “God, you got to stop making me soft like this, Harl. Fine. I’ll listen to her, but that’s it. If the accords wants a piece of her, then they are more than welcome to have it.”

Harley gulped and nodded, settling himself back to Tony’s side. They were going home, and everything would be alright.

At least he hoped so.

(New Avengers’ Facility, Upstate New York)

When the high from getting Harley back began to fade, Tony mentally bashed his own head in.

‘What’s happening right now, Davidson, is you’re being fussed over by two people who have absolutely no blood relation with you at all, but love you like family.’

Ugh.

Tony buried his face into Pepper’s hair and groaned miserably.

“Tony?”

“I’m okay, honey. Just regretting my past decision and lack of impulse control.”

Pepper turned in his lap to face him in earnest. “Tony? What’s wrong?”

He hesitated. “I might or might not have just told two children to call me daddy.”

“I hope you’re talking about Harley and Peter. And please, by god, don’t use that word.”
“Hey, it’s not my fault people choose to normalize that kink!”

“Yeah, you’re right,” she sighed. “So what’s the problem? Did they get uncomfortable?”

“No…?” Tony tried. “I mean, it was Harley that woke up calling me ‘Dad,’ and Peter acted so much like a goddamn older brother, and I just…” He shrugged helplessly.

Pepper snorted affectionately. “OK, you got me there - I want the full story. Spill.”

So Tony did. He told her about how fucking lost he felt when he thought Harley was gone for good. How Peter kept him from spiraling down that path. How overjoyed he felt when Harley finally woke up and still called him ‘Dad.’ He told her all about Peter’s heated speech, how it matched almost word to word the one he knew Harley gave his sister once - Hailey told him herself, after all.

He told her about how he got overwhelmed after more than 24 hours emotional roller coaster and just said fuck it to restraint and stoicisim. How he just let Harley call him ‘Dad,’ before he rolled on and call him Peter’s younger brother in distress - by proxy, telling Peter, the boy who he just knew for a few months, and whose aunt hates his guts, that he was extended the same “courtesy.”

By the end of his rant, Tony was closing his eyes, ready for Pepper to judge him. He wasn’t expecting her to laugh so hard she almost fell down the sofa.

“Pep?”

Pepper wheezed and coughed.

“Oh, Come on, no need to be mean, I know I fucked up,” he sulked.

She sobered up a little at that. “No, no… I wasn’t laughing at you… honest,” she said as she wrapped herself around him once more. “It’s just… Tony, don’t you see how Harley’s been seeing you as his father figure for years now? It’s not that big of a jump to say that he just started to call you that because… well, getting kidnapped so soon after seeing you dying wasn’t exactly a trauma free experience, now, is it?”
Tony opened his mouth to protest, but he couldn’t find any logical answer to that. “Fine. I’ll give you that one. But Peter? Pep, I can’t just, I don’t know… stake a claim on him, or something. I barely even know him, for god’s sake.”

“And yet, you care for him,” Pepper answered easily.

That wasn’t a question, but Tony was defensive. “Well, yeah, of course I do. Peter just wanted to do good - he’s a good kid and he’s going to be so much better than me, Pep. He can’t exactly do that in a footie pajama, can he?”

“Okay, so you make him a new suit. Done. Why are you still hanging around then? You’ve given him the best protection he could ever get, so why are you still hovering around him like a helicopter on a rescue mission?”

Tony gritted his teeth. Pepper was making sense, and he didn’t like it. “I can’t just leave him alone to figure it all out by himself, Pepper. I can’t let him go through all that unnecessary shit show when I can just, you know, tell him all about it.”

Pepper smirked knowingly. “Ah, I see. Just acting as a mentor, huh. Care to explain the college fund, then? The chem set in your personal lab? Sudden interest in hacking a high school server just to check his grades? The – ”

“Okay, Okay! Fine. I overstepped a little bit. I’ll stop, you happy now?”

Pepper’s face softened and she reached out to brush his cheeks. “Oh, Tony… It’s not bad to care. You see a lot of yourself in him, so you reach out and now you’re attached. It’s happened once with Harley and now it’s happening again, so you’re doing it twice as fast. I don’t see how that’s your fault, Tony.”

“His aunt hates me.”

“Not really. In fact, she just called me to say thank you. She figures Peter won’t ever tell her about Spider-Man if you didn’t insist on it. She’s coming soon, by the way, I told her about his injury and she flipped, understandably.”
Tony pursed his lips. He wanted to argue, to tell Pepper that he wasn’t worth all of that. But just as he opened his mouth, Pepper continued, “If you’re really bothered by that, Tony, why don’t you talk about it with the kid himself?”

He flinched, hard. “Pep, no - I’ll scare the kid off, and - ”

“Tony,” Pepper interrupted sternly, “what did your therapist say about avoiding emotional conflict.”

Tony hung his head in shame. “Don’t,” he mumbled like a chastised boy.

Pepper nodded, satisfied. She twist around again to face the TV, and just sat there in companionable silence.

*This is nice,* he thought. *It’s been a while since we just cuddle like this.*

He settled himself for a long, comfortable snuggle. His A.I., however, had different ideas.

“Boss? Is it OK if I bother you with something else now?”

He groaned internally. Somehow, he just knew it had something to do with his estranged… ex-squatter. “What now, Fri? Can’t you see we’re about to have fun?”

“I’m terribly sorry, Boss and Boss-Lady, but it seems like a certain spider wanted to have a look at the commotion back in long island… 12 hours ago.”

*See?! Can’t they just leave me alone like regular people who don’t like me??* “And you just told me this now why, F.R.I.D.A.Y.?”

Her voice was almost sheepish when she answered. “Well, I did have a lot of fun playing cat and mouse with her. But it seems she grew tired of the game and rage quit back to Venezuela a few minutes ago.”
Pepper piped up with something that sounded like a vindictive glee, “And did you alert local authority, F.R.I.D.A.Y.?”

“No, Ma’am. I need Boss’ express permission for that.”

“Leave it, baby girl. I’ll handle them myself,” he answered tiredly. “I think it’s high time we deal with them, anyway. The accords are in place, and people are stepping up to protect the earth.” Gently, he set Pepper down from his lap and stood up. “We don’t need training wheels anymore. If the UN wants them in prison, then they’ll have them in prison. I’m done covering for their asses.”

“You’re going to the council now?” Pepper asked.

“Nah, I promised my kid I’ll go talk to his kidnapper. Might as well check if she’s still alive.”

Chapter End Notes

College's starting soon, so I don't know how's that going to affect my schedule.

C'ya!
The Loose Ends

Chapter Notes

I'm stressing about this chapter so much because this is where Tony's going to have the talk with Tracy.

I might or might not have mothballed a lot of different ideas, but I think I nailed it?

Idk, this chapter gives me anxiety.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Medical Bay, New Avengers' Facility, Upstate New York)

Tony walked through the compound with a purposeful stride. Now that Ross had been taken out and Harley's safe and sound, his mind's already pacing three miles a second with clear-cut ideas and plans. True, he was wishing for a much later date for his next confrontation with Rogers and company, but like he said in his hearing by the Accords Council - he's got no intention of covering their asses anymore.

The Council didn’t have to worry about releasing all those sensitive materials for the public, he’d do it himself.

In any case, the Avengers wouldn’t be called to personally deal with them, anyway. Between the Accords’ latest amendments, and the multitude of sporadic superhuman teams all over the globe, the Council had a lot of options for who to give the displeasure of taking the strays in. No need to resort to people with personal beef to settle - people like him.

He couldn’t be more pleased with the progress that they had made so far. Ross’ ideas and secret backdoor within the document were easy to identify and eliminate, and from there, followed the revisions and stipulations, designed to give those unwilling to fight with their powers the same protection and human rights as those who were. Many vigilantes began to request their own personalized agreements and conditions before they sign, mainly dealing with secret identity, and freedom of action vs jurisdiction range.

FBI became the first to organize such agreements between local police force and the vigilantes in question. In fact, the council just called him to inform that 2 new signatories had been deployed to help FBI deal with Vulture. Which was good, because it meant that Peter had no other reason to wiggle his way out of his infirmary bed.
He’s going to shy that kid away from the fray until the amendments for minor enhanced got pushed through. Maybe Cassidy’s case would finally give the final push?

Tony shook his head to clear the errand thought. Those were stuffs to worry about later. Now, he was nearing Tracy Crowley’s infirmary ward, and if he couldn’t switch his mind into objectivity, then at least his poker face had to be perfect.

As he walked nearer to the door, however, he noticed not just Dr. Cho - who he’d expected - but also Vision waiting for him to arrive.

Cho saw him and immediately marched towards him, Vision by her side. “Mr. Stark, I was hoping I could catch you before you go in.”

“How reassuring. Here, I found this inside her skin when I patch her up,” Cho answered drily while holding a palm’s worth of little plastic chips. 

*Tracker* chips.

He bit his lips. “Where?”

“All over her body. Back, shoulders, upper arms, thighs, anywhere concealed by clothes.”

Tony took a deep breath and pocketed the tracker chips. “Well, now we know why she didn’t tell proper authority. Not that it would’ve done any good against Ross at that time, but…”

“She’s stable now. The cradle was able to reconstruct her abdomen, although I’d imagine she’d still be pretty sore for a while. She’s lucky the wound wasn’t on her longitudinal axis, or her spine would’ve been gone by now.” Cho shuddered a little. “I have to be honest - reconstructing a literal hole in a human’s body wasn’t exactly what I had in mind when I developed the cradle technology. She’s lucky her brother’s cells’ regenerative properties are compatible with her.”
Tony nodded along with her, although he was more focused on Vision, who apparently had stared rather intently at Crowley through the window. “So you’ve figured out their deal yet?”

“Rudimentary information, yes,” she answered with a sigh. “The younger brother displays control over electron - down to a minuscule level. His explanation was… childlike and simple, but the general idea is that he could literally overload his neural system and muscle cells with his power, which sends him into a “overdrive” state, so to speak.”

“That’s where the ‘I run fast’ part happens, right?”

“That, and the fact that his muscular strength and endurance is a little of the chart for a boy his age and size. I think his sister has that too, to a certain degree.”

Tony raised his eyebrow. “She’s buff too? How is that fair?”

Cho shook her head absently. “Not to the degree that you’re thinking about. According to my estimate, she’s just very slightly stronger that what a baseline human would be. Naturally athletic, so to speak… at least with a regular human standard. Proportionately, the brother is physically stronger than she is.”

“That’s why he heals fast too?”

“I think that comes with his power. Controlled or not, overloading your nerves and muscles with electricity is bound to cause damage without some kind of regenerative ability.”

Tony hummed, noncommittal. He was about to ask for an update when Vision visibly stiffened.

“Tony, Dr. Cho, she is waking up.”

He nodded in thanks and strode over to the door. Cho, however, reached out and placed her hand on his upper arm. “Don’t kill my patient, Tony. I mean it.”

Shrugging, he went in to the room. “Ye of little faith. Don’t worry, Harley’s pretty dead set on me not killing her.”
“Come in,” Happy called lazily when he heard F.R.I.D.A.Y. announcing some accord’s guys’ arrival.

The door opened smoothly to reveal a pair of air force officers - majors, from the look of it. Both looked somewhere between late 20s and early 30s, both carried themselves with the disciplined air of a trained soldier, and both stepped once into the room, but made no further move beyond standing at ease after closing the door.

Happy decided right there and then that he liked these two.

“Majors Leonardo Verde and Naomi Lim from the Accords Council reporting for duty, sir.”

Oh, yeah, I can work with them, alright.

“You’re the new Falcons, right? Aren’t you supposed to report to Rhody? I’m just the head of security of this company, he’s the one in cahoot with the big league.”

The man, Leonardo, quirked his lips unhappily at the mention of Falcon. “With all due respect, sir, Harrier is not a falcon.”

Naomi nodded at her partner’s words. “We don’t take a traitor’s name. My designation is Peregrine, not Peregrine Falcon.”

Happy nodded, inwardly smiling at their obvious distaste for their predecessor. “And Rhodes? Again, I’m just here as FBI’s go to guy for SI, so I’m not sure why you’re reporting to me now.”

"Our instruction as of now is to coordinate with FBI until Colonel Rhodes accepts, or refuse, his promotion to the rank of Major General,” Naomi answered with one of the most impressive drill sergeant voice he’d ever heard. “Until he does, we don’t report directly to him.”
Leonardo picked up where she left off and said, “We did work with the FBI for a while on this case, but the weapons found in ex-Secretary of State Ross’ residence suggest that Chitauri techs was not the only things that were stolen from D.O.D.C.’s vaults. Several components that was identified as the ones that SI produced had also been found in the weapons.”

Happy wanted to curse. “So either SI got swiped, or we intentionally gave them the parts? Is that what you’re saying?”

He shook his head. “All those components can be found in D.O.D.C. as well, so it must’ve been stolen at the same time. No, we’re suggesting that this vulture, whoever he is, has a sentimental motive strong enough for him to steal easily obtainable parts instead of just buying it from the market for less hassle and risk. We think SI is the specific target of his operation.”

“Figures, who is it this time? Someone Tony drunkenly blew off back in late 90s?”

Naomi shrugged. “We’re still getting to that part. That’s why we’re here. We need whatever information SI can give about anyone who has come into hostile contact with SI in the last few years. Whatever unclassified information would be an improvement to our none, right now.”

Happy grunted and made a gesture at the ceiling. “F.R.I.D.A.Y. will upload the appropriate data. Anything else, you have to ask Tony Stark or Virginia Potts directly.”

Both nodded and, honest to god, snapped a salute at him before turning back and marched out of the door.

Happy just shook his head and huffed a laugh. Hopefully this new position didn’t come with additional paperwork. At least this time it’s a couple air force Majors instead of a fanboying teen. Should come with less stress, right?

*(Tracy’s Infirmary Ward, New Avengers Facility, Upstate New York)*

“Ye of little faith,” Tony said. “Don’t worry, Harley’s pretty dead set on me not killing her.”
But it wasn’t Ms. Crowley’s health that Vision’s worried about right now. He understood very well that, while Tony was understandably hurt and angry at her, he was very much in control of his action, and thus, was in no danger of lashing out so impulsively.

No, he was worried for Tony. More than anyone he knew that mental powers were bound to be one of the most unstable of them all. Mind was fickle, and stressful situation tend to have unpleasant side effects on psychics.

Physical pain aside, Ms. Crowley had been subjugated to a highly stressful situation in the past few months, if young Mr. Crowley’s stories were to be believed. Waking up to face a person who could rightfully exact revenge on her could definitely scare her into hostility.

“Tony… if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to be there in the room as well.”

The man blinked at him. “Uh, sure? Like I said, I’m not going to hurt her or anything… but if you’re that worried….”

“No, Tony. It’s not her that I’m worried about, it’s you. Mental powers are notoriously volatile, and your… upgraded physiology isn’t really equipped to handle such attack. So, may I?”

Tony’s feature softened considerably and he nodded, seemingly nonchalantly.

Both of them walked (floated, in his case) into the room, which was sparse and very clinical. In the middle of the room was Tracy Crowley, connected to several machines through clear tubes full of various liquids.

As Tony and he came closer, however, the woman fidgeted and tossed her head about, as if she was having a nightmare. Cautiously, Vision raised a mental barrier between her and them.

“You said she’s waking up?” Tony asked, a little uncomfortable with the distress Ms. Crowley displayed.

“She is. Watch.”
As if on cue, Ms. Crowley opened her eyes frantically, and immediately zeroed in on Tony. Vision tightened the mental shield in preparation when the man stiffened beside him.

Amazingly, however, she appeared to deflate at the sight of Tony, even when the discomfort was still clearly etched on her face.

“Mr. Stark,” she greeted softly.

“Ms. Crowley.”

She swallowed visibly when Tony greeted back coldly. “I’m sorry. For kidnapping your son, for causing injury to the other one, and for… giving you that sight.”

Vision furrowed his brow instinctively. She was not supposed to know about Peter… unless….

“Stop peeking at my head, if you’re really sorry,” Tony growled menacingly, “and stay the fuck away from Peter.”

Ms. Crowley flinched back immediately. “I’m trying. Trust me, I usually have to actively read someone’s mind to know details like that…. But it’s kind of hard to do when your mind is practically screaming at me like this. Can you stop, by the way? It kind of hurts,” she said with face pinched from the pain.

What did she mean? Who’s screaming?

“What do you mean by that, Miss? I am unaware of Tony’s mind doing such a thing,” Vision asked when Tony fell silent at her request.

“You don’t know? How?? His mind is literally leaking like a faucet right now, it’s even louder than my own thought!”

“OK, I don’t know what’s your deal, but if you’re just pulling this out of your ass to get out of trouble…. …”
“No! I’m serious! It’s… Jesus, who did this to you? It’s like… it’s like someone punched their way into your mind, fuck it up, and then pull back out with a power drill or something - This is… this is a wound… and it’s bleeding.”

Tracy Crowley was beginning to hyperventilate, and Tony’s breathing pattern was also beginning to take on a more erratic pattern. Dimly, he felt the woman’s control falling apart in waves of projected emotion. Things were getting out of hand very quickly, and Vision had to rein it in as soon as possible.

He reached out to her forehead, and with his stone, began to assess the situation as soon as he shielded the woman from outside influences and from using her power outwards. What he found, however, almost made him question whether or not an android could throw up: Tony’s mind wasn’t just wounded. It was torn open and left gaping and bleeding for the world to see.

Except he didn’t see it. He was never even aware of the existence of such extensive damage. A quick examination at the injury revealed the reason, clear as day.

The wound was gaping red. No, not red… *scarlet*.

Of course he wouldn’t feel the wound - the energy signature wasn’t just similar to his, it was also designed to keep him out of the loop. To keep him from knowing of it’s existence.

It was decidedly impossible to throw up without a stomach, but he felt sick, regardless.

“Tony… please don’t panic, but I think Ms. Crowley here is telling you the truth.”

His creator’s eyes widened. “Is it…?”

“I think I know who did that. Would you like to postpone this talk for another day?”

Tony sucked in several deep breaths to calm himself. “No, it’s OK. I have to do this now. Unless she’s out for the count?”
Ms. Crowley shook her head. “I… I’m OK. I think. He’s blocking everything out right now, so you can get it all out of your chest.”

The room quieted, and for almost 5 minutes, no one said anything. The silence was almost overwhelming.

“I wanted to ask you why you did that,” Tony started eventually, “but I already got the gist of it. You’re orphans, only have each other. Ross napped your brother and experimented on him, probably with you there in the room to watch, told you to work for him or else, put all these trackers in your skin,” he jingled his pocket for emphasis. “Did I get anything wrong?”

“That’s our life story in a nutshell, yes.”

Tony nodded, face carefully blank. “The next in order, then, would be to ask you, rhetorically, if you’re sorry. But you already told me that you are, so it’s all moot point anyway.”

Ms. Crowley didn’t say anything, but she nodded at him.

“Well, I already promised my son I’d listen to you first before I do anything. The question is… what else should I hear from you?”

“What do you want to hear?”

“I’m not sure, but your excuses are certainly not welcome.”

Vision watched as Ms. Crowley crinkled her forehead, lost in thought.

“I don’t have any,” she said eventually. “Excuses, I mean. I have reasons why I did what I did, and, save for one, you already know all of that.”

“Save for one?”

“Yes. The reason why you saw Harley’s body instead of mine when I got shot.”
“OK, why is that?”

“I’m not sure,” she answered. “Illusion wasn’t something that I knew I could even do until Harley pointed that out to me. My best guess is that my power just continued running even after that shot made me pass out, so what you saw was my subconscious rendering of what would happen instead of me actively giving you nightmare. I’m sorry.”

Tony appeared to weigh it in for a while. “Alright, fair enough, I guess. Anything else you want to say?”

“Yes,” the young woman answered without hesitation. “I’m willing to go through any investigation and court trial that you deem necessary.”

“You don’t have to state your consent, blondie, I’m reporting you anyway.”

“Oh, I know,” she remarked easily. “I’m simply informing that I will cooperate.”

Tony scoffed at that. “What, you’re telling me you’re going to self-flagellate in front of the judge for atonement?”

“No. I’m telling you that I will tell the truth. I won’t promise that I won’t defend myself, Mr. Stark, I have too much self-preservation for that. But I can promise you that my defense won’t contain any lie - about me or anyone else.”

“Planning on throwing your old boss under the buss, are you?” Tony asked flippantly, to which she snorted.

“Of course I will. I have no lost love for that dick. And if telling them all the details of what he’d done to my brother and me would give me a lenience? I won’t just be dumb if I don’t take it, I’d also be aiding him.”

Tony eyed the young woman for a long time, and even Vision got a little nervous at Ms. Crowley’s borderline impertinent tone.
“Is this how you got that summa cum laude for your PR major?” he asked after a while.

She shrugged. “I’m the biggest party girl in the whole campus, and yet I still graduated with honor. Speaks more about my skill on making people believe my bullshit rather than my academic achievement, really,” Ms. Crowley said without breaking eye contact. “But when I promised you that I’d cooperate and tell the truth, I meant it.

“You don’t have to trust me, Mr. Stark. I’m a manipulative cunt - that’s what I do. Even without my powers, people believe what I say. My words mean jack shit, and I know it. I’m telling you I’d cooperate so you know that when you check all my words and found them true, that’s because I meant it to be, not because I have any ulterior motive whatsoever.”

Vision, who was still shielding her mind, couldn’t help but notice the lack of lie from her words. Those were all facts - she had no intentions against Tony at all.

Apparently, Tony also noticed this, as he simply sighed heavily and said, “Damn it, you’re good.” He glared at her. “As much as I love him, I don’t really have any legal authority to sue on behalf of Harley. His mother, a much better person than I am, also see no point in dragging a court battle against you. With the new amendments to the accords, situations where an enhanced was forced to illegal actions fall under the jurisdiction of the Council, and they seem to be rather sympathetic of you. However, I’m still holding you up to your promise on cooperation, because there will definitely be an investigation and a hearing by the Council. Hell, they might even ask you to testify in Ross’ trial later. You can prove your remorse that way.”

Ms. Crowley pursed her lips. “That’s… not exactly fair for you or for Harley. But thank you.”

Tony waved his hands dismissively. “Don’t thank me, I’m not doing this for you. I simply don’t have the time to add your drama to the mix. I still have a press conference about that damned picture in about 12 hours, an Edward scissorwings to catch, and a few ex-teammates hounding me and my kid. Don’t bother me, and I won’t bother you. We clear?”

“Crystal,” Ms. Crowley agreed. “Want my 2 cents for your press conference? I know I just told you I bullshit my way into diploma, but those written essays and tests are all legit. I’m pretty damn good at what I do.”

Vision was very sure Tony would just reject the offer. “Too soon” would probably be the appropriate reason for the rejection. But Tony proved himself capable of surprising him yet again.
“You know what? I think I do. What do you have?”

(Venezuela)

“OK, Nat, from the beginning. Are you sure F.R.I.D.A.Y.’s gone rouge?”

Steve didn’t need to hear Nat’s answer to Sam to confirm his suspicion. He always knew something like this would happen sooner or later. Ultron was the proof of that.

Both his friends continued to bicker, Nat was insisting that Tony’s A.I. had to be stopped, while Sam was understandably more reluctant. Steve won’t blame Sam if he didn’t want to face off against Tony again anytime soon. He had been so horrified when he saw Bucky missing an arm back in his cryopod in Wakanda, and apologized profusely to him for giving Tony their location.

Sam had spat on everything Tony or SI related after that, albeit with a sensible trepidation and unease. Steve had felt rather bad for Tony - he wasn’t all in the wrong in Siberia. Steve should’ve handled it better, subdue him faster instead of trying futilely to get him to listen. But in the end, he decided not to tell any of his team about the details of what happened there.

Whatever was shown to Tony there was not for Steve to tell. He’s doing his friend (So was I, so was I, so was I) a favor, he knew Tony would appreciate having his privacy intact.

“Nat, Sam, enough,” he commanded, and they listened. “We don’t know for sure that it was F.R.I.D.A.Y. that messed with you. It could be literally anyone else at this moment. We’re wanted, remember?”

Nat huffed at him impatiently. “Really, Steve? Who do you think I am? Your regular Joe Schmo won’t have a chance at finding me. It was F.R.I.D.A.Y. and you know it.”

“It could be on Stark’s order, who knew how far down he’d fall,” Sam seethed.

There it was again. None of his friends ever call Tony by his first name anymore, like they are no
“You don’t know him like we do,” Nat argued, jolting him out of his thought. “He was running on his emotion when we fought each other, but he’s literally so desperate of acceptance, he’d do anything for us. Most likely, he gave his A.I. the green light to track us in case we need back up, but the damn computer went Skynet on him. Again.”

At Nat’s words, he felt his heart swell with affection for his dear friend (SO WAS I, SO WAS I, SO WAS I) . That was Tony, through and through. Always looking out for them to the best of his ability. It’s such a shame that he didn’t have them to guide him on how to do it the right way.

“Look, Nat, if you’re right, then Tony’s on our side, and he’s going to find out about F.R.I.D.A.Y. soon. He’d call me, I know he will,” Steve tried to placate his friend, his hand nervously playing with the flip phone.

Tony would call. He had to.

Nat gritted her teeth at him. “I won’t be so sure if I were you, Steve.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked her before Steve could disagree.

“Remember the business I had to take care of? Harley Keener, the kid that got outed by the media for playing date with Stark, got kidnapped by Ross.”

Several shouts of indignation filled the room.

“Stark’s endangering children now??” Sam hissed.

“W – Why doesn’t he call me?!” Steve sputtered.

“That’s just it, Steve. Either he’s can’t get over his ego to admit his fuck-ups, or he just wants to keep that kid away from other people’s reasonable doubt about Stark.”
Steve swallowed the hurt he felt inside. “This kid, is he… is he really Tony’s son?”

Nat shook her head. “No, I don’t think so. No doubt the kid feels like Stark’s his father figure or something, but I can’t say if Stark’s unwillingness of letting us close to him is a sign of him being overprotective, or just him trying to manipulate the kid.”

“Poor kid, god knows what kind of lies Stark must’ve fed him with,” Sam said disgustedly.

Steve just felt a touch of anger and melancholy at the thought of Tony keeping yet another secret from him - from the team. (Did you know? Did you know? Did you know?)

Steve shook his head. No. He had his reason for not telling Tony about his parents. He just… he didn’t want to open an old wound, and it’s been so long… surely Tony’s already over their death? No. Keeping a secret like having a son figure or ward or anything was way out of line. They were supposed to be teammates - how were they supposed trust each other if they kept secrets like that from the team?

With a sigh, he pocketed the flip phone that he unconsciously pulled out. “Let’s just… let’s leave him alone for now, Nat… lay low. We’re supposed to fight for the betterment of the world, if Tony’s not deliberately fighting against us, then we don’t have to fight him too.”

He could tell that Nat wasn’t happy about his decision, but thankfully she didn’t push.

With a heavy sigh, they all went their own ways. Living on the run provided little in terms of entertainment, but Steve managed. Until Tony saw reason and reached out for the olive branch Steve gave him, he can’t do anything else.

Tony had to be the one to stop all this pettiness.

Chapter End Notes

So? Too quick? Too hand waved? Tracy's not done making amends, but this is a start, I think?

If any of you can catch that one reference from 'the Magicians' from her quotes, you're officially my favorite. Margo is bae, and I think about her a lot when I write Tracy.
Speaking of Tracy, say hello to the new OCs! god, i'm handing out OCs like candy on Halloween. Did you guys notice what I did with their surnames? ;)

Anyway... hope you like this one. Me, I'm just glad I can get this chapter outta the way - hence, the title.

C'ya!
See the end of the chapter for more notes

(New Avengers Facility’s Meeting Room, Upstate New York)

“Honey Bear?”

“Heya, Tones,” Rhodey answered casually as he strode into the empty, sans Tony, conference room.

The other man quirked his eyebrow and smirked. “Not that I’m not happy to see my braces getting your glorious ass up and about, but what’s with the getup?”

Obligingly, he mock-posed to Tony’s wolf whistles. “What? Can’t a man flaunt his well-earned uniform once or twice a week?”

“Not when the man calls his uniform monkey suit when he thinks no one is looking,” Tony replied with a grin.

Rhodey snorted and took a seat beside Tony. “Well, the council likes the uniform even more than you, so there’s that. Hurry up and call them already.”

“Pushy,” Tony answered as he pressed a button on the desk with an eye roll.

A massive holographic screen lit up in front of them, showing 10 council members sitting in a long desk that somehow reminded him of the time he crashed Tony’s senate hearing.
This time, he’s got his back.

“Council members, thank you for agreeing to this conference call,” Tony opened glibly, face shifting into his usual professional one.

Councilwoman Moore from Australia, a genial middle-aged lady that Rhodey really liked, answered with a smile, “Mr. Stark, Colonel Rhodes, good to see you both.”

“I take it your mission was successful, then?”

“It was,” Tony agreed, before launching into a detailed report of everything that happened since the photo of Harley and Tony hit the news.

The council was pensive, which was to be expected. They were prepared for Ross to be convicted on a myriad of charges: treason, bribery, illegal imprisonment. Hell, Hulk and Abomination’s case proved that he’d stoop to illegal experimentation to get his ways.

But to discover that he would do that to a child? And then use said child as a hostage?

Rhodey could see the murderous glint in several men and women in front of them.

“That man will pay for his deeds. No offence to your country, gentlemen, but this coddling of a single politician must end. Now,” said a man with graying hair in the far end of the table. Swiss delegate, if he’s not mistaken.

“He will, Councilman Rechsteiner. The older sister of Cassidy Crowley, Tracy, has agreed to not only testify against Mr. Ross, but also cooperate with the Council on further investigation and hearing regarding her part in this incident.”

The man nodded. “And the boy himself? How is his health?”

Tony tapped his feet once and that was all the prompt Rhodey needed. “Physically, he’s almost healed. Among other things, his powers include enhanced healing, and Dr. Cho was very thorough with his treatment. Mentally, however…. ” Rhodey hedged uncertainly
Now it’s the elderly woman on the other side of the table, Councilwoman Acharya of India, who gritted her teeth. “Do we have records on what kind of torture that monster cooked up for him? Poor boy, will he be well enough to testify? Should we conduct an individual interview?”

“I think it’s better to let him tell the story in private, Councilwoman Acharya,” Moore answered before Tony or himself could answer. “We already have the older sister to tell the people what happened, no need to scare the boy even more.”

Murmur of agreement came from the rest of the Council. “Very well. According to your record, Ms. Crowley had been injured heavily in a scuffle during the mission, Mr. Stark. Will it be amenable if she stays in Avengers’ Medical Facility for the time being, then? Just until her council hearing.”

“That’s fine, Councilman Rechsteiner. We’ve got the space.”

“Good. That’s done, then…. Moving on, your report regarding the rogue Avengers. Are they on the move?”

Rhodey froze. *Wait, I didn’t know about this one!*

“My A.I., F.R.I.D.A.Y., intercepted the Black Widow just as she got off the plane at New York’s JFK. She called for Red Notice Alert and kept her under surveillance for around 12 hours - essentially keeping her in a tag game with airport security.”

Acharya’s eyebrows lifted to her hairline. “That’s… commendable. What happened after the 12th hour?”

“She, I’m quoting my A.I. here, ‘raged quit back to Venezuela’. I guess she got tired of playing the mouse.”

“And the timing, too…. Do you think she was targeting Mr. Keener as well, Mr. Stark?”

Rhodey managed not to growl at Moore’s words. Barely. That bitch so much as breath in Harley’s direction, she’s dead.
“I think she might be under the impression that she could strike a deal with either the council or me if she rescued him.”

Councilman Chiba from Japan piped up for the first time, “Which is definitely not going to happen. So, the question is, what are they going to do about it?”

“Councilman Chiba is right. This group has been proven to be reckless and highly dangerous. Now that their one chance of gaining leverage is gone, will they act rashly in retaliation or will they duck their head and continue to lay low?” Councilwoman Acharya agreed.

“Most likely they will continue to lay low, if they still have a semblance of common sense left,” Tony answered airily, but Rhodey sincerely doubt that they did. “But regardless, the public will still catch a whiff of them sooner or later. A major international airport of the US just got shutdown for 12 hours because of a red notice - things like that don’t just happen every other Saturday.”

The council members looked at each other uneasily and began talking between themselves. Moore was the one to put an end to all of that. “Well, there’s not much we can do about the past, so I say we just go with the flow and cross that bridge when we get there. Should the public suddenly ask for their return - which I highly doubt, at least for people in Aussie - we still have an ace up our sleeve for that kind of situation.” She looked at Tony with an apologetic sort of look. “Although I’d loathe to let you pay the price for that move, Mr. Stark.”

Right. That damn video.

Tony, for his part, waved his hand in an image of nonchalance that Rhodey easily saw through. “It’s fine, I’m ready to do what I have to. Besides, I’ve been talking to Ms. Crowley about my upcoming press conference, and she’s told me about the possibility of some reporter broaching that subject. It’s kind of infuriating to admit, but she’s got a knack on the court of public opinion.”

Moore offered a smile and nodded. “Ah, yes. We shouldn’t keep you waiting, then. On to the last of our list? Colonel Rhodes?”

This is it.

Rhodey straightened up in his seat, pointedly not looking at Tony’s questioning stare. “I’ve received the proposal for the addition of Majors Leonardo Verde and Naomi Lim, designations
Harrier and Peregrine, to the Avengers’ active roster. But I think the team should discuss that possibility after we see their result for this Vulture mission.”

“Those are the guys you send to help the FBI?” Tony asked the Council.

“Yes. US Air Force decided to restart the EXO-wings project, so they made the proper contract with us. We think it’s better for American enhanced to deal with American villain, so we sent them to help the FBI. But that’s not all, is it, Colonel?” the woman’s eyes shone with mirth. “Why don’t you tell Mr. Stark here about the rest of proposal?”

“Sour patch?” Tony asked uncertainly.

“Well… Air Force also offered me a promotion to Major General, but - ”

“He accepts.”

Rhodey blinked confusedly. “What?”

“He accepts,” Tony repeated slowly, as if he was saying ‘duh.’

“I… was kind of waiting for my spine to complete the healing process?”

Tony waved his hand impatiently. “You can use the remote control armor in the mean time, Rhodey. Seriously, you’ve been waiting for this since you still have full hair! What the hell are you doing, waiting around like this?”

They stare at each other for a full minute before exploding in a fit of laughter, totally ignoring the Council Members that stayed silent during the whole ordeal. “Okay, okay. I guess I’m gonna have to call General Lesley about that, huh?”

“Perfect. We’ll come up with the appropriate paper work. I think that’s all for today, Mr. Stark, Colonel… or Major General? I wish you good luck with your press conference. Good afternoon.”
Without waiting for further small talk, the call was cut and suddenly Rhodey had an armful of Tony Stark hugging the crap out of him.

“I’m so proud of you, Honey Bear!”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled, even while he smiled. Together, they walked to the door and open it, only to suddenly came face to face with Vision.

He’d jump back in surprise if he could. “Jesus Christ, Vis, have you been floating there the whole time??”

He stared with a lost expression. “Yes? I believe I did. Congratulation on your promotion, Rhodey.”

Tony exhaled audibly. “Vision, I already told you, I’m fine.”

“I would rather be safe than sorry, Tony.”

“Look, if no one else noticed after all this time, then I could probably get away with it for a little while more, right?”

“Your assessment is highly illogical. We are dealing with the unknown, all precaution must be taken.”

Rhodey was starting to feel like he was watching a tennis match. “Okay, back up. What the hell happened, Tones?”

The younger man fidgeted under his glare, which made him even more suspicious. “Not now, Platypus… we’re kind of on a tight schedule, so – ”

Rhodey shut him off with his best glare. “Spill, Tony. Now.”
Tony’s ears were still ringing from Rhodey’s yelling when he walked into Peter’s room. Peter’s room - complete with nerdy posters, and drawers full of LEGO bricks and sets, and shelves of Star Wars models. If there were any deities out there that reign over humanity’s self-control, they’d be having a cardiac arrest when Tony decorated that room himself.

At least he only splurged on this one room instead of a whole floor like he did with the Keeners’ suite back in his tower.

Hesitantly, he opened the door and stepped inside only to have his field of vision obscured by the fluff of Hailey’s honey-colored hair.

Tony wrapped his arms around her waist to support her weight. “Hello to you too, squirt,” he chuckled. “I didn’t know you and the kids are here, Hannah.”

The woman in question rose from a chair near Peter’s bed and strode over to him with a strangely wet eyes. “Yeah, Harley’s convinced that Peter will try to get up from his bed if he doesn’t sit on him.”

He raised his eyebrow and peeked over to Peter’s bed. Sure enough, there laid a disgruntled looking Peter with Harley stubbornly sitting on the only patch of his torso that wasn’t bandaged.

“Fri, take pictures and send it to my private server.”

Peter pouted even harder, and glared at him in what, Tony thought, was supposed to be betrayal.

“I have videos of how that happened, if you want,” May Parker’s voice suddenly rang behind him.

Tony barely suppressed his flinch as he turned around, fully expecting her to rake him across the coal for getting Peter hurt. But her eyes, while puffy from crying, were not glacial nor infernal. They were… grateful.

“Thank you for bringing my idiot nephew back alive. I don’t want to know what would happen if
“He wasn’t wearing your suit.”

“He wouldn’t get hurt in the first place, if he wasn’t there.”

“Yeah, I know. Which is why he’s grounded for 2 weeks starting now.”

Tony blinked at her. “Um….”

“You told him to lay low, and he didn’t. Thus, grounded.”

“But Aunt May!” Peter whined.

May glared at her nephew and he shrank back. “Do you want it to be 3 weeks instead, Peter?”

“No, Aunt May,” Peter mumbled dejectedly, pointedly ignoring the cackling Harley on top of him.

Tony wanted to snicker at him as well, but Peter looked at him so pitifully with his eyes all wide and pleading, and Tony faltered immediately.

Damn this boy and his puppy dog eye.

“Put those eyes away, Peter. I grounded you, not Tony.”

Peter grumbled and looked away to the window on the other side of the room.

Things were awkwardly silent for a minute until Tony cleared his throat and broke the silence. “Anyway… I’m not just here to check on you, Pete…. I have something to tell you before the press conference. I guess it’s better this way with all of you here too… I can just do this once and be done with it.” Everyone in the room stilled and looked at him curiously. Even Hailey sat straighter in his arms to look at his face better. “It’s about Siberia. It’s time for you to know what happened.”
Hailey looked at him questioningly and spoke for the first time, “Siberia? What’s Siberia, Daddy?”

Tony choked on his spit. “W - What?”

Hailey immediately looked worried at his hesitance. “That’s what Harley and Peter called you… so that must be true, right?”

*Peter called me what in front of his Aunt? Does he want me to die?*

“Why… why would you think that?”

“My teacher said Daddies take care of us, play with us, teach us things… that’s what you do, right Daddy?”

At that moment, Tony realized that this girl never even met her father. Harley’d been very young when his father left, but he at least remembered a little about him. Hailey, however had been a newborn when that happened… which meant that she grew up not even knowing what a father was supposed to be.

Tony never hated Harris Keener more than he did now.

“Is that… is that wrong? I can’t call you that?” Hailey asked hesitantly with a wobbly voice. Tony immediately tightened his hug and pet her hair with one hand.

He wasn’t going to let this girl down - even if his quintessential daddy issues screamed at him to stop claiming these children as his own. “If you want to, you can. I’m honored you see me that way, Hailey.”

Hailey didn’t say anything and just hugged him back, but he could feel her smile pressed against his neck.

“This is heartwarming and all, but… Siberia?” Harley interrupted the sweet moment impatiently. Judging by the glare the boy received - and ignored - from everyone else in the room, he was not the only one that was annoyed.
“Fine. Fri, PG version?”

Peter’s TV flicked on with the edited version of the video - one without the gore and snuff part. He’d watched this video a thousand times, both using B.A.R.F. and during his therapy, but he still felt his heart beating a little faster still. The room was silent during the video, and he couldn’t help but chew on his lips in anxiety.

Finally, 5 minutes after the video ended, May Parker whispered with a broken voice, “How could he?”

Hannah broke into sobs and Hailey twisted in his arms to check on her mom. “Mommy? Why are you crying? I don’t understand, why did Captain America hurt Daddy like that? Who is the guy that looked like Jesus? Did he kill Daddy’s parents?”

The woman continued sobbing, and May made the decision to pluck Hailey from his arms and gave her back to her mom. “Go on, Hannah… Hailey’s going to need a little more explaining from her mom.”

Hannah nodded and walked out, clutching Hailey close like she was afraid to lose her. It was then that the boys decided to finally open their mouths.

“Where are they?” Peter growled, already struggling to sit back up because Harley abandoned post to fume around the room instead.

“This is the asshole that grilled you for not telling him about your personal project??” Harley seethed.

“Harley…”

“No! He almost killed you, Dad! After he lied to you! Did he find out after S.H.I.E.L.D. fell? Jesus, did he use your money to look for your parents killer ?!”

“I should’ve killed him,” Peter muttereddarkly. “I should’ve done something.”
“Peter!” Tony and May shouted together.

“I thought you fought over the Accords! I didn’t know you almost died because he was a fucking coward!”

“Kid…”

“Where are they??” Peter yelled.

“Why didn’t you kill them?! You have missiles and lasers, Dad!” Harley screeched.

“BOYS!” Tony snapped finally, and the boys shut up immediately. “Sargent Barnes was brainwashed by HYDRA when he killed my parents. Blame where blame is due, kids.”

Harley glared right back at him. “Well, he was brainwashed by HYDRA when he duked it out with his bestie, but I guess Captain America is always a special snowflake. Fuck the rest of us, puny mortals, am I right?”

“Harl, you’re not being fair right now and you know it.”

“Not fair?! I’m not being fair because I’m saying the truth??”

“He wasn’t the Winter Soldier in Siberia,” Peter pointed out spitefully.

Harley pointed at Peter and shouted, “Thank you! And you know what? Fine, let’s say he’s innocent during all that for now. I wanna talk about Rogers. Where the fuck is he, and why the fuck is he not dead?!”

“Barnes was defending himself, Harley, but sure, let’s talk Rogers. First of all, watch that mouth, second, Venezuela, and third, I’m not a god damn murderer.”
For a heartbeat, the room was silent, but Harley gathered his wits soon enough. “You punched Rogers in the face, and then Barnes pointed his gun at you. If anything, you’re defending yourself from him. Also, Venezuela? What?”

Peter, who was mostly stewing in silent anger was fiddling with his web-shooters (where the fuck did he even get those?!) and was looking downright murderous.

“Peter, put those down! Jesus, kids, I’m showing you those so you don’t get a heart attack in case some reporter ask me about that later, not so you can go all gung-ho like this!”

“He almost took you from me before I even had the chance to know you!” Peter was screeching now, his usually bubbly expression gone and replaced with red hot anger.

May, bless her heart, took it as her cue and sat beside her nephew to pull him into a hug. “Peter, I know you’re angry right now. Believe me, I’m furious too. But we can’t let this anger control us, Pete…. Walk it off, buddy. Don’t stoop to his level.”

Seeing May handling Peter so skillfully, Tony decided that Harley could use his help more. So he moved in closer carefully, not wanting to spook the angry teenager. But as soon as he was within an arm’s reach, Harley melted like butter and latched on to him almost automatically.

Tony did not want to think about when even was it that he first became this okay with hugs and cuddles.

“You’re missing the point here, tiger. I’m not telling you that it’s wrong to be angry over this, that’s hypocritical. But holding on to it is just going to hurt you in the long run. You don’t need to forgive them if you don’t want to, god knows I won’t. But this? You getting so angry you can kill a man? I don’t want that, Harley….”

Harley sobbed against his chest, “How are you okay with this, Dad? He hurt you! He almost killed you!”

“Oh, Harl... c’mere,” he hauled his boy up and brought him back to Peter’s bed.

“Please don’t make him sit on me again,” Peter joked weakly. Tony thanked the stars for May Parker.
“Don’t leave the bed and I won’t have to. Now listen, both of you. I am not planning on letting any of them off the hook, okay? I’m not bailing them out, I’m not running interference for them, and I’m not going to offer to help them. But the I’m also not going to play judge, jury, and executioner. Let the court deal with them.” Both Harley and Peter looked mulish, but thankfully neither of them objected. “No more getting protective over me, ‘kay? That’s my job, not yours.”

“I think that’s kind of sweet, actually,” May tried to lighten the mood. “Minus the death threat, of course.”

They sat there in easy sort of silence before Peter started to fidget.

“Pete?”

The teen looked at him uncertainly and chewed on his lips nervously. “Can I - can I hug you too?”

_Man, I’m whipped._ “Yeah, sure, bud. Come and get it.”

Peter leaned in and Tony found to his delight that he could hug Peter with a little less restraint than with anyone else. Judging by how quickly Peter tightened his grip, he wasn’t the only one that noticed the fact.

“Is it - is it okay if call you D - D - ”

“Dad?”

Peter nodded.

_Oh, fuck it. Might as well._

“You tell me, Peter. You know I’m basically collecting children at this point. I’d be honored if you see me that way…. Question is, are you okay with that?”
“I… yeah. I think my parents and uncle would be happy for me. I think they’d like it if I have someone to step into that role, and, well… May already said it’s okay, so….”

_May did?_ He thought to himself, barely sparing enough attention to see May smiling softly and them both. “You didn’t answer the question, kiddo. Are _you_ okay with that?”

“I am.”

“Even if I’d probably fuck up sometimes?”

“Who doesn’t”

“Even if you’d probably get hounded by the press too?”

“They won’t catch me.”

“Even if I don’t even have that right, legally speaking?”

“I don’t need a piece of paper to tell me you love me.”

“You’re one stubborn kid, aren’t you.”

Peter chuckled. “Takes one to know one.”

They broke the hug and just stared at each other, grinning like maniacs. Tony felt something fluttered in the space where his arc reactor used to be. Something that felt like bliss, fear, and warmth, all at once. He wondered if this was what fatherhood felt like.

Not a bad feeling.
Until Pepper came rushing in, of course, and the magic vanished. “Tony, why is Vision standing outside like a lost dog? Oh… did I interrupt anything?”

He groaned loudly. “Oh, for god’s - yeah, you did. Is it time already?”

“Yeah. Where’s Hannah?”

“I’m here, I’m here…. Do you think I can cover this with concealer?” Hannah said, gesturing to her puffy eyes with her free hand.

“You just told them about that now?” Pepper griped. “Told you that stupid protocol’s just going to bite us all in the ass later. Come on, Hannah, let the make-up artist take care of that one.”

Hastily, Pepper ushered Hannah away, fussing over her all the way. When they were both gone from view, Vision, looking exactly like a lost dog, peeked into the room and said, “Is it the right time to talk, Tony?”

“Vis, Jesus, I told you I’m fine!”

“But I’m worried for you, Tony….”

“Uh… why is Vision worried?” Harley asked uncertainly.

Vision opened his mouth to answer, but Tony wasn’t having any of it. “Nothing! Not now, Vis, I got to get ready for the press.”

“Dad…?” Peter tried

“Not now, Pete. Seriously, I really need to get ready. Pepper’s going to kill me if I’m late for this.” He stood quickly and pressed quick kisses on top of his boys’ head. “Don’t do anything crazy while I’m gone. Peter, do not move from the bed. Harley, sit on him if you have to. May -"
“Yes, yes, I got them. Go!”

He waved a small bye and rushed out, but Vision floated with him, phasing through obstacles like a ghost. “Tony, please, I’m really worried. I… I don’t know what else to do.”

He sighed, but didn’t slow down. “Fine, you can come. But really, Vis, I’m fine. You don’t need to hover like this.”

“I’d rather not take my chances.”

“Well, for what it’s worth… thank you.”

He didn’t wait for Vision’s response as he practically dove into his suite’s bathroom. Different battles requires different armors, and Tony was planning on bringing his best for this one.

Chapter End Notes

You think last fluff was indulgent?

I had diabetes writing this chapter.

C'ya.
What Happened in Siberia?

Chapter Notes

The dreaded Press Conference... Finally.

A Rogue was given a third chance. Another was not.

A reporter proved her mettle. Another was shot down by a pissed off mother.

I should just change the tag to Very Salty, Much Bashing.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Scott Lang’s House, San Francisco, California)

“Hope….”

“Scott.”

Scott felt his heart clenching in his chest as he stared at the woman standing on his front porch. Hope looked… well, she looked beautiful as always. Her hair was a little longer than when he first met her, but otherwise, she looked mostly the same: crisp cut business dress, minimal makeup, and severe, analytical eyes.

She looked amazing… and amazingly unreachable.

Scott cleared his throat. “You… you got out OK, then? Stark’s minions didn’t come after you?”

At the mention of Stark, Scott knew he fucked up somehow. Hope’s eyes, already sharper than usual, turned flinty and cold. “Mr. Stark’s “minions” adjusted the Accords so I can sign and save my father, myself, and your whole family from your fuck up,” Hope spat.

He recoiled as if she’d slapped him. “You… you signed?! Oh my god, I’m so sorry, Hope…. Did Stark force you to - ”
This time, Hope really did slap him. “That man has done your whole family and yourself a massive favor, Lang. Learn to be grateful for once in your life!”

“What?”

“What the hell did you think you were doing, helping terrorists in my father’s suit?!”

“It’s Captain America!”

“So fucking what?!” Hope screamed angrily.

Scott stumbled backward, not entirely convinced Hope wouldn’t just deck him right there and then. “Hope, please, it was Captain America. The Captain America. When he ask for your help you don’t ask question, you just do it!”

Hope gaped at him like he just told her he believed that earth was flat. “I can’t believe this,” she whispered. “Do you even know what you were fighting for?”

“Freedom,” he answered automatically. “Stark wanted to control the Avengers. Make them government’s guard dog. I had to stop him.”

“Jesus Christ, Scott, it’s been months. Please don’t tell me you haven’t been watching the news?!”

He made a face at that. “Why would I watch them? They’re all paid by Stark, anyway.”

“Oh my god,” Hope moaned into her palm. “I should’ve known you’re the type to make up conspiracy theories like that.” She sighed heavily and eyed him tiredly. “Scott, those are all true. The Accords really did get amended. Superheroes all over the world really did band up together to make teams of enhanced people. And for god’s sake, Scott, the UN is not a goddamn government!”

Scott had to pause. It’s true, he really was the kind of guy that’s naturally suspicious of the people
in power. It’s a well known fact, considering how he lashed out during that one interview back in prison.

But it’s Stark. Even Hank told him not to trust him.

Judging by Hope’s hardening gaze, he knew she could tell what he was thinking. “You, of all people, should’ve known that my dad is a petty old fool.”

“Hope! You can’t say things like that - ”

“Oh, spare me your crap, Lang! If you cared about my dad, you wouldn’t have used his suit to become a fucking terrorist!”

“Wha - ”

“The moment you revealed Pym’s technology, Scott Edward Harris Lang, you made us your accomplices. You don’t need to spare any breath defending my Dad’s honor, he hates you already.”

He felt his air knocked out of him. “Is that… is that why you signed the Accords? Did they force you to?”

Hope snarled at him, “Nobody forces me to do anything, Scott. I brokered a deal with Mr. Stark. My signature… for your lightened sentence and reduced media exposure.”

“Hope…” he whispered brokenly.

But Hope was relentless. “Do you know what would happen if we didn’t do that for you, Scott? Let me spell it out for you. You’ll be the only member of Captain America’s team that received actual trial, meaning the whole world would set it’s eyes on you. Now, three guesses on who else would’ve had their faces plastered on TV alongside yours?”

_Cassie, Maggie, Paxton. Luis. Everyone._

Suddenly, all of his choices didn’t seem so righteous anymore. He would’ve keeled over if Hope
didn’t brace him against the wall. “C - Cassie.”

Hope nodded, and for the first time, her eyes didn’t seem as harsh. “And Maggie. And Jim. And Those clowns you picked from god knows where. Make no mistake, Scott, if you’d been sent to prison again, then I’ll be the first to say that you deserve it. But Cassie? Maggie? Jim? They don’t deserve to pay for your mistakes.”

He couldn’t deny that. His daughter… his sweet daughter…. He almost jeopardized his Peanut. What kind of father was he?!

“And… and Stark…. Stark spared them?” he rasped after a while.

Hope’s eyes softened yet again with something that looked like her namesake. “The choice was either me and Dad exiling ourselves so they can argue for plausible deniability, or we have a third party, trusted by the Accords and law, to vouch for them… and by extension, you.”

*Stark… Stark did that for me? For Cassie?*

“What…?”

Hope scoffed. “Why would he do that for your ungrateful ass? I don’t know. Maybe because he actually needed my help. Or maybe he was just doing his duty as a hero that actually cares about what happen to the people left in the aftermath.” She shrugged. “Or maybe, most likely, he knows how it feels like to life with the sin of a father, hanging over you, taunting you, tainting your future. Maybe it’s because he’s a father himself, and he knows the pain of having to live without his child.”

He didn’t know that about him. “He’s got a child?”

“Children, from what I’ve seen.”

*Oh.*

“Is he….”
“A good father? I’d say he’s a very dedicated one. The kind whose whole world is his children. The kind that I wish my own father could’ve been.”

‘The kind that I wish you could’ve been’ went unsaid, but he heard the accusation anyway. “I didn’t know that,” he said softly.

She eyed him speculatively. “Would you like to know?”

“Huh?”

“He’s about to give a press conference in an hour. It’s about one of his children, I think.”

Scott thought hard for a minute. Like, really hard. He didn’t trust Stark… but he trusted Hope. And Hope seemed to like the guy alright… which said a lot, considering that Hope only liked a handful of people.

‘The kind whose whole world is his children.’

Scott made his decision.

“Yes.”

(Stark Tower Conference Room, Manhattan, New York City)

“Good Evening, ladies and gentlemen. My name is Hannah Keener, mother of Harley Keener - whose picture was leaked to the media yesterday by an unknown party. I’m here now to set a few things straight about the nature of my son’s relationship with Mr. Tony Stark.” Hannah nodded professionally to Tony, who had stayed silent and let her take charge, just like how Pepper told him to.
And Crowley, if he was being honest with himself, but it still grated on his nerve to think that a single, drug-addled fresh graduate in pain came to the same conclusion as his entire PR department in less than 5 minutes: Let the mother talk. Be honest, but don’t overshare. Don’t just threaten, act.

So he did, and Hannah performed wonderfully.

“I would like to ask all of you to not interrupt me or ask any question until I’m done. Mr. Stark and Ms. Potts have informed me that security will escort any offenders out of the room, so please refrain from doing so. My son got kidnapped by the now ex-Secretary of State Ross because of an unethical journalistic practice, so you must forgive me for having a short fuse against such people.” Hannah leveled her glare at some select reporters, no doubt the ones that had been flagged by Pepper to be problematic. “And no, I will not discuss that particular incident, Ross’ trial will be aired publicly and internationally. You will all wait for that to happen for further information.”

“Well then,” she continued, ignoring the burbling that filled the room when Harley’s kidnapping got mentioned, “let’s address the elephant in the room. My son, Harley, is not Mr. Stark’s biological child. I will be expecting news outlets and amateur blogs that had and has been reporting him as such to publicly apologize by the end of this day.”

Several dismayed voices clamored around the room, and Tony decided to put his foot down as soon as possible. “She just told you all to not interrupt. Shut up or get the hell out of here,” he intoned coldly.

The effect was immediate. The room fell silent almost instantly when they heard the voice nobody had heard ever since Afghanistan.

“Thank you,” Hannah said calmly. “Like I said, each and every party that has slandered my 12-years-old son’s name will be expected to publicly publish their apology before 12am tomorrow. Failure to comply will result in a very loud, very public lawsuit that we will win, so I suggest you all, especially those of you that personally wrote those disgusting gossips, to start making your draft.

“Now, as to what the exact nature of my son and Mr. Stark’s relationship is, I will be the first to tell you that it is none of your business. I assure you that the relationship is not sexual, because I did find some especially vile individuals that wrote it as such. And neither is it professional, either, because I can guarantee you that while my son would love to be involved in SI’s internship program, I will not allow him to join until he is at least 15 years old - the minimum age that SI required from their interns.
“What they are to each other, how they feel, and what they do on the weekend is not for you to snoop about. They have not done anything illegal in the course of their acquaintanceship, and as such we will not tolerate any defamation with false claims and scandalous theories. My son is a minor, and thus is protected by several different protection laws from such attempts.

“However, my son also told me privately to tell you all that, and I quote, ‘I’m not ashamed of the fact that I have Tony as a father figure.’ The same sentiment has been expressed by both his little sister and another young boy that my children have come to see as their older brother.

Wait, That wasn’t on the plan!

Was that what the Parkers and Keeners discussed before he got into their room? Was that why both Hailey and Peter were so quick on the draw with the”dad” thing?

Tony’s heart skipped a beat.

On one hand, he felt an immense, smug satisfaction from the kids’ - his kids’ declaration. But on the other hand… Tony wasn’t particularly keen on having them putting any of his kids in the media’s unrelenting cross hairs, unlikely as it was, judging from the harsh, fierce look on Hannah’s face.

Evidently, however, his fear was not entirely unwarranted. He saw a reporter, one that had been stowing mulishly ever since Hannah’s declaration about public apology, looking disturbingly gleeful at Hannah’s words. Discreetly, Tony leveled his sunglasses on him, scanning his face to reveal his identity. John Jonah Jameson Jr.. Publisher (and occasional reporter, apparently) of Daily Bugle.

Hannah soldiered on, unperturbed by the stares of varying degree of inquisitiveness from the press before her. “I can tell you that those three had told me that their life has grown for the better ever since they met Tony. And us, meaning me and the other boy’s aunt, agreed that Mr. Stark’s presence allowed our children to not only develop better, more wholesome attitudes and mental health, but also improve and cultivate their individual talents and abilities.

“Now, to close my statement, I’d like to reiterate to you all the importance of leaving these children alone. Not only because we will take every legal action against you should you try, but also because it’s what a decent human being would and should do. I know that it’s your job to tell the public the truth, ugly or otherwise, but please restraint yourself from spreading baseless gossip and cheap clickbaits. The world has enough hate and lies to last a lifetime, and we can use a little more kosher news and meaningful stories instead of ugly, hateful massages. Thank you.”
Tony raised his hand and took over the stage before the questioning started. “Before you start asking us anything, I would like to lay a ground rule for you all. Disrespect my children, and you won’t deal with Tony Stark. No, who you’ll be facing in the courtroom is the Merchant of Death. So think very carefully before you open your mouth.”

The entire room was dead silent, partly from the fear of saying the wrong word and risk sending him on a warpath. But Tony also saw several guilty glances and resolute, approving stare among the crowd.

J4, however, did not get the memo. “J. Jonah Jameson, Daily Bugle. Mr. Stark, what kind of relationship do you have with Mrs. Keener and the other boy’s aunt?”

“We are good friends that co-parent the same children,” he answered succinctly, eyes already narrowing at the implication of the question.

“Well, Mr. Stark, considering your… well documented, wild sexual exploit, don’t you think it’s fair for us to view your unusual parenting strategy as you practicing polygamous relationship? Can you comment on that?”

_Ho, boy. You want to do it like that? Alright, let’s play._

“Mr. Jameson, are you implying that I’m cheating on my girlfriend? That I’m keeping my children’s mother and aunt as some sort of glorified concubine?” he asked callously.

All the other reporters were either shifting in discomfort or staring at J4 in incredulity, but the man himself was either too dumb to recognize the threat, or too suicidal to care. “You can’t deny that it’s the impression that the people would get, Mr. Stark.”

Hannah pointed a glacial glare at Jameson’s direction, and the man discreetly gulped.

_Suicidal, then._

“Tell him, Hannah.”
She smiled like a shark and started to speak slowly, as if she was talking with a misbehaving pre-K student, “I am not a homewrecker, Mr. Jameson. Nor am I some kind of trophy woman for billionaires to collect. I have a job with stable income, and I’ve been living independently ever since the day I move out of my parents’ home when I go to collage. I raised my children practically alone since day 1 because their father was a deadbeat that knows nothing of responsibility, let alone parenting.

“When Tony came into our life 3 years ago, I was apprehensive. How could I not, with the reputation people like you gave him over the years? But he broke Harley out of the shell that his bitterness over his father had created - something that not even I could do. And he practically raised my daughter as the only male figure that she ever know, considering that her father left her when she was just a few days old.

“I care for this man, yes. But my admiration over him extended only so far: a co-parent, a friend, and an occasional hero. Yes, our family’s configuration is unconventional. But Parents with platonic relationship with each other is really not that rare. Fathers and mothers across this country lose their parental rights after a particularly nasty breakup, and never get it back, even after they reconcile with their family later in life. Don’t insult those people and us for not falling under your repulsively narrow category of what an ideal family should look like.”

Tony recorded the whole speech, along with J4’s increasingly sour face, using his colored shades. That’s what families do, right? Document milestones and moments?

Again, the crowd of usually rowdy reporters hushed up. Tony was almost disappointed at how quick they all shriveled up. Did they get lenient in the absence of SI’s more ruthless PR maneuvers?

Finally however, someone raised her hand gallantly.

Christine Everhart.

The woman was uncharacteristically silent during the conference, Tony didn’t even notice her attendance. Inwardly, he prepared for the worst. She had come a long way since her days with Vanity Fair, but her sharp tongue still remained.

Curiously, however, she didn’t even look at him. The reporter focused her attention on Hannah, her face unexpectedly appreciative and spirited. “Christine Everhart, WHiH. First of all, Mrs. Keener, I
would like to applaud you for standing up for single mothers everywhere. And on the behalf of my own mother, who raised me alone as a single mother, I’d like to say thank you for your courage and wish good luck for you and your children.”

Oh. Well, would you look at that.

“My first question is for both of you to answer. Mrs. Keener, you have shown your resilience and competence as a single parent, and you also commended Mr. Stark for the same quality. But I would like to ask, how do you both deal with the power imbalance that your co-parenting bring? Mrs. Keener, you have all the parental rights over your children: custody, guardianship, all the works, while Mr. Stark legally has none. On the other hand, Mr. Stark, you undoubtedly hold the edge against Mrs. Keener in financial and political powers. How do you balance such asymmetry? What advice do you have for parents worldwide in a similar condition as you?”

Tony almost wept with joy at the intelligent question - and with frustration at his own inability to see that problem himself until someone else pointed it out for him. He glanced at Hannah, who nodded at him. The message was clear: 'tell her the truth.'

“Thank you for your kind words, Ms. Everhart. I must admit, I wasn’t expecting this question. Mr. Stark and I have never discussed this matter explicitly before, so I will instead tell you about our actual experiences during our 3 years of friendship.

“While it’s true that I hold all the legal rights for the guardianship of my children, you forget a very integral part of that equation: the children themselves. Harley and his sister adore Tony, Ms. Everhart, and the man himself is good for them. What kind of mother would I be if I purposefully shy them away from such a good influence?”

Hannah looked pointedly at Tony, and he took the cue. “My decision of never bringing up any motion of shared custody with Mrs. Keener was because I wasn’t even sure the children wanted that from me. In my defense, the other boy that Mrs. Keener talked about told me earlier today: ‘I don’t need a piece of paper to tell me you love me.’ And yes, he is that sappy.

“If in the future the kids told us they want to make it official, black on white kind of affair, would I reconsider? Yes, of course. But until then, I think we’re good with the current arrangement.”

Christine seemed happy with the answer as she nodded and gestured at him to answer the next question. Which was a little bit more difficult than the first, if he was being honest with himself.
But really, was it ever easy to address a problem that has roots in not only classism, but also sexism and gender inequality?

“As for my part in the power imbalance…. Well, like Mrs. Keener said before; she’s a strong, independent woman who did not need my help to survive. But I assume you’re asking about the possibility of me using my wealth and resources against her deliberately? Well, that’s where you come in, Christine. Abuse of power is happening everywhere, everyday. Be it in homes, in workplaces, in schools, hell, even in the White House. The strong have the ability to trample on the weak, and historically, they do tend to abuse this ability.

“But we now live in an era where even lies get spread around faster chicken pox. Through the media, the weak gain the power to fight back, and regain what they are due.

“Don’t confuse our earlier threat for anti-media sentiment, Ms. Everhart, we are all for free speech and freedom of expression. What we do not like is the exploitation of children, our children, for the sake of a trending news and hashtag. But if I somehow, someway, do go off the ledge and act in a way that merit the public censure, then by all means, go right ahead.”

“So you are asking us to be your conscience, Mr. Stark?” Christine asked neutrally.

“I’m asking you to watch me hold myself accountable.”

Christine smirked with an honest approval, and just a little bit of victorious delight. “Speaking of accountability, Mr. Stark, let’s talk about Sokovia Accords.”

Motherfucker.

“We all know by now about how the Accords were brought forth as a response to the increasingly erratic and destructive exploits of the Avengers. We also know that out of the original members, you alone stood behind the idea of accountability and responsibility, regardless of the divided opinion of the public for that decision. We know now that in the span of a few months, you have bolstered said Accords, making it fairer and more acceptable for enhanced people all over the world, and we all see the good result.”

Christine paused, likely for the dramatic suspense, and leaned forward. “What we don’t know, Mr. Stark, is something that happened in between. What happened after the scuffle in German’s Leipzig Airport? Where did you go days after that? What happened that suddenly Steven Rogers,
and Steven Rogers only, received condemnation from US Army?"

This woman, I swear. Can’t believe I almost not dislike her.

“Mr. Stark, What happened in Siberia?”

Damn it, Everhart.

(Trinidad, Trinidad and Tobago)

“...My son, Harley is not Mr. Stark’s biological child. I will be expecting news outlets and amateur blogs that had and has been reporting him as such to publicly apologize by the end of this day,” Said the woman on the TV… Hannah Keener, was it?

To be honest, Steve wasn’t entirely buying the whole rehearsal that Tony was doing. It was clear from the woman’s childish demand for the reporters to apologize for doing their job that Tony orchestrated the whole thing. Maybe even bought the woman’s service. Too bad he had to watch this alone… Sam wasn’t interested in seeing Tony’s face, and Nat was still resting from her latest mission.

“She just told you all to not interrupt. Shut up or get the hell out of here,” Tony said, and his cold tone validated Steve’s suspicion. Tony just wanted to rub his influence over those reporters - probably to stroke his ego like Nat’s been saying.

“Thank you,” Said the woman in a mock-calmness. “Like I said, each and every party that has slandered my 12-years-old son’s name will be expected to publicly publish their apology before 12am tomorrow. Failure to comply will result in a very loud, very public lawsuit that we will win, so I suggest you all, especially those of you that personally wrote those disgusting gossips, to start making your draft.” Steve shook his head at Tony’s childishness. Those reporters were just doing their job! If he didn’t want to be bothered, he shouldn’t have done anything suspicious like sneaking around with a child!

The woman kept on prattling about tedious things on the TV, and Steve was aghast at how the poor child must’ve been shunned because of Tony’s influence. He should’ve told Steve about this Harley kid so he could protect him from Tony’s bad reputation! Another case of Tony keeping secret from him.
He shook his head when the woman “quoted” her child saying that he considered Tony as his father-figure. That man could barely function correctly without the rest of his team keeping him in line! Such a man could not possibly be a good authority figure. No, if anything, Tony should’ve trusted this kid to him. If Tony really cared about Harley, he should’ve seen that Steve was more capable than him in guiding a young man such as Harley.

And that wasn’t even mentioning the other 2 kids… why didn’t she mention their names? Honestly… was this Tony keeping even more secret?

“I can tell you that those three had told me that their life has grown for the better ever since they met Tony. And us, meaning me and the other boy’s aunt, agreed that Mr. Stark’s presence allowed our children to not only develop better, more wholesome attitudes and mental health, but also improve and cultivate their individual talents and abilities.” Said the woman Tony paid to do the monologue on stage.

And there was the proof of Tony’s deception. No life has been bettered by Tony’s singular influence.

The woman closed her rehearsal by threatening the press. Again. Truly, Tony’s insolence knew no bounds.

Just as soon as she stopped talking, Tony made a ruckus like the show pony that he was. “Before you start asking us anything, I would like to lay a ground rule for you all. Disrespect my children, and you won’t deal with Tony Stark. No, who you’ll be facing in the courtroom is the Merchant of Death. So think very carefully before you open your mouth.”

Steve was galled by Tony’s words. His children? Tony… Tony never vocally claimed such a close kinship with anyone… not even the team. Who were these kids that Tony deemed them worthier than his friends? Family? And “Merchant of Death?” Did Tony just threatened the press over these faux-children of his?

At least this Jameson fellow showed some backbone by mentioning the only possible explanation of Tony’s over-protectiveness over these unknown kids. After all, Tony was a renowned playboy with no morality left whatsoever. It wouldn’t be too far off for him to keep some women and use their children to justify his depravity.

Of course, Tony had to cowardly hide behind the woman’s outrage. Although, Steve had to admit
that the woman seemed honestly offended by poor Jameson’s logical deduction. But Steve didn’t think it merited her calling him repulsive. Even Steve came to the same conclusion… it was their fault for having such a complicated relationship in the first place!

And then, after they both bully the press over such a common misconception, silencing them just because one of them misspoke, another brave soul raised her hand. This one Steve recognized as one of those that protest about anything and everything Avengers. Although, with Tony essentially selling his dignity to the government, Steve wasn’t so sure she wouldn’t be biased towards his former teammate.

“Christine Everhart, WHiH. First of all, Mrs. Keener, I would like to applaud you for standing up for single mothers everywhere. And on the behalf of my own mother, who raised me alone as a single mother, I’d like to say thank you for your courage and wish good luck for you and your children,” she said. Steve was disgusted. That Hannah woman had just reacted so exaggeratedly over such a simple mistake, and Everhart was applauding her?! Even more, she thanked her on the behalf of single mothers? Like Steve’s own Mama?!

Was she implying that anyone that agreed with Jameson was disrespecting single mothers?? The gall of that Everhart woman was horrifyingly disgusting.

And then she babbled on and on about “power imbalance” or other such crap. Honestly, people in the future were so sensitive. Back in his days, women dealt with it bravely and uprightly. Not complain about it all day like they did now.

And that woman indulged in the display: saying such utter lies about children’s wishes and whatnot. Evidently her children was unfit to make their own decision. They saw Tony, of all people, as a role model!

And then said man quoted his other “son” saying stuff about not needing actual adoption. Really, now he was just trampling on laws! He kept on blithering about power abuse, while he was abusing his power over all those reporters and his own teammates… how hypocritical could one man be?

But then…..

“Mr. Stark, What happened in Siberia?”
Steve’s blood ran cold.

*It’s OK,* he reassured himself. *Tony wouldn’t sell his family out like that.*

But he found himself calling for his teammates still. Tony just proved again and again how petty he was willing to be… Steve needed his team’s presence there with him, just in case.

They all went into the room just in time to see Tony taking a deep breath and removed the ridiculous shade from his eyes.

“What happened after the “scuffle”, Ms. Everhart, was me noticing the disjoint in Sargent Barnes’ alleged bombing case. I’m sure all of you know this by now, so I’ll skip the details that were already public knowledge. What you didn’t know was I had to promise Mr. Wilson to ‘come alone and as a friend’ to gain the coordinate to an abandoned HYDRA bunker in Siberia.”

No. No, no, no. This couldn’t be happening. Tony shouldn’t have stooped *this* low!

“As to what happened there, and why were we there in the first place… I’ll just give you the visual. I advice minor audiences and the squeamish to turn off their devices now and just watch for the censored version later. It’s rather disturbing.”

VISUAL?! Tony was *recording* them?? How could he?! And now he’s about to let the world know such a private thing??

Tony flicked his phone on the TV, and suddenly Steve couldn’t feel his body as the video played on and on and on.

Chapter End Notes

I went easy on Christine here. Honestly, her videos on Youtube showed her as a competent, dedicated journalist, so I write her as such.

Jonah, on the other hand....

Scott Lang... I was debating whether I should give him just one more chance. I fell in
love ever since the 2015 movie, so I'm rather biased.

I mean, he's *dumb*, don't get me wrong. But I like him, nonetheless.

Steve tho. Guess he's a misogynist too now.

God, CW ruined Steve for me.

Hope I don't make too many mistakes here. I just got a burst of inspiration, and my fingers barely kept up with my brain.

C'ya!
Wound and Wings

Chapter Notes

Say hello to the one character I never like and could not come to like in MCU.

Scarlet Bitch, ladies and gentlemen, round of applause.

Also, apparently I just found out that Peter's birthday is 10th august 2001?? Which means he was still technically 14 in CW???

I'm fixing 50k+ words over one small detail, so I'll just make a story out of it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Scott Lang’s House, San Francisco, California)

Hope wasn’t sure why she’d decided to come here and visit Scott.

Maybe she was just trying to figure out whether or not she fell for the wrong guy. Maybe she was hoping to be proven right, that Scott Lang was indeed a good, albeit a little dumb, man.

Or maybe she just wanted to make Scott see reason. Because she couldn’t bear the thought of considering Scott as her enemy. Scott, whose silliness somehow wormed into her heart and made her warm and tingly in all the right places.

Whatever the reason, however, she was glad that she did.

He had been stubborn, at first, but Hope hadn’t expected anything else from him. He’d harped about how helping Captain America was a duty he was honor-bound to uphold. For a second she’d seen a vision of him toting around bigoted signs in the street, carrying handgun in his back pocket, chanting “‘Murica, ‘Murica.”

Sometimes she wondered if there was ever a line where stupidity turned into hatred.

Thankfully, he proved himself to be simply foolish instead of hateful. She didn’t even need to
mention his daughter’s name, he’d whispered Cassie’s name first, all by himself. Scott didn’t need much convincing after that to see the idiocy of supporting a cause that he didn’t even understand in the first place.

And now, they were here: On his couch, watching Harley Keener’s mother fight tooth and nail for her son, and Tony Stark frighten the press with only a few, carefully worded threats. Scott’s face was a comical cocktail of begrudging approval of Tony Stark’s obvious paternal protective instinct and awed respect for the mother’s calm ferocity.

She pretended she didn’t see him clutching his phone in a death grip, while occasionally ghosting his eyes over the pictures of his daughter, scattered around his living room.

Scott watched the press conference with a focus worthy of an engineer, and Hope found herself praying to deities she never believed in. She prayed for him to finally see that the man her father and he had hated was, in fact, an exceptionally good man. It’s a praise that she rarely ever gave to anyone, and Hope had never thought that she would one day give it to Anthony Stark.

They listened as Stark cowed the usually frenzied reporters with the promise of a visit by the Merchant of Death, and even Scott whistled lowly in appreciation. Amid her awe at Stark’s ability to look intimidating while wearing a ridiculously colored shade, she felt a swell of pride for the man sitting beside her. Maybe there was still hope for Scott, after all.

Both of them clenched their teeth when Daily Bugle’s Jameson made a fool out of himself. Scott actually whooped in delight when Mrs. Keener slammed the slimeball down without missing a single beat.

“Don’t insult those people and us for not falling under your repulsively narrow category of what an ideal family should look like,” she’d said.

She supposed it was fair for him to cheer on that particular line. After all, his was one of such families with unconventional composition.

When Christine Everhart raised her hand after another awkward silence, Hope had expected Scott to start ranting. After all, he did have a bad history with the reporter, from that time he got tazed by a prison guard when she interviewed him for his heist on Vistacorp headquarters.

But as soon as the reporter congratulated Mrs. Keener on speaking up against Jameson, Scott’s
features lightened into a contemplative musing. Maybe having his opinion on Tony Stark amended so drastically had given him the spare room for second impressions?

“He’s a good dad,” Scott admitted reluctantly.

Hope nodded absentmindedly. “He is.”

“You think I’ll ever get the chance to be that too?”

She paused. “I think Cassie loves you too much to not give you that chance.”

“I don’t deserve her.”

“Then make sure you do sometime soon. She needs her dad, Scott, and she deserves the best of him.” She returned the gaze that he’d been giving her. “She deserves the best from the man that I fell in love with.”

She watched as his eyes went misty with tears. Happy or sad, she didn’t know. Maybe a little bit of both.

“She does,” he whispered finally, looking back at the TV.

Yes, going here was a decision that she was going to be thankful for for a long time.

They sat in companionable silence, watching as Mrs. Keener and Tony Stark delivered lines after lines that would undoubtedly end up on the front page by tomorrow morning. That is, of course, until Everhart asked a question that even she was guilty of being curious about.

“Mr. Stark, What happened in Siberia?”

She knew something happened. Something big and bad. But that’s all that she knew about. Judging from Scott’s interested expression, she wasn’t alone in her curiosity.
But when that horrendous video played, she wished she’d listened to Stark when he told the faint-hearted to turn off the TV.

Scott and she watched as Captain America’s lies sent Iron Man into a rampage. One backhand turned into a pointed gun, one pointed gun turned into a brawl, and soon the brawl turned into a vicious 2-way alley beat down.

She stared, horrified, as the two super soldiers ganged up on her now team leader. Said man fought back tooth and nail, but she could see how this desperate rage was different from the silent, all-consuming wrath that he’d displayed when he had believed his son to be murdered.

This was no vengeance, it was grief.

And Captain America and his best bud fought back with the ferocity unbefitting for a grieving man.

Scott stood up and ran to the bathroom when the video, now a blurry security footage instead of the HD recording from Iron Man suit, showed Captain America slamming his shield - no. Howard Stark’s shield into Iron Man’s heart.

Hope was tempted to follow Scott to throw up her dinner.

But she persevered and watched until the camera panned back into the podium. Immediately, she noticed something was wrong. Stark was… hunching. His face was pale and shiny with sweat. His eyes was crinkled and strained with pain - the physical kind, not psychological pain.

“That would conclude today’s press conference,” the man said through gritted teeth.

All at once, the formerly cowed out reporters sprang into action. Camera flashed and questions was shouted on top of each other. Stark moved away from the podium, but instead of walking away with his usual poise and bravado, his step faltered and he almost keeled over before he even got to the backstage.

Her heart was already beating hard. Something was definitely wrong. She stood up when Stark had
to be prop himself against Mrs. Keener and the suddenly appearing Vision to walk off stage.

“Scott!”

Said man wobbled into the living room, face a little green. “Hope, I - ”

“You’re sorry, got it. I’ll tell him you said that,” she cut frantically, already packing her handbag. “I got to go now. Something’s wrong with him, and I got a bad feeling about this.”

Scott’s face fell a little, but he gave her a brave little smile. “Yeah, gotcha. Go kick their asses, Hope.”

“Will do. Call your daughter.” She waved him goodbye, and hurried out to her car.

If she used her father’s experimental shrinking tech to get to the airport faster… well, no police caught her, so she wouldn’t tell.

(Edinburgh, Scotland)

Wanda felt her anger bubbling under the surface as Stark played the media like a fiddle. He’s gone so far as to use children in his crusade against the Avengers. The real one, not the fakes that popped like daisies after Stark forced the original away with his silly little Accords.

It’s a pity that the back door she made inside Stark’s mind was more or less useless these days. She could really use an intel on whether these children were real or simply one of Stark’s evil ploy. After all, children were more vulnerable than that bitch of a CEO of his.

She didn’t know when the connection had started to weaken, exactly, but if she had to guess, it must be around the time Stark imprisoned her with that horrible collar. She definitely couldn’t feel anything when that thing was on her, and when it was taken off, all she could hear and see from Stark’s mind was some sort of buzzing sensation - like a hive full of hornets.
Whatever it was that he did, she didn’t think it was intentional. That arrogant, disgusting man stood there looking a decade younger than he was supposed to - whatever it was that prevented her from peeking into his mind, it must’ve happened when he pampered his narcissistic self.

Stark kept on yapping about this child that he supposedly “love”, and Wanda was almost bored enough to just turn off the television. But when the video started, she decided against it.

On one hand, seeing Stark’s parents killed by her former(?) comrade was very satisfying. Now he knew what he had made her feel like. Bonus point for seeing Steve and Winter Soldier beating the life out of him. She was almost giddy with joy when Steve brought the shield down on Stark.

But on the other hand… Stark was still alive. And thriving like a weed underfoot - trampled but still stubbornly undying. It must’ve been why he so arrogantly experimented on himself: to prolong his worthless life.

Wanda felt her anger surge scarlet. She directed her power with all her will, pushing against the buzzing of Stark’s mind.

**Kill yourself! Kill yourself! You worthless monster, KILL YOURSELF!**

Such ferocity should’ve made any man choke himself on the spot. But she doubt he’d even heard her. The buzzing sound was picking up in volume and intensity the harder she pushed.

But the man on the screen scrunched his face in pain and stumbled away from the podium, so she figured he must’ve heard the buzzing instead.

A double-edged sword, then.

Grinning, she picked up where she left of, throwing even more of her power to him. She watched in satisfaction when the man stumbled into the whore he’d payed to do his speeches. But when her Vision appeared out of nowhere and started to help Stark as well, she screamed in rage, and sent those hatred towards him.

Her TV spewed smoke and sparks, and suddenly, the electricity completely cut off in her apartment. Huffing in annoyance, she stared at the phone Steve gave her for “emergency.” Poor Steve, the world just ate Stark’s act right off of his palm. He needed her right now, especially if
this situation that Stark made was to be blown over.

Steve didn’t specify whose emergency the phone was for… so, it’s OK if she used it to offer help instead, right?

She picked up the phone and dialed Steve’s number, and waited impatiently while the phone rang.

She really liked Steve and his friends. It was so rare to see people who she didn’t need to manipulate into hating Stark. That slimy man had so many ways of appearing innocent, even with the blood dripping from his hands.

When she met Steve, his mind was abuzz with anger towards Stark, but deeper down still, she sense an undercurrent of resentment, jealousy, and, oddly enough, fear. True, his mind wasn’t exactly the most stable, but really, she hadn’t encountered any recipient of SSS of any variation with no mind defect. Steve got the better end of that stick, in a sense that he was still running in full mental capacity.

She didn’t need to convince him to see Stark as the monster that he was, he was already doing it himself.

“Wanda?” Steve’s voice cut through her inner musing.

Poor man, he sounded so scared. “Steve. I just saw the news, and - ”

“It didn’t happen like that, Wanda! I didn’t - Tony was - ”

Wanda felt a flicker of irritation at being cut off, but she disregarded it. “I know. It must’ve been tempered or something. And even if it wasn’t, Stark deserved that. He deserved all those pain. Listen, do you need my help? I can go to your place, if you want…”

She could hear his relieved sigh over the phone. “Yeah… yeah, please do. Sam’s… Sam’s acting a little weird… saying such mean things to me.”

“He’ll come around,” she said flippantly. And he would…. Deep down, Sam also resented Stark
for his undue wealth and power. If he didn’t manage to get over himself by the time she got there, she just had to remind him that the only reason he should be mad at Steve was because Steve didn’t do his job and kill Stark properly.

“I hope so…. Listen, are you still staying in your last address?”

“Yes. I’m still here. Are you coming to get me, or should I go there by myself?”

“Stay there. I’ll send Nat to get you.”

“Alright, cool. See you soon, Steve.”

“See you, Wanda. Thank you for being such a good friend.”

The line went dead, and she leaned back, still preening from Steve’s compliment. Now she just had to wait a few hours for Natasha to pick her up. In the mean time, she should just make herself useful and see if she could drive Stark to death by pain.

Red light danced around the dark room, and the Scarlet Witch went to work.

(Peter’s Room, New Avengers Facility, Upstate New York)

“Peter? Can I see now?” Hailey asked, eyes still tightly shut, and ears firmly covered from the last time Harley and he asked her to.

“Yeah, it’s OK now. No more scary movie, see?”

Slowly, the girl opened her eyes, only to pout at the holoscreen. “Why’s Daddy frowning?”

Immediately, they all noticed how Tony’s face was pinched in what looked like….
“He’s in pain,” Harley whispered, more to himself than to the general audience.

“Something’s wrong,” Peter warned when his Spider-Sense tingled.

“No shi… stuff, Sherlock,” his brother sassed. “F.R.I.D.A.Y.? What’s wrong with Dad?”

“I am not at liberty to say anything, Harley,” the A.I. answered, sounding almost regretful when she did.

“But are you at liberty to… hypothesize what happened out loud?” Peter asked carefully.

“Boss also thought you’d be the one to try that, Peter… I’m so sorry.”

“Peter, do you think Daddy’s going to be fine?” Hailey asked worriedly.

Harley mock gasped at their sister. “Oh, I see… you got a new brother and now you’re not even talking to me anymore?”

“Peter’s older!”

“Peter’s a dummy that got his ass - butt kicked trying to open a door, that’s what he is.”

“Hey!”

“I’m literally sitting on half a butt-cheek because the rest of your torso is bandaged, Pete.”

“Don’t sit on me, then!”

“Make me.”
“You know I can.”

“But will you?”

“Aunt May! Peter and Harley’s being mean to each other!” Hailey tattled at the top of her lungs.

“Lay off, boys! I’m trying to cook here!” his Aunt shouted back from presumably the kitchen.

“Oh no,” Peter blanched. “Don’t eat anything,” he warned his younger siblings, “she’s stress cooking, so it’s not gonna be edible.”

His brother cocked an eyebrow at him. “Rude. Imma tell her you said that.”

“Oh yeah? Well, I’ll tell your mom you almost cursed in front of Hal.”

Harley scowled at him. “What are you? Five?”

“Fifteen, actually,” He mumbled. “Almost.”

Harley whipped his head around so fast it creaked. “Wait, what?”

“Don’t tell Dad.”

“You’re fourteen?”

“Don’t tell Dad!”

His brother floundered like a fish. “What kind of Dad doesn’t even know – He made you passport!”
“Happy made me passport, actually.”

“Well, he’s gonna know sooner or later.”

“Peter’s having a birthday soon??” Hal asked excitedly.

Peter cringed at the impending conversation with his dad, and his brother laughed at his face. But as soon as the laughter died out, a sense of dread crept back down his spine.

Tony was in pain. He didn’t know why, or how, or who did it, but when he found out…. Harley looked at him grimly, because he could read minds like that. Somehow, he just knew both of them suspected the same party.

Soon enough, F.R.I.D.A.Y. announced their dad’s arrival, and Harley and Hailey scrambled up to greet him downstairs. Little traitors actually left him to struggle alone. Not even a day being their brother yet, and he was already getting sat on, sassed, and then left to shuffle solo downstairs by his supposedly loving younger siblings. He grumbled along the way, taking care not to get noticed by his aunt. Lucky for him, his room was one of the nearest to the elevator, so he didn’t have to stumble for too long.

“Aren’t you supposed to be in bed, kid?” Tony teased with a strained voice as soon as the elevator’s door opened.

Instead of answering, he limped to where his dad was being crowded by the others and joined the group hug.

The older man let out a soft chuckle and ruffled his hair affectionately. “Missed you too, buddy.”

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“Better now.”
“And you call me sappy,” he scoffed, even as he snuggled in closer.

“Never told them I’m not, though,” Tony reminded him as he pulled away and moved to sat heavily on the sofa.

“Dad? Are you really okay?” Harley fretted.

“Killer headache. Sorry.”

“What happened, Dad? I thought you’re not supposed to even get sick anymore with extremis?”

“Well, it’s not physical, so….”

Harley frowned confusedly. “So psychological? Like… a panic attack?”

“Oh, no!” Hailey gasped as she threw herself back into Tony’s lap.

The man grunted and looked at Vision with… an apologetic sort of look? “It’s… uh…. More metaphysical, actually.”

_Huh?_ He thought to himself in confusion before he realized something.

Metaphysical.

Magic.

“Hal, why don’t you go and help Aunt May in the kitchen?” he asked, carefully trying to keep his voice even and calm.

The girl pouted. “But I missed Daddy!”
“I’ll go up in a sec, sweetheart. It’s gonna be fine.”

Hailey looked like she’s about to protest, but eventually, she caved. “OK…” she mumbled and trudged away dejectedly.


The man sighed and said to Vision, “You want to tell them instead? I know you and her…”

Said android’s feature turned even colder than an ice block. “No, Tony. The Wanda that I thought I loved wouldn’t do something like this to anyone. I don’t know whether she changed for the worse, or I was just being ignorant, but whatever it was that I had with her is now gone.”

“I will murder that bit - prostitute,” Harley promised darkly when they heard the implication.

“Okay, what is it with you kids and murdering people that bother me?”

“Are you… are you in pain, right now?” Harley ignored the question.

Tony hedged uncertainly. “Well, I got a killer headache, but nothing else.”

“Can’t you do something, Vision?” Peter almost begged.

“I can, but…”

Tony cut him off impatiently. “No. Right now, she doesn’t know that we’re aware of her little hole in my mind. I want to keep it that way until the Council can deal with her.”
“But you’re hurting, Dad!”

“Nothing I can’t handle, Harl. Calm down.”

They bickered back and forth for a minute, until a feminine voice drawled from behind them. “You want me to help you with that?”

All of them turned to the voice’s owner, revealing her to be none other than Tracy Crowley, somehow dressed in expensive leather jacket and combat boots.

Harley snorted beside him. “Gucci? Really?”

“Hey, if I’m gonna make a doppelganger of me, I might as well dress her up real nice.”

“You heard me again, didn’t you?” Tony asked a little apologetically.

“Yeah, it’s pretty fucking loud. Turns out I can block it as long as you don’t shove it on my face just after I woke up from a surgery, though, so we’re good.”

“How come you told me not to curse but your own mouth is dirtier than my school’s toilet?” Harley pointed out.

“’cus you’re not tall enough for this ride, shrimp. Now hush, the adults are talking.”

Now Peter understood why Harley seemed to like his kidnapper so much. She mouthed him off even better than their dad could.

“What are you going to do? Just in case you haven’t noticed, I’m not letting you play with my mind. No offense.”

“None taken. And it’s not your mind that I’m gonna fuck around with. It’s hers.”
Tony huffed a pained laugh. “Which you’ll access through mine, so no thanks.”

“Nope. I’m not suicidal, so I’d rather stay the fuck away from your mind. Vision, though….”

Vision perked up at the idea. “I do have the ability to access the wound in Tony’s mind with little to no discomfort, so in theory I could act as your proxy. And since no one except us knows about your existence…. Yes, this is perfect, Tony!”

Vision sounded so enthusiastic at the prospect of helping his creator, but Tony still looked apprehensive. “Have you ever done something like that before, though? I’m not looking forward to be your lab rat, Crowley.”

“Don’t worry, Tony. Even if anything goes wrong, my part as the go-between will shield you from harm.”

“You heard the robot.”

Tony chewed on his lips. “What are you even going to do with her? Knock her out?”

Tracy’s doppelganger smiled evilly, and her skin shimmered blue for a second. “Hey, Harley. If I spook the bitch a little, are we gonna be even?”

His brother smirked in answer. “I want full commentary.”

“Deal.”

Peter wasn’t sure if he should follow his heart and cheer with his brother or listen to his brain and comply to his dad’s disapproving outcry.

(Underground Parking Lot, Queens)
“You sure he’s our guy?”

“For the last time, Leo, yes,” Naomi hissed through the com. “Both license plate and facial recognition matched. Just do your job, and I’ll get the rest done.”

“Okay, okay, just checking.”

Straightening his shoulders, he marched (casually) to the black man fiddling with his car’s trunk lock.

“Mr. Davis?” he called.

The man didn’t answer, and just stared at him distrustfully.

“Major Leonardo Verde, U.S. Air Force. I’m here to - ”

Davis broke to a sprint to the exit.

Immediately, Naomi dropped in front of him from wherever the hell she was perching for the last 30 minutes, and raised from her dramatic crouch landing in all her badass, 5’6”, Chinese-American dragon lady glory.

Her words, not his.

“Shouldn’t have run from the good cop, buddy, ” she whispered menacingly, folding open her EXO-wings like an angel’s.

“Aw, hell na, man! Falcon’s ain’t no chick!”

Leo winced. “Bad call, man,” he mumbled.
Naomi’s eyes turned cold, and her wings’ bladed “feather” flashed angrily at the man. “I’m not sure if I should address your support for a known terrorist or your blatant sexism, so let’s talk business instead. Where’s the weapons?”

Davis gulped audibly and backed away slowly. “I - I don’t - ”

Leo extended a manacle gun from his EXO-wings pack into his forearm and shoot one at the retreating man’s ankle. He stumbled and fell on his ass.

“I thought you’re the good cop, man,” he complained.

“Just doing my job, sir. What information can you give us about the weapons? Who’s the creator? Who’s the dealer? Where’s the guy with the wings?”

“And just so you know, if we don’t make you crack, you better be sure FBI’s gonna try twice as hard. Talk. Now,” Naomi said as she loomed in front of the frightened man.

“I - I don’t know anything, I swear! I just know that he’s a psychopath that likes to dress like a demon!”

“I am not sitting on a vent shaft for 30 minutes for your fashion commentary. Where is he?!”

“I don’t know! I - Wait! Wait!” he wailed when Naomi flared her wings like an angry chicken mama. “I… I know where he’s gonna be. This crazy dude I used to work with, he’s supposed to be doing a deal with him.”

“Where?” Leo asked before Naomi could unleash more threat on the poor guy.

“Staten Island Ferry, 11.”

For a tense minute, nobody said anything. But then, Naomi’s fake flinty eyes thawed and she quipped bubbly, “Right! Thanks!”
She turned around and tucked her wings back in. “C’mon Leo, we got a ferry to catch!”

“Wait! What about me?”

“Hang around for a bit, man. FBI’s car got stuck in a traffic.”

“I got an ice cream in here!”

“Just eat ‘em!” he shouted as he took off to the sky and chase after his partner.

“You’re gonna report back to Mr. Hogan?” she asked once they’re both flying.

“Yeah, just a sec.” He tapped a few button and placed a call to SI.

“Hogan,” answered a gruff voice.

“Mr. Hogan, this is Major Verde. We just got a new info. The Vulture is going to be on Staten Island Ferry in an hour for a deal. We’re flying there as we speak.”

“Good job. But you should check your phone every once in a while. Colonel Rhodes is a Major General now. Report to him.”

He blinked even though the man couldn’t see him. “Wait, really? That’s quick.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised he cave in that quick. Here, have his number.” A notification popped up in his UI. “He’s been informed, and asked me to tell you to meet him on the first warehouse’s roof top.”

“Roger that, sir. Thank you.”
“Yeah, yeah. Just catch that maniac.”

The line went off.

“Well? Where are we flying, Partner?” Naomi asked from above him.

“Terminal’s first warehouse. We’re reporting to Major General Rhodes now.”

“For real? Cool! Race you there!” With that, Naomi sped like a bat out of hell with a gleeful whoop.

Well, he thought, best not keep the Boss waiting.

Chapter End Notes

I don't know if there's even a "first warehouse" in NY's ferry terminals, I made that up, I'm sorry.

Also to clarify, I use CW's release date as the guideline to set where and when stuff happens. This story starts there, so that's 27th April 2016. Right now, it's supposed to be "A couple months after CW", so I'm thinking somewhere in late July - Which makes it weird for readers in US, because summer break's supposed to be around May to August... or so said wikipedia. Let's just pretend Midtown High sets a higher standard so their break's shorter than the national standard.

Another thing, just in case Wanda's creepo villain monologue doesn't clear it up, Steve of this fic is NOT psychotic. I'm thinking more about narcissistic personality, some degree of sociopathy, the likes. To clarify: he IS mentally competent. I'm not gonna give him some kind of free pass for being a dick. He's delusional cuz he makes himself so. SSS made him more susceptible, yes, but if didn't delude himself with his own self-righteousness, he wouldn't find himself in this position.

TLDR; I h8 stev and I refuse to give anyone reason not to put him in prison. Not a spoiler. I still don't know what to do with him - could be prison, could be grave, who knows with brains like mine, man. I have, like, 3 drafts just for this chapter and each one ends differently.

But tell me what you think. Personally, I like having a canonical reason for anything and everything under the sun, including all of my own hatred towards team cap. BUT I'm also not a psychiatrist, psychologist, or studying to be one. I'm a (failing) architecture student (which is why I assume the warehouse were built in sequence - all warehouses are built that way, to save money and time) so I'm not sure if this googled
psychology is legit enough to be a headcanon.

At the end of the day, this is a work of fiction, so take it with a grain of salt.

Extra salt, if you're still bitter like me.

C'ya!
Entrance Examination

Chapter Notes

Hi! Sorry for the delay... I'd blame it on my professors forcing books and education down my throat, but it's really just a case of a writer's block.

Anyway! Here, have a chapter. I'm so done with Homecoming's arc.

Also, I'm pretty confident with the Spanish, but German and Russian was all google translate. I'm shameless, sue me.

Correct me if you find any translation mistake!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Whitehall Terminal, Manhattan, New York City)

War Machine’s silver coating was easy to spot from the sky. Summer sunlight was glimmering harshly, and the armor reflected the rays like a very badass, very deadly mirror.

Naomi might or might not be having a fangirl moment, but impressing Major General Rhodes meant professionalism and graceful dignity. So with a little more flair than usual, she dove to the rooftop where the armor was waiting and nailed her landing with ease. Leo landed a few seconds after her, and she swore she could hear him snickering at her.

Prick.

They both stood attention and snapped clean salutes. “Majors Lim and Verde reporting for duty, sir,” she said purposefully.

“At ease, soldiers. This armor is remote-controlled,” the man said as he flipped the face plate up to reveal a completely empty armor.

They both lowered their hands and stood at ease. “How do we go with this, sir?” Leo asked politely.
“We decided that your acceptance to the Avengers will be reviewed by your performance on this mission, so you'll be the ones ambushing the Vulture before he got into the ferry.”

A chance to join the Avengers by showing off to the War Machine? Yes please.

She could feel Leo's judging amusement rolling off of the big man, and honestly, she didn't even care. “What about the ones in the ferry, sir?” she asked for a good measure, pointedly ignoring her partner.

“I'll take care of it. You just make sure that maniac doesn't land until I can come to back you up. Bonus point if you can save me the trouble and bag him quickly.”

Leo and she looked at each other briefly before nodding minutely in agreement. “Affirmative. Ready for deployment.”

They folded their wings back open and took into the air. Immediately, they fell back into an old pattern that they had perfected after so many missions together. Leo was flying low and slow, acting simultaneously as a bait and herdsman, while she soared high above, watching his back while staying hidden from sight.

Saying that they work well together would be an understatement. Their records, which had been spotless before they met each other, had turned into something of a legend in the Air Force. Ultimately, His ballsy, relentless bombardment maneuvers, paired with her blink-and-you-miss-it hit and run tactics had earned them their place in the EXO-wings program.

But even before they found a match in each other, they had both been lauded for their solo accomplishments. It was hard to say without sounding braggy, but when they first worked together, they had each earned their respective “epithets” and the resulting bragging rights within the base.

His was “Leo the Mower.” Leo insisted that he got it from that time he left a line of charred earth, straight to the heart of an enemy base somewhere in middle east. According to the engineer that fixed his jet after said mission, it was a miracle that he managed to land without a single bolt or nut missing. Seemed like Leo had both the innate instinct of knowing which shot he could take, and which one he should avoid, and the guts to do so without once changing his course.

After 10 shots of her best Vodka, though, Leo spilled the beans that he only got that nickname after he demonstrated that same bravery (although she would rather call that insanity) out of the field.
By pulling that one bigoted drill sergeant’s testicles like one would do to a lawnmower. After that they used “the Mower” instead of “faggot,” “fairy,” “homo,” or the likes.

Leonardo Verde abolished homophobia in his base by literally pulling it by the balls, and Naomi had never been prouder to call someone like that her best friend.

It was kind of hard to top that kind of backstory, but thankfully her moniker was a lot cooler than a garden appliance. “Cincinnati Reaper,” they called her. She had to explain over and over that she never actually lived there, because her family moved to Phoenix a few months after she was born in Ohio. But the name stuck, so she decided to roll with it, even if she bemoaned the lost potential.

Even now, North Korean government still couldn’t find any proof that U.S. military was involved in the black ops that annihilated half of their top air squadron, and that was a fact that Naomi took grim pride in even to this day.

Sometimes, she even wondered if the North Korean had a different name to call her with.

She sobered up when a winged shape appeared over the horizon, heading towards the ferry behind her, only to suddenly turned to her partner instead.

The Vulture had just arrived.

“Heads up, Leo, you're on his radar. 3 o’clock, firing distance in 10.”

“Got it. Formation alpha.”

Naomi steered her wings ever upwards, and stuffed herself inside a wet cloud hanging nearby. “Peregrine in position. Open fire in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1.”

Leo’s wing pack opened up to reveal a multitude of assault guns and micro missiles that he unleashed with abandon at the quickly approaching Vulture. Sounds of explosion and gunfire filled the open space as Leo's salvo hit his target dead on. But it seemed like the Vulture was heavily armored, because he shot out of the cloud of smoke and mist, looking just a little banged up.
Both of them reached towards their pack and drew their respective weapons. Leo had a military issued, modified portable coilgun that she knew had enough firepower to pierce through a frigate’s hull, while the Vulture prepared an alien looking rifle that would undoubtedly shoot lasers like the ones from Star Wars movies Leo really liked.

No subtlety, really.

She watched as Leo faked a dive, getting himself in a point-blank distance with the flying monstrosity. The Vulture immediately twisted mid-air, trying to defend himself from the threat of Leo’s gun making a new hole in his ass. Naomi dove down immediately in a break-neck speed when the Vulture exposed his back to the sky.

Her EXO-wings didn't come equipped with the same kind of firepower, nor the improved defensive plating that Leo's harrier had, but Peregrine’s Wings' speed and agility was unrivalled. She extended her bladed “feathers,” activated their high-frequency electric current edges, and angled it carefully. Report said that Chitauri tech was highly unstable, and was bound to be explosive unless destroyed entirely before they could blow up, and she was looking for a clean job with no messy corpse retrieval afterward.

Under her, Leo and the Vulture was still busy grappling for an upper hand. Leo was using his manacle gun to wrench the Vulture’s gun away, while said man somehow produced a familiar round shield to deflect Leo's coilgun shots.

Where in the name of fuck did he get a vibranium shield?

But shield or no shield, Vulture's wings were still created out of regular earth metal alloy, and her wings met only a little resistance when it cut through his. She heard Vulture's scream as he spiraled into the water below, but she had her own maneuver to complete.

Trusting Leo to be able to apprehend the disarmed terrorist, she corrected her dive and went after the fallen wings and rifle of the Vulture. She wouldn’t want them to start spewing lasers and somehow made a new Mariana Trench in New York's coastline.

“Got ‘im,” Leo grunted.

“Got the techs, too,” she reported back as soon as she snatched the falling machinery out of the sky.
"You don't know what you're doing!" Vulture's muffled voice screeched through Leo's com. "You're fighting against equality and freedom!"

"Can you muffle him? I have a feeling Major General won't appreciate his spiel about the glory of freedom of terrorism."

"You try holding a squirming, heavily armored grown man waving an indestructible Frisbee at your face, see if you can still find the time to gag him," Leo answered grouchily.


"Don't preen, you peacocking fangirl," Leo teased in their private channel.

"Go eat a dick, Leo. You're annoying when you're thirsty."

The prick laughed over Vulture's increasingly erratic swearing and confirmed the rendezvous point with Major General Rhodes.

"Seriously, man, can't you threaten him to shut up, at least? You know the Council is going to review our com channel later."

"¡Oy!" Leo barked after he sighed at her request. "Te calmas, o te calmo."

"You'll regret this!"

"Welp," Leo said with and audible shrug, "I tried. Could’ve sworn it worked on me."

Naomi sighed in defeat. "Yeah, well, you're also the biggest mommy’s boy in the Continental America. Just make sure he doesn’t have any bomb to blow himself up with."
“Aw, you do care.”

“Yeah, every rom-com protagonist needs her gay best friend to make fun of.”

“See that, Lim? That's the puddle of my melted heart over there.”


“One highly choreographed landing coming right up.”

(Pepper’s Office, Stark Tower, Manhattan, New York City)

“Pep, c’mon, calm down just a little.”

“No! You can’t just find out a psycho bitch messed up with your mind and expect me to calmly leave her be! Where is she?? Where is that little fucker??”

“Pep, please… I got this in the bag, OK? I don’t want you anywhere near her, ever.”

Pepper started tear up, but she didn’t care. How messed up was this situation?

“Honey, hey, don’t cry, please? Just for a little while until those idiots all clumped up in one spot, and then we’ll get them, I swear.”

“What the fuck is her problem?!” she screeched at the holoscreen, wishing madly that she wasn’t strapped to her office in the tower right now.

Surprisingly, it was Crowley that poked her head over Tony’s and the gaggle of children (and Vision… is that Cassidy?) that crowded around Tony protectively. “I think I can answer that, ma’am. I’ve seen her head and it was messed up, believe me.”
“Tell her something we don’t know,” Harley mumbled angrily.

“No, I’m serious, tell ‘em Vision.”

Vision looked a little abashed when he answered, “I didn’t actually manage to glimpse at her mind, keeping her power at bay without her noticing was surprisingly complicated enough for me to do the first time.”

“Huh,” Crowley mused, “well, you’ll just have to take my words as is, then. From what I’ve gathered, she really held Mr. Stark here responsible for her family’s death - ”

“Old news, my missile dropped on her house, killed everyone except her and her brother,” Tony answered glumly.

Crowley looked at Tony calculatingly, before turning to look at her instead. “If I tell you she remembers the serial code under the SI logo, can you check the record if that missile even existed? Because I never once heard an SI bomb that doesn’t go boom when it should’ve. Especially for 2 days.”

Maybe Pepper could get along with this girl after all.

“Yes, we do have the records of every single weapon we ever produced.”

“Right. SI-MRP-1503-X51.”

“Records checked. No match found,” F.R.I.D.A.Y. answered both from both ends of the call.

Peter made a ‘there you have it’ gesture with a very exasperated face, but Tony wasn’t convinced.

“Doesn’t make a difference. At the end of the day, she thought it was mine, and she hates me for it.”
“Oh, no, we can use that later, actually. Spin it off to make her look as idiotic as possible, because believe me, beyond the ‘kill Stark’ chant she had in her mind, there wasn’t much going on in her brain.”

“Enough to gain her a mental illness pass in the court?” Pepper asked sharply.

“Nah. She’s not mentally incompetent, just dumb. Honestly, you shouldn’t need to solve for X to know that maybe joining a terrorist organizations with creepy logo might not be the best idea. She did seem delusional, but she brought that delusion on herself because of her hatred. Not the other way around.”

*Which means that bitch hurt my man because she’s dumb enough to be fooled by herself. Good to know.*

Crowley must’ve seen her murderous expression, because she snorted and continued, “That wasn’t all, actually.”

Peter groaned in annoyance. “Can this woman be any more heinous ?!”

“Oh, you sweet summer child. HYDRA or Ultron, which one do you want first?”

Tony’s face fell even more. “Ultron was mine."

Crowley’s grin was incredibly vindictive and gleeful, and Pepper couldn’t help but feel the approval for the young woman. “That’s the stuff. It’s not yours.”

“Ultron - ”

“Could’ve picked literally any other name, but your program was just there, so he took it.”

“I brought the scepter back - ”

“At the agreement of your whole team.”
“If I hadn’t tinkered with it - ”

“And we arrived at the crux of the matter,” she said triumphantly. “Why did you tinker with it, Mr. Stark?”

Tony’s face was a combination of regret, hurt, and… confusion.

Could it be?

“Because I thought it might make Ultron work.”

“Which had failed and been shelved for quite some time, then, right?”

“Uh… yes?”

“Then why did you restart the project? Because you suddenly have an alien artifact in your hands? I thought you hate that scepter?” she asked innocently, but Pepper already had an inkling of where she was leading them all.

Tony gulped on the screen, his hands shook minutely. “I… I saw something, back in the HYDRA base…. Jesus, did she…?”

“Yup. She gave you that vision. She knew that you’d be desperate enough to do something with the scepter, and she knew that the scepter would fuck it up.” She paused, relishing in the silence of both rooms. “Guess who she blamed for her brother’s death?”

Harley growled angrily. “She made that monster! She killed her own brother!”

“Told you she’d rather delude herself. That’s her whole MO, really.”

Vision looked horrified. “I… I did not know that.”
“That’s why you were acting so weird!” Harley exclaimed. “She triggered you!”

“OK, that’s… I don’t know why I never suspected that,” Tony looked around confusedly.

Crowley’s eyes were razor sharp now. “The same way she made sure he,” she gestured at Vision, “didn’t know about her little hidey-hole inside your brain.”

“That… that… that bitch!” Harley ground out, and Pepper didn’t even have enough brain power to scold him for swearing.

“B.A.R.F.,” she said finally after she managed to calm her breathing down. “Get all you know about her and Ultron loaded up. I want the files as soon as possible.”

“Gladly,” Crowley… no, Tracy drawled easily.

“Any dirt on her, whatever mission HYDRA assigned her and her brother….”

“I got them all, don’t worry.”

Pepper nodded, satisfied. “Now, then,” she looked sharply at Tony, who groaned at her expression.

“Is this going to involve me signing anything?” he whined.

“No, no, I just need a line with the Council.”

He looked at her in suspicion. “Why?”

“Well, I need to coordinate with the people that’s actually going to catch her, right?”
Tony looked like he was going to protest, but he gave up midway. “You know what? Plausible
deniability and all that. Go ahead and do whatever you want, just don’t bother Crowley tomorrow,
she’s going to testify for Ross’ trial.”

Revenge, at last.

“Done. Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“You called me!”

“Will that be all, Mr. Stark?”

“Ugh, fine. That will be all, Miss Potts.”

(Commercial Flight to Trinidad)

Her wigs itched, the seat was uncomfortable, and the flight attendants were rude. It was hard
enough to use her power without letting anyone see the red mist around her, but if one more person
told her that she had to strap that ugly safety belts on, she would do more than just make them
forget why they’re there in the first place. The damned plane jolted again, and she lurched forward,
hitting her stomach on the tray in front of her. Natasha sent her a warning glare when a wisp of red
made a light overhead flicker.

Damn this plane and it’s stupid turbulence. Avengers’ jet never had any, and she didn’t see any
reason why people would sell planes if they couldn’t even make it comfortable. She went back to
her seat, ready to get back to work. But something felt a little off for some reason, and she couldn’t
pin point where.

Whatever, she thought. Probably just the altitude.

She reached out with her power again, routing back to the now familiar path leading to Stark’s
mind, but somehow, she suddenly felt a little… nostalgic. Images of her childhood and her home
that was robbed by that monster Stark and his accursed weapon flooded her mind. He took her life
away, so she used it to fuel a new one. Stark was going to pay for the home that he had taken away
from her.

She remembered the nights that she had spent with Pietro, planning the demise of the monster that made them orphans. She wondered if Stark’s sob story about his “kids” were any good for her. Maybe if she made him feel what she felt that night…. A sharp stinging sensation broke her train of thought. She glanced from left to right, trying to find the offender, but found nothing.

Just her imagination? Wanda settled down, deciding that maybe she overextended her power a little bit.

“So you do have a little self-control left, Sister. Good to know.”

She jolted up again, gaining Natasha’s irritated glare in the process, but she didn’t care. That was… Pietro? She reached out with her mind, desperately trying to find the source of his late brother’s voice… just another casualties of Stark’s creation.

If only Stark wasn’t so stupid. Couldn’t he make something else? She just wanted him to self-destruct, not make a murderbot!

“You blame him for your brainchild, Wanda? What did I tell you about cleaning up after yourself?”

What?? It can’t be…. First Pietro, and now….

“Мамочка…?”

She resolutely ignored Natasha’s now confused gaze. She focused instead on listening to her mother’s answer, but it never came.

What on earth was happening?

“The crazy bitch hearing voices. I wonder where I’ve heard that one before?”
She barely suppressed her flinch. That voice… she remembered that voice. It was her first… trial back when she was with HYDRA.

“Wow, trial, huh? Didn’t know I rank that low on your scale, you Nazi scum.”

No! No, she’s not Nazi! She’s just misguided!

“Aw… did Stevie told you that one too? Did he put pacifier on you when he tucked you in after you made a boo-boo?”

“Du bist kein Kind! Du hast mich getötet! Brenn in der Hölle, Nazi Schlampe!”

“Убей ее! Убить ведьму!”

“Why did you take Mummy away?! Why?!”

No! No! Shut up!

“What’s wrong, sister? I thought you wanted all those?”

I didn’t! I didn’t!

“Not so fun now when they can get back to you, hmm?”

Please! Stop!

“Regretting something? That’s a first! Congrats!”

I had to do it! I had to kill you!
“Or not.”

“Einmal ein Nazi, immer ein Nazi.”

“I’M NOT A NAZI!” she screeched accidentally.

“Wanda, what the hell?” Natasha hissed at her.

She shrunk on her seat, nervously looking around at the people that were either gawking at her, or recording her with their phones. “I… I don’t… - ”

“You are this close to giving us away, Wanda! Lay off!” Her friend hissed lowly.

She could swear the voices were laughing at her as they fade away.

Chapter End Notes

Honestly, writing about Wanda hitting a food tray was the highlight of my week, but I'm pretty happy with how Leo and Naomi turned out too.

And Leo gay. Yay for representation.

Translations:

¡Oy! Te calmas, o te calmo: Hey! Calm down, or I'll calm you down.

Мамочка…?: Mommy...?

Du bist kein Kind! Du hast mich getötet! Brenn in der Hölle, Nazi Schlampe!: You are no child! You killed me! Burn in hell, Nazi slut!

Убей ее! Убить ведьму!: Kill her! Kill the Witch!

Einmal ein Nazi, immer ein Nazi.: Once a Nazi, always a Nazi.

Thanks for the correction. Miri!
Might seem rushed in some parts, that's where the writer's block acted up. Sorry bout that!

C'ya!
“Miss Potts… this… I don’t even know what to say,” said Everett Ross, who was fortunately unrelated to the other Ross charged guilty of treason, among other indictment, just a few days ago.

“We apologize if this all seemed staged, but all this footage were only accessible after the Council gave Miss Crowley the green light to intercept Scarlet Witch’s tampering on Dr. Stark’s mind,” Pepper explained smoothly. “As you know, she was busy preparing to give testimony on Thaddeus Ross’ trial and her own hearing a few days ago. These videos were taken directly from what she had seen in the Witch’s mind, translated into a digital format via Dr. Stark’s B.A.R.F. technology.”

Ross was pensively silent for a moment. “Miss Potts, what exactly are you planning with this… evidence?” he asked finally.

Pepper sighed internally. It seemed like King T’Challa’s sympathy for the rogues really did rubbed off on him. “What I am doing with it right now, of course. Reporting it to the proper authority.”

“I see,” Ross hedged with a visible gulp. “And… what is your expectation from us? If you don’t mind me asking?”

Too easy. “Well, we would appreciate a fair response, that’s for sure.”

“Fair?”

“Miss Maximoff is to be tried for her involvement in the “civil war” once the Council caught her, correct? We are giving you these footage along with the official statement from Stark Industries that we are charging press against Miss Maximoff for mental assault and manipulation, as stated in
the Sokovia Accords’ 5th amendment.” She felt her eyes turning flinty and cold. “We also hope that the Council would try her for her involvement and actions as a part of a well known terrorist group, H.Y.D.R.A."

Ross shifted nervously on his seat. “Ah…. And I don’t suppose I can convince you to… uh… go easy on her?”

This man was making it way too easy. “By “I,” do you mean “the Sokovia Accords” or “Everett Ross,” Mr. Ross?” she asked calmly.

“I… uh… Everett Ross, of course. Miss Potts, you can’t possibly deny the fact that this is nothing more than a revenge on Dr. Stark’s side,” he fumbled to answer, sweating profusely.

Pepper gave him her sharpest smile, one that had brought grown, rich, powerful men to tears multiple times before. “Of course it’s a revenge, Mr. Ross. But can you point out why we shouldn’t or couldn’t do it? Is it not more illegal for us to hide this kind of information? Stark Industries does not abet terrorism and any kind of criminal behaviors - as should you.”

“Of course, Miss,” Ross answered quickly, “it’s just… wouldn’t the people get suspicious? I’m not saying that these are fake, of course, it’s just…. How convenient it is that a woman that Dr. Stark saved from being held captive suddenly found information that benefited his… vengeance? And that it’s made possible for the world to see using his own technology, no less?”

“Oh, we are prepared for that, of course,” Pepper waved off the unveiled accusation, pulling out a memory stick from her purse. “This is the documentation and science behind B.A.R.F. technology. Here you will find that as sophisticated as it is, B.A.R.F. is inherently incapable of creating visual from imagination. Long story short, it only has the capability to access a long-term and short-term memory, via the hippocampus. Imagination, on the other hand, happens mainly in the brain’s occipital lobe, which Mr. Stark had deemed too close to the skull to be safely “hacked” using B.A.R.F.”

Ross looked stuck between confusion and dread. “I… see?”

“The point is, Mr. Ross, we are confident we can prove the legitimacy of our technology. Of course, the council is welcome to provide their own experts to check this evidence. In fact, we’d rather they do.”
“Very well, Miss Potts,” Ross said finally, “I will see that the Council is notified about this.”

She nodded regally. “Thank you, Chairman Ross. I think that would be all, so I’ll take my leave here.”

Pepper stood from her seat and started to walk to the door, but Ross called after her, weak but still imploring, “I can understand Scarlet Witch… but what of the rest of them?”

“Captain America, you mean?” she asked, turning back slightly.

“And Black Widow, Hawkeye, the Falcon… all those that sided with him…. Is the bridge truly burned, Miss Potts?”

She didn’t hesitate when she answered, “It did.” Ross flinched and opened his mouth, but Pepper cut him off. “Don’t be mistaken, Mr. Ross… we’re not actively searching for dirt to bury them with - after all, we’re all quite busy, too busy to be bothered with those… people. But really, we don’t need to. They’re quite adept at shooting themselves in the foot, and all we had to do is stop covering for them, and do our civic duty to both this country and the world.”

“Case in point?” Ross asked in defeat.

“Case in point,” she agreed.

“And Dr. Stark won’t raise a hand? Not even for old time’s sake?”

Pepper turned the door’s handle, and threw one last cold gaze backwards. “I don’t see the point in celebrating a toxic past, Mr. Ross. But you can tell his majesty that Dr. Stark’s sentimentality is neither his business, nor yours. Good afternoon.”

(Trinidad, Trinidad and Tobago)

Being with just one other person already made Steve nervous. Having that one person completely
mad at him for some reason was doubly so. He’d given up attempting to breach the subject to Sam, and just opted to wait it all out instead. They both watched Ross’ trials in awkward and tense silence because of that decision, but at least Sam had stayed in the room without bolting out like a bat outta hell.

Still, Steve had felt the need to break the awkward tension. “See? I told you Ross’ a bad news. Good thing we didn’t bow down to him like Tony did,” he said triumphantly as the trial went on on the screen.

“In case you forgot, Steve,” Sam answered coldly, “it was Stark and the Accords Council that put him in trial.”

Steve stumbled for a response, but Sam didn’t even look at his direction. “Well, he should’ve done it from the start then!” he tried indignantly.

“Whatever,” Sam bit harshly as he stalked out of the room.

Steve was left dumbfounded. Sam… Sam had stuck by his side the whole time he knew him. And now, suddenly he was acting so mean just because of one news? Steve shook his head and followed Sam out of the room. Seemed like waiting this out was out after all.

“Sam! Wait up!”

Sam whirled angrily. “What do you want??” he spat.

“Why are you being so… so mean to me??”

“Mean?!” Sam shouted incredulously. “What’s “mean”, Captain, is the fact that you roped me into this gig, making me believe that we did the right thing - that we’re saving the world, when the truth is you’re doing this just so you can save your fucking boyfriend!”

Steve flinched. “Hold up, now, that’s not - ”

“Don’t you dare lie to me too, Rogers. I was there with you at Triskelion! I dragged your sorry
“ass from the river to hospital! I stuck with you, thinking that you’re a good man that the universe seemed to like to fuck with, but guess what?! You like to fuck with people just as bad, you fucking liar!”

“What the hell, Sam?! Are you talking about… about what HYDRA made Bucky do? That’s not your secret to know!”

“Well, it’s certainly Stark’s, considering it’s his parents your precious Bucky murdered! But I guess Captain America is god now too, huh? Only you get to decide who gets to know which secret.” Sam was panting from his cruel outburst, but his next words came just as sharp. “Good news for you, Cap, you get to play god all you want now, because I’m out.”

Steve felt the cold of Arctic sea washing over him. “What… what do you mean you’re out??”

“Exactly what it means. I’m. Out.” Sam glared daggers at him when he moved in with his hands outstretched. “I refuse to stay in this bandwagon any longer, Cap. Full offense, but you’re not the guy that I thought you were.” With a huff, Sam slammed his room’s door on Steve’s face, ignoring his attempt at adult communication.

A few minutes later, he emerged, bearing his bag and falcon wings.

“Wait! Sam, please…”

Said wings flared defensively just as he came close to Sam. “You wanna keep counting to ten with your fingers? Don’t you fucking touch me.”

“Look, is this because of that video? Sam, it wasn’t that bad, OK? I was defending myself and Bucky! If I didn’t stop Tony…”

“Do you honestly think he was trying to kill you, Rogers?” Sam asked mockingly. “Even if he wanted to make it long and painful, he could’ve just used his one off lasers at your knee caps and watch you bleed to death. But he didn’t, and I’m not sure if that makes him kind or stupid.” Sam crept closer, wings still in defensive position. “Trust me when I say that if you try to stop me, I won’t be as lenient.”

Sam stomped outside, and quickly flew away without even a second glance back.
Steve didn’t know where things had started to went downhill ever since he woke up, but he knew that this was Tony’s fault. If Tony hadn’t blown things out of proportion… If Tony hadn’t been so infuriatingly self-righteous…. Hell, if Tony hadn’t fought so hard against him in the first place, then none of this would’ve happened. It was Tony’s fault for being such a drama queen, like Clint had said once.

Steve sighed heavily. He’d wanted to move past this, but it’s clear that Tony had drawn his lines in the sand. Still, the Avengers was in need of his resources. If nothing else, Tony was good at providing for the Earth’s Mightiest Heroes. But if Tony thought Steve would let him play hero for one second longer when he got back home, he’s in for a big surprise.

Steven Rogers did not bow down to bullies. Especially not to Tony Stark.

(Classified Location, Trinidad, Trinidad and Tobago)

A handsome man, clad in black combat outfit peered through a binocular, completely indifferent to Trinidad’s harsh midday sun. Suddenly, he spot a winged figure taking off into the sky. “Heads up, guys. Falcon has been sighted.”

“What?” A similarly clothed woman with rich cinnamon skin muttered, breaking the silence.

“Yeah, he’s flying south… oh, wait. Is it only me, or is he really going to to that police station all by himself?” The man whistled appreciatively.

Another woman, dressed in white blouse, looked up in surprise from the card game she was playing. “Huh… would you look at that. Looks like minion number 2 still has some common sense left in him after all.”

“Do we need to escort him or something? Because I am not doing that,” scoffed her opponent, who was looking down unhappily at his hand.

A pair of twins that were, somehow, floating cross-legged at the back of the room perked up. “Nah, don’t bother. Mr. Stark’s already given us his wings and drone’s override code. What’s he gonna do then? Punch someone in the face?” said the girl.
The boy shrugged. “Not exactly far out, all things considered.”

“Touche,” the blouse-clad woman admitted, before revealing a royal flush with a grin to the man in front of him.

Said man huffed, and leaned back. “Any news on Black Widow and Scarlet Witch, Ate?” he asked when the woman, his sister, already scrolled through her phone’s feed.

“Their plane just landed. People’s already posting videos about her having a mild breakdown in the cabin, screaming “I’m not a Nazi!” over and over.” she answered with a chuckle.

A tall, terrifyingly muscular man entered the room with a lightness of step that belied his stature entered the room. “Whoa, that Tracy girl is not playing around, is she?” he said, impressed.

“Transcontinental micro-illusion. She literally whispered in that witch’s ears from across the Atlantic. Undetected. I think I’m swooning, am I swooning?” quipped yet another girl, this one reclining casually against a guandao , twanging the pole arm’s blade every now and then.

“Well, we’re not getting one-upped without a fight, are we?” the first woman said playfully, striding across the room to perch herself on the card-playing man’s lap.

“Hell no,” he answered in a sultry, husky voice. The man craned his neck to nuzzle the woman’s hair, revealing an intricate tattoo underneath his shirt.

“Oh, get a room, you two,” their leader joked, tossing his binocular into a nearby pile of clothing.

The bloused woman stood and mock-saluted at him. “Sir, yes sir!”

“You’re not letting that one go, are you?” he groaned.

The tattooed man chuckled. “For the right price, Chief? Sure.”
“Yeah, no thanks. I don’t wanna go broke at 27.”

“Hell of a goal, man. Hell of a goal.”

“Har, har. Get ready. It’s going to be 8 on 3, but I’d rather not take any chances.”

The floating boy cut, “Actually, Boss? It’s gonna be 8 on 2.”

“Hmm? Update from the Council?” the Large man looked up from where he was shuffling through his pack.

“Yeah, it’s just in. Looks like our little red wasn’t just getting trolled in the plane, she got her mind screened too!”

“SI just gave the Council some… incriminating evidence of the Witch’s past,” his twin continued.

“Short version? That whole Ultron mess was basically her fault,” he concluded, looking a little sick.


“Also, she’s HYDRA,” the floating girl added.

Silence.

“Holy shit,” the large man said finally.

“Yeah, I know. The council just cranked their threat level to S class,” said the twin boy.

The woman in blouse groaned. “They’re going to blast that on the news, huh?”
“Well, that is one way to make the Widow go AWOL,” answered the floating girl with a shrug.

“It’s gonna make the Witch skittish, though,” the cinnamon-skinned woman noted.

“Good. All the more reason for us not to hold back,” said her companion confidently, even though his hands wrapped a little more tightly around her waist.

“You sure you can take her? Crazy as she is, she’s still undeniably strong,” The leader said as he strapped weapons after weapons around his body.

The tattooed man waved his hand nonchalantly. “Relax, Chief. We got three energy projectors and three psychics here. Worst comes to worst, you can just stick an bullet on her head and call it a day.”

On his lap, his partner twist to raised an arched brow at him. “And let her get an easy death instead of making her pay her dues? No chance. Besides, someone’s got to make sure our dear captain is well cared for, right?”

“Okay, so you and Boss vs Cap, the rest of us vs the Witch?” the girl in the back asked, twirling her guandao.

“No, he can handle him alone. I’m gonna track the Widow. I’m not convinced she’s going to surrender herself to the police quietly,” she answered, finally getting up from the man’s lap to stretch.

“She’s slippery, though. You sure you don’t want my brother to go with you?” the woman in blouse offered.

“Yes, because my sun-themed, hyperactive fiance-slash-hero is the epitome of discreet take down and/or assassination. I’ll be fine, people. Baba Yaga’s got nothing on me.”

Their leader clapped his hands sharply, gaining their attention. “That’s settled then? Good. Stay sharp, they’re coming in a few hours.”
Most times, reading the political climate meant reading the actual lines instead of the implied meaning between said lines. After all, every entity in the world had their own breaking point, including the UN. And the bigger - and stronger - the organization, the more blatant they can afford to be about their intentions.

Natasha read and reread the official statement from the UN with a feeling of dread running down her spine.

“New evidence… involvement with HYDRA… denounced the main cause of Ultron incident… SI cooperation with UN investigator….”

Stark had sold Wanda out… and by extension, the whole Avengers Initiative.

Maybe she should’ve predicted this. Wanda didn’t make her hatred for Stark a secret… and while Stark had been showing nothing but remorse and guilt in the face of her hatred, she should’ve guessed that even Stark had his own breaking point. Stark was aiming for Wanda, but in the process, he also shoved the cross hair into her and the others as well.

She shouldn’t have followed Steve here.

She took a deep breath and closed the news apps on her phone. Right now, she was supposedly finding information about Wanda’s meltdown aboard the airplane. And she did find the information she sought: Wanda Maximoff had become a deadweight.

Logical course of action: abandon ship.

She was more than ready to do it. While Steve had been a good comrade, she knew that between her and Maximoff, he’d choose “Wanda the Kid” every time. Sam’s already voiced his displeasure ever since that Stark showed the footage from Siberia, and without her to cajole him every 5 minutes, she doubted he would still be there when she came back.
Staying would mean death, and the Black Widow’s first lesson was not to get killed.

The only problem with that, however, is the fact the Council was obviously rearing to get one of their “superhero” teams to catch them. And while none of them was on her caliber, sometimes quantity won over quality. She needed to find friends on higher places to survive. Someone not even Stark could touch.

She needed to bargain with the Council itself.

*Well,* she thought, *time’s wasting. Better move now before Maximoff could read my mind.*

Without even a backward glance, she slunk away through the crowd, mind already buzzing with plans. She needed to convince the Council to take her back… but to gain a position of power, she needed a lot of voices to vouch for her. She didn’t have that, for now, so maybe start slow? Offer the Council her service in teaching new recruits? Yes, that could work…. She’d pose herself as the mentor those amateurs would love, and then… *they* will vouch for her.

She changed her wig so quickly, nobody would’ve noticed, and got into a taxi to the port. Thankfully, her driver was silent and didn’t ask questions. She needed the quiet to plan her whole move, and she wasn’t above committing a grand theft auto to get the peace and quiet she needed.

She got into this mess in the first place because she didn’t plan enough. She got too careless, and now, unless she could pull this off, she’s going to pay a heavy price. She wasn’t going to make the same mistake twice - she would think of every detail, including what would happen after she was all buddy-buddy with the Council.

It’s risky, but she could start to take Stark down then. He obviously had no more lost love for his former team, if the dirt he threw Steve and Wanda’s way was any indication. No doubt, he’d have some saved for her too, but she wasn’t going down without a fight. If Stark wanted try and blackmail her, then two can play the game. Someone needed to tell the Council about Stark’s rouge A.I., might as well be her that did it.

Her taxi suddenly lurched as the driver slammed the brake in front of the port’s entrance. She bit back a curse, and payed with the paper notes from her counterfeit wallet, and walked in confidently. For some unknown reason, however, the port was… deserted.

Two muffled bangs rang from behind her, and she toppled down as her thighs were pierced by hot
lead. Trapped… again. She growled in irritation. They weren’t supposed to find her this soon! She scowled at her shooter, a woman in her mid-twenties. She was beautiful… in an exotic kind of way - brown skin, piercing dark eyes, a dancer-like poise. Another Black Widow wannabe, in short.

“Who are you?” Natasha barked, refusing to stay down on the floor even with two holes in her legs.

“Srikandi, AERA,” she answered casually.

Srikandi , Natasha mused.

She had heard rumors about how when USSR had given weapons and information to their allies during the cold war, they’d had also gifted one particular country with the training regiment from the Red Room. USSR government had hoped to stretch their influence to Australia, so naturally, they stuck a deal with the closest country they could find - Indonesia. Of course, in the end, the communist party still got violently toppled. Last she heard, though, the government still hadn’t scrapped the project.

But if her sources were to be trusted, the regiment they had been using was incomplete. USSR hadn’t been keen on giving away some no name country their best weapon yet. Supposedly, they only divulge the physical aspects of the Red Room - combat training, physical conditioning - and some infiltration drill.

They certainly hadn’t given away the juicier bits - the ones that truly made a Black Widow. No seduction and manipulation tactics, no psychological conditioning, no nothing .

She must’ve seen the amused look in her eyes, because the woman, Srikandi, huffed a laugh. “You don’t think we’d just use your regiment as is, do you?”

“You can’t improve perfection.”

“Is that why you’re here now? Limping and desperate?” she mocked.

Natasha let her crackling widow’s bite answer the question.
Srikandi smirked and pounced forward, faster than her eyes could see.

Chapter End Notes

I *really* hope I don't piss anyone off. I didn't think South East Asian history would have this much connection to the Cold War, so I decided to fuck around and make a new OC that I don't think I'd ever use again.

Last I heard, Indonesians are pretty spooked with anything and everything communism, but Wikipedia said their first president was "veering to the left" in early 60's... and USSR was recorded selling weapons and fighter jets to Indonesia somewhere during that time. I don't know tho, I'm not 100% sure about how cool they are now with that side of their history, so please don't burn me on a stake if I did offend you.

Also, Ate (Pronounced aa-t(e), I think) is how Filipinos call their big sister... supposedly. Wikipedia told me so.

This story is getting crowded, so I don't think I can fit any backstory on our AERA OCs, but just in case: 8 people on the Rogue retrieval teams: 4 men, 4 women, from 4 countries. Indonesian pair is "the leader" and Srikandi. Filipino pair is "the tattooed man (who is also Srikandi's fiance, just a back story) and his sister, "the woman in blouse". Thai pair is the floating twins. Malaysian pair is "the large man" and "the girl with guandao."

I honest to god researched their naming system, but in the end, a lot of name randomizer had been used.
"the Leader" is Jeremiah Kusuma Sanjaya, code name Arjuna
Srikandi is Ida Ayu Dewi Jelantik, code name... well... Srikandi

"The tattooed man" is Elija Monte Dy Lorenzo, code name Apolaki
"The woman in blouse" is Reyna Maria Dy Lorenzo, code name Mayari

"The Twin Boy" is Kaan Chalor, code name Kinnara
"The Twin Girl" is Mae Chalor, code name Kinnari

"The Large Man" is Zakariyya Bintang bin Arhab, code name Jin
"The girl with guandao" is Tan Ai Lin, code name Bunian

Just a little background, you guys. I don't think I have the brain power to add 8 more OCs in this fic. If you are from any of these countries and find anything weird or mythologically incorrect... just ignore this. It's not gonna be in the story much, anyway. You can literally change "Kinnari" and "Kinnara" to "Girl and Boy wonder," and the plot will go on just fine. I just don't think it's realistic for non-english speaking countries to name their icons in english, y'know?

C'ya!
Wanda tapped her foot impatiently. Her wigs were still itching, but Natasha told her that she couldn’t take them off until they’re somewhere safe. She said she was just going to check the news for anyone suspicious of them, and she knew for a fact that Natasha was telling the truth. But for some reason, she was feeling… unsettled.

It was the people. They were… staring, pointing. Cold sweat dripped in her back as she heard the accusations in their minds.

*Murderer. Terrorist. HYDRA.*

She quickly walked out through the least crowded exit she could find, and took out her phone. Said phone burned in a burst of scarlet mist just minutes later.

*How did Stark get his dirty hands in those videos?!*

No, no, no. This was *not* supposed to happen. She made sure no one could get suspicious. After all, it was Stark’s own weakness that gave birth to Ultron, it was only right for him to get the blame. But now….

Nearby trash can burst in scarlet flames.

“I’ll kill him!” she screeched.

“No, you won’t” a calm voice answered from her back.
Wanda whirled around, only to notice that she wasn’t even in the airport anymore. “Where am I?!” she demanded, hands lighting with her power as she took in her surrounding.

It was dark, it was cold, and her mind reading power was in a fritz. The man standing in front of her was tall, muscular, and downright intimidating. The darkness of the space seemed to creep out of his body, writhing around the both of them in an erratic dance.

Frantically, she pushed with her power, eager to read his mind. But just when she reached into him, some kind of energy shield flared, and bounced her power back, giving her a terrible feedback in her own brain. The black wall parted, and two… twins floated in, hands swaying in a complex formation.

“What is this?! Who are you?!”

Another shield blocked her mind’s probe, and it was clear that the twins were the source. Angrily, she flooded even more strength in her attack. But just as the twins started to struggle under her assault, the darkness parted once more, and in came a group of three. One man, hands ablaze with golden flames, one woman, floating gracefully with glowing silver spheres orbiting around her, and a girl with an ostentatious looking pole arm.

The girl slashed at her, sending ripples through the cage, and shredded her mind power. Flinching, she threw a shield of her own, just as one of the orbs following the white-clad woman sent a lance of silver energy straight at her.

“Who are all of you?! What do you want?!” she screamed, nervous now that it was clear that all six of them had hostile intent.

The fiery man smirked devilishly. “Those guys are Jin, Kinnara and Kinnari,” he nodded at the first three people to enter. “I’m Apolaki, and that’s Mayari and Bunian. We’re from AERA, and you’re under arrest.”

“Please, resist,” the girl he called Bunian added. “It would be a shame to think that we went all the way here just to sight see.”

With a scream, she threw a flood of red energy at all of them, but the large man flicked his fingers lazily, and the darkness swallowed her power like a bottomless pit.
“I think we just get our answer,” the silver woman, Mayari said coolly.

Apolaki’s smirk grew even wider. “I can’t believe I’ll ever say this, but let’s gang on her!”

*(The Rogue’s Hideout, Trinidad and Tobago)*

Steve was left speechless and confused the moment Sam walked out the door. He knew things had been hard lately, and that he and Sam had been butting head over Tony’s little show and tell with the press. But Sam had been watching his back since DC! He never would’ve believed Sam would take Tony’s side of things over his like this.

With heavy heart, he trudged to the living room and turned the TV on, but the news made him wish he didn’t. Tony didn’t just stop with him, he extended the same courtesy to Wanda as well. The video was incredibly ridiculous, he didn’t know how and why any news station would air this.

Wanda is a good child! There’s no way any of this was true!

Angrily, Steve switched the TV off. He wore his hoodie, and head out to the airport. Natasha and Wanda were supposed to call in a few minutes ago, but with this news blasting on international media, there could be a chance of them getting attacked on the way home.

Just as he was about to take a turn at the strangely empty alleyway, however, a bullet suddenly struck the wall just inches away from his face. He flinched back, immediately looking around. But he was alone, and the small neighborhood that used to bustle with activity was now eerily quiet.

Dread filled his stomach when he realized that they had been played.

Natasha was with together with Wanda, but both Sam and himself were alone. He looked around again, settling his eyes at a dingy looking tower, far in the distance. He couldn’t hear any other people around, so the shooter must’ve been perching up there, sniping at him.

Steve smirked. The missed shot told volumes about this supposed sniper’s ability. The council
should’ve done their research that no sniper could’ve made that kind of shot from so far away except for the one and only Hawkeye. Confidently, he flit around the corners, trying to discretely make his way to the tower and take out this impostor.

But another bullet buried itself, this time just a breath away from his ankle. He took off to the other way, only to have a bullet ricocheting, thrice, right in front of his face. Desperation and doubt started to creep into his mind. This guy is definitely pretty skilled in his own right.

But Steven Rogers never backed down from a fight.

He kept dodging and dodging as hails of bullets zipped around him. Maybe his attacker wasn’t that good after all? What kind of self-respecting sniper missed this many shots and keep trying?!

His line of thought was cut short just as soon as he stepped into something that gave under his feet. Immediately, ropes shot out of nowhere and bound him in an inescapable vice grip. Steve cursed and wriggled around, but the ropes only dug deeper into his skin. He continued to struggle for what seemed like an hour, until he heard motorbike closing in on him.

The biker, a man in black combat jacket with a sniper riffle slung across his back made his way calmly and wordlessly attached a hook into the rope cocoon around him,

“Hey! Who do you think you are?!”

“Arjuna. AERA. You are under arrest, anything you say can and will be added to the charges waiting for you. So please spare my ears and sanity, and shut the fuck up.”

Steve sputtered indignantly. “Don’t you know who I am?? Let me go! You’re making a big mistake here, son - ”

The man hauled him with no noticeable strain at all, and dumped him on his motorbike. “First of all, don’t fucking call me “son” when you’re barely even 30. Second, if you don’t shut your mouth, I’ll gag you.”

Steve opened his mouth to retort, but his captor pulled a handkerchief and stuffed it in his mouth. “MMMGH!” he protested.
“Told you.”

“Mmmgh!”

But Arjuna just secured more ropes from his binding to the motorcycle, and kick started it. “Arjuna reporting. Captain America has been apprehended. Bringing him to the extraction spot. Over,” the man said to what appeared to be his com unit, before revving the bike with unnecessary grandeur.

As the motorbike drove away, he heard cheering from the houses they passed.

(Chaguaramas Sea Port, Trinidad)

It has been a long while since the last time she faced a baseline human that could give her a workout, especially with injured legs. But Srikandi was obviously just *toying* with her right now. She moved like a blur, evading her bites and shots, not even bothering to draw her own guns again, opting to hit her bare-handed (and footed) instead.

“This is the perfection you were talking about?” she mocked.

Natasha gritted her teeth and reached for the electricity grenade Stark had given her for the confrontation in Germany. Just as she was about to throw it, Srikandi pressed a button on her wrist watch, and her grenade chip clattered harmlessly on the floor.

“Nu uh. No fancy toys for you, Missy,” she said cheerfully, kicking her square in the stomach.

They clashed again, but it seemed like Stark had given them more than just a grenade defuse switch, because her bites had also lost power the moment Srikandi pressed the button. Natasha had been in a disadvantage with her legs before, but now she’s just powerless.

Srikandi staged a yawn. “You know, I’m getting really bored now. Can we wrap this up? My boss just bagged your boss, anyway.”
Well there went her escape plan.

“I don’t need him to beat you.”

“Hah!” she laughed derisively, “I’d like to see that happen too, hon, but your mouth is writing checks your body can’t cash.” Srikandi pulled her gun out then. “Final chance. Surrender, and you’ll walk to your cell, or don’t, and you’ll get thrown in instead.”

“Try me.”

Srikandi smiled turned cold. “Your choice.” She danced out of Natasha’s line of sight.

Before she could even retaliate, bullets flew around her, grazing her muscles, puncturing the tendons with surgical precision. Limb by limb, Natasha fell to the floor. She tried to roll out of the way, but Srikandi’s assault was unending. Her own guns had fallen from her grip, and now all she could do was curl on the floor, trying to guard her torso.

“That’s it? Damn, I thought I brought the low calibers. Should’ve brought the BB guns instead, huh?”

That would explain why she wasn’t bleeding to death by now.

“You had enough? Bullets don’t grow on trees, you know.”

Natasha knew that it was time to give up, but not before she set the stage for another resistance. “I won’t talk until I have a lawyer.”

“Tell that to your jailers. I’m just the delivery girl.”

“I won’t stand for internment.”
Srikandi tossed an innocuous disks that exploded into thousands of metal strings that bundled her up in seconds. “You would know all about illegal custody, won’t you, Black Widow?”

Natasha swallowed her pride when Srikandi attached a lasso around her bondage and started to drag her like a sack of potato. “The people won’t let you get away with it if you ever make the Avengers disappear without trial.”

“Why would I catch them? They didn’t break any laws.”

“We’re the Avengers.”

“Uh… no? I’m with AERA, and you’re with a band of terrorists. Get it right.”

Natasha didn’t say anything else the whole way to Srikandi’s car.

(Piarco International Airport, Trinidad and Tobago)

Wanda threw waves after waves of magic at her assailants, one hand held up to maintain the circular shield that surrounded her. She had tried to bend their minds, time and time again, but the twins and the girl with pole arm kept countering it.

So far, those three hadn’t shown any energy manipulation like their other companions, so they were her focus of attack. But each time an attack got through Apolaki’s golden inferno and Mayari’s barrage of silver beam, the muscled man simply flicked a finger and darkness would swallow her magic and spit it back out at her.

She dodged a particularly harsh silver light, but her escape was cut short by the slicing blade of Bunian’s pole arm. Angrily, she thrust her hand out at her, but the darkness coagulate in front of her fist and morphed into a portal, through which Jin sprang out and grabbed her hand harshly.

The man twirled her around by her hand, holding her in a lock. “What rotten manners,” he said dismissively. “Shall I teach you a lesson in etiquette?”
Dark walls turned into shadowy tentacles that grabbed her wrist and threw her away like a rag-doll.

She used her magic to stabilized her landing, but Apolaki and Mayari’s bombardment chased her around the black cage. “Can’t teach this dog new tricks, Jin-O,” the fiery man sneered.

“I don’t know, I kinda think I’d like to see her groveling,” Mayari countered, silver spheres burning bright with power.

“I’ll never grovel to weaklings like you!”

“True power comes from restraint,” one of the twin chanted mysteriously.

“Restraint comes from discipline,” the other continued.

They both moved their hands in synchronous dance, sending barriers around her like a cell. “Discipline is the true measure of one’s strength,” they concluded at the same time, voice blank and devoid of emotion.

“You know you’re milking that creepy twins trope too much, right?” Bunian said, planting her weapon into the ground with a loud clang. The vibration raced through the barrier-cell, creating loud noise she was sure only she could hear. “Whose quotes even was that? I don’t think I read that in Arts of War, but that sounded Sun Tzu-ish.”

“No, we made that up just now,” they answered, still with their annoyingly blank voice.

“Wonderful. You really are creepy.”

“Arjuna and Srikandi have already caught their targets,” one of the twins said, unflinching even as she flung her magic into her face.

“Should we wrap this up, then?” Jin asked with a wave of his hand, swallowing her spell into his darkness.
As if on cue, the six of them amped-up their offensive, sending waves upon waves of attacks of flames, rays, and blades of shadow and steel. Jin locked his hands in a complicated arrangement, and darkness solidified all around, making platforms that Apolaki jumped around from. He danced on the air, not unlike how Mayari soared, held up by her silver aura. Now his meteor-like flames rained down on her from every direction, and she was reduced to holding the barrier without being able to retaliate.

Mayari floated down to her eye level, her orbs already combining into a large, moon-like sphere of pure energy. Distantly, she realized how Apolaki had landed on the opposite side of her barrier, golden flames gathered in his palm and held aloft like a miniature sun. Both sent forward their attacks, and her barrier finally failed when the powers clashed with her being stuck in the middle.

The noise in her head suddenly picked up again, reaching a deafening level. She cried out in pain, and fell into her knees. Immediately, the darkness collapsed on her, latching itself unto her skin like a skintight suit.

And then, the feeling of a collar around her neck was the last thing she felt before the darkness consumed her whole.

(United Nations Detention Unit, The Hague, Netherlands)

When they brought in Wanda to the neighboring cell, unconscious and collared, Steve quickly stood and pounded his fist into the glass walls. But they had somehow made the cell not only strong enough to keep him in, but also soundproofed it. The man that dragged Wanda in didn’t even look in his direction, much less heard him.

To think that Tony retrofitted his tech to this drab of a jail in Europe, just to keep them away. Steve had never met a man with less honor than the disgraceful billionaire. He pounded on the wall again, but before his fist made a contact, the door opened again, and in walked a blonde dame in a man’s suit. The woman reached for the suit’s pocket, pullet a small device out and pressed a button. Suddenly, voices came flooding in to his cell.

“Who are you?! Where am I??”

“You are in the United Nations Detention Unit, in Den Haag, Netherlands,” the dame answered in an accented english. “My name is Eline de Haas. I will act as your court-appointed attorney during your trials by the United Nations.”
He breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank god we actually got one…. Eline, isn’t it?”

“You may address me only by my surname, Mr. Rogers. And I represent only you, not the others. They will get their own attorney soon enough.”

Steve flinched at her cold, clinical tone. “I… ah, okay, Miss… de Haas? Are you going to let me out now, or…”

Eline’s eyebrow shot up, but she said nothing as she nodded a thanks when a man brought in a chair and set it in front of Steve’s cell. “Let you out? I suppose you mean for your consultation? No, Mr. Rogers, I am not letting you out. The United Nations and the Kingdom of the Netherlands have deemed you a security risk, and thus, are not to be let out at any time except for your trials until a more suitable arrangement have been made.”

“I - That’s outrageous! I’m not a danger to your country!”

“Multiple sovereign nations beg to differ, Mr. Rogers. We are to have all our meetings here, and that is final.” She gestured at his bed. “You may sit down.”

“I thought you were supposed to be on my side,” he accused.

“I am supposed to make sure you get as light a punishment as you can. My country has generously offered her service through mine, and I will fulfill that duty, regardless of my personal opinions on it. During our interaction, you may expect me to give with nothing but professionalism and total honesty, and I expect the same from you. It is imperative that I know every little details that may make or break your case. Spare nothing, hide nothing, make-up nothing.”

Steve was speechless.

“Do you agree with this term, or must I resign and get another co-worker of mine to deal with your case?”

“I - Sure,” he bit angrily. “Are we gonna stay here for the trial too? Video call the judge from our cells?”
Trials, Mr. Rogers. Plural. And no, you are to attend your trials in person. So will Miss Romanova and Mr. Wilson. Miss Maximoff, however, has been deemed an even higher security risk than you and Miss Romanova combined. She will not leave her cell at all until all the portable power suppression systems have been tested more thoroughly.”

Rage filled him at the injustice of it all. “She’s just a kid! She doesn’t deserve to be treated like that!”

But Eline simply scribbled a few notes in her paper, looking unfazed. “By legal definition of Sokovia, her home country, United States of America, your home country, and Netherlands, the country who very reluctantly houses her as she waits for her trials, A woman encroaching her mid-twenties is not a child.”

Steve sputtered. “She was manipulated! Wanda’s a good kid!”

Eline held her hand up. “Enough. You obviously have a lot of attachment to Miss Maximoff, and you can be sure I’ll study this fact again to see if it will play in our favor or against it. But for now, it is you that I want to learn more about.”

“Fine!” he spat. “Go on, I’m sure you’d like nothing more than to get over this sooner.”

“As should you, Mr. Rogers. We will work backwards, starting from the most recent events, and back to as far as we can go. Tell me about the events in Trinidad. And remember, Mr. Rogers, if you hide any unsavory details, and the prosecutors produce evidence that reveal them, your defense will be knocked down even quicker than you can say Mississippi.”

(Stark Tower, Manhattan, New York City)

“Pull that wire, the red one… yeah, cool.”

“But why the… ooh…. Yeah, I see. Think this will work, Peter?”

“Only one way to find out, Har.”
“I’m not feeling like sticking on the ceiling for 3 hours while you trial-and-error’d a web solvent, surprisingly.”

“That was one time!”

“3 hours, Pete! Dad have that video saved in his server forever now.”

“Aw… sorry? I’m pretty sure he won’t actually use it?”

The lab’s door opened and Tony strutted in with a smile on his face. “Think again, Spider-Boy. I save all of my kiddos’ embarrassing videos for future reference. In case any of you ever hit that rebellious stage, you know?”

Harley pouted. “I’m rebelling now. This is clearly an abuse, and I will not stand for it. Peter, back me up.”

“Uh….,” he hedged, trying to hide a smirk.

“Really?! After I stick upside down on the ceiling for 3 hours for you?? Peter, why!!”

Tony guffawed and slung an arm on his shoulders. “Okay, you know what, save all our family footage in my server, F.R.I.D.A.Y..”

“Yes, Boss,” the A.I.’s answer came almost like a laughter.

“Daaad!!” Harley protested, even when his mouth were stretched in a grin.

“Can it before I bring out the dad jokes, Kiddo,” Tony said, wiggling his finger comically.

Peter laughed out loud. “No, please, god no. Anything but dad jokes.”
“I’m hurt, Pete. My dad jokes are the best ever.” He inclined his head and whispered, “Especially when I’m a husband soon.”

Both Harley and he gasped. “Wait, you proposed?! When??”

“Did she say yes?? She said yes, right?? Cus you’re getting married??” Harley asked excitedly.

Tony scratched the back of his head sheepishly. “Well… not exactly? Not yet, at least. Our councilor told me that we’re basically ready, and if I want to go for it, I should…. What do you think?”

His last question came a little softer, like Tony wasn’t sure that he was actually ready for it, but Peter made sure he got his answer through a hug instead. “She’d be so happy, Dad… seriously, go get her, already!”

“Wait, you haven’t proposed? Does that mean I get to plan it?? Oh my god, Dad, you gotta let me and Peter and Hailey help you out! And Tracy! And Cassidy!”

“Ooh! What about Rhodey?? And Vision! Wait, did you tell anyone else yet? Are we the first?”

Tony chuckled and mussed their hair. “Alright, calm down you rugrats. I just came from Rhodey’s, obviously. He’s gonna be my best man, you’re the flower boys, of course he came first.” Tony pinched their noses when they scowled. “Kidding. Hailey’s insisting on taking Cassidy “flower throwing”, as she said. You guys can be the ring bearers. Speaking of which….”

The door opened again, this time letting Happy in. “You called? You said it’s an emergency.” the man asked gruffly.

“Oh, but it is, my friend. A… ring emergency,” Tony answered with a wink. But Happy’s face went blank for a second and Tony faltered. “You… still have it right? The Ring?”

“The DVD? Yeah, I still got it. Thought you hated that movie.”
Tony laughed nervously. “Hap, c’mon… you’re messing with me, right?” Tony’s eyes went wide just a little bit more. “Right?” he pleaded again.

And then, after a tense silence, Happy doubled over in laughter. “Jesus, you should see your face!”

“Not funny, Hap. I almost had a heart attack. Again,” Tony grumbled, visibly relaxing.

“Yeah, course I got it.” Happy reached to his pocket, and pulled out a beautiful engagement ring. “I’ve been carrying this since 2008. It’s gonna be weird not having to check for it every 5 minutes again.”

Tony’s smile softened as he closed Happy’s hand around the proffered ring. “Well, I’m gonna need you to hold on to that just a little bit longer, okay? I can’t just pop the question without any prep -”

“I’m home!” Pepper’s cheerful voice came from outside the room.

All of them froze on the spot, before hectically tried to act normal. Harley went to the desk and grabbed a random textbook, not noticing that it had Peter’s name scrawled on the cover… and that he held it upside down. Peter peered into a microscope, but almost gauged his eye out because he was so jittery. Tony looked like he was seconds away from a panic attack, and just threw himself to a nearby sofa and proceeded to take a “draw me like one of your french girls” pose.

Happy just stuck his hands into his suit’s pocket, looking disgustedly at all of them.

Pepper poked her head in, blinking confusedly when she took in the weird scene in front of her. “Uh… hi? Am I interrupting something?”

Happy rolled his eyes and ushered her out. “Just father and sons being weird, Pep. C’mon, I heard Rhodes was looking for you.”

“Nice to see you too, Honey!” Tony called out, still frozen in his ridiculous pose.

“You want to propose to her? With that skill?” Peter asked, still rubbing his sore right eye.
Tony glared at him. “I panicked, okay?”

“Yeah, you’re gonna need a lot of help, Dad,” Harley chimed in, looking a little shaken himself.

“Speak for yourself, Rekrap Retep.”

Harley turned the textbook and scowled. “Hey, I’m not the one proposing to the Pepper Potts.”

“And I’m the Tony Stark, kid. I don’t see your point.”

“His point is that the Tony stark just impersonated Kate Winslet because the Pepper Potts, who has been in relationship with him since way back when, made him nervous.”

“This is disrespect. I’m bringing this to Hannah and May.”

“Mom would probably just laugh at you, to be honest.”

“And I think May would cry… after she laugh at you first.”

Tony scowled at them.

“But for real, though. Can we help with the proposal? Pretty please?” Harley begged.

Tony sighed. “Fine, just don’t spill the bean on Pepper, Okay?”

Peter held up three fingers. “I volunteer.”

“Pretty sure it’s supposed to be “scout’s honor” instead, but sure. Fanboy all you want.”
“It’s a great movie, alright??”

“Yes, yes. Got it.” Tony rose and walked to the door. “I’ll leave you to it. Just please try not to destroy the lab, okay? We’re celebrating your 16th birthday here.”

Harley kicked his shin.

Peter stuttered, “Uh… yeah. About that? You might wanna sit down, Dad.”

Chapter End Notes

I might've been watching too many slapstick comedy.

But for real, though, I've already got half the mind to make Peter and Harley the flower boys, but my wittle junior OCs spilling petals everywhere is just too precious to pass.

On that note, this is it for the Rogue's arc. I hope i don't give anyone a HBP from all the salt. From now, they'll just get mentioned, or be the topic of discussions, but I'm so done writing in their POV. It gets tiring really fast, if you can believe it.

No spoiler or anything... but I think it's time to introduce the last addition (I think) of the New Avengers team ;)


Something Wicked This Way Comes

Chapter Notes

Officially giving a reason to why Peter's age is such a big deal - other than because I realized too late that he was 14 in CW, of course.

Don't you just love filling up a plot bunny hole?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

(Keeners’ New Apartment, Queens, New York City)

“Okay, so I get it that you don’t want Miss Potts dropping in, but you can ask F.R.I.D.A.Y. to alert you for that,” Tracy said as she made herself at home on his sofa.

“Yeah, I know. But I kinda want to give Peter some quality time with Dad too, you know. He seemed upset about… well.”

Tracy winced in response, but quickly sobered up to grip a steadying hand on a tripping Hailey. “Alright, Cassi, no pushing. We’ve talked about this.”

Cassidy looked down, appropriately chastised. “Sorry, Trace.”

“I’m okay, Tracy! Thanks!” Hailey quickly jumped to her new friend’s defense.

“Yeah, yeah. Go on with your play date now, the adults got some super serious stuff to do.”

Harley smirked winningly at her. “Oh, so I’m an adult now? Gee, thanks.”

Tracy rolled her eyes. “The adult and a brat,” she retorted.

Harley opened his mouth, but the bell rang before he could speak.
“Yoo-hoo, anyone home?” a woman’s voice called.

“Adults ,” he said with a grin and hurried to open the door for Major Naomi and Major Leo. “Hi! Thanks for coming!”

“Not everyday you get invited to Tony Stark’s sons’ super secret stuff,” Leo answered kindly.

“So, are we waiting for anyone else?”

“Just Vision, Rhodey and Happy. Miss van Dyne said she was busy doing science stuff with her dad,” Harley said as he stepped aside to let them in.

Naomi’s eyes went wide. “Wait, we’re waiting for Major General Rhodes?? I’m wearing T-shirt!”

Her friend guffawed loudly, already walking to the living room. “Seriously? We’re off-duty, girl. Grab a bag and get it all together already.”

“You shut your mouth, Leo. This is serious!”

Leo ignored his panicking friend, and introduced himself to the amused looking Tracy. “Leonardo Verde. Air Force Major and Avenger… I guess.”

Tracy, the thot, eyed the tall (and admittedly attractive) man appreciatively. “Tracy Crowley. Hopefully an Avenger, and available as fuck,” she purred with half-lidded eyes and fluttered eyelashes.

Leo chuckled. “Sorry ma’am. I don’t swing that way.”

“He likes the D!” Naomi called from behind the couch.

“Aw, shucks,” Tracy mumbled nonchalantly, if a little awkwardly, already shelving away her sultry
Harley barely stifled his laugh.

“Flattered, though. Thanks,” Leo offered.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re the prettiest of them all, Verde.”

“Aw, thanks, Lim. Really warms my heart.”

Harley watched, smiling. Somehow, he just knew that this new team of superheroes would take good care of his Dad. Something told him that this team won’t turn to hell the way the old one had.

Another ring of the bell broke him out of his reverie.

“Heya! How’s home?” he asked immediately when he saw Vision, Rhodey and Happy.

Happy’s eyebrows furrowed, half concerned, half confused. “Honestly? I think he’s sulking way harder than he should. He certainly didn’t lock himself down the lab when he offered Pepper strawberries… again.”

“He’s not going to buy Peter 5 pairs of heels, right?”

“Honestly, I’m not even sure at this point.”


He ducked his head, hoping to hide his blush. Quickly, he ushered everyone into their seats, and cleared his throat. “Okay, so first of all, thank you for coming.”
Several hums of agreement answered him.

“Second, if you don’t know, we’re going to plan Tony Stark’s proposal to Pepper Potts.”

Several brows were raised, but nobody said anything.

“Third, it’s going to happen in exactly… 30 hours from now.”

All hell broke loose, and it was at this moment Harley knew… he fucked up.

*(Stark Towers, Manhattan, New York City)*

“Dad?”

“Go away, Pete.”

“Please….”

“No.”

“I’m so so - ”

“Don’t you dare apologize for me being a shit - ”

“I won’t have to feel like I should apologize if you’d just tell me what’s wrong!”

“I don’t even know your - I don’t - ”
“Big deal, Dad! We’re not always this close, and then stuff happen, and you have other stuff to worry about, it’s fine, Jesus!”

“It’s not!”

“This is ridiculous, you’re blowing this out of proportion!”

That did it. Tony stomped to the door and pull it open with way more force than necessary. “Out of proportion’?” he hissed. “Did you know that the only birthday party my dad ever bothered going to was my 13th? And that he brought a card that said ‘Happy 12th birthday’?!”

Peter backed away with wide eyes, and immediately anger drained out of him like air out of a punctured tire.

“I’m… I’m sorry Kiddo, I shouldn’t have yelled.”

But Peter just shrugged it off and flung himself into a hug that he gladly returned. “No… I’m sorry, Dad. I didn’t know it was such a sore point for you….”

“Course you don’t know, Peter, I never told you. Never told anyone, really.”

“Well, thanks for telling me.”

They held each other in a hug for a long, long time, but neither of them protested. Perks of having enhanced physiology.

“You’re not him, Dad,” Peter whispered finally, still clinging to him for dear life. “You’re better than he ever was.”

Tony tried to swallow through the thick lump in his throat, but when he answered, his voice still came out hoarse, “I’m trying, Peter… I’m trying really hard, but I keep fucking up. First with Harley, and now with you….”
“Peter tightened his grip around him. “Harley wasn’t on you.”

“I should’ve done more. I should’ve protected him.”

“And you did. But you can’t plan on every single contingency. You’re Iron Man, not Batman.”

He let out a shaky laugh. “Hold my… non-alcoholic beverage.”

“You still got nightmare? About Harley?”

“And you. And Hal. Perks of parenthood, I guess.”

“Oh.”

“So apparently I don’t like the idea of you getting buried alive. Surprise.” Tony sighed. “You guys should really learn a few things from Hailey about not giving me heart attack once every other quarter.”

“Sorry.”

“Not your fault. Ross’ a dick.”

“How come you can say that to other people but not to yourself?”

“That a rhetoric, Kid?”

“No. I’m asking for real.”

He paused, surprised. “I… I guess it’s habit by now.”
“Well stop it. I don’t like you beating yourself over something that you don’t have anything to do with.”

“You’re one to speak. You apologize for everything.”

This time, it was Peter’s turn to pause. “I… guess? I never really thought about that too.”

“Aren’t we the pair.”

“If I say I’m going to work on that, will you work on your self-blaming problem too?”

Tony didn’t hesitate to answer, “Yes.”

“So… I still get to have a party tomorrow?”

The party.

*Shit.*

With a jerk, he extracted himself from the hug. “*Shit. I forgot to cancel the dri *- *your present!*”

Peter, bless his obliviousness, scrunched his nose in confusion. “I told you, Dad, you don’t have to get me anything…. And why do you need to *”

“Welp, look at the clock! So much to do, so little time. Shoo. I have bribe some people.”

“Dad!” Peter whined as Tony practically stuffed him in the elevator.

“Kidding. But it’s for your birthday. Which we’re totally still celebrating.”
“Wait!” Peter held a hand to the elevator’s closing door. “Just so you know, you’re proposing at my party, OK?”

“What?!”

“Bye Dad! Good luck!”

That little shit.

(Keeners’ New Apartment, Queens, New York City)

“Not to rain on your party, Harley, but does Tony even know?”

“I’ve seen promposals planned with way more time than this.”

“I don’t wanna be that girl, but…”

“Yeah, this is… pushing it a little bit too much.”

Harley let out a big sigh. “Look, he’s ready, okay? And if we keep pushing the date back, he’s just gonna get more nervous and second guess everything.”

Happy, always the cool dude, studied him carefully, looking for a trace of uncertainty. The man must’ve find none, because he just nodded and slid Tony’s ring to the coffee table. “Well, this kid’s brand of crazy always seemed to work in the past. I’m down.”

“See? This is why you’re my favorite.”

“Pep’s your favorite, Kid. Stop sucking up.”
Rhodey eyed the ring with rapidly widening eyes. “Holy shit. Isn’t that his mom’s? I thought it was buried with her!”

“Nah, he had it custom-made. Sappy, I know.”

“That might just be the cutest thing I’ve ever heard,” Trace said. “Should I be concerned that you remember his mom’s engagement ring, General?”

“I remember the diamond’s shape. Say what you want about Howard Stark, but if a man cut a diamond himself for your ring, that’s dedication.” Rhodey paused, and his face darkened. “Too bad he didn’t have the same dedication to his own son.”

Everyone in the room fell silent, each with their own reaction. Happy eyed the ring with a mixture of melancholy and bitter smile. Rhodey closed his eyes and breathed slowly, as if trying not to curse out loud. Vision looked a little lost, like he was struggling to reconcile the idea of a parent not loving their child with the image of harmonious, if a little unconventional, family that the synthetic being had been a part of. Leo was staring at his hands, clenched so tight the knuckles turned white. On his side, Naomi rubbed his arm soothingly.

Tracy was facing away to where her brother and Hailey was, obliviously, playing, but what little of her face that Harley could see was suspiciously red and watery. “At least he’s taking his past back,” she said after a while. “He’s not letting it control him. That’s the best case scenario, I think.”

“You’re right,” Rhodey answered. “Tony’s gonna be a better husband than he ever was.” He looked at Harley, eyes bright with pride. “He’s already a better father after all.”

“Well,” Naomi said, voice uncharacteristically soft, “what can we do to help?”

Harley’s grin widened. These really are all good people. Tony’s in good company this time around.

“Alright, so…”

(New Avengers Facility, Upstate New York)
Pepper walked into the main hall, fully expecting it to be decorated in a way only superheroes could pull off. When she saw that the room was not only bare bone, but deserted as well, she frowned in confusion. She was sure that Tony told her the party was going to be in the compound instead of the tower like he originally planned. To clear the air from Rogers’ stench and all.

“F.R.I.D.A.Y.? where’s everyone?” she asked.

“Down in the lab, Ma’am. I believe Boss is waiting for you to reveal Peter’s birthday present. You, and I’m quoting, “have at least 12% credit on the idea.””

Laughing softly to herself, she stepped into the open elevator. Tony had wanted to outright buy Peter a new car, which she had vetoed immediately. Even as close as Peter and Tony was, the boy still had the reservation about receiving expensive gifts, even if said gift wouldn’t even make a dent in Tony’s pocket.

Tony’s next idea was a little more sedate: A learner’s permit, or at a promise to help Peter get said permit and drive the car that followed the permit. It was maybe one of Tony’s brightest ideas. A present that costed next to nothing, but resulted in a father-son bonding time that Peter craved more than any physical gift that Tony could buy.

Of course, that was before the man was thrown out of the loop so hard because of a misunderstanding gone wrong.

To be fair, none of them, safe for Happy, knew for sure about Peter’s actual age. When Peter introduced himself as 15, nobody was expecting the “I’m almost 15, but what’s a few months, right?” kind of approach would backfire and hit Tony in his daddy-issues later. Tony’s regress was so quick and unexpected, but thankfully the man called her a few hours later and explained the whole deal with Howard and his damned birthday card.

Pepper sighed. The more she heard about Tony’s father, the more she became thankful that Tony got his personality - the real one, not the asshole-billionaire facade - from his mom instead. The real Tony was loving, selfless, fiercely protective - a perfect image of how Tony always described Maria Stark.

A stab of melancholy struck her as she realized that she would never know if Tony’s mom would actually approve of her relationship with “bambino.””
But the elevator’s door dinged cheerfully, and opened to reveal a strange view. The lab was lavishly decorated with strings on strings of red and blue ribbons, balloons, and small spider-shaped drones that occasionally squirted silly strings and confetti from above. The lab desks was clear for the first time in forever, and instead of scientific equipment and metallic knick-knack, mountains of chips and sweets and sandwiches piled on them, enough to feed more than just 2 people in the room: Tony and Peter.

Weird.

“Happy birthday, Peter,” she said anyway, schooling her face into a neutral smile to hide her confusion.

“Thanks, Pepper!” the boy answered cheerfully, blissfully unaware of her questioning gaze to the man beside him. Conveniently so, if she had to say.

Tony ignored her unspoken question and clapped Peter’s shoulder instead. “Well, since the 12% -”

Pepper cleared her throat.

“Fine. The sole holder of the copyright of your present is here, can we open the mystery box already?” True to his word, Peter’s gift was “wrapped” in a big box, standing in the middle of the room, wrapped in baby blue wrapper with “it’s a spider!” printed all over it.

Peter eagerly unwrapped it, obviously trusting her choice to not be over the top. But when the boy opened the box to reveal a bunch of metal parts, he blinked confusedly.

“Uh… thank you?”

Tony laughed, loud and warm. “Take the biggest piece out, Kid,” he directed.

Peter dug out a piece of metal that Pepper believed was called an engine block, turning it around to check it until an emblazoned letters caught his attention.
The boy’s eyes went wide, and Pepper swore she could hear a boyish gasp from somewhere behind her.

“Is… is this what I think it is?” Peter stuttered, holding the spare part like it was some sort of holy artifact.

Tony’s eyes crinkled at the corner with his smile. “Your very own DIY car kit? Yup.”

Peter gaped at him. “I - I don’t know anything about car building though….”

Tony rolled his eyes at his son’s shocked face. “What am I? Chopped liver? Greatest Engineer alive, Kid. I’m pretty sure I can build a car just fine.”

“You’ve made one before?!”

“Nope. This is my Mark 1.” Tony grinned at Peter’s awestruck reaction. “Well, your Mark 1. We’re gonna have so much fun, Kid.”

Peter flung himself at Tony, mumble of gratitude muffled by his father’s suit.

Another shuffling noise from her back, and this time Pepper did turn around in suspicion. It sounded distinctly like someone getting their mouth muffled.

“Okay, I’ll bite. Where’s everyone?” she asked after the noise suspiciously disappeared.

Peter looked pointedly at Tony, and, after putting the engine block back into the box with great care and adoration, shuffled backward silently.

“Tony?”
“Um…”

Tony floundered, opening and closing his mouth silently. A beep interrupted them, and they both stared at Peter, now holding a video recorder.

“Uh… don’t mind me?” he tried.

Someone slapped their forehead at the corner of the room, and Pepper knew that it wasn’t just her imagination.

“Okay, is this the part where you…”

“CodewhiteCrowleydoitnow!” Tony blurted out in a breath.

Silence.

“Wha… - ”

Suddenly all decorations vanished, leaving the room empty for a split second. Electric blue sheen glided over the surface, and she recognized it as Tracy’s power. The light dimmed, Floating orbs of light danced around them, subtle scent of rose and jasmine wafted through the air, and in the distance, she heard a music box tingling the love theme from the Godfather.

Despite everything, she still gasped in surprise.

Shadowy figures moved around her, and she recognized Rhodey’s whirring braces just as well as the new Avengers, Leonardo and Naomi’s unfamiliar frames. Her pencil skirt and blazer glowed blue, and it changed into the dress she wore on her first date with Tony - complete with the ketchup stain on the waist fold that only Happy knew about, because he was the one who had bought the instant stain remover stick that only made it worse.

Whirring noise on her left notified her of Rhodey’s arrival. She turned, only to see a chair, a perfect
recreation of the one from the restaurant, had already been set for her. Tentatively, she sat down, and immediately, Leonardo and Naomi leaped into action, setting a dining table, complete with a flower bouquet that Naomi arranged on the spot. All around, tables popped into existence, and the room slowly transformed into the beautiful Italian restaurant they never went back to because it was destroyed during the Chitauri Invasion. Vision glided down gracefully, and set down one final flower to Naomi’s arrangement. A lone rose, red and dewy.

The music morphed into a distinctly 2008 love song playlist, and one by one their friends and family filled the tables around her, pointedly ignoring her wet eyes. Rhodey, Happy, Hannah and May sat the closest. On her left, the Vision, Tracy, Leonardo, Naomi, and even Hope van Dyne huddled close, throwing encouraging smile at her. Peter, Harley, Hailey and Cassidy was nowhere to be seen, but excited noises from the ceiling told her that they were all watching, suspending upside down on Peter’s web, probably with recording devices on hand.

She saw Tracy’s eyes glow blue once more, and the glowing orbs shifted to the chair in front of her. Tony, clad in his atrocious, pre-avengers red and gold suit and tie, appeared out of the darkness like a mirage. The man was smiling, nervous but genuine and determined.

She never saw a more beautiful sight.

“Hi Peps,” he said, voice tight with emotion.

“Hi Tony,” she answered, voice tight with even more emotion.

“Sorry, I know you hate this suit. For the sake of immersion, though….”

“I don’t remember the bouquet.”

“Ah, yeah…. Naomi said we should use appropriate flowers for the occasion.”

“The occasion?”

Tony gulped, but his eyes never left hers. “You know what I used B.A.R.F. for, right?”
“Memory modification, right? Guilt and trauma reconciliation?”

He nodded. “That’s the closest thing I could get to changing the past.”

Pepper looked around her, recognizing the parallel. “Since you still wear that horrendous suit I guess you don’t really regret that?”

“It compliments my eyes.”

“It really doesn’t.”

“But yes, that’s not what I want to change from our first date.”

Pepper inclined her head, but said nothing.

Tony took a deep breath, reached into his suit’s pocket and took something out, but hiding it in his palm. “I was late to the dinner,” he said.

“You were.”

“Because I went somewhere first.”

“I gathered.”

“Do you know why Happy took so long to buy you that totally useless detergent stick?”

Pepper felt her eyes began to mist with tears again. “I think I do.”

Tony offered her his still-closed hand. Slowly he opened it, and revealed a beautiful ring that she just knew match her finger perfectly. “The jeweler didn’t have time to finish the custom box, but my hands were shaking too much to stuff it into my own pocket. It’s been in Happy’s since then.”
Pepper knew that she was full-on crying now, but she didn’t care.

“Even then I knew that you were it for me, Pep. I knew that it’s either you or no one at all,” Tony said, voice shaking, but unflinching. “I wasn’t ready, though. That’s why I didn’t propose.”

“Not because it’s bad move to propose on first date?” she teased, even when her voice shook just as much as Tony’s.

“Yeah, that too,” he agreed, eyes glittering under the illusory lighting. “I wasn’t ready then. I wasn’t good enough for you. But hell if I regretted not doing it every time death brushed past me. Never again, Pep. I’m ready now. I’m ready to work my ass off to deserve you for the rest of my life. As your husband.” Tony stood, walked to her side, and instinctively, she stood in front of him too. Tony smiled and went down on his knee, holding the ring hopefully. “Pepper Potts, I’ve never loved anyone the way I love you. You make me strong, you make me kind, you make me better. I just want to be the same for you, if you’ll give me the chance. Will you marry me, Pep?”

“Yes.”

The room erupted in cheers, spider drones returned and showered them all in a storm of confetti. But all her attention was directed at how Tony carefully slipped the ring into her finger, and gently kissed it. He looked up, grinning like she just gave him the best present in the world instead of the other way around. She dragged him up and kissed him, ignoring the wolf whistle and children scream that threatened to bring the building down.

“Party time!” Harley shouted from the ceiling, and Tracy’s illusion gave way to one final decor change.

* * * * *

She went around the room in a daze, thanking each and everyone with Tony on his side, still grinning. She distantly registered Rhodey’s and Happy’s fierce hugs, as well as Hannah’s and May’s tearful ones. Hope van Dyne, Vision, Naomi and Leonardo opted for a more professional, but no less warm, handshake. Tracy grasped her hands tightly, mischievous smile bellied by her twinkling eyes. The kids’ embrace was messy and allover the place, and Pepper couldn’t help but imagining her own child, her first and Tony’s fourth, joining this hug in an immediate future.
“Can we go back to Peter’s new car, though?” Harley asked excitedly after he extracted himself.

“My almost-a-car, you mean?”

“We’re totally putting spider web decal on it!”

Hailey scrunched her face at that. “Ew! No! Do kittens!”

“Oh! Puppies!” Cassidy joined in excitedly.

Peter just smiled and shook his head, “How about none of the above? Maybe I want a black car with… flames and stuff.”

Harley snorted. “You’re not that cool.”

“Hey!”

They bickered for a while, unaware of the few amused glances the party-goers threw their way. Pepper, for her part, simply stepped back, her fiance in tow, and watched as the scene unfolded in front of them.

This is nice.

“I’m really sorry to interrupt, but…” F.R.I.D.A.Y. called timidly from the speaker. “Boss? It’s an emergency.”

Jinxed it.

“Didn’t I tell the Council that the Avengers are having a break?”

“You did… but it seemed like the situation in Hong Kong is critical.”
“Wait, hold on. What situation??”

“It appears that the… minor magical disturbances in London and Bleecker Street are linked to this attack. Two groups of these magicians are fighting against each other in the middle of Hong Kong.”

“Okay? Didn’t China have their own super secret boy band?”

“They have their hands full with citizen protection, Boss.”

Tony and the other Avengers stood up, looking grim but battle-ready. “I need visual,” Tony said.

A holoscreen popped up, showing a scene of mass panic in a crowded street in Hong Kong from a bird’s eye view of a drone. A group of people in red and orange uniform were scrambling all around, trying to block off stray attacks while at the same time corralling the panicking citizens. But one group of the magicians, the attacker, seemed to be inclined towards total destruction, and they were actively attacking both the defending group and the bystanders alike.

They were fighting an impossible battle.

“The Council?”

“Chinese government seemed hesitant to call for help, Boss.”

Tony let out some very creatively disguised curse words. “Emergency protocol is in effect! Who’s their first contact?”

“AERA. But their rank is spread too thin. Half of them are busy with the rogues, the other is still in covert mission in Madripoor.”

“PIERA?”

“Circumventing a volcanic eruption in the Pacific.”
“Damn it, call someone! People’s going to start dying before - ”

Suddenly, a man made a slashing gesture towards one of the last few standing defenders. They all flew backward, and slammed into the building behind them. The man made another set of hand gestures, shouting maniacally about world without time and immortality. The building tumbled and crumbled in a smoke of dust.

Gasps filled the room as a portal suddenly opened in Hong Kong air, bigger and more menacing than the one that once filled New York’s sky. Another explosion, this time on the streets of Hong Kong, and bodies went flying everywhere.

“Fuck it. This is Level 10 emergency. Avengers, Assemble!” Tony yelled.

Armors and wings barged into the lab, ready for their users to don them. Hope opened a briefcase hurriedly, and took out a small doll that grew into a full-sized mannequin of her Wasp suit. Tracy rushed into the corner of the room and put on a leather jacket and a belt full of daggers.

Pepper just stood there, stunned.

She watched helplessly as her friends and family prepared for war, just minutes after her proposal. She stared back at the screen, frowning when yet another portal, much smaller and circular in shape, opened and spat out two men into the ruins.

She gasped when she recognized one of them. “Dr. Strange?!”

Tony whipped his head around. “Who??” His mouth fell open when he saw the unmistakably goatee of the former surgeon. “Holy shit, that’s him.”

“F.R.I.D.A.Y., enhanced visual. Read their lips,” Rhodey commanded.

“The dark dimension - Dormammu is coming. It’s too late, nothing can stop him.”

“Not necessarily,” the Doctor said after a beat.

The caped man made a strange gesture, and a green light lit up from an artifact in his chest.

“No.” the attackers’ leader whispered, leaping to action, but But Doctor Strange pushed his hand forward, a mandala glowing green in front of his palm.

And then multiple things happened at once.

Vision suddenly yelled, “No!” and flew into the middle of the room. The stone in his forehead glowed bright yellow, and a bubble of the same color spread outward from it. Pepper yelped in alarm, reaching for Tony who already made the same motion, but suddenly, she felt like she was moving through molasses. Her movement was slow, like she was in a movie’s over-dramatized CGI. Tony’s eyes went wide in alarm, but he was obviously caught in the same position as her.

It was as if the very time itself was stopping.

But Vision’s bubble of protection kept growing and growing, and after a while, she too was enveloped in it. The time started to move again.

“What… what was that?” Tracy asked with a trembling voice.

“F.R.I.D.A.Y.?” Peter asked, still hovering protectively in front of the younger audiences.

“Her core is too far away. I cannot reach it from here,” Vision said with an obvious strain in his voice.

“What is this, Vision? What’s happening?”

The android turned his gaze toward her, but she knew instinctively that at that time, it was more than just Vision that was talking. “Brother awakens,” he said. “Five revealed, one yet left to
slumber. The end game approaches.”

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to call the chapter "Party Crashing Time Lord" but realized that it's probably gonna spoil the cliffy.

Oh well.

C'ya!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!