Iron Man: Director of S.W.O.R.D.

by Pookaseraph

Summary

In the wake of the events of Captain America: The Winter Soldier, the Avengers need to pick up the pieces, and figure out where to go from here. Tony had a plan, at least he thought he had a plan, but Steve Rogers seems to have blown most of those out of the water.

Spoilers for CA:TWS, lots of them.

Summary is a little vague to avoid spoiling, but it's a ploty, post CA:TWS 'what do we do now' fic.

Notes

Special thanks, as always, to Regann and E. This fic owes a great debt to Volume 4 of Iron Man, one of my favorites, especially the Iron Man: DOS Annual. Please enjoy. This fic is COMPLETE, I am just editing at this point.
Chapter 1

Tony glanced over the dozen screens in front of him again, trying to make heads or tails of the serious shit that seemed to be going down in Washington. Fury was dead, Camp Lehigh had been destroyed, and there were three helicarriers launching behind - but also ahead - of schedule based on Tony's delivery times. Not for the first time, he considered pulling out the suit and flying down there, but there was so much more he could do here... maybe. He could see the suit, standing silent and waiting in the corner; he kept telling himself he didn't need it, but he was starting to doubt it.

"Sir, we have a massive bandwidth usage spike on the private Avengers servers," JARVIS said, and Tony spun to where JARVIS was pulling up the data. He'd put the server in place to provide a secure - or as secure as possible - line between all of the Avengers if it was ever needed. Natasha's account was dropping what must have been terabytes of information onto the server.

"Please tell me she's streaming porn," Tony answered, but he doubted that was it, and he grabbed a file at random: S.H.I.E.L.D. shipping manifests, classified Level 3. Another proved to be an Agent duty roster, classified Level 6. "J..." There were millions of documents here: scanned memos, audio and video files... "Data mine this, ASAP. What the hell is Natasha thinking...?"

Tony pulled up a dozen more documents, each one seemingly random with little connection between them, before JARVIS had his answer. "Based on some preliminary analysis, it appears that what Agent Romanov was thinking was: S.H.I.E.L.D. has been infiltrated by Hydra, since its inception, at the highest levels. Budgetary allocations in the trillions, operations with long-reaching effects to sow discord, assassinations, regime collapse - all designed to benefit Hydra."

"So what you're saying is I graduated from selling weapons to terrorists to selling advanced propulsion systems to Nazis." Pepper would say that was his tendency to make things 'all about him' and she was right, but Tony was having a hard time processing the fact that the helicarriers launching out of Washington right this second had StarkTech and might very well be used to sow war and terror. "J, tweet something pithy and anonymous, string together a paper trail and get it trending."

"Might I suggest #paperclipd?"

Tony just waved his hand in the usual 'you know best, JARVIS' way. "And while you're at it, what the hell did Natasha just dump out there about me?"

Yet another screen filled with information: his Avengers psychological profile, details about the palladium poisoning, hundreds of hours of media profiling, dozens of hours of found footage of his time in Afghanistan, and… rudimentary attempts to backwards engineer his suits. "Fuck."

He'd known Ten Rings had had him under surveillance, but the idea that S.H.I.E.L.D. had eventually recovered hours of footage of him there left his skin crawling, to say nothing of the data about his suits.

"Sir, there is a more pressing issue." JARVIS brought up over two hundred faces. "These are deep cover S.H.I.E.L.D. agents whose cover has just been compromised. Some are without any outside communication and will not be aware of their compromised status."

"Prioritize them," Tony answered, voice hard. Moscow, Kabul, Congo... S.H.I.E.L.D. had feelers everywhere, and some of them were going to be a bitch to extract. "Where are my international Stark Industries production sites?"
JARVIS answered with several dots glowing on the screen.

"Embassies?"

More flared to life.

Some of them would be almost easy.

He used the console to dial the first number. "Better tell Pepper I won't be home for dinner."

"I imagine she already knows, Sir," JARVIS answered. "As a reminder, you and Ms. Potts have been broken up for several months."

Tony ignored the response.

"Reeves," Tony said before the woman had a chance to even answer the phone beyond 'go'.
"Consider yourself burned, your cover is compromised. Code Black. Authorization Code: HS-62159, Get out before local intelligence puts the pieces together. Your extraction point is a Stark Industries production facility sixteen clicks north of your current station. Good luck."

"Did you really just use your father's authorization code, Sir?"

"They left it in there. It's not my fault." But Tony's mouth hardened even further, pushing away things he didn't want to think about right now. "Fire up Vision, and Iron Man. We have a lot of work to do, and not a lot of time."

That was about the time three helicarriers started shooting at each other over the Potomac River.

"And... ah... see if you can allocate some resources to that... Whatever 'that' is."

"Naturally."

Tony tried to put it out of his mind, he had more on his plate than Washington now.

* 

One hundred eighty six out of two hundred and one was... well it could have been better. Tony had stripped out of the Iron Man uniform, now clad only in the tight black undersuit that interfaced him with the suit itself. Changing could wait, this was more important. He surveyed the shell-shocked Agents who had taken up temporary residence in the Tower after their various extractions from overseas.

"S.H.I.E.L.D. has now been officially disbanded," Tony said, in case there was any doubt. "Director Fury is dead, the World Security Council is dead, all S.H.I.E.L.D. active case files are burned and out in the open. The dirty laundry has been hung up for the world to see. You need a good job reference, leave your name with Vision on the way out. Some of you will no doubt be called before Senate subcommittees or the Department of Defense to discuss who knew what, when. Stark legal can advise you if you request it."

JARVIS, or 'Vision' as he was called when he was controlling the specially tooled suit Tony had made for him, stood at the back of the room; a vision in green, red, and gold that almost worked, Tony's eyes and ears to the world when he was stuck inside.

Tony raked his fingers through his hair, and turned back to his screens. Vision joined him several minutes later.
"Over one hundred of them requested a job," Vision said. "They are under the impression that your speedy rescue suggests you will be looking to fill the power vacuum left by the collapse of S.H.I.E.L.D."

"Privatizing world peace, huh?" Tony answered. "Been there, done that, been to the other side of the known universe. Penny for your thoughts?"

"You bill your own thoughts at a considerably higher compensation rate," Vision answered, but he slid next to Tony, leaning his own back against the console. "I believe it may be necessary. The Avengers are now unfunded, intelligence resources are gutted. There are lessons to be learned with the failure of S.H.I.E.L.D., but the dangers are real."

"And leaving the vacuum plays right into Hydra's hands. 'The future we deserve'." Tony clapped his hands together, and then rubbed them. "Alright, back to basics, S.S.R... Stark's Sexy Reservists..."

"That name is--" Vision began.

Tony waved it off. "Later."

The next few days were hell. JARVIS continued to data mine the S.H.I.E.L.D. reserves, socking away useful information for later use, cataloging sites for later recon, looking for facilities that needed to be shut down or relocated. Tony glanced over the projects, threw most of them under Banner to have the man assess their value and their potential harm. Apparently accidentally turning yourself into a giant green rage monster gave you a keen insight into the value of scientific ethics.

Steve Rogers had just gotten out of intensive care at Andrews AFB after surviving several bullets to the back and stomach, near drowning, and a variety of other injuries. Tony ignored that part, he had other things to worry about.

The Department of Defense hearings were just as much of a bloodbath as Tony always remembered, too many questions, not enough facts, and all the accusations in the world. Natasha probably handled it better than Tony ever had, but, then again, sassing and walking out was his specialty and he'd mastered it before she was even born.

"Ms. Potts is on the line," JARVIS reminded him. Tony ignored it.

"Not now, Dear, revenue streams," Tony may or may not have been continuing to cover the trail of his embezzled money from secret S.H.I.E.L.D. accounts... there were massive amounts of black bag money sitting around for the taking. It wasn't his fault no one else had capitalized on the opportunity. "And people think what I did was criminal," he said, under his breath. "Let's get us some corporations set up, buy me some nice ones, J."

"Of course, Sir. The decommissioned New Jersey manufacturing yards have been re-purposed for training yards, Floors 80-90 are now dedicated to R&D under the auspices of Dr. Banner. The Security Office has filed three complaints about the increased workload for the last three days as they process security clearances for new personnel."

"Whine whine whine. I haven't slept in four days," Tony answered. "What's the longest a human body can go without sleep? You always remind me of this."

"You should have slept yesterday, Sir. And the day before. Additionally the day before."

"Yes, mother." Tony ignored JARVIS as well.

"Agent Romanov is in the lobby requesting to meet with you."
"Is she armed?" Tony asked, more out of curiosity than because he thought she wouldn't be.

"Of course, Sir."

"Let her up. Keep data mining targets. Figure out who's training our first recruits. And who--" JARVIS flashed up another image... Maria Hill, inside his HR department, sitting for a preliminary polygraph as required, by Tony, for all new personnel. "Get her up here when she passes, JARVIS."

Natasha entered his office, more his interconnected series of a thousand panels all processing every single different permutation of the data he could manage. "Hey, Stark..." She said, voice sing-songy and slightly teasing.

"Here to assassinate me?" He asked, only half teasing. She didn't answer. "Nice work," he said, finally. "But you did realize you don't actually upload things 'to the internet' as though that actually lets people see it, know where it is, and process it, right?"

"Thanks for the help in that," she answered. "The hashtag was inspired."

"Blame JARVIS." Tony tapped a few more buttons, mindless, just trying to sort out all of the information cascading through his systems. "Seriously, have a world to sort out, what do you want?"

"A job." With no preamble she took another step forward. "Turns out I don't really know who I am when it's all peeled away... my lies have lies, and it's all gone, and there's no one I can find under it all."

"So you come to the self-obsessed narcissist who's arrogant enough to think he's going to privatize world peace less than a week after the biggest spy organization explodes? Blind leading the blind, Widow. Still..." He glanced back at his screens. "We had 201 deep covers blown last week, Vision and I extracted 186. Thirteen died, two are unaccounted for, one of them is this chucklehead."

Barton's picture came up on screen. "He's in Madripoor, you're going in, basically no cover, but I do own a casino there, so... as my personal assistant, no one will punch you in your face." He handed her back her passport, her one from her time as Natalie Rushman at Stark Industries not so long ago. "They'll just stab you in the back. There's a jet in Flushing Meadows, it will be ready to leave by the time you arrive."

"Thanks, Stark," Natasha answered.

"One question, before you go."

"Just one?"

"I've tagged Barton, you, I know where Banner and Thor are. Where'd Rogers run off to?"

"Chasing his past," Natasha answered, and then shrugged. "Winter Soldier, James Buchanan Barnes... one and the same."

Tony stood for a moment, allowing himself surprise for probably for the first time in a week. Tony knew about Bucky, everyone did; he had a whole wall in the Cap exhibit down at the Air and Space museum. If Steve had that opportunity to connect to his past... well, Tony could understand that more than anything. "He alright?"

"He's got a great wingman."

Tony snorted. "If you see the bird brain tell him another Falcon suit's in the works for him, just stop
by the big tower in Manhattan with the bright, shiny A on it."

Steve knew, objectively, that the world hadn't gotten any bigger, physically, but there were so many more people, so many more ways to hide, and so many more ways to stay lost that he didn't really have any clue where to start.

"Anything?" He asked Sam as the two of them sat in an internet cafe in Washington the day after Fury's funeral.

"You just exploded the entire US military intelligence complex and you're hoping I can google one lost soldier?" Sam answered, smiling, but with a sort of 'you're hopeless, Steve' look on his face as well. "What about you? You know him better than anyone, and he knew you, he knows you. There was enough surveillance to prove he was the one who pulled you up onto Roosevelt Island. What's going on in his head?"

Steve wished he knew.

"Bucky's direct," Steve answered, finally. "Focused. Front line, sniping, anything between, he knew how to get the job done." He'd saved Steve's life more than once, and not just on the battlefield. "He's confused, though. He knew me, but he didn't know me, not all the way."

"Just enough to know he had to save Steve Rogers?" Sam asked. "I know what that's like. So he's confused, probably half out of his mind, brainwashed... ah..." Sam looked away, uncomfortable. "He's going to have a hard time, Steve. What you heard in group doesn't even begin to cover what it's like to be held like that, to be remade that hard... and that's just human nature, not even whatever science Hydra could use on him."

"I know." Steve did, he wasn't a fool. "But there's enough in there to start. That's what matters." That was the only thing that mattered. When Steve needed him most, Bucky was there, and Steve had already failed Bucky once, he wouldn't fail him again.

Sam's phone beeped; Steve glanced up at it, so used to having his own phone report and having it be Natasha with a new mission, but there would be no phone messages and no new missions, not without S.H.I.E.L.D. Steve wasn't quite sure what to do with himself now, he had nothing but Bucky again... not quite true, he decided, as Sam glanced over to him, but that just meant the road might be a little easier.

"I just got a text message..."

"From who?" Steve asked.

"Restricted number... but it said we should go to the Air and Space Museum, Security Office... and that you should apologize for battering priceless historical artifacts... and damaging the suit, too..." Sam laughed. "Natasha?"

"Maybe." Steve stood and left a tip for the bus boys. "Come on."

They metroed into the city and stepped out onto the Mall; Steve slid his sunglasses back on. Little bits of wreckage still pock ed the spotty grass, a scrap here and there. There were thousands of them all over the place, and more on eBay. The fires on the Triskelion were long since extinguished, but every once and a while something sparked and a little half-hearted 'boom' came from the direction of the river.
"Who's supervising the clean up?" Steve asked, realizing he'd missed a huge chunk of the politics of what he'd done. He hated politics.

"Stark," Sam answered. "Remote controlled search and rescue vehicles are a major part of the SI arsenal Post-Diversification."

Steve had been in the government long enough to hear the capitalization that Sam had put on the words. After Afghanistan, then...

"Not sure how I feel about Stark taking the reins there," Steve admitted.

"He's your team mate."

He was, but Steve had just seen how much power could corrupt those in power, and Stark was... Steve didn't know him well enough to judge. "I don't like how quickly he's stepped in to fill the void left by Pierce."

"And Fury," Sam added.

"Exactly."

Sam didn't have anything to say to that, but the two of them had gotten to the Museum and the two of them slid inside. They headed towards the front desk, and when they got there, Steve leaned against the desk. He gave the receptionist his best cheerful smile.


The woman seemed to recognize him a moment later, glancing over to the huge posters with Steve's face on them, and then back to him. "I'll... call... could you sign this for my son?"

Steve scribbled a signature down across the program for the exhibit, before he beat a hasty retreat in the direction Sam dragged him.

"Can you even turn that off?" Sam asked. "Does it just... go? Is it in your pores?"

"What?" Still, Steve stood in front of the office only to have a very old, very distressed looking man answer the door, along with a few younger security staff.

"Oh my word."

"Sorry for borrowing your exhibit," Steve said, giving his best USO grin. "Ahh... National Security?"

Behind him, Sam snorted.

One of the younger men, towards the back, stepped up and offered a hand. "Sir. Well, thankfully the owner won't be filing a claim against our insurance for it, assuming it is returned..." Steve heard the undertone of 'please return it, Captain, Sir'. "So, no harm done."

"Have there been any other problems with the exhibit?" Steve asked, curious, now, why he'd been sent here at all.

"No, Sir. The uniform has been replaced with a replica prototype, and has continued to operate."

Steve frowned, again, and glanced at Sam. "Can I see the security tapes?"
The two of them ended up left alone in the feed viewing room, Sam taking the console and shaking his head. "You know you could steal candy from babies with that smile."

Steve glowered at the back of his head. After an hour, Steve was bored, even as they watched it on sixteen times speed - or, more accurately, Steve watched, Sam's eyes glazed over - after two, he was beginning to think this was a waste of time. But then---

"Wait."

Sam started, and then hit the stop button.

"Go back."

Sam did, and then back some more.

"There." He tapped the image of a man, standing in front of the Bucky part of the exhibition. He then tried to pinch-expand it, the way Natasha had taught him. When that didn't work, he tapped it again. "Can you make it bigger."

"This isn't CSI," Sam groused.

Steve looked at it again, and then again, trying to decide if he was reading what he wanted into it, if the man with the baseball cap was who his heart was telling him he was. Why else would the mysterious texter tell him to come here... who else could it be, but Bucky? He'd stood there for at least two hours, staring, looking at the short, repeating reel of him and Bucky during the war, reading the short biography on the wall, listening to the reports about Bucky's own death, watching the little 10 minute documentary about Steve and his life... and then he went back to the front and did it all over again.

"When..." Steve heard his voice crack, and he cleared his throat. "When was this?"

"Yesterday," Sam answered, before he put a hand on Steve's shoulder. "I'm going to see if they can tell us more about who might have bought the ticket to the Cap exhibit."

"Should have been free," Steve groused, under his breath.

"Exhibitions cost money. Museum's gotta pay the bills somehow, you know how underfunded these... don't even get me started." Sam levered himself up. "Take all the time you need."

Steve carefully reached out and took the little toggle switch that Sam had been operating, slowing it down to regular speed, watching the lost way the man circled through the exhibit, over and over, looking at the words about Bucky as though he could burn them into his mind, watching the video on repeat with Steve laughing, the two of them so happy...

"That's you, Buck. Come on." He could tell the man was still lost, though, that it wasn't fully connected. Steve knew that feeling, knew it from when he'd first looked at his new body and known it was him but not him... "Come on."

No spark of revelation came, though. Bucky stayed until the end of the exhibit; whenever he was ushered out to make room for more people, he was back not ten minutes later with a new ticket. Steve felt the beginnings of tears prickle his eyes, as he covered his mouth, watching, watching...

"Come on," he said, in silent prayer. "You can do it. I'm here with you."

Sam came back, maybe an hour later. "Reginald Thames, Reggie, to his friends." Sam put the list in front of him, the name highlighted six times. "He visited the exhibit six times yesterday."
"Who is he?"

"S.H.I.E.L.D. Agent, Security, died on the helicarrier, Hydra goon. About half his body was found washed up on Roosevelt Island about a quarter mile from where you were found."

"Can you... ah... back... trace his credit card? Find out where else he's been."

"Still not CSI," Sam answered. "We'll see what we can do with the contacts you still have."

Steve wanted to stay, wanted to keep hoping that Bucky would somehow see, that he would look at his face and recognition would push through, but this lead was even hotter than the Air and Space one, time was of the essence, and they needed to move.

"Security's making us a copy of the day's tapes," Sam assured him, as they walked out together into the sun.

*

"Romanov."

"Natasha?" Steve asked into the phone, knowing it was her, but still needing to be polite. "Do you know how to back trace a credit card? We need to find out anywhere it's been used the last week or so."

"I'm not actually a computer hacker. You know that, right? All the tools we used to hunt down Zola were using already designed S.H.I.E.L.D. utilities, on servers that are now down. You'll need to find someone with actual law enforcement ties if you want to do that, now. You're basically a well-respected vigilante."

Something that sounded like music from a club continued on in the background. "What's that music?"

"I'm on assignment!" Natasha shouted back.

"From who?!"

"Look," Natasha continued to shout. "Call Stark."

Steve wasn't quite able to contain his snort, but apparently Natasha didn't even hear it.

"Trust me!"

After everything, he really did have to, but as he hung up and stared at the phone he realized one small problem.

"Do you know Tony Stark's phone number?"

"Really?" Sam sighed. "Did he give you an email address? Anything?" Sam tapped on his tablet for a moment. "Here's the New York branch's main line, but I'm not sure how long it'll take you to get to Stark like that."

None the less, Steve dialed. It took two minutes to even get to the operator.

"Stark Industries, how may I direct your call."

"Tony Stark," Steve said, knowing what was coming.
"I'll forward you to media relations."

"This is Steve Rogers. Please, I need to speak to him." He waited for about two minutes, hoping he wouldn’t just get hung up on.

"I've been presented with a challenge question for you to prove your identity," the receptionist said, when she returned to the line. "Which is better: Star Wars or Star Trek?"

"Did he seriously...? Look, Star Wars is sweet, I don't care if he doesn't like that actress who looks like Thor's girlfriend, it's a good story, and..."

"One moment. I'll redirect you."

"Cap!" Stark's voice came through the phone, and he pulled it away from his ear, moving it to speaker while he and Sam sat together on the Mall. "A little spider said I might expect you. What do you need, Spangles?"

"I need to run a credit card."

"I thought you had the future all sorted out, swipe plastic, receive goods."

"A credit trace!" Sam corrected, next to Steve, and he rolled his own eyes, making Steve feel a little better.

"Birdman? Is that you?" Stark didn't wait for an answer. "Look, I figured you'd be more tech savvy, so I set you and Rogers up with a pair of accounts on the Avengers back servers. You'll have email, access to our criminal databases, all that jazz. Your username is swilson at sword dot gov, password 'pajamas number four life with a y'. I've pushed the app to your tablet and upgraded your data package. Four gigs, seriously? How are you going to stream Breaking Bad like that?"

Sam pulled out his tablet and punched the app there, a sword insignia crossed over a shield. Steve felt even more uncomfortable.

"What's 'Sword', Stark?"

"Oh just a little something I snapped up a few years ago."

"Sword dot gov, it's a government address."

"You're learning DNS, I'm so proud. And yes, I decided, in a proactive spate of planning, that I wasn't interested in continuing to leave the bulk of the national and international intelligence in the hands of a 'security council' whose first resort was nuking Manhattan, so I've been putting out a few feelers, writing a few billion lines of code, analyzing even more documents, and when Widow aired S.H.I.E.L.D.'s dirty laundry I decided it was time to step up."

"Sword?"

"Strategic Worldwide Organization and Response Department."

"That sounds an awful lot like what I just tore down, Stark."

"It's a dangerous world, Cap. We need to respond, but if you think I'm down with rampant and wanton destruction that endangers the lives of billions of civilians, then I'm afraid you're looking at me circa new millennium, not now. The future is now, we’ve just gotta make it better."

Steve didn't know if Stark knew how close the words hit to a lot of things he'd been hearing the last
few days, but it, surprisingly, did the trick. "Stark?"

"Yeah?"

"What's my password?"

"TheFreedomIsTooDamnHigh," Stark answered. "srogers, of course. Pushed the app to your phone, and set my private line as a contact. Come to Manhattan if you find your ghost."

His ghost. So... Stark knew what this was all about. He didn't know if Natasha had told him, or not, but... "Thanks, Stark."

"Tony."

The name didn’t work, not for Steve, not yet, but he supposed Bucky wasn't the only ghost he was carrying with him, and at least that one he needed to let go. "Tony. Thanks."

"He last used the card two hours ago," Sam said. "Bought six different train tickets out of Union Station."

"Do you think he knows we're following him?" Steve asked, hanging up on Tony before the man could add anything else, and make Steve regret thanking him.

"He definitely knows someone could." Sam looked down at the purchases. "He might not be trying to get away from you, maybe just his handlers. Pittsburgh, New York, Newark, Atlanta, Chicago, Richmond... Anything sound familiar?"

Steve shrugged. "New York, sure. A lot of those places have airports, right? International ones."

"He'd need a passport, and honestly if he's brainwashed and frozen between missions like Natasha's dossier says... he probably knows less about the modern world than you do."

"So he's lost..." Steve tried to push down the pain at that though. Bucky was out there, more lost and alone than Steve had ever been, because Steve wasn't right there for him, wasn't next to him, couldn't help him... "If he's trying to go home, New York. But he's killed people in Pittsburgh and Chicago recently... I don't know. If I chose wrong, I'll lose him again, he'll get a new credit card, we won't be able to track him."

"He'll steal one on the train, whichever one he takes," Sam agreed. "And the trains might be a diversion."

"Bucky was never much for diversions..." Steve answered. It was Steve who usually had to reel the man back in, reminding him that they could go around sometimes. "But does he even know what he'd be diverting us from? Or to? Let's go to New York. Stark's expecting us and that's where Bucky's from. If he's really trying to remember himself, us... me, that's where he'll go."

"Traffic's a mess," Sam said, glancing down at his phone map. "It's going to take us almost an hour to even get on 95 right now."

"And Bucky booked a commuter express... Do you think anyone would notice if we borrowed a quinjet?" Steve asked, feeling guilty for even asking.

"Do they even have quinjets anymore?"

They needed to at least check, even if the Triskelion was a smoking mess. Of course, as soon as they
got anywhere near it, a robot rolled up. "Area access restricted." It didn't look anything like Stark's other bots.

"We need to get in," Steve argued.

"Access restricted."

"It's a robot. It doesn't talk back," Sam said. "We'll have to call--"

"Ahh, I'm an authorized user," Steve said, frowning. "Ask... ah... Jarvis? Can you ask Jarvis?"

"My apologies, Captain Rogers," Jarvis's voice came out of one of the robots. "Bandwidth requirements make keeping them up to date on authorized users is a lost cause. What can I help you with?"

"Are there any quinjets I could... ah... 'borrow'?"

They had a quinjet in under a half hour.

"Who the hell is Jarvis?" Sam asked.

"Stark's adaptive AI," Steve answered, carefully entering his password in and changing it to something more suited. "He runs the Tower, Stark's data stuff, his suit, parts of his company..."

"That is some serious SkyNet level shit," Sam paused. "That's from a movie, where there's a robot from the future..."

"I do watch television, you know," Steve groused and pulled the phone closer. "They shouldn't have canceled the TV show."

* *

The quinjet touched down at Stark tower less than an hour after it had taken off from the Triskelion, and Steve and Sam disembarked and went inside, but Tony barely glanced up from his displays.

"Maria, could you introduce Wilson to his new wings and debrief them of anything I should be made aware?"

"On it." Hill raised an arm and directed the two of them farther in.

Tony was still standing at the console.

"Hey, guys," Tony said, holding out two cards as they walked by. "Here are your badges, 24 hour access to the building, biometrics are still being installed, place your left thumb to the picture to initialize them. I'm re-appropriating the quinjet, we have a situation brewing in Hong Kong."

Steve took the card, pressing his thumb there, before he realized what Tony had said. "Situation...? What--?"

But Tony waved his concern away. "You're on leave," Tony answered. "And you..." He glanced at Sam. "You don't even work here, why would I order you around? Nope, I have no idea what you're doing, get out of here, don't let Hill kick you on the way out, bye. Bring back two forms of ID so HR can fill out your I-9s later!"

"Stark... Tony, if there's an actual situation in Hong Kong..."
"I'll dispatch Vision, or go myself. I can hold down the fort for a few more days."

Steve tried to take Tony at his word, and he watched, silently, as Hill patted a backpack hung up on the wall. Sam nodded, and tugged it over his shoulders, giving it a pleasant little jostle. "It's light..."

"Who's Vision?"

"New Avenger, takes most of my field duties," Tony answered. "You'll meet him later, I have him headed over to Brussels."

The three of them climbed into an elevator and it started to descend. "Is Stark alright?" Steve asked, shooting a worried glance to Hill.

"He hasn't slept since the data hit the internet. I think part of it is avoiding... well, the talk shows will get to him eventually. He's also trying to found a basis for the Avengers, for a different sort of S.H.I.E.L.D., for a way to keep everything in balance... to continue to avoid thinking about the fact that he's feeling overwhelmed and his solution to that is to keep working and isolate himself more... you didn't hear that last one from me, though." Hill glanced over at him. "Don't worry, Banner and I are going to drug his coffee if he doesn't sleep in the next twelve hours. How are you doing? I'm supposed to debrief you."

"We're tracking The Winter Soldier, he bought a train ticket to New York... and a few other places. Could you look and see if we might have missed him?"

"Saw your request on the server. I'll keep an eye out."

"Did you send me the tip about the Air and Space?" Steve asked.

"Stark."

"Oh..."

Hill then glanced down to her pad, which had chimed. "Stolen credit card from one of the passengers on the New York train. I'll keep the credit card company from declining it and send you the particulars. Stay in touch."

"Thank you, Maria," Steve said, holding a hand out, they shook. "Let's go."

The problem with the credit cards was that they didn't post until minutes after Bucky had bought something, some clothes... a new hat, a hot dog from a street vendor, and Steve couldn't quite put the pattern into place. He was bouncing all around Midtown to start, almost aimless, and Steve wondered if he couldn't get his bearings, but Bucky was never the same place when they reached wherever the card had been used.

"We're not getting anywhere!" Steve growled before he leaned his back against one of the buildings and stared off into the middle distance. "My amnesiac friend is walking around New York City and no one's even noticed!"

"And if you put out a BOLO, you'll spook him, at best."

Steve nodded, miserable, before glancing down at his phone as it pinged again. "Flowers?" Why was Bucky buying flowers?

Bucky always had dates, always bought them flowers, but that didn't seem quite right. Bucky didn't have some hot date, probably wouldn't even be confused into thinking he did.
"Flowers..." Steve shook his head again. Everything else had made sense, clothing, food, transportation, but flowers were the first thing that was extraneous, the first thing that a soldier didn't need. That was enough to give Steve a little hope, if Bucky's mind wanted something it didn't need, if it was groping for some connection... "I... Brooklyn, please be in Brooklyn."

"I bet both bridges are as messed up as 95 would be..." Sam came up behind Steve. "Hopefully these wings are as good as Stark's reputation."

They were better. They made it to Brooklyn in a matter of minutes, and as Steve touched down in the cemetery where his mother was buried, he couldn't help but hope. "There's no way he made it here before us."

"If he's coming here," Sam reminded him.

Steve checked his mother's grave. Sarah Rogers... no flowers, and then Bucky’s parents, George and Winifred Barnes, also no flowers. He gave the headstones a squeeze before finding the nearest tree, with Sam ducking behind a mortuary.

A text came through a moment later from Sam: *Hope you're right, Man.*

Steve didn't answer. What was he supposed to say? He hoped this link to the past could be salvaged? He hoped Bucky would show up here, against all odds? Of course he did. He wasn't going to be the same until he knew Bucky was safe, until they were back, side by side. He waited, he waited for what felt like hours, but the credit card was silent, no more purchases, and he waited in that dusty old cemetery where his mother still rested, when he'd been left all alone in the world save for Bucky.

He heard a twig snap, and he glanced over to Sam... to see that the man had actually snapped the twig himself. Another glance, back towards the graves, and he saw Bucky... dressed all in black, arm hidden under the hoodie, his good hand holding flowers... but he was scouting the distance, looking for whoever had made that noise.

Now or nothing...

He stepped out from behind the tree, hands raised. "Bucky?"

Bucky drop the flowers and ran, Steve chased. He was pretty sure he heard Sam swear, but the man also gave chase, skimming close to the ground on his wings, using his movements to corral Bucky back into the cemetery, giving Steve the opportunity to cut him off as well.

"Bucky! Please! Stop! Just let me talk to you."

"I'm not your friend," Bucky answered, growling, and Steve's heart broke just a little bit.

"Yes you are!" Steve held out his hand again, and Bucky didn't back away, but he was still too far away for Steve to grab. "James Buchanan Barnes, my best friend."

"I'm not him," Bucky protested again. "He wouldn't have hurt you, he wouldn't..." Bucky brought his hands up to his head, pained, and Steve hated himself for it but he dashed the rest of the way, dragging Bucky into his arms and not letting him go.

"Stop." Steve clung to him. "Just stop. I've got you. I'm with you 'til the end of the line."

The words twisted a wracked sob out of Bucky's throat, and Steve brushed the man's hair out of his face, but Bucky stopped; he didn't fight Steve's hold, but he did melt into it, slowly.
"I've got you," Steve promised. "I've got you. I'm gonna take care of you, we'll... get you fixed up, we'll... make a pillow fort like when we were kids," Steve started to cry himself, clinging even tighter. "Please, just stop running, we'll find you the answers you need."

"I... I killed... I killed so many people..."

"I know," Steve said. "I know. It's alright, Buck. You-- it's alright. You're still the world to me, please."

"I don't deserve this," Bucky answered. "Don't deserve you... your..."

"Yes you do." Steve dragged him even closer. "Yes you do. Please, Bucky, let me be the strong one right now."

But Steve was falling, falling apart and breaking even as he clung to Bucky. The world was so damn confusing, it didn't make any sense, everyone and everything was so broken and twisted the wrong way and here was Bucky... *his* Bucky, same as the day he'd first died, physically, at least... and they could get the rest back, they could... he could have this one thing that was *right*.

"Okay?"

Bucky didn't answer, not right away.

"Okay?"

Finally, he nodded. Steve felt like he could let go, and he did, and Bucky stayed long enough for Sam to help the two of them up.

"Alright, Cap," Sam said, falling, perhaps unconsciously, to parade rest. "Where, exactly, are we taking him."

For a tactical thinker, he probably hadn't thought this all the way though.

* Tony felt himself start to flag. He knew this would happen. The body could only run for so long and he hadn't exactly prepped for it. He was the wrong side of forty for this. Steve was running all over New York City looking for his past, and Tony could only keep a half eye on that but he couldn't do anything about that now. Steve wasn't going to be any use until he found Bucky, or convinced himself it was a dead end for now. Tony could accept that.

"I'm going to sleep," he told Hill, glancing at her surprised face. "What? I do know how to sleep. Four hours, I think... I'll want a situation report, if we're still green I'll take another four. Unless it's Hulk green, wake me if we're Hulk green."

"Yes, sir," Hill answered. And for one brief second Tony thought she was being lippy, and sarcastic, and then he felt even worse when he realized that she wasn't being lippy, she was being serious.

"JARVIS, do all those things you do that make daddy love you."

"Of course, sir."

Tony didn't bother with the shower, he'd scrub when he woke up. Then he collapsed, face first, into the mattress before the wires in his chest started to ache and he was forced to roll onto his back. "Four hours, J."
Tony blinked, and when he opened his eyes again he had the distinct impression that a great deal of time had passed, if only because the sun seemed to be in a different place.

"What time is it, J?"

"Three twenty five," JARVIS answered, crispy. "You have been asleep for four hours and twelve minutes. I did not disturb you as you appeared to be coming out of REM sleep on your own."

He groaned and rolled onto his front. "We still green, buddy?"

"There has been no further degradation of the current geopolitical climate while you slept. Sub-Director Hill has prepared the briefing materials as requested."

"Sub-Director Hill, huh? Did she print business cards?" He didn't wait for an answer, instead rolling onto his feet and stripping off his boxers as he padded to the bathroom. "Send it to the wall, I'll go over it while I shower."

JARVIS did as asked, and reviewed the terse mission report from JARVIS... Vision's mission to Brussels to extract a pair of scientists deep in a Hydra-S.H.I.E.L.D. occupied lab. Mission successful. They were currently debriefing with Banner. The situation in Hong Kong was heating up, but no one was throwing any punches yet. Three S.H.I.E.L.D. battleships were making what could be aggressive gestures, or could be nothing, and Tony was trying to decide if he should play Battleship with them or not. Report of 'nothing to report' came from Romanov a little over an hour ago. No Clint, no sign of a dead Clint, so for now it was all good news.

Tony scrubbed, shampooing his hair and soaping away the funk that he’d no doubt built up since the last time he’d showered. He hadn’t neglected food and hygiene the way he had his sleep, but he didn’t look like much of a prize and he knew it. When he stood in front of the vanity, brushing his teeth, his eyes were drawn to the hole in his chest and the white, puckered mess that was the remains of his reactor. The site itself was mostly healed, but the skin grafts had probably been a lost cause from the start. It was yet another reminder that in so many ways he was no longer the man he’d been before Afghanistan. That was a welcome change on many fronts, but not nearly so much on this one.

After he’d dried, he pulled on another undersuit before he headed up to the control room.

"Sir," Hill said, as he entered. "Situation green, but Captain Rogers called just a few moments ago. I took the liberty of answering."

Tony waved his hand, yeah, yeah it would happen.

"He and Falcon have acquired Sergeant Barnes. They're asking if he can come into the Tower. They're out in Brooklyn."

Tony considered, long and hard, assassin in the Tower... a brainwashed one, but this was Steve they were talking about, the man would just run off and hunker down in some 1940s bunker with shitty music and bad canned beans. "Pull up everything we have on the Winter Soldier, code words, that sort of thing. Tell Rogers he can bring Barnes to the service entrance. I want to vet Barnes before he goes anywhere, and have Banner prep Hulk's playpen just in case."

Hill gave him a look that Tony interpreted as disapproval.

"Permission to sass me, Hill."

"No sass... just are you sure that's the best move?"
Tony shrugged. "We've got to deal with him somehow. I'd rather a controlled environment, with Steve there, so we can sort out how much is still in there and where we have to go."

Tony pulled up a very long list of code words on his tablet, and went back to work.

"Ms. Potts called," Hill said, tone inviting comment. Tony ignored her. "When's the last time you talked to her?"

Tony continued to ignore her.

"She was a little irritated you created a paramilitary government contracting agency within the auspices of S.H.I.E.L.D. without her knowledge or approval."

"I asked legal," Tony answered, before he pulled up more of the data that JARVIS had been sifting through for him. "I made sure certain parts of my work product remained as my intellectual property."

"I'm sure that's the part she's really worried about."

"Look, what do you want me to say? I lost her because I was working on S.W.O.R.D. without her knowledge. I put in sixteen hour days with nothing to show her for it, and now she knows why, and it's probably even worse, because I promised to focus on her and then..." Tony took a long breath, and glowered at Maria, because she knew all this, Tony knew she did. "I gave you guys advanced propulsion systems and communications systems, and Fury understood why I wanted a finger in the pie. I'm wasn't going to let the Avengers become government attack dogs. I lied to my girlfriend, and my CEO, and she's rightfully mad at me. I lost her, and I knew that would happen as soon as Fury and I shook on this deal."

Tony... Tony was just so... irritated with Hill. She knew why they were like this, she'd watched, she wouldn't have come to him the very hour S.H.I.E.L.D. shut down if she didn't think this was where she needed to be.

"You think I don't need to be here, standing in front of these monitors, say the word, Hill, you'll get a huge promotion."

She didn't say anything for several long seconds. "You should probably head downstairs, sir. Captain Rogers is here. And... you should at least talk to her."

"Later." Tony was going on adrenaline and fear. He wasn't sure he could face down Pepper, though.

Barnes was at the loading bay with Wilson and Steve. Tony waved them in to the cargo elevator and then brought it to a stop. The man looked... blank, there was almost nothing there, but he still followed Tony's gaze and seemed... curious if not quite cognizant.

"I realize he's your friend, but I'd appreciate it if you kept him from killing me." Tony then pulled out the StarkPad, pulling out the list of dozens of code words he'd been able to cull from the Winter Soldier files. "Zola. Paperclip. Romanov. Khrushchev. Red Skull. Sin. Stark. Shield." He then headed off into the truly bizarre, 'peanut butter', and all that, but he'd rather look like an idiot now then regret it later. "Sputnik."

Barnes was on him in an instant, faster than Tony could even blink, hands around Tony's throat, grabbing and twisting. If Steve hadn't moved as fast as he had, Tony was pretty sure his neck would have been snapped before he could even think about it.

He collapsed on the floor, choking and sputtering, trying to breathe. "That would have been an
embarrassing way to die..."

"Bucky, Bucky, it's me, it's Steve. Come on..." Barnes continued to struggle against Steve's inspired grip, and Steve found himself forced to put him in a sleeper hold, and Tony reached out to check the man's pulse as he slowly came down.

Steve looked down at the unconscious form of his friend, head buried in his hand, shoulders shaking.

"He's going to have to stay on Hulk's floor until we run him through some more tests, and probably every psychologist known to man," Tony said. "There's a TV and everything, it's very humane."

Steve nodded, but he still looked miserable.

Tony pressed his thumb to the control panel "JARVIS. Floor 84." And the elevator began to move. "Alright, that's enough fun for the hour. I'll get some folks to come in and give us some medical opinions, don't give him any sharps, he should be alright when he wakes up. And I wasn't kidding about the TV, both of you can make yourselves comfortable. Debrief in six hours."

Steve checked his phone clock. "Debrief at 2215?" He asked, sounding confused.

Tony just shrugged and let them off at Floor 84. "After you go in, you can't get out without command authorization, which is currently limited to Banner and myself."

Steve nodded. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Didn't think you were," Tony answered.

He groaned and waited for the elevator to start ascending again before he let out a small - pathetic - little cough.

"Tell Hill I'm going to take five hours this time. I feel like crap."

With Sam's help, Steve got Bucky laid out on one of the couches on the 'Hulk floor'. As far as Steve knew, the floor hadn't actually gotten any use at all - Banner had the Hulk well under control - so it was mostly a room designed to be trashed, but hadn't been.

He took a heavy seat next to the couch, and sighed. "Shit."

"Wasn't sure you could swear."

Steve chuckled. "I am a soldier, fly boy."

Sam headed over to the kitchen, and pulled down what looked to be a rugged plastic cup, before he filled three of them with water and brought them over. "You alright?"

Steve took the glass, but shook his head. "Hopefully... hopefully Stark knows some folks."

The second glass, Sam placed over near Bucky's head, and then he took a sip from the third. "Well, I can't say the VA is used to dealing with the Manchurian Candidate..."

"Is China working on...?"

Sam chuckled. "Sorry, man, you got the Terminator but not the Manchurian Candidate? It's a movie... just... brainwashed assassin." Sam waved a hand over his face as though to illustrate it
somehow. "Psychological triggers, hyper-vigilance, that sort of thing is normal, whatever they did to your friend... It's science fiction."

Steve thought about Zola, preserved on thousands of miles of storage tapes, and nodded. "Zola figured it out, there must be records somewhere. And whatever's in there... it's not all gone, he recognized me, they couldn't take that away from him, not all the way."

He had to cling to that, he had to remember that. Bucky had remembered him, and had saved his life. Bucky, his Bucky, was in there somewhere.

On the couch, Bucky winced and then coughed a little, clearing his windpipe. An instant later, his eyes shot open.

"Easy, soldier," Sam said, coming up beside Bucky and not touching. "You're safe. Steve's here. We've got you."

It seemed to calm Bucky, but only slightly, so Steve came up beside Bucky as well. "Hey, Buck. You alright?"

"That man..." Bucky seemed to be straining to remember.


"Why did I...? Why did I attack him?" Bucky levered himself up, and Sam handed over a glass of water; Bucky took it, and then a long drink from it. "What did he do?"

"He used a trigger word," Sam answered. Steve wanted to wince, because he didn't want that burdening Bucky, didn't want him to be burdened by that knowledge. "You've got some memories implanted, and it's going to take some time, but you're going to start to get better."

"When are you putting me on ice?" Bucky asked, eyes dead now as he looked down into the water and didn't drink it.

"We're not," Steve answered, more forceful than he'd meant. "Stark... Tony is going to get you some help. You're going to stay unfrozen, you... you're not going to have missions, no targets, just... you. We'll get you back together, as long as it takes, I'm here with you."

Bucky looked back up at him, and his face was so lost and scared and confused, the corners of his mouth turned down, his brows furrowed. He was confused, confused by the idea of being out, not frozen, and Steve knew how that felt.

"You'll stay here, on this floor, as long as it takes," Steve assured him. "I'll be here as often as I can. There's... all sorts of stuff here, you can relax, watch a movie, work out..." All the things Steve had done as soon as he'd been thawed himself. "I... I was on ice for a long time," he admitted, softly. "I... I've only just started to get it worked out. You will too."

Steve dragged Bucky into his arms, tugging him close and wrapping him up the way Bucky used to do for him when he was sick or just feeling so miserable that he would allow himself to be taken care of.

"You know... ah... when we were kids, we used to sneak into the movies because our moms wouldn't give us the nickel..." Steve set his chin on the top of Bucky's head, thinking. "We'd sneak in the back... and I always felt so guilty about it afterwards, I worked four times as hard on selling papers to get the nickel and I'd sneak it into the till the next time we went..."
Steve laughed, and Bucky seemed to relax under his arms as well.

"I'd sneak a nickel back in your pocket," Bucky answered, and Steve thought he'd cry, because that was something, it was. "Always... always knew when you were being an idiot."

The two of them hugged, tight, and Steve finally let his arms relax. "How about a movie?"

"We can't go out..." Bucky said, not sad, but concerned, because he knew how dangerous he still was and Steve could hear he was terrified.

"It's the future," Steve assured him. "It can come to us! JARVIS?" Steve waited for the soft response from the AI. "Could you play us something old? Something fun?"

A few minutes later, the three of them were engrossed in Snow White, and Steve could almost pretend things were the way they used to be, and that was what Bucky - and he - needed right then.

* 

Steve and Sam headed up five hours later, after getting Bucky settled in with some food, and grabbing their own showers and changes of clothes. They arrived upstairs a little before 2200 to find Tony again looming over the screens and panels, but this time he looked... neater; his beard had been trimmed, and cleaned up, but he was back in the flight suit he'd been wearing every time Steve had seen him.

Tony glanced over his shoulder, and then over to Maria. "Hill, you're off duty for the next 12."

She nodded, and closed down whatever it was she was working on, before leaving the office with a nod to Sam and Steve as she went. "Captain, Lieutenant."

After she gestured them to the table in the corner, and indicated the coffee maker, Steve went to work on making coffee for himself and Sam, while Tony continued to do... something. Mostly it looked like he looked at the console and then pressed a few buttons, before doing it all over again.

"Gentlemen," Tony said, before blanking the consoles and walking over to the coffee maker and getting his own cup. "Let's get one thing straight, right off: you don't work for me. I mean, you can, but from a practical, military and former S.H.I.E.L.D. hierarchy standpoint I have no standing to tell you to do anything." He waited a moment for that to sink in. "Alright, now, S.W.O.R.D.. You're welcome to listen to the DoD Hearing when they drag me down there next week, but here's the executive summary:"

Tony cleared his throat and pulled up a tablet, before flicking it and bringing the presentation to one of the walls. "I wasn't pleased with a World Security Council whose first resort to an alien invasion was to try to nuke Manhattan, bad form. I... had a thing, for a few months, but after thinking about it I realized the most productive course of action would be to focus on first responding to any worldwide crisis so that politician idiots wouldn't have the chance to decide nukes and guns were the answer to all their ills. To that end, I approached Nick Fury with a proposal: I design the propulsion systems for the new helicarriers I wasn't supposed to know about, and he'd sign the paperwork to allow me on as the head of a subcontractor: S.W.O.R.D.."

Some paperwork, things that looked like a contract between Tony and Fury came up on screen. "Basically the original goal was to fund the Avengers under my purview rather than S.H.I.E.L.D. and the WSC. When S.H.I.E.L.D. imploded... well I was one of the few apparatuses directly linked into their servers and data streams with the processing and man power to make heads or tails of their intelligence fast enough to do anything with it. We extracted almost 200 compromised undercover
"Which is basically my way of saying: you don't work for me, but I'd like you to."

Tony waited.

Steve considered. "I'm not comfortable working for an agency with no parameters, no... no limits. There were problems with Insight from the get-go, it never should have been approved."

"We have a Charter..." Tony punched another button. "Emailing it to you. All Avengers will be asked to sign it. We serve the world, the people. S.W.O.R.D. will function under a similar Charter, but that's still in legal and public relations because I didn't think I'd need it."

Steve started to read: Be it known... that we, The Avengers, have banded together to protect and safeguard the Planet Earth, its inhabitants and resources, from any and all threats - terrestrial or otherwise - which are or might prove to be beyond the power of conventional force to handle...

"You've been thinking about this for a while..." Steve said, not sure if it was an accusation or surprise.

Tony shrugged.

"So S.W.O.R.D. will be...?"

"An intelligence agency," Tony answered. "We're without a major apparatus of world intelligence and peacekeeping right now. S.H.I.E.L.D. was originally conceived of as a peacekeeping force, a group dedicated to stopping the looming problems of the Cold War, and all that jazz. There were good... good ideas at the heart of it."

Steve realized, slowly, exactly what Tony was talking around, Howard. His father. His father had founded S.H.I.E.L.D. on an ideal.

"Back after the War, my father had a few choice quotes," Tony continued, not meeting Steve in the eye, looking at Sam instead. "Peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy."

The words were a knife in the chest. Howard had said that?

"Well then the Reds got the Bomb and..." Tony waved his hand, brushing away the rest of the story that Steve desperately wanted to hear. "When he died, he was looking at ways to create limitless clean energy, reduce or eliminate power scarcity, which would hopefully lead to eliminated pure water scarcity, then food scarcity... Well, it's easy to see why Hydra wanted him dead. Arc reactor technology, more dangerous than weapons... Anyway. Come on in, ground floor. I can think of worse people to approve of a Charter to Operate than Captain America, or Steve Rogers."

"Full transparency," Steve said, locking his eyes with Tony. "No lies, no half-truths, no telling me to jump and expecting me to say 'how high'. I may be a soldier, but I'm not an idiot."

Tony held out a hand. "Welcome aboard." Steve grabbed it in return. "And send your damn suit back to the Smithsonian so I don't have to keep getting frantic calls from their insurance carriers. You can wear the one I had designed for S.H.I.E.L.D. for a few weeks, right?"

Steve sighed. "Wait... you own my suit?"
"I thought you said you weren't an idiot," Tony answered. "The one that was in the Smithsonian was your spare, Dad owned it, the one you went down in is still being restored. And you, Lieutenant Wilson, your service record is impeccable. You want in, you're in. Either way, consider the Falcon system, Mark II, a gift."

"I'm in," Sam answered, no hesitation.

"Steve, your apartment contents were in lock up on the Triskelion, so my bots have recovered that and they're on their way to the Tower. Wilson, your things are... in your house, so they are still in your house. We're going to be operating out of the Tower for now until we can get a more uniform presence."

"Ah... and the Winter Soldier... Bucky. What happens to him?"

"He's not going anywhere until he's had some serious psychoanalysis. I haven't had the opportunity to go over Zola's research, but we have a pretty large section of it." Tony pressed a button and Steve heard his phone ping. "You can review it. You find someone who knows what they're doing when it comes to this stuff, I'll sign the checks myself, but for right now he stays in the Tower, under surveillance, and on the Hulk floor for the next day or two at least."

"But he can stay?" Steve asked, feeling like he needed to hear it, in small words, from Stark... Tony.

"He can stay."

Steve sighed in relief.

"Now get some sleep, you look like hell."

Steve and Sam exchanged a glance, right in front of Tony, that said they were thinking the exact same thing: Stark looked like hell. Tony then stood up and went back to his console, Steve and Sam huddled together at the conference table, out of direct earshot.

"If you don't need me for a day or two, I'll head back to DC, pack up..." Sam said, clearly wondering if Steve did need him.

"Yeah... I... I suppose I should trust Stark. His father was killed by Hydra, Zola wanted to kill him this time around... he's a threat to their order." Steve glanced over to where he was standing. "I want to be here, though, make sure it all gets done right. He... knows what he's doing, I guess, more of a politician than me."

"You know he told a Senate Subcommittee meeting where to shove it, right?" Sam answered. "He knows the dance but he's still... Tony Stark, almost everyone over in the Middle East would trust him with our lives. He might have run away from the reputation for guns, but he still builds the battle armor."

Steve nodded. "I'll make sure things stay good on this end. You have my number."

"I guess I should... put in my notice?" Sam asked, looking a little lost for a moment.

"Whatever," Tony said. "You came in after CSRS got discontinued, your retirement benefits are shit anyway."

"Tony!"

"Or you could put in for a transfer to the Bronx VA, they need social workers, use my name, for
some reason they love me over there..." Tony shook his head, and Sam headed out, giving Steve a bit of a raised eyebrow as he left.

After a few moments of leaving his head spinning, Steve came over to stand beside Tony, looking over the dozens of screens and not really seeing whatever Tony was. "What's going on in the world, Stark?"

"Lots of everything," Tony said, clearly dismissing the question.

"I thought we agreed: total transparency."

Tony sighed, and drew up sixteen map positions. "There are sixteen S.H.I.E.L.D. cruisers, each armed with conventional missiles and other armaments tooling around in international waters. Their compositions were largely Hydra, but based on our satellite feeds they are still trying to figure out what to do. They will need to be neutralized, but I don't have the manpower to task people to that."

Another dot flared to life, centered over Madripoor. "Clint was one of the assets burned by Natasha's tell all book all over the internet. She's now in Madripoor trying to extract him. He's not dead, as far as we know, but she's having a bitch of a time finding him. She's there on the paper thin cover of being my personal assistant to keep them from arresting her on sight."

Hong Kong. "The US embassy has been overrun by extremists and several S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel both clean and dirty are part of the hostage situation. We believe Hydra is responsible for trying to light that powder keg."

Brussels. "Bioweapons facility with mixed personnel tried to go hot, Vision stopped that and made the extraction."

"And who is Vision?" Steve asked, anxious to have that opening again since Tony had brushed it off hours ago.

"JARVIS, in a suit. He did so well a year ago we've been practicing."

"As long as he doesn't... ah... 'go SkyNet'." Steve said, trying to decide if he was making a joke or just teasing.

"This is JARVIS we're talking about. He's way more ethical than me." Tony sighed, scrubbing his fingers through his hair. "And those are the hot issues. We extracted the aforementioned burned agents and scientists, they're getting set up here. I'm acquiring some corporations and their facilities to move the science back out into the field as soon as everything settles in a few months."

Steve nodded, still hesitant but... "Do you need me in Hong Kong?"

"I would love you in Hong Kong," Tony said. "I'd love me in Hong Kong... Come on, we're going to Hong Kong. Bruce can run S.W.O.R.D. for a few hours."
Chapter 2

Tony passed the flight to Hong Kong in relative quiet, Steve sitting beside him in the copilot's chair. After they got over the Pacific, Tony kicked his feet up on the dash and kept an eye on the monitors.

"You know," Steve said, looking over at him. "If you're the Director of S.W.O.R.D you shouldn't really be out in the field."

"Vision is great and all, I love him like the son I'll never have, but he's not human and he doesn't have that emotional component in his on-the-fly thinking." Tony closed his eyes for a moment. "Not that he doesn't have emotions, just... they're a little sluggish."

"And... didn't you retire last year?"

Tony clenched his jaw. "I came out of retirement. You're great and all, but you were punching below your weight class and Fury knew it. Rhodey's still Air Force so I can't move him around without authorization, Vision isn't the best choice for things like a hostage negotiation... Look, sometimes I'm the right tool for the job."

Steve looked over at him, frowning, but then he went back to looking out the window. "I didn't say you weren't, I just... I mean people get out, sometimes it's time to get out."

"I thought I was ready," Tony said, after a long minute. "You... die, and you start to look at your life... again... Pepper's great, she's perfect, flawless, and too good for me, and if she wanted to be with me, despite me being who I am, and who I was, that's great... but... I started working on S.W.O.R.D. an hour here and there, I reworked the helicarrier engines - a few hours gone, tweaked the flight code, started analyzing some of the stuff I scooped up from S.H.I.E.L.D.'s databases... Before I knew it it was ten hours a day, then fourteen... and that was fine, Pepper's the CEO of one of the largest tech companies in America, her days are that long too... but then they got longer. It got to the point where this woman who I love sees me two or three times a month, then less..."

And then he'd destroyed the one good thing in his life.

"She used to see me every day, when it was her job to see me every day, when it was her job to do everything, including kick out whoever I took home the night before and take my clothes to be dry cleaned when I vomited on them. She had seen me at the lowest I have ever been as a human being, and she asked for my time in return and I just... couldn't. I was never with her, even when we were in the same room. I'm worrying about the future, about my company, about the Avengers, about some bit of news on the scroll under Blitzer's face..."

Tony had tried, he had, he'd tried to make it about Pepper, to push his life more towards her to make up for the years he'd spent being a selfish ass, but the truth was that he was a selfish ass, he was a workaholic, and he was never going to be able to wrap his life around any other person like that, no matter how much he loved them.

"There's too much to do," Steve agreed, and Tony was almost relieved to hear the assurance reflected in Steve's tone. "Sam told me... he reminded me that I could do anything I wanted, that I didn't have to work for S.H.I.E.L.D... but I'm glad S.W.O.R.D. was here, ready to go when S.H.I.E.L.D. collapsed. I don't want to do anything but this. I get to help people, save the world, catch a television show, and maybe the pretty nurse across the hall is actually a pretty S.H.I.E.L.D. agent sent to guard me, but I'm not sure that's what I want anyway."
Tony sighed, a long, wistful thing, because he did miss Pepper, but the deeper he'd sunk into his agoraphobia and PTSD the worse their relationship had gotten, and Tony wasn't sure they'd ever entirely recovered. "Sadly I'm a head of a major contractor now too, so I can't have hookers."

Steve glanced over at him, but didn't comment. Tony found himself disappointed because he really had wanted to needle the guy some more, but Cap had definitely started to unwind, if only a little bit.

"You're settling in."

"Yeah," Steve answered. "I think that's why Natasha kept trying to set me up on dates. This-- ah-- you're--"

"Got a sentence in there, somewhere, Cap?" Tony asked, grinning over at him, because it was funny, hearing Steve so flustered; he did wonder what the hell Natasha was thinking trying to set Steve up on dates, but maybe the guy was starting to move on. Good for him.

"I was going to say it was nice to talk to you like this, but I take it back."

Tony snorted, but he decided to take pity on Steve, and not pick. He was more comfortable with Steve now, with... Steve and Dad being people who had inhabited the same space. "How you doing on your list?"

"I still haven't watched Star Trek," Steve admitted. "But Natasha made a War Games joke and I understood it!" He looked so happy and pleased with himself, that Tony couldn't help but smile. "Of course, then I found out about Zola... about your father's accident."

Tony ignored the comment. They were not going to get talking about his father. "We'll land in Hong Kong in about thirty five minutes. Go recite the pledge of allegiance three times fast or whatever you do pre-mission. I've cleared our landing and actions with the Special Administrative Region government, because apparently you're supposed to do that when you land on foreign soil. Who knew?"

Steve, thankfully, took it for what it was, and went to stand in the back of the quinjet while Tony prepped them for landing.

Captain America and Iron Man made their way into the American Embassy, low-light goggles for Steve, and the armor for Tony made their circumvention of security a piece of cake. There were only four Hydra agents - their leverage had been more the hostages than weight of numbers. With so many high-value targets, no one wanted to go in shooting. Still, they rescued the ambassadors and administrative staff, killed three Hydra-aligned S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, saved two of the good guys, and then smiled for the press.

He even got Steve to name-drop them without too much fanfare.

Everything, hopefully, was headed in the right direction.

"Mr. Stark." Tony glanced. Questions to be answered. "Did you feel a personal connection with the mission, owing to your months of torture and captivity in Afghanistan?"

He froze, just for that instant he froze, but his smile was back an instant later. "S.W.O.R.D. does make a point to combat terrorist activity when it aligns with our core objectives. As the attackers were primarily Hydra, I think it's more likely the good Captain felt a personal kinship with the mission. Cleaning up damage that's been done to the international intelligence community is very personal, to both of us. Thank you. We have a few other matters to attend to, now."
Tony didn't even have to drag Steve off to get him out of there.

Things didn't slow down.

Natasha and Clint were still under the radar... or at least Clint was; Natasha had been trying to draw the man out, but Steve got a feeling that Clint was feeling more than a little paranoid after the revelation and had probably gone to ground. Tony hadn't been able to get much more than that out of Natasha, but they had an eye on the situation.

Steve spent missions away from the Tower, only to come back and spend as much of it as he could with Bucky, talking about the past, about old times, and about what he was missing. He brought Bucky Chinese takeout, they watched ball games on TV, and tried I Love Lucy - an old TV show that was new to Steve and Bucky - and slowly there seemed to be a personality that peeked out behind the blankness.

Still, it had been barely two weeks, and Tony kept them all hopping to neutralize the worst threats that Hydra still posed to the world.

Sam tapped on the containment glass for Bucky's floor, and Steve glanced over. "Stark's about to come on C-SPAN. We're analyzing."

"I need to go," Steve said, feeling awful about abandoning Bucky, even though the man was hardly helpless with his limitless supply of food, exercise equipment, and entertainment.

"You--" Bucky frowned, trying to put something together. "They could come down here. I won't-- I--" He could see the look that said Bucky realized he couldn't promise not to hurt them, that there was still a chance he might snap and try to kill them. "I'd like to try."

"I'll ask them."

In the end, all of them piled onto the various couches in Bucky's containment area; the only real addition to their usual was Bruce. Sam had taken to spending some time down when Steve was there, but Bucky sat next to Steve, looking blank, but obviously trying to keep pushing through the walls in his own mind.

Bruce turned on the TV. "Looks like we missed the swearing in and introductions." Bruce pulled out a tablet, though.

On screen, Tony checked his phone, before setting it down and looking up at the assembled Department of Defense staff who had grilled Natasha two weeks ago.

"Tell us about S.W.O.R.D., Mr. Stark."

Steve listened as Tony talked, and described exactly what he was looking to do, taking care of the intelligence community, taking care of the things the Avengers needed, and Steve was ready to agree that power had to be accountable, but that meant it couldn't be in the hands of politicians. That was a different sort of accountability than it had been back in his day.

"We're privately funded," Tony continued. "We have a Board of Directors, or as I like to call them 'The Avengers'."  

Steve couldn't help but smile a bit at that.
"Does that include Natasha Romanov, who failed to complete her testimony before this committee?"

Steve frowned, irritated that they would go for her throat, again, after all she'd done to save them a few weeks ago.

"Widow? Yeah. She's great. All of our Board members have profiles on our website. She comes well recommended." Tony seemed to let that information sink in for a moment, before he leaned in. "Look, I've got places to be, let's cut to the chase and you can start picking on us with the questions you want to ask, and we can leave the polite banter for someone whose pants you might actually have a chance of getting in, alright?"

"Tony!" Bruce winced from the other end of the sectional.

"Guy's a huge anti-gay marriage proponent," Sam explained, since Steve hadn't quite understood why Tony had directed that the way he had.

The General turned purple. It was pretty nice to watch, actually, but Steve watched the way the man's eyes lit up a moment later, as he went in for the kill. "There has been some speculation that you're captivity in Afghanistan - where you were tortured for at least sixteen hours - has left you psychologically ill-equipped to run an agency that might be asked to go after, or not go after, agents of that organization, or others like it. How do you respond?"

Their entire room went quiet.

Steve hadn't known it was... that long. Maybe it didn't matter, torture was torture, but... that was a very long time.

"Sixteen hours?" Tony asked; his voice made it sound like it was clarifying, but Steve heard the attempt to buy for time. Then he broke out into a soft little smile. "Felt longer."

Tony tapped his fingers against the table for a moment, and Steve watched him take a deep breath.

"I'd say it was a lesson," Tony answered, and his voice was cold, and deadly serious. "A lesson I was, admittedly, slightly slow to learn, but a lesson about violence, how it is wielded today, and the lengths men will go to secure personal power. Those are the sort of lessons you don't learn at MIT... or Brown, Wharton, Harvard, or Yale." Tony then leaned in, all smiles and completely affable. "Sir."

"Were you aware of the full scope of Project Insight before you agreed to contribute Stark Industries resources to the project?" Another suit asked.

"Considering that Project Insight was going to put a bullet through my skull at 250 miles, no. I think it's safe to say I was unaware."

The Hearing continued to pick, continued to prod, and Steve watched as, a half-dozen times when questions went to Natasha or Steve, or Bruce's 'condition' as the Hulk, Tony would turn belligerent. Then it was all eyes on Stark again, picking at his record, his history, to S.W.O.R.D. - and Steve couldn't have been more thankful.

"I have a final question, Mr. Stark," the Secretary of Defense asked, leaning in. "There have been accusations that you are harboring the man primarily responsible for the assassination of Director Fury, known by his code name 'The Winter Soldier'. Your comment?"

Steve felt himself tense, and he glanced over to where Bucky was sitting, jaw clenched, eyes worried. And Steve's gaze darted back.
"I don't have a comment," Stark answered.

"Not an option, Director. If you're harboring the man who assassinated your functional predecessor you cast doubt upon all of your claims of transparency and clean dealing."

"Everyone heard that," Tony said, finger sweeping across the cameras. "The Secretary of Defense called me Director. You heard that, right?" Tony asked, leaning to the former S.H.I.E.L.D. agent next to him. "Alright, my comment: Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes is a war hero who would have probably felt blessed to give his life for his country. He served with Captain America, he was a man my father told me stories about since before I was old enough to talk. He has been a prisoner of war since 1945. He's a hero, and a patriot, and he is currently voluntarily detained undergoing psychological evaluation by psychologists and a social worker with experience from the Department of Veterans Affairs. You may not see him, you may not touch him, and you can leave him the hell alone."

Tony then leaned back in his chair, and spread his arms, waiting.

"I feel like he should scream 'come at me, bro' to the cameras," Sam said, laughing.

Steve smiled lightly and glanced over to where Bucky was staring, blankly. "I didn't deserve that," he said, voice soft. "I... I tried to kill him."

"You're a hero, Bucky, it's just going to be a while until you remember it all." Steve gave him a squeeze on the shoulder, and then the rest of them continued to watch the close of Tony's testimony, where he went over how the Avengers and S.W.O.R.D. would be funded to eliminate Stark's conflict of interest as the primary shareholder of Stark Industries, which was very boring to Steve. He mostly ignored it in favor of grabbing Bucky around the shoulder and squeezing tight.

Bruce was the one who cleared his throat after the hours-long testimony, and looked at the team: "Tony did a good job." He glanced down at her tablet. "That Fury question was a little surprising, we'll need to figure out how to counter that. If the rumor Tony had Fury killed gets legs, he's in trouble."

Given that Fury wasn't even killed it was even more troubling.

Steve ended up back in the command center; Hill was there, continuing to direct the few ops they had, using the three quinjets that had been salvaged from the Triskelion in Arlington. They had managed to find a fourth, and Tony was bringing that one back from Washington, but it meant they had to juggle their operations a little tighter than Maria was used to.

"I think we should paint the quinjets red," Tony said as he strode in. "I feel so boring when I'm flying something grey. Grey is for Oldsmobiles. How are we trending?"

"Political analysts hate you, but the S.H.I.E.L.D. inquiry has placed you in the public eye as the Director of S.W.O.R.D. You'll still have to tackle the UN and get their official approval to operate if you want to keep your authority legitimate and not fall under the US complex." Maria pushed a website to the console Tony was standing in front of. "We've got some Furygate Truthers making a mess of things, but hopefully we can keep it fringe. You'll probably want to get someone with some authority to see Barnes, but like you said, touching should be a no-go. Indonesia is heating up."

"Global warming," Tony mumbled, but he pulled up the status report as well. "Ugh. All I want to do is run the world's intelligence community from my sexy tower in the sky without people stirring shit up for one day. Is that so much to ask?"
"Yes," Steve answered, but he came up next to Tony. "Thank you."

Tony brushed away the compliment.

"I mean it, Tony."

Tony waved again, and Steve took a step back. "We'll have to decide how to handle Indonesia if they request - or don't request - intervention."

"If they don't request intervention--" Steve started, warning, and Tony again waved his hand.

"Yes, yes, but we'll need to work on potential outcomes if that bubbles over into neighboring countries." Tony glowered at the map. "One of our missing S.H.I.E.L.D. ships has gone dark in their territorial waters; I informed the President very politely, he told me to mind my own business. President Ellis at least returns my calls since that time Rhodey and I rescued him from evil government contractors."

"As opposed to the good, kind, patriotic sort," Steve said, sounding more wry than he was feeling.

"Exactly."

"Well, if they need an intervention, I'll be there. In the meantime, you should probably take a nap."

Tony grumbled.

"Maria is here on time and everything," Steve continued.

Tony gave Steve a tired, flat sort of look, before he started to yank off his tie and head towards his elevator.

"Let me know if the fate of the free world is at stake, Hill."

"Have a good night, Sir."

Steve watched the elevator door close behind him, and Steve took a deep breath. "He looks tired."

"He's still catching up. Fury had a whole command structure, he could even take vacations, as infrequently as he did. Stark's been pulling this all together much faster than he'd expected he'd have to, and he's only human, unlike other people in the room."

"I'm human," Steve protested.

"Speak for yourself, I'm a goddess among men," Maria answered. "I can hold down the fort if you have somewhere else to be, or I can give you a briefing of the day's happenings."

"I'll take the briefing." And then Steve frowned. "Where, exactly... I mean you're the Sub-Director..."

"Captain Rogers," Maria answered, very, very seriously. "Never ask for an Org Chart. Stark briefs you, I brief you, but if it makes you feel any better I could call you Director."

"Doesn't sound right."

"Commander?"

"Wrong branch..." It sounded sort of alright though, wrong as it was.
Tony glowered at the battleship just west of Indonesia, waiting, looming, and in a lot of ways calling his bluff. He'd slept badly the night before, and his goatee wasn't as neat as he would have liked, but Maria and Steve were standing next to him, waiting for his thoughts.

"The UN is arguing over whether or not to officially confirm us as a peacekeeping force, which means I'm supposed to be keeping my nose clean, but..." Tony tilted his head, indicating JARVIS should continue.

"The Furygate Truthers contingent is growing in strength and numbers; although it is still a minority, there continue to be questions about whether Director Stark is responsible for the assassination of Director Fury," JARVIS continued, as requested. "I have again reiterated several leaked documents showing the connection between Pierce and The Winter Soldier, but to no avail."

"To add insult to injury, the S.H.I.E.L.D. ship I originally thought was going to Indonesia is actually heading to Madripoor, home of cheap sex, death, and life, and apparently run by at least two or three interested Hydra higher ups," Tony explained.

"We've always known Madripoor had Hydra ties, but the amount of resources necessary to perform some sort of coup has always been..." Maria glanced over to Tony, and he caught the slightly abashed look. "Well it's always been denied by Pierce and the security council."

"We're not overthrowing a sovereign nation and installing a different dictator," Steve answered, arms crossed over his chest; damned if he didn't look pissed, but Tony sort of liked the look anyway.

"It's almost like he was here for the 70s and saw how that worked the last time," Tony said, sotto voce to Hill. "But we now have a pretty good idea why Clint has gone to ground. He might even be captured by Hydra, interrogated... it's bad."

"Then we go rescue him," Steve answered, matter of fact. "I'll need some time to work out an entry strategy, but..."

"Oh, so a forcible regime change is not alright, but invading a sovereign nation and circumventing their non-extradition status for criminals or possibly releasing a prisoner of their state is A-OK?" Tony glowered at Steve. "Do you want to go explain to the Senate or the DoD why the not actually yet a world peace keeping organization invaded a country without UN authorization? Do you even understand how politics work?!"

"Do you?" Steve answered. "And you sent Natasha!"

"Yes, as Jane Citizen. She has a level of plausible deniability that Captain Sass and Spangles doesn't have."

"It's Commander Sass and Spangles now, Sir," Hill reminded him, but Tony wasn't hearing it.

"We are not invading Madripoor just to get Barton," Tony insisted.

"So you're going to leave him there?" Steve yelled, voice getting even harder, and more disbelieving.

Tony went back just as hard. "Don't put your guilt on me, you and Romanov were the ones who ousted the active covers of those embedded agents." Tony pressed a finger hard against Steve's sternum and looked him square in the eye. "Suck it up, accept the unintended consequences of your righteous act, and give me a minute to think!"
Steve's jaw clenched, and then eased, before it clenched again. Tony turned back to the screens.

"Alright. Madripoor is a Principality, so there is nominal rulership by a Prince, Sumar, but for all practical purposes it's ruled by a small panel of 'advisers' with a Prime Minister who's generally elected by an entirely rigged vote by anyone who has more than a couple million dollars to blow on the election." Tony drew up a few pictures. "I know... most of them, personally, but it sounds like these three are... well, Nazis. You think you know a guy..."

"So Natasha and Clint are behind enemy lines, in Nazi territory..." Steve started, calmer, but still with an edge to his voice.

"Commander V-E day is right," Tony said. "But that doesn't change the fact that these are duly elected officials of a sovereign nation. I'll insert, I should be able to rub enough elbows to find a terminal to hack, locate Barton if he's on the advisory panel's radar, extract Natasha..."

"I'm coming with you."

"What happens in Madripoor stays in Madripoor, sorry, Steve."

"You are the Director of an intelligence agency, you can't just go to a foreign country in your private jet with your hair and your sunglasses and your Stark."

"That's exactly what I'm going to do."

"Not by yourself."

"Fine," Tony answered, annoyed that Steve apparently thought he couldn't take care of himself on his home turf. "I'm sure Hill would appreciate the promotion. No shield, though, you're there as Steve Rogers, not Captain America."

"There's no difference."

"In the world of international politics there are thousand distinctions that appear to be without a difference until you really scratch the surface." Tony sighed. "Battlefield tactics, I'm all yours, Steve, but for this you have to play by my rules."

"You told a US Army General he wasn't going to get into your pants," Steve answered, dry.

"It's an advanced technique. Once you learn the rules, you're allowed to break them; until then, you follow the script." Tony considered what he would need. The Suit, of course, but they likely wouldn't let that past customs; a tux; a few nice suits; a few million in cash; the private jet... "Do you own a suit?"

"I've got my Sunday..."

"No." Tony pointed to the door. "Go wherever JARVIS tells you and don't come back until you have a proper suit."

Steve went, obviously grudgingly, but Tony waited for him to leave before letting out the sigh he'd been holding in.

"Take pictures," Maria said, and Tony gave her a chuckle in response. "You sure this is the best idea, Sir?"

"I don't know." He honestly didn't. "Sneaking around didn't work or Natasha would have had results
a week ago. Barton's got to be somewhere she can't gain easy access, even if that just means her decrypto card wizardry isn't working. Money opens up some doors that even Natasha's expansive skill set can't. Is this the right call? No idea. Is it the best call? I think so. The more Hydra resources we can neutralize, legally, in the next few weeks, the better our case for stepping in when the UN finally makes their own determinations."

"Be careful, then. I don't want your job." Maria smiled at him, an actual, real smile, before she turned back to the briefing for Madripoor. "You dated Ophelia Sarkissian and Giulietta Nefaria right?"

"Seriously starting to wonder about my type," Tony admitted.

Steve bought two suits, and a tuxedo; he had no idea how much they cost and the gentleman at the suit store wouldn't tell him, but he figured that was for the best. He brought them back to the Tower, hung them neatly, and went to see Bucky.

He and Sam were talking. "I just, when I see him--" And then Bucky saw Steve, and clammed up.

He could have kicked himself. He knew how much talking to Sam could be exactly what he needed, and he hated the fact that Bucky had maybe been making a leap, some progress, and he'd cut it off. "Hey, Buck, Sam. There's a situation in Madripoor, Stark and I are going to go in to extract Barton and Romanov."

"Sounds like an international incident waiting to happen."

"That's why Stark's running the mission," Steve said, realizing how idiotic that sounded that Stark would...

But Sam nodded. "Aye aye, Commander."

"Stop that."

"No, it makes sense, turn your back on the Army, and the Air Force, see if I care." But Sam was smiling. "The dividing line is good. You need to make a distinction, you can't go walking onto foreign soil as 'Captain America' and expect them to fall at your feet all 'Mission Accomplished'. And you are the de facto field commander for any S.W.O.R.D. ops."

He spent an hour or so with Bucky watching a bit of baseball and relaxing, but he finally caught Sam alone, an hour or two before they'd have to head out to Madripoor. "Is Bucky...?"

"I'm not breaking his confidence," Sam said, but he put an arm on Steve's shoulder. "That's an important part of any counseling experience, but... he's dealing with a lot, you heard..." Sam twisted his mouth, clearly holding back words and trying to decide how to say what he needed to. "You heard what people said at group, you know how you feel about your bed and not knowing what to do with yourself. We all feel it different ways, but we all feel it to some degree. Barnes is having the same hard time anyone would be having..."

"Just magnified by brainwashing and trying to kill me," Steve said, sighing, again. "I wish he would talk to me. I'm his friend. I'm his best friend."

"And he knows how badly you want your friend back, and how much it hurts you when he's not all there. You're a crappy liar, man," Sam said, and patted him on the shoulder. "Take it as a compliment, but it's a complication too."
Steve hadn’t realized how much that expectation might have weighed on Bucky. "Did he... get back into the swing after I left?"

"Some. It’s not your problem. Let me work on it, alright?"

It might not be his problem, but Steve couldn't help but feel he was still failing Bucky, even if the man was safe and secure. He met Stark, as requested, in the man's lab. He handed over a thin, almost sheer feeling, navy pile of fabric.

"Silicon and carbon nanotube fiber weave, scrape and tear resistant, breathable, some stopping power on hollow point rounds, no stopping power on full metal jacket. Completely invisible to metal detectors and backscatter machines. You wear that 24/7." Steve took it, and folded it under his arm, almost impressed... definitely impressed. He knew Tony was brilliant, but SHIELD hadn't had that level of defensive tech available to them. He pulled out another jacket that looked more like a standard bulletproof vest. "Stark Industries ultralight body armor, this is on the market for military purchase, it's never met a knife or bullet it didn't stop, but there's always one. You wear this after we go through customs. You are to introduce yourself as my bodyguard. No one will believe you, that's fine."

"I'm not--" Steve protested, but then realized he'd agreed to do this Tony's way. "Fine, but if this goes south, it's my show."

"Of course."

"Do you have these for yourself?" Steve asked.

Tony's was a brilliantly tacky yellow gold, and Steve wasn't certain why he was surprised.

The first two hours of the flight were quiet, and Tony continued to tap on his tablet while Steve read his own, looking over the notes on Madripoor. "How do you know the Counselors?" Steve asked, because Tony had said he knew them, and it could be important.

"Ahh... I dated them? Dated is a strong word. Young, pretty, rich folks tend to hang out together."

Steve rolled his eyes. Tony really was a lot like his father, even if Steve knew that Howard was a sore subject.

"Sarkissian, Nefaria..." Both of them were gorgeous, Steve would have had to be blind not to see that; the briefing materials had dozens of pictures of them, both tall and lean and buxom with long, dark hair and dresses that looked painted on. "And... Stone." Stone, Tiberius was a man, and although he was blond and attractive he was distinctly... male.

Tony shrugged.

Steve wondered if that was confirmation or... "Ah... 'it was a phase'?” He suggested with a hint of joking in his voice, because he'd watched enough media to know that was the casual way to dismiss that sort of thing.

"Nah. I like men. I mean Ty's an attractive guy," Tony answered. "It wasn't anything serious, and he and I both were in the same business, off and on, which means security clearances, and they were none-too-fond of that sort of thing only a few years ago. Used to get you discharged from the military, too. Honestly finding myself wondering if he was trying to seduce me to evil... way to give a guy a complex."

Steve laughed, because Tony was ridiculous and there wasn't any other easy way to say Steve didn't
care. The modern take on the whole thing was startlingly refreshing, and he was glad for it, even if he'd never really gotten the chance to talk about his opinions in public. "I don't think the Nazis were trying to seduce you, Tony."

"You say that now, but... I sort of wonder." And Tony obviously did wonder, not the sarcastic, silly, hypothetical wonder, but real wonder and doubt. "My father started experimenting with green energy in the 70s, collaborating with Russian scientists, shit that would have gotten you dragged in front of the McCarthy Hearings a decade or two earlier... and then he dies, killed by Hydra while I was off at college, still a fuck up... I made my own choices, Steve, but a lot of people worked very hard to keep me from seeing things that were right in front of my face. Maybe that's the easy excuse though."

Steve didn't know what to think. Tony did have a point, but he was right it would be an easy excuse to dismiss where he'd come from by shifting the blame.

"The only thing my father ever created that didn't get subverted by Hydra or politics or everything else was your shield," Tony admitted, voice soft. After a moment he added: "You're alright, too."

Steve had to chuckle at that.

"I'm going to get some sleep before we touch down in Madripoor, you might want to as well," Tony suggested.

"I'll catch a few winks."

"You won't freak out if Ty tries to kiss me, then?"

"Only if he's got on poison lipstick," Steve answered.

"Nice," Tony answered, grinning. "James Bond?"

"Get Smart, actually," Steve answered, grinning from ear to ear. "I love that show."

Steve was surprised they let them in at all, but with the simple matter of Tony presenting their passports and visas, they were allowed to enter the airport, and then be driven to the Royal Palm Casino, deep in the heart of Hightown. Tony made it clear he expected Steve to handle their bags, and as much as Steve felt his own teeth grate at it, the man had a point, so Steve took the role of 'bag man'. Tony tipped everyone disgustingly well, with more money than Steve would see in a month back during the War, but it seemed expected, and after a hugely ostentatious jaunt through the gambling floors, with Tony drinking at least seven flutes of champagne that Steve could count, they finally ended up in a suite on the top floor.

Almost before the door was closed, Tony was stripping out of his tux shirt and jacket. "Get your vest on."

He watched, open mouthed, for a moment as Tony stripped down to the nanofiber suit, before he blushed and started to do the same, dragging the two vests out and sending the smaller one over to Tony. "What's our first move?"

"Hopefully Natasha knows we're here. I sent her a message before we left. Do you know how to play chauffeur-bodyguard?" Tony asked. "It's not hard, just stand around and look menacing. No one buys it, so you don't even have to sell it that hard, I just want you close if things go south."

"How are we going to find her without anyone watching us knowing we're up to something?"
"She's a spy, I'm sure she'll think of something. Come on, the floor awaits."

Steve followed after Tony, feeling lost and more than a little irritated; the two of them ended up in an isolated booth with three guards, all of them nearly as intimidating as Steve, while Tony ordered them both a glass of scotch.

"I don't drink scotch..." Steve said, staring down at the glass.

"You do now. Drink."

And Steve took a sip, because it wasn't as though the stuff could affect him; he was fairly proud that he'd managed to choke down more than half of it, when Tony took a sip of his own and... suddenly there was Tony's full glass in front of him and Tony was flirting after one of the waitresses to get himself a refill.

After four glasses went the same way - Steve drinking most of them, and then Tony begging for a refill - Steve found Tony slowly attracting more and more hangers on, beautiful, attractive women in sinfully low cut tops that Tony seemed to delight in dragging onto his lap, or licking champagne off their throats or sharing glasses of the stuff... Steve was getting wildly uncomfortable, and that was before Tony started sending rejected women to him and forcing him to 'sorry, miss, I'm on duty' them on their way.

A bottle of champagne worth more than his motorcycle was wasted mostly on throats, low cut tops, and lipstick-stained glasses, and Steve couldn't help but think Tony had only dragged him out to have the time of his life on the taxpayer's dime. Tony was attractive like this, beautiful, confident and suave; Steve tried not to notice, but the more time they spent together the harder that was. Thankfully the rampant immaturity made it easier to ignore.

Steve, of course focused on scanning the area, keeping apprised of threats and making note of the people who made note of them. No one made any moves, no one gave Steve an excuse, but that was easier than watching Tony make a fool out of himself.

When he glanced back, Tony had a busty, shorter brunette on his lap, and his hands were teasing along her stomach. Steve glanced away, but still heard the start of their conversation.

"Come here often?"

The woman answered with a low, throaty chuckle. "Only when I have a very good reason." She moved, hands starting up Tony's chest before her right thumb seemed to come up and rest casually against his throat - left side. His own hand teased left of her belly button. Their eyes locked, and Steve wasn't sure they wouldn't start kissing right then. He turned away. "I can give you anything you want, be anyone you want."

"I think I'd like you better with red hair," Tony answered.

Steve couldn't help but feel Tony was embarrassing himself utterly, hung up on Pepper like he still obviously was, but the woman seemed charmed... or... expecting to get paid. Honestly she seemed to be looking to get paid.

"How much?" Tony asked, and Steve's eyebrows arched, shocked, because Tony was... well... why was he paying?!?

"How much do you have?" She laughed, though, leaning in and pressing her lips to his throat. "Fifty, sixty, depends what you want?"
"And how long do I get to keep you?" Tony asked.

"How long are you going to take?"

Tony laughed, and his arm looped around her back, gently easing her to stand by the table. "Come on," Tony said, grabbing Steve by the tie.

"No way."

"I thought you had to check for poison lipstick," Tony answered, grinning, and he dragged Steve; Steve, God help him, was supposed to be watching Tony's back, but there was absolutely no way he was...

The woman - he still didn't even know her name - was laughing and tugging at Tony's tie all the way up to their suite; Tony even threw his wallet at Steve to make him open the door while Tony grabbed the woman and levered her up by her butt... only for the two of them to tumble into the room. Steve tried, valiantly to shut the door behind them, only for her to pull him in by the wrist.

When the door closed, she climbed immediately off Tony and glowered at him. "How did you know about the scar?"

"I've seen your un-Photoshopped lingerie photo shoot."

Steve gawked between the two of them, only for the woman... for... Natasha to pull away the film on her face and pull off the wig. "Could you be any more of a pervert?"

"Do you really want me to answer that?"

Natasha walked into the room and Tony followed; Steve sort of stumbled for a moment before she looked over her shoulder and smiled at him. "I told you, public displays make people uncomfortable."

Steve was dealing with uncomfortable right now, with the knowledge that Tony had just... that Natasha had just... like it was nothing and... they'd looked gorgeous. He blushed, again. "I need a drink." He went to the mini-fridge and pulled out a bottled water before swallowing half of it in one gulp.

"So where's our idiot?" Tony asked, when Steve came up beside him.

"Like I said, fifty, sixty guards, Lowtown. I just found him yesterday." Natasha pulled up a camera, and Tony took the card out of it before sliding it into his tablet and starting to look. "I could get in... not easily, but it shouldn't be that hard. They have a lot of guns, he's being tortured. I'm not sure why, almost everything he knows is on the internet."

"Sometimes it's just for kicks," Tony said, voice soft. "Is he officially a prisoner of the state, or do they have some plausible deniability about his detainment?"

"Deniability."

"That works in our favor. Any action won't be against the state just criminals being criminals, as long as they can't positively ID you. Do you have another mask?"

Natasha shook her head. "Just the one I used to get into the WSC meeting."

Planning Steve could do; he and Natasha went over the blueprints and schematics of the buildings
near where Clint was being held, while Tony undid his tie and messed up his hair, then went back to work on his own tablet.

"Did you really not recognize me?" Natasha asked. "I'm offended."

"I thought you were..."

"A hooker?"

"A working gal!" Steve hissed back at her. "When Stark said you should have been a redhead..."

"That's the point Steve. That's subterfuge, that's the mask: Tony Stark, lonely, sad, billionaire looking to bottle lightning. It's an easy sell to anyone who doesn't know him." Natasha and he continued to plan, going over their way in...

"Pretty sure I can make you... five flashbangs and a makeshift Widow Sting from the stuff in the room," Tony said. "Actually... let me do that."

Steve rolled his eyes, but was at least a little a little impressed as well.

"When can we move in?" Steve said, going over the last of their plans.

"Stark's under watch, no doubt about that," Natasha answered. "No suit?"

Tony shook his head. "Left it in the airplane per customs regs."

"So he's vulnerable, and just striding into Lowtown would raise a lot of eyebrows... and we'd still have to get Clint out," Natasha continued.

"Even the plane isn't safe from search, if they ask, I have to open up the cargo hold and passenger manifest. They can also legally keep us from leaving..." Tony frowned. "Complications abound."

So they needed to get Steve, and hopefully Tony, down to Lowtown without arousing suspicion of anyone watching them, they needed to get into a secured area and get Clint out without anyone knowing he had been sprung, and then, even after they got Clint to the plane, they would still probably be searched. For a brief, tiny, infinitesimal moment, he missed the ability to do whatever he thought was best for the mission and Fury could deal with the consequences.

"What if..." Steve considered, thinking on the fly. "What if we went to Lowtown so you could look for... um... a guy, a working guy!"

"I'm uncomfortable with how much Captain America wants me to make out with guys," Tony said.

"Well they know Natasha's here; as soon as a man and a woman break into the facility they'll know it's us, so there's no point in hiding that, but if we use Natasha's mask on Clint we can make it look like I... like I was getting him for you. We could get him back to your hotel almost no questions asked. Natasha can come and go, right? So can you and I. All we need to do is smuggle him to your plane, hide him somewhere, and we're home free!"

"Is that all?" Tony asked, but he did look like he was thinking about it. "Well, I want you to know I take full credit for your plan, because it's entirely too devious for you, and involves male prostitutes. Sorry Natasha, I'm sure we'd be flawless, but apparently I needed something a bit harder tonight."

"No hard feelings," Natasha answered, but she did pull the face mask back on and settled the wig before she leaned up and gave Tony a peck on the lips. "Sorry I couldn't be what you wanted me to
Her voice was deep and sultry, and even the words themselves shot a jolt down Steve's spine. It was no wonder men did whatever Natasha told them to.

"Meet you at the corner of Twink Terrace and Bear Boulevard in three hours, Widow."

Steve nodded, agreeing with the time frame, before his forehead crinkled. "I didn't see those street names on the map."

Steve served as the driver of the disgustingly expensive car that brought him and Tony into Lowtown; Tony sat in the back, fiddling repeatedly with his tablet. Natasha had already gotten out of the hotel and was waiting for Steve in a nearby alley. The three of them were connected with earbuds that Tony had passed out before the mission started in earnest.

"You going to be alright?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, I'll just sit here thinking of the attractive boy toy that Captain America is going to pick me up from the corner store," Tony said, grinning at him. "No, the car's pretty secure, and I can get out if need be. Actually... I think I'm going to have to make another copy of Fury's old van, that thing was a beast."

"Didn't save his life," Steve said, feeling a twist at the lie, but Tony wasn't even looking him in the eye so he didn't notice.

"It's your show, Commander," Tony said, ignoring Steve's words. "Lethal force is not authorized, highest degree of stealth. Please don't make us an international incident, that would be embarrassing."

Steve turned from the driver's seat and gave Tony a quick salute. "Wouldn't want to embarrass you, Director, you do such a great job of it yourself."

"Damn right."

Steve stepped out in the street, and he tried to calm his nerves. They were a half-dozen blocks from their actual target, and as Steve weaved through the streets, Natasha came to fall in beside him.

"Our first priority is the retrieval," Steve said, voice hard. He checked the 'Widow Sting' at Natasha’s wrist - more a collection of metal and wires on her fist. "Non-lethal force only, per the Director. I'll concentrate on locating the target and extracting, you liaise with the Director on any electronic intelligence monitoring." He handed over a small thumb drive.

"We've got to be stealthily," Tony's voice came over their ears. "I've designed a spike to scramble the evidence of an intrusion, but that's not an excuse to be sloppy."

"Show time," he said, tugging a mask down over the top of his face; he was comfortable with that, he wore the helmet often enough.

Steve hit first, pulling a pair of rocks from the street and flinging them like a pair of stones across a pond. They shattered the cameras that flanked the door, and a half second later he kicked the door in, cracking it off its hinges and sending it into the front of the safe house.

Natasha was only a breath behind him, and they fought their way, back to back, through the two
front guards. An inner door opened, and three more guards charged in.

"Blasting their comms," Tony said. "We'll go dark on the mic and the Widow Sting for about forty-five."

The lights flickered, and Steve felt the electricity in his teeth and the shell of his ear. Steve took down two, Natasha took one. The next few seconds were a chaotic mix of gunfire and fists, as a bullet winged Steve and Natasha cracked the offending gunner, hard. He checked his shoulder - not enough blood to leave a mark, hopefully. What was so hard about leaving no trace, Steve cursed to himself.

After that, he fell into an easy pattern of taking down the offending free agents, keeping himself down and as inconspicuous as he could. Stealth missions he wasn't unfamiliar with, but actually trying to keep the whole base off high alert wasn't as easy as he thought it would be.

They made it to the area they'd thought might house Clint; when Steve stepped into the room, Natasha a few feet behind him, still out of the room, a gorgeous woman in skin-tight bright green came into view, leaning, ever so casually, on a bound, gagged, and beaten Clint.

"Captain America," she said, her voice almost purred as she said it.


"Sorry, ma'am," he said. "I'm afraid you have me mistaken with someone else."

Tony snorted this time. "Nice plausible deniability, dumb ass."

Steve gave Natasha a quick hand gesture. Ophelia no doubt knew she was there, but her attention was all on him. He needed her to disengage, finish her own mission.


"I hope we can have a good experience, regardless," Ophelia continued, as she reached to her waist and pulled at a handle, letting free a long, thin green whip that she let casually dangle at her side. "I won't bother to tell you you won't get away with this. My darling Tony has walked you right into an embarrassing intelligence failure."

He took a deep breath, and then another.

"She's not wrong," Tony added, unhelpfully. "Don't assassinate a foreign dignitary, please, Cap."

"You work with HYDRA," Steve said, trying to feel her out. This was the first time he'd really had a minute with someone who had betrayed their world to a dictatorial ideology as though it was turning on the television.

"Have you seen the world today?" She asked, and then she laughed, pleased with her own joke as she walked to Clint's other side. "Of course you haven't, you came from this clean, black and white world where you are good and we are evil, but it's so much more than that. The people who scurry around in their lives have no idea how much they crave guidance. We're... we're a public service, Captain."

"I understand grey, lady. This is just more fear."
Before Steve could react, her hand snapped out and the whip curled around his ankle, yanking him down and starting to drag him towards her. It took a quick twist, but he was back on his feet and then hurrying towards her. She wouldn't have the same leverage again, and although she could push and pull, keeping him close, he knew he would have the upper hand as she dodged and weaved.

She punched, and he punched back. She went for his throat and he blocked. He hit her in the stomach and she barely flinched, only to return the punch with one of her own.

They traded blows, back and forth, the two of them not so much evenly matched as Steve had strength and Ophelia was clearly more comfortable with her own speed. She had a few moments of being able to take advantage of his own weight, and her own lack, to spin or throw him when he committed to an attack.

He considered whether or not he was allowed to break something, when he decided to take Tony's request for what it was. No evidence. Steve grabbed the trailing end of the whip from the ground and spun it around her legs, tightening it around and getting enough whip to bring it up to her throat, which he slowly tightened around her neck.

A groan from his left distracted him, where Natasha was pulling Clint free.

"Stop looking so beat, Barton," Natasha said, voice light. "We're getting you out of here."

"But... I was just starting to enjoy the S&M show..." He interspersed the quip with a great deal of coughing, but let himself be fitted with the SHIELD issue mask.

"Your cover is: you're a male prostitute, you're probably a little high, or drugged, maybe drunk, so don't worry about looking together," she said.

Steve checked Ophelia's pulse, beating slow, but steady, before he patted her down, finding nothing of note, he stood back up. "Ophelia is unconscious," he reported to Tony. "Barton's on his feet."

"Better just carry him bridal style for now, Cap," Tony answered in his ear. "We need to speed up our time table and we've got to get him back to the hotel."

"Can't we go straight for the plane?" Steve asked. Clint didn't look great as it was, but the man did accept Steve swooping him up and carrying him out as Natasha dealt with the stragglers.

"Not unless you want me to explain why I'm bringing a drugged and beaten prostitute-slash-Avenger onto my plane. No, we've got an exit strategy, we just have to implement it now. I'm going to file our flight plan as soon as we get back to the hotel." Tony sounded more and more tense. "Come on."

They managed to get Clint to stagger into the back seat of Tony's car, into Tony's waiting arms, while Steve went back to his position in the driver's seat.

"Hello, gorgeous," Tony said, starting to peel away the layer of Clint's jacket. "You're going to get medical attention," he told Clint, pulling out what must have been a small first aid kit. "But they can demand a 24 hour hold on our departure, which they'll do, searching for you. You'll be locked up, without access to us, or really anything beyond some life support, for those 24 hours. Understood?"

"Why am I taking orders from you?" Clint asked, more confused than anything else.

"Shhh." Tony scrambled around in the minibar and pulled out what looked to be a small container of orange juice. "Gonna sting. Drink."

Clint did, coughing some up on Tony but otherwise greedily accepting the juice. Tony brushed away
"What were they trying to get out of you?" Tony asked.

"Tony!" Steve protested, loudly.

"Could be time sensitive," Tony shot back.

"Just... Tesseract, Loki stuff," Clint answered. "I filed reports but... they wanted to know more, wanted... wanted to know if they could get... Red Skull..." He coughed again.

"Makes sense," Tony answered, carefully pressing his fingers to Barton's shoulders, his ribs, his stomach, checking for bruising and probably internal bleeding. "We'll get you some more evaluation soon. At the very least you can have pain killers or adrenaline."

Clint whined, softly.

The trip up to Tony's room was more delicate than the first part of the rescue, but Clint did manage to put on at least half a show of draping, sloppily, over Tony as they made their way up to his room and set Clint down on the couch.

"Pack," Tony ordered. "Now. Everything as you found it."

Steve obeyed instantly, grabbing up Tony's clothes and shoving them into his suitcase, and then finishing up with his own. Clint was sitting up, a little more, drinking from a glass of water and taking a handful of pills. "Can't I have something stronger?"

"Not until JARVIS checks you out," Tony answered. "And... come on Circus Boy."

Tony helped him into a suitcase, a large one, but still... Clint groaned and contorted himself into a fairly impressive knot, knees tucked to his chest, neck bent down, ankles clenched, shoulders hunched. "You carry that like it weighs nothing," he told Steve, "and be careful." After another few seconds, Tony gave Clint a pat on the head. "Almost home, Barton." And then zipped him in, leaving a small gap for air.

They made their way to the car, Steve loaded up their bags, and they made their leisurely - 'we're not fleeing Madripoor with our tails between our legs' - trip to the airport.

"How are we--?"


Steve shook his head, but went back to his drive. "Nice work."

"You, too," Tony answered. "I'm a little surprised you punched a girl."

"Well it's only fair, if she was going to start punching me."

Steve got the suitcases loaded, only for Tony to head up to the cockpit, where Steve heard a light instruction of: "You stay there, you didn't see nothing."

"We've been asked to hold for inspection, sir."

"Then hold." Tony came back into the main cabin and looked down at the suitcase. He opened it up.

"We should put him in the cargo hold," Steve said. Clint might be in danger there, he could bleed, he
could stop breathing and they wouldn't even know, but...

"No." Tony helped Clint to his feet, and started to drag him to the back of the cabin, only for him hold his hand to an innocuous-seeming panel, which opened onto a keypad. He then keyed in a sequence of numbers and revealed the Iron Man armor. Another few entries and the armor folded open, and Tony helped him in. "That'll do some diagnostic evaluation on you, even has a few on board medications. Get rid of that." Tony gestured to the suitcase.

After a few twists, Steve crunched the side-walls of it shoved it in with some trays.

"Man, I was looking forward to the hooker..." Tony said, before pulling Steve over to the table. "We'll be detained for the next 24 hours, might as well get comfortable."

Tony kicked up his feet and pulled out a tablet. Steve looked at him, at the purposeful, poised, relaxed mask when Steve knew for a fact that Tony was worrying about Clint, worrying about that battleship, worrying about S.W.O.R.D. and the UN, and for the first time he realized exactly how good an actor Tony Stark could be, and how glad Steve was the man was on his side.

"You know," Steve said, a moment later. "I had a few ideas for an insignia design for S.W.O.R.D."

Tony arched an eyebrow. "Thrill me."

So Steve pulled out his notepad and started to sketch for Tony.
Tony had taken up position in one of his chairs and was slowly working his way through a tumbler of scotch while Steve doodled across from him. There were at least a dozen inspectors going over every last inch of the plane, and after checking Tony and Steve's seats, along with the table, the two of them were mostly left alone. The pilot helped the inspectors into the every nook as requested.

"Sorry for not calling you in on the Washington incident," Steve said, apropos to nothing.

Tony blinked, owlishly, where Steve was looking back at him, very seriously. He supposed he should consider the apology seriously, so he nodded. "Being in New York was better to collaborate with Natasha, even if that wasn't my intent."

"Just... when Fury told me you'd designed the engines, and then the Insight programming ended up being what it was..." Steve shook his head, but he seemed to be really trying to put his thoughts into words. "I should have trusted you."

"Nice thought, Cap, but you don't know me." That was the truth, they'd gotten to know each other better in the last two weeks than they ever had during the Battle of New York. They'd gone months with little more than a few emails passing between them. Tony did nothing but needle Steve with a few science fiction movie suggestions and little else.

Tony hadn't wanted to think about New York, to start. He wanted to distance himself from the Tower as much as possible, he'd retreated into the armor. After the Mandarin incident, he'd gotten back on track, at least some, but seeing Steve would have brought back so much about New York and all of the nightmares, until Tony had really started to put it all away.

"I knew your father, he--"

Tony glowered down into his scotch. He did not want to talk about his father. Still, the ever-present elephant in the room wasn't going to shove itself out of the airlock. Tony set the glass down on the wood with a clunk before he looked up to meet Steve's eyes.

"I'm not my father."

"I know that, Tony, I--"

"Whatever, relationship we have will never be what you had with my dad."

Steve waited, and an arched eyebrow seemed to ask 'are you finished?' before he took another fortifying breath. "I just meant... you clearly learned a lot from him." Steve fell silent, waiting again, before he continued. "He was in on Rebirth from the start, he-- he could have learned so much more and gone so much farther if he'd worked with Hydra during the War. He was in awe of what they accomplished every time he peeled open their tech. And... I know you two have a... you're a lot like him."

Tony's jaw clenched, but Steve didn't back down. He did wait, though, expectantly.

There were so many things Tony could say: his father had never been around because of Steve, out in the arctic, looking, over and over; his father was constantly away, working on thousands of his own projects with no time for Tony; his father wanted Tony out of his hair, never with a word other than that Tony needed to get serious and think about the future... "I have probably a thousand soundbites about him I bring out depending on the interview, none of them seem appropriate."
"I think the War hardened him," Steve said. "He was such a... ah..." He chuckled and gave Tony a particularly bashful look. "A playboy."

"Weird to think of your father like that," Tony answered, and it was hard. As much as he had seen the old reels, there was definitely a harder, more hawkish man who Tony had known growing up. "He was pretty old when I was born... I didn’t know him that well, really. He didn’t make the time, and he didn’t have the time to really talk about what it meant to do what we do. After I was captured, I had questions about what he thought about what we did as a business, about the nature of modern war when the enemies were so much more nebulous with terrorist actors instead of nation states. That's a lot of heavy stuff. I find out he *founded* S.H.I.E.L.D.? I had no idea."

"And you founded S.W.O.R.D.," Steve answered, cocking his head as if to say 'so there'.

"I thought he was a stodgy old business man who just didn't have any time for me," Tony responded. "Instead he was working on green energy, an international spy organization, and the head of a multinational corporation. Sort of puts my inability to keep a girlfriend in perspective."

Steve smiled. "He did get married, eventually."

"To a woman who saw him every other month, maybe..." Tony sighed, and then looked at Steve, scowling. "Why am I talking to you about my mother?"

A flicker of hurt crossed Steve's features, and then it smoothed over, turning back to something more neutral, and Tony felt like a bit of a jackass. "I just-- knowing that Peggy had a good life, that the Commandos made it through the war, it's the only way I've got to put those things to rest. Fixing S.H.I.E.L.D. or remaking it with a better look to the future, is a way I can thank them, remember them. So I guess I just hope your mom was a hell of a lady."

Tony saw that this was a question that Steve had wanted to ask for months, but never really had a quiet moment like this, free from Tony's own ghosts and any sort of danger. "Maria Carbonell," he said, quietly. Everyone always talked about Howard this and Howard that, but Mom... "She was... Dad had all sorts of charitable foundations, Stark Industries has always given back, firefighter and police officer funds, education, childhood illness prevention... Mom was the secretary to the Stark Charitable Foundations President. She had a bit of a scientific mind, but I think she just liked helping people more, and it was the 60s so it wasn't like they were going to hire her to run a lab. Anyway, they met at a fundraiser, it was animosity at first sight, she told him he was being a cad..."

Steve started to chuckle, and then laugh. "You're kidding."

"My father took a great deal more interest in the Stark Foundation's charitable efforts after that. I don't know, I guess he still had that charm... they got married eighteen months later, Mom took over the *Maria* Stark Foundation, did a lot of wining and dining when Dad wasn't around. They were always doing their own thing. I guess when I was a kid it seemed cold." Tony thought about it, swirling the scotch as he looked down into it, searching for answers to the past. "Maybe that's why they worked? I don't know. Mom was a good thirty years younger than him."

The answering bulge of Steve's eyes was well worth it, but then he was smiling again. "Of course Howard would marry someone half his age and twice as stubborn as him. That's sweet. There..." Steve looked awkward, and embarrassed again. "There's not a lot about her on the internet other than that she ran the Maria Stark Foundation."

"She was a hell of a gal... Obie..." Tony didn't like to think about him, about his heart being ripped out and nearly dying, about killing his mentor and father figure. Without even thinking about it, he pushed his hand against his sternum and bone and metal pushed back, no arc reactor, nothing to
steal. "Obie said it was her bell bottoms and 'hippy hippy shake' that had Dad looking at green energy in the 70s..."

"I know that reference."

Tony snorted.

"She sounds nice."

Tony might have been growing as a person, because he didn't pop Steve's bubble by reminding him that she'd died in the same crash that had killed his father when she was only forty-five. Another year or two, and Tony would be older than her when she died. "She was."

"I think this is the longest we've ever talked."

"Certainly without biting each other's heads off," Tony answered, but he did check his watch. "We've got another nineteen hours, though, so we'd better come up with something else to talk about."

Something had been bothering Tony, something - one of many things - that had been teasing around in his mind for the last weeks. He checked over his shoulder, no inspectors in sight. "When were you going to tell me that Fury's not dead?"

Steve's eyes widened in shock. "I-- ah...?"

Tony gave Steve a flat, unimpressed look. "How long have you been working for a spy organization? Go for 'curious' not 'deer in headlights'."

Steve's face recovered, but honestly he was far too expressive, not even microexpressions, just his whole face said exactly what he was feeling. "What gave it away?"

"Two level tens are needed to unlock the archives Natasha dropped on the internet," Tony rattled off his reasoning: "Hill took possession of the corpse but he never made it to an undertaker. No funerary company in the DMV area did his prep, no coffin purchase..."

"I'm sorry." Steve hung his head. "I didn't want to lie to you."

"Then don't." Tony answered. "If you want to be down on how Fury ran things, you have to remember the trust flows both ways. You want to know I'm telling you all I am? You have to tell me when I'm stepping into a dead man's shoes and the man's not even dead. Deal?" Tony asked, and part of him was actually scared of the answer, because it was entirely possible that Steve didn't trust him, that they were comrades in arms and nothing more.

"Yes. I-- I'm sorry. You've asked us to trust you and I didn't--"

"Have you seen Sneakers, yet?" Tony asked, changing topic on a dime, because he didn't need to second guess himself, and wonder, because he needed the Avengers to trust him, and he couldn't rely on his smarts and his wits to dig up the things his coworkers should tell him. "I think you'll enjoy it. Or possibly find it ironic. Come on."

They might have been on the cusp of friendship, or something like it, and the two of them enjoyed the movie while the Madripoor cops kept trying to find Clint. So far, so good.
"Stop bleeding all over my billion thread count sheets," Tony grumbled as Clint continued to do no such thing. They were international airspace, and Clint was out of the Iron Man armor, but he was still pretty bloody, and sore, and no doubt had some broken parts. The internal bleeding had mostly sorted itself out, thankfully, but JARVIS had kept a pretty close eye on it.

"You try getting kidnapped for two weeks by Nazis and see how you like it," Clint groaned, and Tony froze for a moment as he started to clean one of the larger gashes that looked like it was brewing an infection. "Sorry."

"Nah, it's great. That's how you become a superhero." Tony looked down at Clint's back. "No, seriously there's pus coming out of your back. This is disgusting. You owe me a new bed."

"You can afford your own new bed," Clint growled back.

"Fine, fine. I should make Steve do this, I bet he knows how to medic people," Tony said, mostly under his breath, but Steve was standing in the doorway so it wasn't like the man would miss it.

"Gangrene," Steve said, voice serious. "We'll have to chop off the arm." And then he broke out into a smile. "Back in my day, we got our penicillin and we were happy for it."

"I don't like either of you." But Clint submitted to his wounds being as cleaned as Tony would be able to manage with a moderately appointed first aid kit. "So what the hell happened? I was just doing some recon, trying to get a bead on a few Hydra supply lines, and then... boom I got burned in a big way and they're trying to beat Tesseract info out of me. They didn't even ask for my codes, anything like that, just about my being mind controlled."

"Yeah... ah..." Tony glanced to Steve and then back to Clint, wincing as he did. "So... there was a bit of a... dust up."

"How'd I get burned?"

"That's my fault," Steve said, no hesitation. "We got into a mess in Washington and we uncovered evidence that S.H.I.E.L.D. had been compromised at every level. World Security Council on down had been infiltrated by Hydra since its inception, to get that information out there, we had to dump the S.H.I.E.L.D. servers for the world to see... but that included active ops, active covers... and you, and about two hundred others, were blown."

"Hydra? Right," Clint snorted. "And like Captain America would pull a Sno---" And then he craned his head to where Tony was sitting. "Are you fucking serious? S.H.I.E.L.D. is Hydra? How long? What the hell?"

"Since just after World War II," Tony assured him, well, it probably wasn't assurance, but perhaps it would make him feel better to know how many people had been taken in by it. "I wouldn't have believed it if I hadn't seen the documents for myself. They tried to assassinate a few hundred thousand dissidents, people who were going to make trouble for their plans for a world of alles in ordnung."

"That's messed up," Clint answered, face pressing into Tony's pillow.

"I'm the Director of the new agency," Tony added.

"Super messed up."

"Not yet," Steve corrected. "You still have confirmation hearings, and they're going to vet your bylaws and contracts..."
Tony didn't want to think about that part right now, so he didn't. "When we get you back state-side, we'll get you cleaned up properly, get you some actual antibiotics and deal with your seeping pus problem."

Clint eventually passed out, or fell asleep, face pressed into Tony's mattress, and Tony left him there to sleep it off.

"He gonna be alright?" Steve asked when the two of them retreated to the airplane's lounge.

"Hopefully," Tony answered. "He's running a fever, but JARVIS doesn't think he's septic. He'll be out of commission for a while to recover. Not all of us have Super Soldier healing." Tony gave into the urge to collapse, falling into one of his chairs to just rest. It wasn't even as though he would be able to rest for long, Maria could call, Clint could wake up, Steve could decide they needed to talk about something, and he was just tired. "This is why I let other people run my company."

Steve put a hand on his shoulder and gave a light squeeze, before he headed over to sit across from him. The two of them fell into a gentle silence, punctuated only by the flight attendant who came over and poured him another scotch, but the man was blessedly quiet for the rest of the ride to Los Angeles, the refueling, and the return to New York.

Maria tried to bring him up to speed as soon as he stepped onto the command floor, but Tony gave her one look before he headed to his quarters, showered, shaved, and changed, before finally coming back.

"Now you may speak."

"The UN has scheduled the hearing to determine S.W.O.R.D. and the Avengers ability to operate." Maria paused, probably for the dramatic effect. "Six months."

"Six months?!" Tony asked, making sure he'd heard her right. "They want us to continue to operate for six months before they make a decision? God, I could start World War III by then. So... do we have some sort of interim license to continue our operations?"

"Functionally we're in a trial period."

"By which they mean they want to see how badly we fuck up in the meantime, while maintaining the plausible deniability that we operated without their blessing." Tony fell silent, and then tapped his fingers against his console. "Alright, business as usual... considering what 'usual' is now, this should be fun."

He punched up his preferred display console.

"JARVIS, compile me a list of the team's personal and professional vulnerabilities and then get Stacy from public relations up here so we can plan a counter-position." Tony pulled up the mission reports from the other actions that had taken place while he was extracting Clint in Madripoor. There were a few more scientists retrieved, several new programs that Tony needed to go over with Bruce, and a training roster he'd need to go over with Maria and then Steve. "How's recruitment?"

"Tapered off considerably," Maria answered. "Most of the rest of the S.H.I.E.L.D. agents have gone on to the CIA, FBI, and NSA. I think beyond the people you rescued personally, there's a feeling that they should wait until S.W.O.R.D. is officially online, rather than throwing themselves into an agency that might not find its legs."

"So we get to try to prove we can run the world's security, while having a thousandth the level of..."
assets that S.H.I.E.L.D. had to do the same job? Great.” Projects... projects... he glanced over his other open cases, other problems that he had on his radar that would need to be solved. "How's our Nazi freezy pop doing?"

"Agent Wilson has been working with him, and your requested neurologists from the VA has looked at him." The news wasn't that much of a surprise, Tony had tried to get some resources to help Bucky, but they were in uncharted territory and it wasn't going to get easier. "There's a lot of Winter Soldier data in the dump that went out from the S.H.I.E.L.D. servers, and that's helped."

"How long until we start seeing more Winter Soldiers because the information in how to accomplish it is out there?" Tony asked, more rhetorical than anything else. That was the big concern, it was why he kept his tech proprietary, and his suit specifications off anything but his most private servers. "The process doesn't seem to take long term," Hill answered. "It would work better on someone who already had their ideals in line with the brainwasher... and only the serum made it possible for Barnes to survive his interim freezes. Hopefully we won't see anyone quite as competent as him for some time."

"Hopefully." Tony let out a long, slow breath. "But he's getting his memories back?"

"Slowly."

"That'll make Steve happy." Tony looked at the date of their testimony before the UN again, and stared at it. "Six months, I went from no Iron Man to the Mark VI in that time frame. Hell I built 30 suits in that time frame. Do they have an idea how much could happen? And people who deal with us will have every right to assume we're not legitimate... I bet Dad never had to deal with this."

Maria, thankfully, didn't answer that.

"Alright, we'll need to rework some assumptions." He glanced over to Maria again to see she looked more than a little run down herself. They needed to get another few people who could handle their day to day, because the two of them might kill themselves at this rate. "Get some sleep," he told her. "I have simulations to run."

She was tired enough that she didn't protest, and Tony pulled up a chair before he started tweaking the algorithms he was using to select targets and assign priorities.

He wasn't certain how long he stayed at it, working, keeping an eye on the various Hydra assets they knew about, sniffing on the satellite communications that he was able to gain access to, while the back of his mind considered a propulsion problem to Vision's suit and trying to decide if a new helicarrier was a brilliant or a horrible idea. Tony liked his Tower too much to live on a helicarrier.

"Hard at work?" Steve's voice drifted from beside him, and then a mug of coffee was placed near his elbow.

"Something like that. We've been given enough rope to hang ourselves, so we're going to have to figure out how to use it all." Tony pulled up some of his calculations. "The UN isn't going to consider the question of the S.W.O.R.D. charter for six months, which is great, because it means we have some time to stabilize our position, but it's awful because we have that long to ruin our potential support base and leave the world worse off than it was. Here are our main priorities I've been working from."

Tony brought up the files. "First - destruction or reacquisition of all resources that have come under the purview of Hydra; second - safety and security of all S.H.I.E.L.D. resources that remain..."
uncorrupted by Hydra influence; third - strengthening of S.W.O.R.D. ties to a broader base of national interests in the wake of our new, more international, focus."

Steve nodded. "I think we should prioritize getting the S.H.I.E.L.D. men and women safe. I... that's my fault, and seeing Clint like he is..."

"We've taken care of most of the assets in immediate danger, Steve. It had to be done."

"Doesn't make me feel any better when I'm watching them take care of Clint in the hospital," Steve answered. "You order men forward, you lead the way, but they signed up for it, they knew the risks when they choose to stand beside you and..." Steve bowed his head, and Tony just jostled him with an elbow.

"I'm not sure how Fury did it," Tony admitted. "He was the spy. He played all the angles at once, covered all his bets. I could lose tens of thousands of dollars in a single roll at the craps table and I didn't care..." That was admittedly a younger, simpler Tony Stark, but the general premise remained.

"Aren't you a genius or something?" Steve asked, grinning over at him. "You'll figure it out." He sobered, though, a moment later. "Need my help for anything?"

"We've got a few new personnel, and we need to keep the core Avengers functional as a unit in case we need to deal with a larger problem than simple international fuckups." Tony wasn't sure what the best priority of other problems. "It might be good if you could talk to the new agents, give 'em some of the ol' 'Yes We Can'."

Steve looked over the list Tony had forwarded him, nodded, and then gave Tony a firm squeeze on the shoulder. "You've got this, Tony."

Tony snorted as Steve headed out, but he couldn't deny it was nice to hear.

* *

Hours ran more slowly for Tony; he almost considered asking JARVIS to time them, because he could have sworn they used to go by more quickly. In spite of that, he had almost no time to himself, barely enough time to keep himself fed and clean, much less all of the other thousands of things he had to organize in his day. Sleep was a luxury he couldn't afford as much as he used to... it reminded him of just after New York, when his nightmares would wake him more often than not, and he wanted nothing more than to just have a few moments of sleep.

He didn't linger over designs as much anymore - there were designs, of course, the suits, upgrades for Vision or JARVIS, but there were few and far between - instead he looked at mission reports and at intelligence actions. His analysts kept him apprised, JARVIS kept him on top of things, but he was still human and he still needed the hours to process it all. Tony should have been in bed, at least sitting on top of the coverlet and the cool sheets, but instead he was down in the lounge.

It had originally been meant as an Avengers commonfloor, a place where the team could get together, strategize, watch a movie... now it was an officers' mess of sorts, a situation room with luxurious couches and chairs. It was their war room away from the war room.

Tony was so lost in thought he didn't even notice when Steve entered, but he did hear the soft clinking of a glass, glancing up to see Steve pouring himself a glass of milk.

"Just got back?" Tony asked, voice sleepier than he would have thought. Steve had been off somewhere - Africa, maybe - Tony didn't remember off the top of his head.
"Just debriefed with Hill," Steve answered, taking a sip and then scrounging around for something more to eat.

He had so many things on his own plate, that Tony seemed to be letting more and more through. This was more than Tony wanted to deal with right now. This was more than he ever wanted to deal with. "I miss being irresponsible."

Steve answered by leaving a sandwich at his elbow. Tony looked at it, confused, before he took a large bite. Steve sat down across from him, his own meal perched on his knees, and then he took a bite.

"Thanks. Didn't realize how hungry I was."

"You've been pulled in a lot of directions," Steve answered, diplomatic and polite. "I guess we all have but... You've taken on a lot."

Tony shrugged. "This was all because I didn't want the Avengers funded by people who wanted to nuke Manhattan. Law of unintended consequences, I suppose."

"I'm glad you were ready to take up the reins," Steve admitted, voice growing even softer. "I don't think... I just wanted to take S.H.I.E.L.D. down, and Hydra, they were so intertwined I guess I just hoped things, the right things, would rise to the surface in the wreckage... It's easy to crash a couple helicarriers into the Potomac, it's hard to pick up the pieces afterwards."

"I've been thinking about my father," Tony said, because there was nothing else for it, and there was no one else he would have admitted it to, not even Pepper. "Growing up, I wanted to be everything like him... and nothing like him. He was the ideal, a true Stark, and now I'm left with all these pieces and wishing I had more of his experience. I wish I could have actually known him, rather than the image and the asshole who wouldn't give me the time of day. I barely have time to sleep. I haven't talked to Rhodey in weeks; I've missed a dozen fundraisers that I probably should have gone to; I haven't had a chance to look over the Maria Stark Foundation books to make sure we're in order on the S.W.O.R.D. funding..." Tony pinched the bridge of his nose, again, squeezing, wishing he could push away that headache and make his mind stop throbbing. "I haven't gotten to look at the Winter Soldier documents, either."

"You've been busy," Steve answered. "We all have. I wish I could be at Bucky's side, every minute of every day, but there's a huge mess, everywhere... Let me know when you need me," Steve said, standing, sandwich in hand, looking like he was ready to--

"Stay," Tony asked, his voice pathetic and raw, before he stopped himself. He wasn't going to beg for approval from Captain America - or Commander Rogers - he was better than that, he wasn't a kid anymore. "Sorry, never mind, get some sleep you've been hopping for days."

Instead of leaving, Steve headed over to Tony, leaving a half of a cushion between them but he did sit there.

Neither of them said anything while Steve finished his sandwich, Steve didn't comment when Tony buried his face in his hands, feeling the weight of the world on his shoulders and wishing that his own were anywhere near as strong - and aesthetically appealing - as Steve's.

"You'll figure it out," Steve promised him. "I'm here for you." He put a hand on Tony's shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

Tony wished it were so easy. He thought about Pepper - the ex he hadn't seen in almost six months -
or Rhodey - the best friend he hadn't spoken to in longer - hell even Banner, who he lived with, hadn't gotten his time in almost a week. He really was turning into his father.

He stood, brushed away Steve's hand, and started to head back to his room.

"Get some sleep, Cap. The next few months are going to put that promise to the test."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

Tony ignored him. There was too much he was going to have to put on Steve as is, he didn't need to add all the personal crap to the pile.

* *

Per Tony’s request, Steve started to run more intense training drills for their teams (Alpha, Bravo, and Charlie). Steve also admitted they needed to prioritize the Avengers themselves staying in fighting form as well. They might have been dealing with real-world, grounded problems for now, but the next supernatural problem could be right around the corner.

Tony, Banner, Natasha, Sam, and Vision had all made the time for this week’s drill. Tony seemed to mostly have Vision there so he could teach him the moves for when Tony wasn’t available.

"I'm not as young as I used to be," Tony admitted to Steve after the drill, in private, still dressed in his flight suit. "The suit can compensate for that, but it can't shave a decade off my age."

Tony underestimated himself, at least from a tactical perspective. He gave his all when they were drilling, and when they were in the field. The passion was there, but Tony held back now in a way he hadn't in New York, which was less than two years ago.

"Really. You're not old," Steve said. "and I say that as a nonagenarian. You're still in top form on missions but you're holding back."

"I'm old."

Steve arched an unimpressed eyebrow. "You're only as old as you feel."

"I feel old," Tony answered. "I run a world security apparatus!"

"You started running SI when you were twenty-one."

"I feel irrationally old because I'm old, I started to settle down, I tried to fucking retire. I feel old because I can't even convince myself to go out and find a twenty-something to invite home for sex because it's boring and vapid and bad for my security clearance." Tony raked his fingers through his hair. "My mid-life crisis was maturity."

Steve couldn't help the curl of a smile that tugged up at his lips, because it was funny. The Tony Stark Steve had learned about from S.H.I.E.L.D. profiling and in person wasn't the sort of man Steve would have been friends with, but this one was easy to respect, admire even, and he still oozed the raw charisma that he probably associated with his own immaturity.

"It's a good look for you," Steve said, smiling at him.

Tony looked shocked for a brief moment, and then snorted. "Haha. Yeah. No, it's terrible and I hate it. Go on. I'll be up later."

Steve nodded, the rest of the team had already hit the showers, as had Steve, and they had headed off
to their other responsibilities. He hated how conflicted Tony seemed. He wasn’t old, no matter what he said, he was a little run down, a lot more responsible, and he was still a very attractive man. The combination must have been what was pulling on Tony, and Steve wished he knew what he could do to help other than keep being there for Tony.

When Steve finished dressing, the locker room was almost completely empty but for the sound of a shower running off in the back. He knew from experience that Tony shrugged off injuries more often than he should, though, so he headed over for a quick check. Tony’s back already had a red mark or two, probably courtesy of the Hulk.

He didn’t quite suppress his sigh, which apparently was loud enough for Tony to hear because he glanced over his shoulder, gave a little confused jolt of recognition, and then turned back to the wall while he continued to scrub.

"I charge by the minute, hot stuff," Tony shouted over his shoulder, and Steve had to fight down the beet red flush to his cheeks.

Steve figured Tony couldn't have been that bad off if he was teasing him that much. He sounded tired, certainly, but he didn't sound as bad as he had after New York, breathless and surprised to still be alive. "I was just checking on y--" He had every intention of finishing his sentence, he really had, but Tony had turned around and Steve couldn't help but stare.

He hadn't really gotten an explanation of the glowing circle that had been in Tony's chest other than Natasha telling him it was an arc reactor. S.H.I.E.L.D. had a few files on it, but nothing that had explained the full extent of it, but now it was... out, and in its place with a white circle of scar tissue that stretched over most of Tony's sternum and even though he knew he should, Steve couldn't stop staring, and watching the droplets of water rolling off of Tony's hair and heading down his chest.

Tony joked about being blindingly attractive, not infrequently, but there was something informative about actually seeing the man naked. He was beautiful. He could be so charismatic and effortless sometimes, but seeing the weight of Afghanistan and Iron Man on his body was a reminder of how much the man carried under the surface.

Steve was now uncomfortably, painfully aware of the fact that Tony was attractive, and naked, and looking at him, just a little confused. “I’m fine.”

Steve nodded, mutely, before he swallowed. "Well, good. Good."

"Said that already, Cap."

What little was left of his dignity went with him as he left the locker room and headed up to his room in the elevator. Steve spent the short ride confused. Certainly he’d found men attractive before, guys on the street, fellow soldiers, actors... it wasn't any grand revelation, but the idea of finding Tony attractive and desirable was... odd. He’d let his guard down, maybe, gotten to know Tony better and gotten to see the good qualities, and then suddenly he had... a butt, a round... tone... Steve shook his head to clear it.

He’d never thought of a teammate like that, never, and he was having a hard time squaring it now, seeing Tony as a man, a man that was desirable enough to make Steve stop for air. It was too unexpected to really process, not right away, so he let it go. It was something he could consider, later, when he’d had some time to think.
With no active missions, and a great deal of desire to avoid the question of his attraction to Tony, Steve decided to hit up Bruce for one of their slightly lower priority concerns, that Steve knew still needed to remain on their radar: rogue Hydra scientist who’d been operating within S.H.I.E.L.D. It was interesting to see Bruce so clearly in his element, dressed cleanly in a white lab coat, a tablet in hand, glasses perched neatly on his nose. He looked at home, and it was hard to forget that only a few years ago he’d been on the run from the government and now he was - for all practical purposes - helping Tony reorganize a huge swath of it.

"Dr. Banner." Steve entered the room and held out a hand. "Or what are we calling you now a days? I feel like we all have new titles."

"Chief Science Officer, Research and Development," Bruce answered with a smile. "Just Dr. Banner, or Bruce, is fine Steve. Tony's been calling me Mr. Spock."

"I feel like I shouldn't encourage him."

"I let him have his fun," Bruce said. "It's not like he's getting much now, even with how much he's asked me to take on. What were you down here for?"

"Tony asked me to find out if you had any research projects that needed a more... ah... hands on approach." Steve wished he could do more. Tony and Bruce were dealing with what must have been six decades of Nazi research buried in plain sight, and it couldn't have been easy. "We have enough quinjets to form a strike team or two."

"Oh." Bruce smiled. "Good. Yes. I could use some hands. Although many of these are in territories controlled by one country or another, there are several dozen that take place in what are essentially... well they belong to a government, but S.H.I.E.L.D. purchased or land-leased the area, so there's no political complications. Second priority are territories where you could get in and out with only a local hat tip, without entering into populated areas and creating situations where civilian lives could be endangered. Lastly we have our... well our international incidents waiting to happen."

"Hong Kong," Steve said, remembering his and Tony's trip there.

"And Madripoor," Bruce answered. "Those operations will need to be more carefully planned. There's also a few that deal with... well, mind control, and the full scope of their data was not on the S.H.I.E.L.D. main servers, so I figured those would be most of interest."

Yes! Steve tried not to leap at it, though, he had to be rational about this. "This is important, Bruce, but I need to focus on the biggest threats."

"There's a little island hide away just East of the Lesser Antilles, there are over a dozen active projects there, and we're fairly sure the staff are exclusively Hydra. There are at least 3 dozen security staff to support the scientists, and they will be expecting you." Bruce gave Steve a pat on the back. "I've pushed the schematics to your phone, let me know if you need any more information, your primary objectives will be to kill or capture the Hydra personnel and their base, retrieve their research notes, and destroy the computer infrastructure of the base."

"Not the base itself?"

"Tony's words, and I quote, were 'well I'll never know when I'll need a secret underground lair to launch my doomsday weapons from', so I think he's got plans for the property."

Steve rolled his eyes, but he could also agree that an offshore base would have its own uses in a way the Tower never would. "I'll get working on this. Thanks Bruce."
He headed down to Bucky's floor, where he saw Sam and Bucky, both laughing, both with these huge... smiles on their faces that warmed Steve, and he felt even better when Bucky didn't close down when he saw Steve, just grinned even more.

"The man of the hour!" Bucky shouted at him when opened the door.

Steve snorted. "You're in a good mood."

"I was just telling your wingman here about back before you joined up," Bucky said, still smiling.

As much as Steve didn't want to hear one of the thousand embarrassing tales Bucky knew from their youth, the fact was he knew one, he remembered one, and Steve didn’t have it in his heart to tell him to stop, he wouldn't, because this was what he wanted more than anything.

"Buck, come on," he said, but it was that teasing, plaintive whine that didn't mean 'stop' just 'why do you always love to embarrass me'.

"Steve wanted to join up more than anything, but he was... well they didn't have enough Fs for him," Bucky continued. "But I... well I've always had a soft spot for the idiot, so I decided to help him. We jogged every damn day, and I thought I was going to..." Steve heard where Bucky would have gone, what he'd meant to say 'kill him'.

"He beat the stuffing out of me," Steve continued, easily. "I don't think I made it down the street once without falling over and having to catch my breath."

"But Steve just doesn't know when to quit," Bucky continued, and when he reached out, Steve didn't even flinch when his metal arm came up and ruffled Steve's hair. "Idiot."

Steve, in retaliation, shoved Sam over a bit. "On your left."

Bucky had obviously heard the story, because he started to chuckle again. "You've got something on your mind," Bucky leaned in. "You're so transparent."

"To you, maybe," Steve answered. "Yeah, got a mission I need to prep for." He handed the tablet to Sam. "But I've got some time, no rush, and Banner thinks we'll be able to find some more information about... how to help you, since Tony and Bruce both agree there's a lot of science fiction in what's been going on the last year or so. Sam can do that, though, we should watch something."

The two of them ended up watching a documentary on the Cold War, which wasn't particularly exciting, but did give Steve some new insights into Tony's weird politics obsession, and allowed him to cross off 'Berlin Wall (up/down)' from his list.

He and Bucky slouched next to each other, and Sam would pass the tablet over to him from time to time with suggestions for ingress, places that looked like they might hold areas to ambush them from, that sort of thing, but Steve tried to enjoy the time with his friend.

"Sort of makes you wonder about what the hell everyone was thinking after the War," Bucky said, as the credits rolled. "You save the world and it's all for that..."

Steve understood, he did, it was hard to see all of that work, and time, fighting the Nazis and Hydra only for it to spiral so far out of control, McCarthyism, Red Scares, the Cold War, Korea, Vietnam and a dozen more proxy wars... it was a hard thing to know.

"It wasn't all bad," Sam said, passing the tablet back to Steve for final approval. "Civil rights, gay rights, women's lib... but nice to know the Greatest Generation is still disappointed in kids today,"
"Get off my lawn," Steve mumbled, under his breath, and Sam laughed. "He's right though, lots of good progress." Nothing had made Steve prouder than the civil rights movement, knowing that it wasn't even a question that Sam could serve alongside him, because there had been problems when Gabe had first joined the Howling Commandos.

"He was born with that sunny disposition," Bucky's voice wasn't conspiratorial at all, as he leaned over to tell that to Sam. "It's terrifying."

"I know, man."

"Thanks," Steve said, and then he gave Sam a nudge. "Go suit up, we'll head out soon."

"Commander."

Sam headed out, and as soon as he'd done, Steve turned back to Bucky. "We're hoping we'll find something to help with your programming," Steve said. "I don't want to get your hopes up, Dr. Banner is so busy..."

"He comes by sometimes." Bucky looked down at his hands, and then back up at Steve. "He's got a girl he's working with on my... problem. I don't want to cause any problems for you, Steve. I know there's a lot going on there now, and I know a lot of it's my fault..."

"None of it's your fault," Steve answered, immediately. "Bucky, you were brainwashed, you were acting in instinct, programming you couldn't fight. Zola used you. I don't blame you for anything that happened."

"Still want me to keep a low profile though."

That brought a chuckle deep from Steve's chest, because he could admit Bucky wasn't wrong on that. "That will change. After we help you, you can do anything you want, fight, read, date pretty dames, anything you want."

"You're not replacing me that easily," Bucky answered, tilting his head to where Sam had left. "Never replacing you."

"Yeah, yeah. Come here." Bucky grabbed him, and hugged him, with one final ruffle of his hair. "Can't wait until I can get back out with you again."

"Soon," Steve promised, and he hoped they would find enough to make Steve's promise not be a lie.

The trip to the Antilles was fast, and the briefing of the actual strike team was had on the fly. They had their floor plans, and their entry strategy, and how they would take the area.

He looked over the small assembled group. "I know we've run a few missions, but this is the first time we've gone into a S.H.I.E.L.D. installation. Some of you may be tempted to think of our opponent as former S.H.I.E.L.D., but anyone who you will face today is Hydra, they have always been Hydra. Remember that. Be prepared for anything from the S.H.I.E.L.D. arsenal, they know all our plays."

Steve glanced around to his assembled team, armored up with Stark body armor, but standard issue parachutes. Sam was in his Falcon suit and Steve had a parachute as well since he'd need to do a landing, and couldn't splashdown.
"Supposedly Stark will get us jetpacks soon," Steve said, and that got him a chuckle. "Are ingress is the North West corner of the compound, follow my lead, Hallings will take care of the IT. There may be hostages, but personnel rosters say it's unlikely."

It was easy, not the mission itself - Steve got himself winged twice with bullets - but falling back into that role, Commander Rogers, taking point, leading his men, bringing them through a battle, taking down a clear, uncomplicated enemy, and retrieving intelligence that would be used to help people, or see that they weren't hurt again. That was what Steve needed.

They did have two injuries - not counting Steve - and found a half-dozen scientists who had apparently not particularly agreed to the change in direction, and... three more test subjects, all comatose.

"Load 'em up," Steve told Sam, who was supervising most of the extractions while Hallings showed Steve their data. "I want all of this backed up, and the computers wiped. Stark wants to have Banner look it over."

"They were doing a lot of far out stuff, mental augmentation, attempting to spark superhuman powers, telepathy, telekinetics..." Hallings shook his head. "There's some conditional response programming as well, but it looks like it didn't take on the subjects."

"Get this to Banner," Steve told Hallings. "I want these hard drives clean enough to eat off of."

Hallings snorted. Steve gave him a little smirk and then winked.

"Aye, aye, Commander." Hallings got back to work, pulling down data and starting whatever wiping processes was needed. "We can send for a Bravo team now, deal with the physical equipment mop up."

"Is any of this particularly troubling?"

"Gene sequencing, maybe. I'll get the hard drives off that as well."

After a few more check-ins with the team, Steve pulled out his phone and dialed the Tower.

"Did anyone teach you about roaming fees?" Tony asked as he answered the phone. "How'd it go?"

"Mission successful," Steve reported in. "Hallings is getting the drives now. Is everything alright back in New York?"

“We’re surviving,” Tony answered. “I’ve had to send Natasha to Russia to deal with some politics over there, so I’m light on Avengers right now. Will be good to have you back.”

Steve couldn’t quite help but beam at that, even if he knew it was practical, not for any other reason.

As was the way of things, Tony found S.W.O.R.D. incredibly busy even though they’d managed to retake the Antilles facility, there was even more to do. There always seemed to be more to do, and Tony really wished he could catch a break.

They weren’t quite all hands, because nothing short of an alien invasion actually was worth that sort of anxiety anymore. Tony remembered a time when the worst thing he had to deal with were a few hundred terrorists... those were good old days.
He got a call from Romanov towards the middle of the morning. "How's sunny Russia?"

"Pretty good, actually. You're not going to like the concessions that they're trying to get out of you, so I keep telling them no, but they keep talking." Natasha shrugged. "I think they want to work with you. The allure of having a S.H.I.E.L.D. of their own is probably tempting enough to get them to budge."

"Suddenly I feel all dirty."

"I've seen the videos of you on YouTube, Stark, and this is what makes you feel dirty?"

Tony didn't answer that, because she did have a point, but that didn't change the fact that he didn't like the idea of being considered an attack dog for any country, much less Russia. They also still had the Chinese to woo. "Keep me apprised. We have more situations brewing."

"I'll be back when I can."

Tony spent the next few hours bouncing between teleconferences and his console, his staff filtered in and out as they came on duty. Barton was up fairly early, having been released from the hospital he was more than eager to get back on his feet. Steve came upstairs about the same time.

Of course, that meant that Steve was also assessing him. It was a subtle thing, at least sometimes, and Steve thought Tony didn't notice... but he'd catch Steve staring, usually at his chest, and that reminded him of the fact that Steve had seemed so damn shocked to see the hole in Tony's chest. Tony wasn't self-conscious about anything when it came to his body, he was still an attractive man, he would probably continue to be, and he wasn't going to let anyone make him doubt that... but Steve wasn't assessing him as a man, he would be assessing him as a soldier, and it was hard to deny that that hole in his chest looked... bad.

So it was no surprise that Steve kept looking, and Tony could almost imagine he could see the wheels spinning in that geriatric head of Steve's. He would wonder if Tony could still fly the suit, if he was safe to rely on, if he could still be counted on to push... And Steve kept staring.

The fourth time Tony caught Steve staring - which meant there had been more - Tony decided they were going to have to settle this like men, or something.

"Rogers? Conference room."

Steve didn't seem guilty about the staring, he mostly seemed curious, and followed Tony into the room without a worry in the world on his face. Tony shut the door behind them and took his own seat. "We have a problem?"

A small frown wrinkled Steve's forehead. "Just things in Russia. I don't have anything Sam or Clint haven't told you. Last time I was there was to..."

"I meant this." Tony waved a hand over his front, the hole where the reactor used to be, the rest of him.

"Ah-- no, no problem," Steve sputtered out, reiterating that Captain America was a shitty liar and there was definitely a problem.

"I mean, yes, I'm not as spry as I used to be, but I've still got it. I'm in better shape than I was two years ago, better lung capacity, less problems with arrhythmia and murmurs..."

Steve flushed.
"Technically you could bench me, you are Field Operations, but I will have you know I've been Iron Man for years, and I'm not giving it up just because you have some questions about whether or not I--"

Steve held up his hands, waving, in some sort of surrender, he even put his hands together in a crossed 'T' - the modern day universal hand gesture for 'time out' - and sighed. "I'm not thinking of benching you. I'm sorry if I made you think that. You're an asset in the field, and while I do think it's good for you to get better conditioning out of the suit, it's not a fair judge of what you're capable of."

Tony felt the wind go out of his sails, and his ramble, because Steve didn't seem to be lying, not about this. The idea that he might bench Tony seemed to surprise him, honestly and truly. "Then why the hell are you looking at me like you're making a tactical assessment?"

That Steve had no answer for, just an awkward moment of panic, eyes wide, before he looked down at his hands. "Sorry. It..." And then he took a deep breath, squared his jaw, and met Tony's eyes with his. "I just noticed you were attractive, that's it."

"I'm attractive?" Tony asked, not out of disbelief of the core thesis but more that Steve Rogers had made that assessment of him.

"That's what you keep telling me, anyway," Steve answered, this time actually smiling just a touch. "It's nothing, just... getting to know you made it easier to realize that you're an attractive man."

Tony gaped, still not sure what the hell he was supposed to do with this.

"Would you like to get coffee sometime?" Steve asked. Tony looked back at him, confused. "Or dinner. Dinner's more of a date, right?"

Steve Rogers was asking him on a date. Tony was very confused by this. He and Steve had along much better than when they had met, they had something that might even be called friendship by most people. Steve was attractive, funny, and smart, and there were definitely far worse people he could date, but while Tony tended to believe the world was his oyster, he didn't exactly expect Steve Rogers to fall at his feet in a neatly packaged bow. "So the whole... 'attracted to a guy' thing, that's just... peachy?"

"I've had a pretty long time to get used to it, Tony."

"Alright... ah... I want you to know that I'll disappoint you, frequently," Tony answered. "I'll forget dates, I'll get caught up in work..."

"I know," Steve said, and he obviously did, as though that was just a matter of course. "But after things settle a bit, maybe we can celebrate... with dinner, together, just the two of us."

"Yes?" Tony answered, voice confused and tentative, but he wasn't going to argue. Thankfully he was saved from more idiocy by another conference call. "I have to take this. Dinner?"

Steve nodded, little smile tugging at his lips. "Dinner."

All of his good warm feelings evaporated a the news that came in by teleconference. He was back out onto the floor seconds later.

"Rogers. Who's our active team right now?"

"Charlie Team," Steve answered, no hesitation.
"You'll lead Charlie Team and Vision. We have a report of a Hydra strike team raiding a nuclear waste storage facility. Armored baddies, lots of flash. They seem to be heading towards some cesium, nasty stuff."

“What’s it used for?” Steve asked, all business, as though he hadn’t just asked Tony out seconds ago.

“Dirty bombs. That’s the big one.” Tony scrubbed his fingers through his hair. "Go."

Steve didn't even wait, wrist up to his lips. "Charlie Team, this is Commander Rogers. Wheels up in ten, mission brief en route."

"I'll push a brief to the quinjet," Tony said, coming up to Steve and giving him a look, not quite sure what to do with him. They hadn't even had dinner yet. "Come home safe."

"I'll consider that an order," Steve answered. "Keep the home front safe."

"I always do."

The two of them stepped away, and Tony went back to his console. He did have work to do, he couldn't bother to worry about Rogers on a good day, besides, he could take care of himself. So he busied himself with the mission brief, and pulling up details of the heist.

"We got permission to intervene?" Sam asked from a few consoles over.

"It’s just out west," Tony answered, pushing more files to the quinjet computers. "But we have been getting international resistance. I'm thinking that would be a good slogan: let me save your life or I'll blow you up."

"Heil Hydra," Sam answered under his breath.

"I know, I know," Tony snapped back. "Can't deny they get better results. I'm getting jaded. How did I get this jaded? No, never mind, I was born jaded. Still, I'm going to take advantage of the detente to actually make some headway on the political front. Wilson, can you put Bravo Team on standby? We'll need to fire them if we have another emergency."

"Yessir," Sam stood, and came over to where Tony was standing. "And you're not jaded, you're a realist, and you see all sorts of ways you could make it better, but I think if we learned anything a few months ago it's that the cure is worse than the disease."

Tony nodded. "I know. Look, don't worry, I'm still paying the price of moral compromise, but it's hard to watch people destroy themselves like this... and suddenly I have a great deal of empathy for Rhodey and Pepper. Prep Bravo Team, if Hydra's hit once, I think we might have another party scheduled and it would be rude not to attend."

"Got it, Chief," Sam gave him a nod and headed out.

The departure left him alone, with Clint, who had his feet up on his own console. "Man, I just wish it was more awesome to be tied up and beaten by an attractive woman for two weeks."

"Heavy thoughts for a heavy era," Tony answered. "What do you even do here? What do I pay you for?"

Clint leaned back and made a lazy gesture of drawing a bow and arrow and then releasing it. He punctuated it with a soft 'pew' noise. "Well, I'm great with boats. I can organize you a strike team in under 12 hours, and... I've also been discussing supply and staffing with Banner for our new labs."
The Antilles facility should be ready to re-launch in less than two weeks."

"I like this. Good."

"I'm not going to wear a mini-skirt and call you Mr. Stark, though."

"You crush all my fantasies," Tony answered, still he was surprised. Clint had never been someone he'd taken a real measure of, but the man had stayed under Hydra's radar for days, and his intelligence was made the fight against Loki a lot closer than it could have been. "Make sure Banner knows. I want to get us geographically diversified ASAP."

The fact that they had to keep fielding out of New York was a serious hindrance to their mobility, and getting a few teams stretched safely afield would be nothing but good. Steve and Vision would take minutes to get west, by that point their shot at whoever was taking the cesium would be gone. Also Steve Rogers had asked him on a date. What the hell was that?
Tony waited, anxiously, for Steve’s report from the break-in at the nuclear disposal facility. It was only natural, Tony tried to assure himself, but he knew that a strange added layer had been added because Steve was… interested in him. Tony still hadn’t quite wrapped his brain around it.

He didn’t even know what the hell Steve wanted from him.

Still, he needed to focus, not worry about his love life - or lack thereof. Tony spun back to his panels. "JARVIS, give me the day's headlines."

He’d managed to poach enough intelligence analysts from S.H.I.E.L.D. that the S.W.O.R.D. analysts were cranking in full force now. They provided his daily, and overnight, analysis of the happenings around the globe, and some of them even dealt with the other intelligence agencies so Tony didn’t have to. From there, they diverted through JARVIS and then arriving at Tony's console. "Someday," Tony said, looking at all of the reports and trying to decide which he didn't want to read first. "I will have an actual command structure that means I will be able to delegate more of this crap."

"Pretty sure you're too much of a control freak to do that, Tony," Clint said, kicking off of from where he was slouching against his console. "But it's a nice thought."

"Whatever, Katniss," Tony answered with the maturity that befit his station as a leader of the free world’s intelligence community.

A few seconds later, his console beeped. “Sir, we have a report incoming from Commander Rogers.”

“I’ll take it in the conference room.”

He took the few steps it took to get to the conference room and the screen flared to life with Steve talking into his tablet. “Director, we have a new problem.”

“The folks here said that’s not useful in much of anything but dirty bombs, but the containers don’t really contain it so well. It’ll be leaking beta and gamma radiation like a sieve.” Steve’s face flashed back onto the monitor. “I’m collaborating with the NRC to find out where it might have been taken.”

“Did you actually trade blows with these guys? Strategic analysis?”

“That’ll wait for my report for the details, but they’re good, fast, strong. I’m not sure Militant is
actually got a serum or if he’s just strong and agile. Tactical Force and Vision, you can see the feed, but he was pretty hard hitting.”

Tony grumbled. “Alright, get back to New York. I’ll get the directors of the CDC and the NRC on the horn and find out how we’re going to find our missing cesium.”

“Got it,” Steve answered. “We’ll wrap up here shortly and be home in under an hour.” A moment passed, and then Steve seemed to get a little nervous, before he smiled. “It’ll be good to be back.”

Tony blinked, just to make sure he’d heard Steve right, realized he had, and then tried to figure out what the hell he was supposed to say to quasi-flirting. “It’ll be good to get you back, Steve.”

That got him a firmer smile, and Tony decided he was completely gone.

JARVIS cut the feed, and thankfully didn’t comment on Tony’s idiocy. “JARVIS, get me my teleconference with the assholes who didn’t secure their nuke mats well enough, and the folks who are going to have to clean up the mess with me.”

“Of course, Sir.” It didn’t take JARVIS long for him to get the conference up and running.

He was still in his call, off and on, pulling up information and trading intelligence, and tracking radiation signatures as best they were able. Sadly the information was very spotty, and they couldn’t really track it down so much as guestimate to within a few dozen miles. Banner probably could have banged together an algorithm in a few hours, but Tony’s bet was that they didn’t have that long.

A gentle tap came on his door and he looked up to see Steve and Vision waiting outside. Tony waved them in.

“Director,” Steve greeted him. “Report now, or--”

“Vision, go download your video and run a diagnostic. Steve, join me here.”

After a brief exchange, the pair of them separated and Steve joined him in the conference room.

“Directors, you know Commander Rogers, he was on the ground with half our Hydra Four.” Tony waited, introductions were made, and he waited for something, anything that might salvage this little dust up. They ended the teleconference for now, and Tony took a deep breath, steeling himself for something.

“You alright? No radiation exposure problems?”

Steve shook his head. “They gave us these little--” Steve held it up, a radiation exposure badge, Steve’s was currently in the clear, and that made Tony feel somewhat better. The guy might have been immune to plenty of things dad tested him for back in the day, but Tony was fairly sure radiation wasn’t one that had been on the list. “So-- um we sort of left--”

Of course, his display panel beeped again, and Tony pulled it up. “Director,” it was that pretty Director of the NRC, she was cute in a matronly sort of way. “We’ve been tracking our missing cesium-137, and it is definitely stopped moving in northern New Jersey.”

"It's New Jersey, how would they even notice?" Tony asked with a sarcasm he didn't feel. “Alright, we’ll take it from here.” After a few niceties, Tony disconnected the call and headed out into the main control area, Steve followed. "New Jersey... Philadelphia or New York City, probably."

"A dirty bomb?" Steve asked, coming back up beside him, all business.
"I wouldn’t be surprised. The actual device would have had to have been already constructed, only awaiting the materials to be assembled. The bomb itself will dangerous to anyone who is exposed to it for longer periods."

"New York or Philadelphia?" Steve asked.

"Depends," Tony answered. "But, since they've come all this way to knock on our front door, I'm going to assume they're coming all the way to our front door. Ugh. And the Mayor was just starting to talk to me again after the Battle of Manhattan. I'll put Vision on standby, he's going to be our first line of defense if we have contamination."

"I can suit up as well."

"That's nice and all," Tony answered. "But you can't punch radiation. You might have some baseline immunity and an ability to process the radiation better than an average human... but honestly Banner might have to be our go-to in the field for this one. Sadly, radiation might bring out the Hulk, so we'll have to plan on that... we might be able to..." Tony punched up a summons for Bruce and then waited. "Cesium mostly produces beta radiation, but does produce gamma radiation as well. We'll see what Banner can do, CDC has also been working on moving around some Prussian Blue if he have an exposure."

The next hour or so went to hypothesizing as to where their bomb was headed.

Sadly, Banner was having trouble detecting the cesium in the wake of the dozens of other sources of background radiation in the city.

"If you were a crazy Nazi terrorist, where would you attack?" Tony asked Bruce.

"Somewhere populated, big statement..." Bruce shrugged.

"JARVIS?"

"Rockefeller Center."

"I'm a little uncomfortable with how quickly you had that answer, J."

JARVIS answered, completely deadpan: "Well, you have asked Dr. Banner, it was only prudent to extrapolate. It is open air, heavily populated by tourists and others, is a noted historical area that will elicit an emotional response. It has many factors that make it a desirable target."

Steve was standing next to Tony, looking at the dozens of recommended hot spots that Hydra might hit.

"Hydra might not be in a position to take advantage fully," Steve said, carefully, slowly, like he was still working the process out for himself. "But their goal was to hurt people, to make them willingly sacrifice freedom for order. They want to hurt us... hit us where it counts..." Steve glanced over the map, and then pointed to Liberty Island.

"Oh come on," Tony protested. "That's a crappy target. I mean the best part would be polluting the Harbor, but your net casualties would be... a few hundred? I could do better by throwing darts on the map."

"But when you look out the window in the morning, and you see a symbol of freedom standing out in the middle of the Harbor, polluted, festering..." Steve frowned. "It's a powerful image, Tony."
"Alright." Tony gave Steve the nod. "Go check it out, ride the Harbor Ferry, go visit your copper girlfriend. Stay on secure channel 5."

"Thanks."

He and Bruce continued to look over more strategically valuable targets.

"I'm on the Ferry," Steve reported, less than an hour later. Tony wasn't keeping exact track of time.

"Make sure you arrest that guy selling hot dogs, those prices are usurious."

Maria, newly arrived upstairs due to the all-hands nature of the event, gave him a long glance. "Did you just bitch about the price of tourist concessions?"

"I'm a government worker now," Tony answered. "I make no money, my pension is shit. I don't know how I'm going to be able to afford a new Tesla." Still, that wasn't the point of the hour. "I think JARVIS might be onto something with Rockefeller Center. Send... Wilde, and the girl with the short blonde hair..."

"Hayes," Maria filled in.

"Hayes, to check it out. Bruce will outfit them with some Blue and some radiation sensing gear. Please don't have them start a panic." Tony frowned at his data. "We should start evaluating the less high-value targets, and not completely abandon our neighbor of brotherly love."

Tony then found himself dragged into a conference call with the NRC and the FBI, which distracted him from being able to actually do anything for almost an hour while he was forced to listen to idiotic 'we don't know nothing, we don't see nothing' reports. Although, it was nice to see that they actually did liaise with him, it was almost progress.

"Tony!" He twitched, having been deep in the midst of nodding off, and for a second he thought Steve had come into the conference center just to yell at him. It took him a moment to realize the response was in his ear. "Tony!" Steve's hissed whisper returned.

"Excuse me, Directors," he said, standing. "I have a situation to attend to." He then brought his comm to his wrist. "Stark, go."

"Tony, they're here."

"What?!"

"A small boat just made landfall. They've overtaken the Ferry. The package is sending Banner's detector up like a Christmas tree," Steve said, voice barely a whisper, sentences interspersed with silence.

"Are you incognito?" Tony asked. "Never mind, don't answer that. Are they dressed in protective suits?"

"No."

"Shit." Suicide squad. "Your first priority is the device, secure it and any trigger. I know you want to save the civilians, but trust me, it won't matter if the device goes off. I'm sending in Vision and Banner."

A gun report came through the mic, and then scattered screaming.
"How many?" Tony asked.

Steve didn't respond.

He charged out of the conference room. "Vision, deploy, Liberty Island, take Banner. Do you think Hulk's going to understand not smashing?"

"I don't know. Beta and gamma radiation might trigger him, or it might leave me immune. Experimenting with radioactive decay triggers wasn't exactly high on my list of things to do while I was on the run."

Tony considered, just for a second. "I can't let you go in, then."

"That container gets cracked..." Bruce trailed off.

"I know." Tony grabbed his neural hook up and brought it up to his head. "Viz, baby, give me your eyes."

"Could use a shield," Steve said, voice now full volume. "Just putting that out there."

Tony didn't even need to instruct him, Vision grabbed the shield from the ready area, and launched soon after that. "Vision's headed to you, Rogers."

"They're using human shields," Steve reported.

"Of course they are." Tony clenched his jaw. "Maria, take situation command, I need to get back with NRC and CDC." He then headed back into the teleconference. "Directors, hey... so... do you want the good news or the bad news first?"

"Bad news," the NRC Director said, all business and not at all interested in Tony's joke.

"It's on Liberty Island," Tony answered.

Her jaw tightened. "Is the good news that you found our cesium?"

"Yeeeeeah... so... if you could, you know... clean up crew... Manhattan... that'd be great. I can have a quinjet pick up responders in minutes." Tony glanced up, taking in Vision's eyes and ears, checking in. "Looks like... yeah... the device was designed to eject mostly airborne, will contaminate... a chunk of the Harbor, Liberty Island... oh Hudson River you never do get a break, do you...?"

Tony caught a bullet whiz by out of the corner of Vision's eye, that definitely hit the canister. Tony winced. "So... how reinforced are those containers?" Nothing visibly started leaking, but... "I gotta go, bye."

He saw Steve, running, hard, taking out another one of the men working on the device.

"Viz, give me your hands."

"Sir, I am more than capable of disassembling..."

"Yes!" Tony answered. "But I'm a control freak and you've only been using fine motor control for four months." He ignored the fight going on around Vision, they wouldn't be able to dent him, after all, even with the bullet or three clanging against the back of his head.

Vision spun a hand around and fired a repulsor blast at one of the nearest Hydra thugs, but then turned back to the device.
"Ok... that's... the ground, detonator is the phone, great... block local cell... good." He grimaced. "Three backup... nice... and a timer. It's a good thing you have very articulate fingers."

He and Vision worked in tandem, trading instructions, and Tony felt his hands in danger of shaking, his mind lending fear to his actions, making his hands twitch almost imperceptibly. Another bullet or two went passed Viz's head, and Tony did his best not to flinch. Four years as Iron Man had given him a fairly fearless response to getting shot at.

"Our attackers are down," Steve reported, enough to shake Tony out of his focus for a second.

"Evacuate, but do not let them go to ground. CDC is going to want to look them over, and you," Tony said through gritted teeth.

It was easy to forget he was up in his Tower, the world had focused down to a single panel in front of his eyes. He worked, he traced, he probed.

"Sir, thirty seconds," Vision's voice, came over his headset.

"Yeah, yeah..." He bit the tip of his tongue in careful concentration. "Cut here... there... pinch, twist... do the hokey pokey... yeah... cut that..." He walked himself through the actions as he took them through them and... "Done. We're done, right?"

"Indeed it appears we are."

"Alright, Viz, you're probably lit up like a Christmas Tree so don't go anywhere until they clear you." Tony clicked off his control interface with the suit. "Steve?"

"We're on the Ferry," Steve answered, a moment later. "Ah... what should we do? My little badge thing turned black."

Tony winced, because that was bad, more than bad, because Tony knew enough to know that meant Steve had taken in a potentially dangerous - maybe even fatal - dose of radiation. Tony just had to hope the serum was as awesome as it was supposed to be. "Wait for CDC, and take your pills I gave you."

"They should go to civilians," Steve protested.

"You were on top of that thing, they, like intelligent human beings with self-preservation instincts, ran away," Tony argued right back, because that should help, he hoped. Tony wasn’t certain he wanted to deal with that stupid idiot keeling over in a couple weeks. "You are a super soldier, you got irradiated with god knows what to activate the serum, but we have no way of knowing what the results of that might be. Take your pills and wait for medical responders."

He pulled off his sensor bar and raked his fingers through his hair. "Well that sucked."

"Could have been a lot worse," Maria answered.

"Don't remind me." As it stood, they could very well lose Steve, and he was just not worried about it at all.

The final tally was: most of the civilians would live, Tony made a note that any future cancer diagnoses were definitely on Hydra's tab - or Tony's, it would be Tony's; and one particularly frail older gentleman was unlikely to make it, even with the transfusions he was receiving. Steve was stuck in a holding room getting precautionary transfusions, even though he wasn't exhibiting any obvious signs of radiation sickness, despite his exposure. Vision had to be scrubbed down six times
before the CDC would let him go home."

"You are a menace," Tony said as he brought Steve a change of clothes for when they inevitably let him out of his confinement. Because of course he could just walk into that many rads and be fine.

"I'm fine."

"Radiation is no laughing matter, Steve." Tony sat down next to him, and damn if the man didn't still look fresh as a daisy's ass. Tony was pretty sure he'd spontaneously sprouted more bags under his eyes and a thousand grey hairs. "I can't replace Captain America... and I don't want to. How do you feel?"

"Fine," Steve answered, again. "Really, I feel fine... alright I have a headache, but I'm fine."

Tony would have been more worried, but the MRI and CT they'd done less than two hours ago were clean, and his bloodwork was normal - normal for Steve, anyway. Steve's body was probably just fighting the mutagenic effects of the rads.

"How's everyone else?"

"The attackers are going to die," Tony said. "No radiation protection for an extended period of time while the container slowly leaked beta and gamma radiation had put them in the 'going to die' category. One of the tourists is probably not going to make it. Three kids are having some scary transfusions, but doctors think they'll probably pull through. Thank you."

Steve smiled, his stupid, bashful, sweet, 'aww shucks' smile. "Just doing my job, Tony."

"You have good instincts," Tony said. "Although maybe I shouldn't be surprised that you're thinking understands Hydra that well..."

"It was nothing."

"You saved a lot of lives," Tony answered, insisted, really. "They're working on some cleanup. Lady Liberty will be ready for return visitors in about a month. I promised the Mayor you'd be there for the reopening. Don't let me down."

Tony glanced over his shoulder, looking to see that they were still alone in the contamination area, and he leaned back into his chair. He could be amused now, he could settle down, now that he knew Steve was likely out of the woods.

"You know, if you didn’t want to own up to the date you asked me on, you didn’t have to go to these lengths. I can take a ‘no’."

Steve snorted. "I meant what I asked, Tony. Do you want to back out. I know you... haven’t exactly dated since Pepper."

"Ah, the P word." Tony sat, trying to decide how open and honest he should be here, but Steve had put himself out there by asking at all, so Tony could do the same. "It’s not that I’m hung up. I do still care about her, maybe even love her, but that was the case before we dated. It’s more... that I’m just not sure I’m cut out to be there for another human being."

Steve actually seemed to mull over that revelation for a few moments, but then he nodded. "I just bailed on our first date by getting irradiated by dirty bomb materials. I think we might be able to accept a few missed dates. You’re the Director of S.W.O.R.D., I’m a Commander there, we’re going to be busy, we’re going to have lives. I’m alright with that. Natasha keeps trying to get me to take
women out for coffee, and I have been, but it never seems to work because... well I don’t know why.”

Tony assumed it was because Steve had gone from shrimpy, and then active duty military with a nominal sweetheart, followed by an icing and defrosting that had probably left him more than a bit confused. "So we’ll see how this goes?"

"I..." Steve crinkled his eyebrows, deep in thought. "Yeah. I-- I felt so sure about someone before, about... this gal in the war, but we weren't... I mean we were never going to be together like some family back home, there was a war on and... I just don't know."

"You want a wartime sweetheart?"

"Well it sounds dumb when you say it like that," Steve mumbled. "Call, but don't call too soon, go all out for your first date and let her see your casual side the second... Tony, we had something going for two years and I only ever kissed her once. I--"

Steve sounded... well... really confused, but Tony was a guy who needed to know at least some of the parameters before he started: one night stand, conference-long hookup, holiday distraction... "Alright. Let's try this. Friends?"

Steve nodded.

"Want to try to be more?"

Steve nodded again.

"Using me for sex because if they gave out instructor certifications I'd be a black belt?"

"That doesn't even make sense," Steve answered. "The belt is..." But then he stopped himself, snorted, and shook his head. "No, Tony, just feeling this out."

"You lob them right over the plate and then I'd feel bad swinging." Tony was glad, though. He might have enjoyed Steve, physically, sexually - the man was gorgeous - but Tony was starting to think he just wasn’t built for that sort of thing anymore. "As fun as this little heart-to-heart has been, I should probably get going."

Steve’s weak smile faltered for a moment. "You're leaving?"


"Stay?" Steve asked, voice just a bit smaller than it was a minute ago. "You can skip it, right?"

Tony wished, oh how he wished. "I'll come back..." Then he realized: Captain America didn't like hospitals... "I might be able to push it back. Let me just call Maria."

He headed out into the hall. "Maria, it's Stark, can you push the press conference back a few hours. I want to stay here with Cap."

"I thought his condition was improving, is he...?"

"He's fine," Tony said, looking where Steve was watching him out of the glass. "He just needs a friendly face. I'll let you know when I head back to the Tower."

He headed back in and took a seat next to Steve. "Alright, Commander, I'm all yours, at least for a few hours."
They watched the news together and plotted how to tackle the next threats on the horizon, and about half-way through, Tony even reached out and squeezed Steve’s hand, offering him that comfort until they let Steve out and they did the press conference together.

* Bucky set his jaw at a stubborn angle before looking back at Steve. "Radiation, like the Bomb?"

Steve honestly didn't know. "It's a byproduct, or something, then they have to dispose it, but living tissue mutates when it's exposed to it. If it's not treated, it shuts down your organs, or gives you cancer. Even so, Stark says some of the tourists could be at risk for years."

"Sure puts saving the day in perspective," Bucky answered.

"I'm just glad there weren't gallons of fuel up on those helicarriers. Apparently Tony designed them to 'fail clean.'" Steve shrugged and huddled down into the couch. "It wasn't a win for them, but... it could have been."

"Saved the day again, Stevie," Bucky said, smiling, and he gave Steve a little jostle with his elbow. "Any time you can give those sons of bitches a black eye is a good day."

After a brief moment, Bucky seemed to sober.

"I killed so many people for them. I keep--" His hands clenched, and Steve heard the gentle squeak of some of the joints. "I keep seeing the blood, remembering the kills."

"They weren't your fault." Steve pulled Bucky in, and the two of them hugged, so much easier than just a few weeks ago.

"I've talked to Sam," Bucky held on for dear life. "Even Barton came by to say he'd been mind controlled before if I needed to talk. Sam says it's normal, don't know how I feel about that."

"It is normal." Steve knew it was. He’d felt it himself, but he didn’t know if he could share it with Bucky, not completely. So much of Steve’s time, after waking up, had been spent on the guilt of him surviving and Bucky dying. Bucky would have no consolation, the men and women The Winter Soldier had murdered were never coming back, unlike Bucky.

"Not much comfort," Bucky answered, but he did seem to unwind, fractionally.

"Saw you and Stark on TV." Bucky had been watching more and more modern television, trying to get up to speed, and understand the politics of the modern day. "I guess it’s the first time I’ve really seen him. I think he’s been avoiding me since I almost killed him."

"He’s also been busy," Steve demurred, because Tony was busy.

"Is it weird, working for him after working with Stark for so many years?" Bucky asked, and Steve understood, immediately, that Bucky wanted a distraction and Tony was the option at hand.

"They’re so different," Steve answered. "Tony's also older than Howard was when we knew him." That was always the thing that got him, whenever he saw Tony. At the start, it was easy to see him as some sort of older version of Howard, but the more he got to know Tony the less that was the case. "It's easy to tell the difference after you get to know him."

"He’s definitely a Stark though. Flirty."
“That he is,” Steve answered, not quite containing his blush. Tony haven’t even put the full force of his flirtatiousness towards Steve and it already had him flustered. "They're both... magnetic."

Bucky chewed on the idea for a few moments. “And you’re alright working for him? S.W.O.R.D.?"

“After we died, Howard founded S.H.I.E.L.D. to keep America safe, to... to keep the country on the right path,” Steve admired that about Howard, so much, but to know that it had been so rotten at the core, no matter Howard’s intentions, made the accomplishment sour in hindsight. “I wonder what it would have been like if I hadn't gone down, if I'd been able to help from the start.”

Howard had made ‘acceptable compromises’, that much was clear. Steve wanted to keep Tony away from those same pitfalls. Tony was a lot like Fury, for better or worse, but unlike Fury, Tony seemed to believe in people, and he continued to long after it was wise to stop. He might play at being jaded, but the more Steve saw of him, the more clear there was someone who just wanted to do the right thing under it all. It was one of the many reasons Steve found himself attracted to the man after so much trouble at the start.

When Tony had trusted someone, he’d had his heart ripped out - literally, but he still trusted, unlike Fury. Maybe that made Tony a better person. It also meant he’d be easier to hurt.

He and Bucky got through an episode of I Love Lucy before his phone pinged, letting him know they were going to have a briefing if he was free. “I’ve got to pack it up, duty calls.”

“I miss it,” Bucky said, softly.

“We’ll get you back out in the world. I promise.”

Steve reported to their officer’s area, rather than the command floor, and it was nice to just have a quick little social moment rather than being forced into the too-small conference room. Tony was leaning against the breakfast bar, looking at the assembled team. “So, the news of the hour is that the S.H.I.E.L.D. ships that we lost to Hydra have largely amassed in Madripoor.”

"You sure we can't just nuke that off the map?" Clint asked.

"I mean, technically I could force an arc reactor overload to approximate a modest nuclear payload," Tony said, taking a sip of his cup of coffee while everyone looked at him in horror. "I mean, I could, but unfortunately using our quasi-nuclear arsenal would probably be seen as a failure of my fitness as Director of S.W.O.R.D.. So no, we can't blow up Madripoor."

"Do we know what they're doing?" Steve asked, pulling out a carafe of orange juice and trying to foist some of it on Tony.

"Loading and offloading, loading and offloading. I have a satellite network giving me as much information as possible, imaging, heat signatures, but there's no way of knowing what they intend to do with them. They have three gun ships that could potentially serve as aircraft carriers of a sort. We're also fairly sure they possess at least twelve quinjets." Tony took another sip of coffee, glowered at the orange juice, and then took a sip of that as well. "That's why we've painted ours."

"I thought that was because you wanted them to be fire engine red," Natasha cut in.

"That too. Still, we're watching, we're waiting. Without some sort of authorization, I'm not sanctioning any more raids. I did insert two intelligence agents, though."

Steve knew about that little op, it wasn't as dangerous as Clint's presence had been. The truth was people went to Madripoor for all sorts of reasons, and it was easy enough to stay for a few weeks, or
months, if you had the money and didn't make waves. The two agents were there 'honeymooning' and were able to keep an eye on the political climate that wasn't broadcast out.

"Banner?" Tony turned to Bruce.

"We've decommissioned about half of the S.H.I.E.L.D. projects we've absorbed, they were... we decommissioned them," Bruce answered, as though that explained everything, and Steve supposed it did. Honestly, he was surprised that few were getting shut down. "We've re-tasked a lot of scientists, some of them have decided to go back to academia, three of the facilities that Commander Rogers has cleared out are quality installations that I've submitted budget proposals for their refurbishment before re-installing research outposts there."

"Alright, I have to get up and take my shift from Hill," Tony said, downing the orange juice and then pouring himself a second cup of coffee. "Enjoy the quiet while it lasts. Rogers, walk with me."

The two of them headed to the elevator, and Steve pushed the up button, they waited.

"Good to have you back, Steve."

Steve glanced at Tony, face crinkling. "Glad to be home." And he meant it, this was home now.

"Are you free tonight? Seven?" Tony said, but it was a question. "Assuming, you know..."

"The geopolitical climate doesn't deteriorate in the next four hours?" Steve asked. "Sure. I need to shower and write a few reports anyway."

He did exactly that, showered, changed into something sort of casual, second guessed himself, slipped into some dark slacks, then some khakis. He finally gave up and texted Tony: 'what are you wearing?'

No answer came for several minutes, but when it finally did, he could almost hear Tony's wry voice answer with it: 'I'm going to assume that wasn't an attempt to initiate cyber. You're picking the venue, you should tell me.'

Steve bit his lip. Tony might be expecting fancy, or he might not expect anything. Really he'd never graduated beyond coffee dates... but there was a little pizzeria not too far from the Tower that was a good mix of casual and good food. 'Jeans'.

'Better make sure they don't have a no shirt, no shoes, no service policy then.'

Steve rolled his eyes, but he spent the rest of his afternoon working on reports and trying to decide how they would do better next time. They had to be a well integrated team, but the team's strengths and weaknesses needed to be assessed and worked on. That was the sort of thing a Commander had to know.

Tony was ready far closer to eight than seven, and Steve didn't even bother to ask an explanation. World peace or just Tony, it didn't really matter; he'd need to get used to the interruptions anyway. They walked, it was warm enough, and still just barely light out; just to be sure, Steve had his shield on his back under his jacket and he knew Tony had Vision on standby.

"So..." Steve said, as the two of them walked. "You mind if we don't talk about work?"

"Pretty sure I don't do anything else lately," Tony answered, but he seemed to fish around for a topic. "Wow... I'm not sure I'm even charming anymore. Missing DC?"
"A little," Steve considered for a moment, biting his lip. "I had more time, and I went to a lot of the museums, so I think I miss that part the most. I'd get bored and just... so see an exhibit. I have so much history to catch up on, and the art. There was just way more than I'd ever learned about in school."

"Art school?"

"Yeah, I did a year or so before my mom..." He shrugged. "Had to start working after that, even with Bucky helping me make ends meet."

"I had no idea you went to art school," Tony said. "I mean, I'm not exactly a Steve Rogers, early years, aficionado, I know more of your later works."

Steve snorted. "Yeah, they didn't mention it in the exhibit at Air and Space. It's nice, like I still have a bit of privacy even after everything. I wanted to be a cartoonist, back before the War."

"I wanted to be a dinosaur."

Steve gave Tony the most incredulous look he could muster.

"Well, you have to remember, I figured out pretty early along that I was destined for something a little more modern than the Cretaceous period. So that's insight into the two and a half year old mind of Tony Stark."

"Two and a half? You knew... you'd be... what?"

"A Stark," Tony answered, like that was all the answer in the world. "I was doing interviews by then, actually."

"How- your fath- Howa..." Steve fumbled with how to even broach the subject, because the 'oh, incidentally, friends with your father' was probably an odd subject for a date, even if it seemed mostly friendly at the current point. "You were interviewing that young?"

"It wasn't some huge deal, I mostly would show the interviewer my little work area and the engine I was working on."

Steve thought that was an incredibly huge deal, but he let Tony get away with the self-deprecation.

"We actually worked together on engines, after I moved on to circuit boards and things he usually fobbed me off on Bill or Steve," Tony shrugged. "Good teachers, but they weren't my dad. So, seriously, not where I wanted the conversation to go."

Even without the full story, it was obvious Tony and Howard were a sensitive subject, and Steve wanted to duck away from that as much as possible. "When did you get into AI?" Steve asked, more than curious now that he had Tony all to himself. "All that's out in the world is... Siri, and that chess computer."

"I'm going to pretend you didn't compare my baby to that fauxelligent hussy," Tony said, as the two of them sat down at their little booth tucked away from the worst of the crowds at the pizzeria. "And the truth is, you've seen the influences, at least you have if you haven't totally ignored my suggestions like you did Star Trek."

"I'm not ignoring it," Steve protested. "Star Wars was maybe fourteen hours, start to finish. Star Trek is three months, maybe more. But you mean... WarGames? Terminator? Transcendence?"
"So, two of those came out when I was fourteen, and one when I was a grown ass man, but yes. I mean there was always the danger, the allure, and as a kid I firmly believed you could make an AI that was moral, that learned and understood... I did a sophomore project on the concept of advanced learning algorithms." Tony started to ramble at that point, just explaining and, obviously thinking he was very clear, and for the most part, he was, but Steve was just in awe of how Tony had these huge ideas in his mind, had had them as a child, even, and he’d even implemented most of them.

Tony finally finished up with a few words about Hard and Soft AI, and by the time he was finished he was just flushed and excited and Steve was more focused on that part than learning anything new.

"I lost you back there somewhere."

"Just... listening. I don't get it all, but it's fun to hear." Steve felt a little dopey after he'd said it, but he tried to recover and say something intelligent. "Makes remembering a few old baseball scores seem pretty small potatoes."

"Pretty sure you remember more than that," Tony answered. "You have an eidetic memory, now, right?"

"Sure." Steve shrugged. "But if you don't know what to do with it, it's not very useful." It was mostly useful on the field, after a round of training, because it meant he could execute new tactics seamlessly. Tactics were 'work', however, and Steve wanted to avoid that. It had helped him learn, and get used to the 21st Century, made it easier to put things into place, but on the technical Tony was still light years ahead of him.

Instead he started to talk a bit about art. Tony wasn't particularly conversant, but he knew plenty of artists, some that Steve hadn't even heard of yet, and then Steve found out that Tony used to have wings full of modern art and he didn't even know much about it and it felt like a huge waste. Steve resolved, then and there, that Tony would have to come to a museum with him, if only to see how much was genuine ignorance and how much was some huge swath of information that Tony had forgotten he knew.

They shut the pizzeria down, staying there well past dinner and into the late evening.

"Still having a hard time with Steve Rogers, bisexual," Tony admitted as they walked home, quiet enough that people on the street wouldn't overhear, but enough to make Steve a tiny bit worried.

"It was a lot more all or nothing back in my day," Steve admitted. "And honestly I wasn't getting either so... not like people didn't assume when they saw me before the serum. Got beat up for it once or twice, but... people have a much better attitude now. I was used to the idea a long time ago, pre-freeze."

He didn't have any practical experience there, but he didn't want to say that outright. It was nice enough to admit to someone that he knew his own wants and desires on that front. Tony was cute, and maybe he could be something close to what Steve wanted.

After a brief war with himself, Steve walked Tony all the way to his little apartment area on their floor and wondered if he was supposed to kiss Tony, or not, or just shake his hand or... "I had a great time," Steve said, watching at Tony seemed torn between amusement and something else. "I want to try this again."

"Me too," Tony said. "Do I get a good night kiss, or are you saving yourself for marriage?"

It was just a little needle, same as all Tony's others, but this one hit closer to home than the rest. "I--
Natasha might have implied I'm a pretty lousy kisser."

"And now I'm jealous that happened and I didn't get to watch."

"Jealous of her or me?" Steve fired back, because if Tony was going to joke...

"Bit of column a, bit of column b. Relax, soldier boy." Tony gave his collar a gentle tug, and Steve tipped in just enough to press his lips against Tony's firm and dry and... nice enough but not...

Tony backed away a bit. "I swear it's like you’re going to a court martial." Tony actually reached up and pinched his lips in his fingers and wiggled his face back and forth for a second. "At ease."

The little military joke made Steve smile, and when Tony pulled him back in, Steve found it a little easier to melt into Tony's lips, to ease against them and not fight or tense, instead just enjoy the slight purse of Tony's lips, and the way they slid lightly against his. It took a few seconds, but Steve leaned in, head tilting just enough to get their heads complimenting each other and pressed together. That was great, warm and a little wet, scratchy from Tony's beard but soft from his lips... When they finally broke apart, Steve wanted to lean back in for more.

"I want you to know, I'm being a gentleman and not trying to slip you some tongue, but it's a struggle."

If anything, that made Steve grin wider. "I appreciate it." And then he gave Tony a soft peck on the lips. "I... this was really nice."

"Goodnight, Steve," Tony answered, with a fond little smile on his lips.

Steve took the short walk it took to get back to his quarters, mind dwelling on that kiss. It had been fantastic, the whole night had been great. Getting to see a side of Tony he wouldn't have even imagined a year ago was the real treat, though; Tony could be suave, and make Steve feel like a bumbling, uncultured idiot, but he could definitely make Steve engaged, and drag him into his world. Tony's mind was a fascinating. And the kiss was great... better than great... he wanted to go back to Tony's room and kiss him again, just because.

He'd gone from finding it impossible to tolerate Tony, to respecting him, to whatever he had now - admiration, a bit of longing - and it left a pleasant sort of buzz in his chest that he didn't ever want to stop.

* *

In spite of getting to bed much later than his usual, Steve was still up with the sun, he went for his morning run and then showered, and changed, while he tried to decide what to do with the few emails that came in, and the other items he needed to work on for the day.

Tony came in, surprisingly early for him, but he must have had an early shift to take from Maria. He went over to the coffee maker, largely ignoring Steve as he did so, before he finally noticed him and gave him a smile. "Good morning, Sunshine."

Steve snorted. "Good morning, Tony."

"I got a free minute," Tony began, and then paused for a second to take another gulp of coffee. "I took a look at the Winter Soldier scientific case files, and the computer programing that ran the system to wipe and reprogram your friend."

Steve stood in shock for a moment and then stared at Tony openly. The man did not have 'free time'
anymore, and the fact that he'd taken the time to do something for Bucky made Steve feel incredibly grateful.

"I'll preface by saying I don't know shit about neuroscience. Zola's research on the topic started soon after the war. I don't know which came first, the chicken or the egg, but Zola's work was in the preservation and storage of consciousness, an artificial simulation of a natural consciousness. It's different from what I did with JARVIS, for example, because I don't actually work on the pure neurology, just the if-then-else of logical and emotional reasoning."

Steve nodded, even if about every other word went in, Tony obviously knew what he was talking about. "So Zola was looking at how to store himself for the future?"

"It seems so, but one of the unintended side effects was being able to do something similar on an actual living tissue, on a human brain. 'The Winter Soldier' is basically an... overlay that they slapped on top of Bucky, a rudimentary identity that still allowed him to act on his various training for the Army, and later trainings they put him through between freezes," Tony continued, the information wasn't particularly new, chunks of this he'd already heard from the psychologists who were working with Bucky, but the foundation was obviously necessary for Tony's conclusion.

"Bucky was wiped and frozen dozens of times, but... why? Because, when they left him unfrozen for long enough he became erratic and difficult to control. Based on their observations, about two months was the peak amount of time they could leave him defrosted. He didn't remember his name, or anything obviously identifying, but he did start to exhibit core personality traits that you'd probably think of as belonging to Bucky." Tony smiled at Steve, excited. "Zola could preserve a consciousness in ones and zeroes, but when it came to putting it on a neurological template, he failed the same problem every other neuroscientist has. The brain is too complicated to program on, but a hard drive isn't."

"So Bucky's under the programming, we already knew that," Steve said, Bucky had been regaining memories by leaps and bounds.

"Yes, but Bucky's triggers weren't engrained by... repetitive stress or trauma, by hypnotherapy or any other mumbo jumbo, they were pressed over the same as his blank slate personality. They'll fade over time, even without our help."

Steve couldn't quite believe that great a news. "So... he'll just slowly be himself again? Same old Bucky? No deprogramming, no...?"

"Well, yes and no. The fact is... he did some really horrible things, things that he'll remember as wanting to do, or feeling were the right thing. He'll remember strangling people to death, shooting through Natasha to kill his target, he'll remember torturing people for information, being tortured... that's all... under, remembered by the human capacity for memory, probably better because of Zola's ersatz serum."

Steve swallowed the lump that formed in his throat as Tony told him all that. He knew, he'd seen the files, all of the kills that were ascribed to the Winter Soldier, some of them had been violent and brutal beyond belief. Bucky would live with that... carry it forever.

"The half-life on the Winter Soldier imprint is probably... six weeks? And once I actually sit down and get into the guts of that machine, I can actually dig up any programming that we might have missed." Tony gave Steve's shoulder a warm squeeze. "I'll be able to do it soon, maybe even today, as soon as I have the time to give to it, but I can't authorize him leaving the Tower until after the hearing. After my review I might be able to justify letting him out of his cage."
He wanted to tell Tony to go, now, to figure it out and get Bucky better, but he was already grateful to know that Tony had put his all into this. "Thank you, Tony. I'll let Bucky know. I think that'll help."

"Sorry I can't do more."

"You're taking on too much as it is," Steve said, but he reached out, and pulled Tony in for a hug, and a few seconds later he followed it up with a soft kiss.

When Steve pulled away, Tony's face was a mix of confused, and a warm sort of happy. He recovered a few seconds later. "Well if that's the thanks I get when I help Bucky..."

"Thank you, really, Tony."

The two of them pulled away, and Steve just looked at Tony for a long few seconds. These were the moments where it was easier to see that Tony was exactly the sort of guy who could be right for him. He gave so much of himself, even when he didn’t really have the time.

“I'll let Bucky know you’ll be coming down.”

Tony gave a brief nod. “Later today, I’ve got shift now. Spend the day with him. I’ll call if we have an emergency. Make sure he knows it will be uncomfortable.”

Steve thanked Tony again, with a soft little kiss, and decided he wanted more before he dragged him in yet again. “Better get to work then, Director.”

“Aye aye, Commander.” Tony gave him a sloppy salute, refilled his own coffee, and headed up to the command floor. Steve finished up his glass of orange juice, grabbed his tablet, and headed down to Bucky’s floor.

"You look chipper," Bucky said, stretching out his back after his own morning’s workout.

Steve was pretty sure it was a mix, between the kisses and the pure bliss of knowing that Bucky might be able to be let out of his cage, however nice a cage it was.

"Tony says he's got some thoughts for your brain, we might be able to let you out of this room, give you access to the rest of the Tower..." Steve smiled over at Bucky, and watched the nervous smile that met him in return.

"Is he sure?" Bucky asked, back popping lightly as he stretched further. "I-- I keep remembering Zola, looming over me, saying my mind wouldn't be my own again. I almost killed your teammate, two of them."

"Tony... he's all about risk and reward," Steve said. "If he thinks it's alright to have you in the Tower, he's not doing it to make me feel better."

Bucky frowned at Steve for a moment, and then turned back to the TV. "If he’s sure."

“He is.” Steve reached out and pulled Bucky closer, hugging him. “He said he was going to try to get down here later today, after his shift. He also said that it’s going to hurt, or it might, so you need to be ready for that. If he and the shrinks clear you, you're going to be able to move around the Tower."

"I want to get out there," Bucky said. "You keep doing these dangerous things and I'm not there to watch your back."
"I'll put you in the training rotation."

"The duty rotation."

"Not until the hearing." Steve knew it wasn't fair, but he knew people would look at Bucky and see a vicious killer, an assassin, and not his friend. "I need to see what you can do, anyway, out of the field, without... everything else over it. Call it a tactical assessment." And Sam had said there was no way of telling how Bucky would respond to being put back in combat conditions. Steve wasn't going to risk his friend until he knew for certain.

The two of them spent the day together, Steve never far from his tablet, but he mostly was able to ignore it in favor of spending the day with Bucky, reminding Bucky - and himself - of how nice it was going to be to have his friend all of the way back. Bucky still had his moments of doubt, and concern, Steve knew he had nightmares, but he was getting better, however slowly.

Tony came down much later. "You ready to have me look at your brain, Barnes?"

"Yessir." Bucky stood instantly. "If you can check that I'm--- clean, I want to know."

"Alright. This might hurt a lot. Come on, let's go down to the lab."

Steve was shocked to find a large metal setup, hooked to a half-dozen screens and something that would come down over the head. "What's this?"

"My... programming chamber," Bucky said. "I have to... I have to sit there?"

"It's guaranteed to hold you, it was accessible, and I can keep looking at the code while I test you. I'll need to comb through the last dozen or so imprints, because the freeze might not erase the imprint, and you stay frozen for so long..." Tony shrugged. "It's this or you go back to your room and wait."

Steve didn't think that was quite fair, but Bucky sat in the chair and Tony clipped him down.

He watched as Tony read off some sort of list that only he could draw out from the computer. He'd say things, inquire after missions, listen to Bucky's responses, over and over again it came back clean, or clean enough. A few traces of mission reports remained, here and there, a memory, blood, a bit of intelligence that Bucky wouldn't have known during the War or learned since then, a name...

"Mission, August 8, 2007," Tony prompted.

"Assassinated defecting scientist... complications: Natalia Romanov, code name: Black Widow. Romanov, wounded, target deceased, mission successful."

Tony patiently went through his checklist. Each point carefully monitored. He was at it for almost six hours.

By the end Bucky was sweating profusely, and Tony had clearly dredged up more than a few painful memories, even if they weren't imprinted by the machine. "You're clean," Tony said, pushing back from the console. "I'm going to authorize you for access to the S.W.O.R.D. floors. You won't have access to sensitive material yet, or the Command floor without approval from a command level staff. Steve will be forbidden from approving your access."

Tony continued to poke at another screen.

"I'm keeping the chair operational until I re-check you in four months, after the hearing." Tony stood, gave them both a smile, and started to turn. "Good luck."
Bucky moved faster than Steve could stop him, and for one brief, breathless moment, Steve thought that Bucky had snapped Tony's spine, but when he finally took a breath, and listened to Tony's confused flailing, he saw it for what it was.

"Stop attacking me, Barnes. I don't want a hug." When Tony was finally released, he stepped away. "I just wanted Captain Sass and Spangles to stop pouting at me. I've got some more projects I need to clear off my slate, feel free to give him the nickel tour."

"Sass and Spangles?" Bucky asked, turning to Steve and laughing. "He's got you figured out."

The last thing Steve needed was Bucky and Tony teaming up to plot against him, especially if Sam got into the act as well. "Alright, I'll give him the tour."

Steve started them off easy, on the analyst floors where the agents looked over the day's intelligence and made their recommendations. Steve introduced Bucky to a few of them, before it quickly became apparent that the whole thing was overwhelming to Bucky. The man didn't last four minutes before he turned around, ended up in the elevator, eyes wide, breathing coming quick.

"Sorry... I... I can't... not right now."

Steve could have cursed himself for pushing, but he waited for Bucky's breathing to slow, for him to seem more collected, but the two of them ended up huddled in the corner of the elevator for longer than Steve could keep track.

"Can we... go back to my room?"

"How about the Avengers' floor? It's just like an officers' mess, you should know everyone there."

Steve knew how hard it was to get out, to push, to fight to get back into the world, and he wanted to help Bucky make that push... but if Bucky said no they'd go back to that floor.

"I-- yeah, we can do that."

They headed up. It was different enough that he was still worried Bucky would feel vulnerable, but close enough to what he was used to from the Hulk floor that Steve hoped it would be... different. Clint, Sam and Natasha were standing in the kitchen, chatting and laughing, only for it to suddenly quiet.

Sam was the first to break the awkward silence. "Sergeant," he came over and shook Bucky's hand. "Stark spring you?"

Bucky nodded, until a moment later his face went a little clouded and confused, but then he nodded again. "Yeah, just trying to get a handle on myself."

Clint gave him a knowing little nod, and then Sam led Bucky over to the breakfast bar and sitting him down. "Where'd Steve take you?"

"Analytics?" Bucky asked, checking with Steve. Steve nodded. "Analytics. Stark's brain in the sky, right?"

"It was a little overwhelming," Sam said, not a question, but it almost sounded like one.

"I wasn't used to having so many people..." Bucky shook his head, like he was trying to clear it, or two things were at cross purposes. "I had too many things to prioritize."

"Car backfiring, crowded spaces, kids yelling," Sam nodded like it was so obvious. "There's going
to be a lot of things that don't feel quite right. You have a problem, you can always come to me."

Steve remembered that, right after coming off the ice. It was easy to wish that Bucky would just be
fine, ready to go, like nothing had changed, but he was also different... shell shocked, not quite all
there anymore.

When Steve glanced back up, Bucky and Natasha were eyeing each other, cautiously.

"Sorry for shooting you," Bucky offered.

"Twice." But that didn't seem to be Natasha trying to make him feel bad, just clarifying. A moment
later, she continued with a smirk. "You're killing my bikini season."

"Beautiful woman like you, you've already hooked 'em with your eyes," Bucky answered, easy as
breathing.

"Well that hasn't changed," Steve said under his breath, heading back to the refrigerator and pulling
out some juice.

“She’ll break your face,” Clint added, a moment later. “I feel like I should warn you.”

Bucky eyed Natasha again, and Steve was fairly certain Bucky was sizing up the potential risk-
reward of continuing to flirt with Natasha anyway.

"We were going to go to the corner for subs, but we could order in," Sam offered while Steve took a
long gulp of juice. "Catch a movie?"

"Might be a good idea... if Natasha doesn't stab Bucky through the good hand first."

They ordered a mountain of Chinese food and watched Good Morning Vietnam.

Sam, Clint, and Bucky ended up over by the window, drinking a pair of beers and talking soft
enough that Steve didn't want to strain to hear.

"How's he doing?" Natasha asked, coming up beside Steve and offering a beer to him as well.

"Skittish..." Steve admitted, taking a sip of the beer and watching where Sam had his hand on
Bucky's shoulder. "Sam says it's normal, but it's hard not to look at it and feel like I've failed him. I
lost him on the train that day, and finding him again is more than I could have asked for but he's... it's
going to take time. I've had almost two years to get used to the future, he's just getting started out."  

Natasha glanced towards him, and then back to his beer. "You did good, Steve. And he'll sort it out.
I remember when I defected to SHIELD I had... a lot of guilt, a lot of blood, and I didn't really know
who I was. It will take him a while, but he'll get there."

"Well if you're looking for shared life experience..." Steve trailed off, smirking over at her.

"This is payback, isn't it?" Natasha started to laugh.

"Little bit."

Tony came down sometime later and grabbed an egg roll and a pile of chicken. “Barnes,” Tony tilted
his head down the hall. “I've got you a room, it's not much, Banner’s floor is actually larger, but it's
less of a cage. Steve can also introduce you to the common gym. As much as you're ready, you can
start feeling out the world.”
“Thank you, Director,” Bucky said, and he held out his hand.

“Tony, or Stark. Although, I suppose with you I should insist on Tony.” Tony shook his hand though. “I’m not doing you any favors, Barnes. It’s good business sense to use the assets you have.”

A day or so later, after a spar with Bucky and a shower, Steve was back up in Ops. Technically it was Maria's turn in the hot seat, but Tony was up there pre-shift doing some sort of engineering work.

"Sir, we have a landing request from Iron Patriot," Hill reported.

Steve glanced up, as did Tony a second later. "We don't use that sort of language in this house, young lady. It's War Machine."

"War Machine is requesting landing permission."

"Yeah, yeah, it's not like I took his codes out," Tony went back to his work. "Tell him Pad II will accept his armor for storage."

Steve watched, fairly eager to see the Iron Patriot armor, as did Sam. There was more than a little curiosity in his mind about Colonel Rhodes as well, and the sort of man that could put up with Tony on a regular basis. Steve should take notes.

The armor itself was a different sort of impressive from Tony's, more... built up Steve supposed, it was also painted... very... patriotic.

"Man, it really does look like Cap and Iron Man had a baby."

"Don't tell Rhodey that. He's sensitive," Tony answered, but he stood. "Seriously, we all hate the paint job."

Rhodes cut a fairly impressive figure, thinner than Sam, and dressed casually within the suit, not the same flight suit that Tony wore, but similar. Tony met him out on the roof, and the two of them had embraced in a tight hug before Tony started pushing Rhodes inside.

They made their round of introductions, and all of them were invited to call Rhodes 'Rhodey'.

"Buttercup, I think there's girls in Atlantic City with our names on them," Tony said, looping an arm through Rhodey's, and for a brief moment Steve was concerned before Tony kept tugging Rhodey towards the elevator, not back to the suits or the quinjet.

"Sorry, Tony, not a social visit. Ellis asked me to stop in."

"Did you just name drop the President?" Tony sighed. "We've got a briefing room. Hill? Rogers?"

Steve stood, and Hill pushed away from her console to join them. "Romanov." Natasha took over for Hill.

The three of them headed over to the briefing room, Maria took a seat at Tony's right, Steve at his left. "What's the President got for us, Colonel?"

Rhodes looked uncomfortable for a moment, glancing between Steve and Maria, before his eyes went back to Tony. "To put it bluntly, Ellis is trying to decide if he's going to give you, and S.W.O.R.D., his nod for the UN confirmation hearings. Smart bet is to not throw in with you, sink or
swim, everyone knows you'll still be here, saving the planet."

Steve gritted his teeth, not even bothering to hide his displeasure. He'd shaken that man's hand when he'd received his Medal of Honor after defrosting, he'd like to think...

Rhodey continued, however, unaware of the train of Steve's thoughts. "Of course, save a man's life and he's ready to give you a little latitude. He wants to give you his blessing, but he also knows it's political suicide if you--"

"Fuck it up?" Tony asked, voice light.

"Basically." Rhodey paused. "That's where his head is right now. He just needs a reason."

"And I suppose he has a laundry list of potential reasons? Was saving the Statue of Liberty from a dirty bomb not reason enough? Should I just write a check from the Maria Stark Foundation to a Super PAC for him?"

Steve didn't quite follow, but it certainly sounded like Tony was implying some sort of bribery...

"Not quite that bad..." But Rhodey looked guilty enough as it was. "We had a line on some Ten Rings higher ups, but they've gotten out of Afghanistan and crossed the border into--"

Tony held up a hand. "Don't bullshit me, Rhodey. I know your bullshit. I taught you your bullshit."

"An extraction. We have the location, but we can't just launch a drone or an airstrike, that would be an act of war."

"So Ellis wants me to order a surgical strike, using the Avengers, or S.W.O.R.D., to extract a terrorist leader from a territory we're not currently at war with? That sounds great, when do we start?" Tony asked, bit out, really, sarcastic and annoyed, then he pinched the bridge of his nose.

"That's a no-go, Colonel," Steve said, answering for Tony, because it was, and Steve might have been ready to bend the rules for Clint, but Tony was right, they couldn't set that sort of precedent.

"Commander's right," Maria agreed. "Clean dealing. We can't let S.W.O.R.D. be used that way."

"Come on, Rhodey," Tony said. "Give me something I can work with."

Rhodey sighed, but he pulled out a sheet of paper and handed it to Tony. It was, no doubt, the list of acceptable tasks that President Ellis had put out for S.W.O.R.D. to handle. Tony's eyes scanned the list, and it did seem to be a list, but none of them seemed to be anything Tony was willing to consider.

After a few minutes, Tony folded up the list, and passed it back to Rhodey.

"You can tell the President I'd consider it a personal favor if he expressed his confidence in my ability to do my job, but these are outside the purview of our interim charter." Tony got up, and pulled out the document - about a dozen pages - and handed that to Rhodey as well. "It's available on the website."

"Sorry, Tone," Rhodey answered, taking the sheets. "I'm just the messenger."

"I know." Tony took a long sigh, and pinched the bridge of his nose again.

"I'll even take you up on the Atlantic City trip to make up for it.”
Steve didn’t know much about Atlantic City, it’s resurgence as a gambling center had happened long after he’d gone on ice, but he knew it was a place for drinking, girls, and gambling. Just the sort of thing Tony would probably like, but Steve couldn’t deny he’d be jealous to know Tony had spent his time like that.

Tony shrugged, and when Steve glanced back up he could tell Tony had been looking at him. “Pretty sure Captain America doesn’t approve that sort of thing. Drinks?”

“You got it, man.” Rhodey gave him another pat on the shoulder.

“Give me five with Hill.”

Steve got up and headed out with the Colonel. "What were the rest?" Steve asked, curious now.

"More of the same." Rhodey's voice was filled with a certain apologetic tone. "I wouldn't feel comfortable doing them in Iron Patriot, either. Most of them would be acts of war if the US military executed them."

"He won't run S.W.O.R.D. ops like that," Steve said, remembering their prioritization of missions. Maybe he shouldn't have told that to Rhodey, but he was Tony's friend. “We’re an international organization, and we can’t be seen to be playing favorites that way, executing the will of the US military or political hierarchy. It’s bad for what we’re trying to accomplish.”

"Man’s changed."

Steve knew that Tony had, some, but it was interesting to hear such a life-long friend say the same.

"Could you--" Steve set his jaw at an angle, before he decided he did want to ask Rhodey. "He needs to unwind a bit. He’s right about Atlantic City, but make sure he has some fun."

"This is Tony we're talking about, right?" Rhodey asked, giving Steve a skeptical look. "I mean he... yeah, no, you're probably right. He probably hasn't been sleeping. That stupid son of a bitch. I love him, but... he is Tony. Even when he's not working, he's working. When we were in college, he actually brought one of his one night stands to the lab to copy the equations he'd done on the girl's back and stomach? She had to stand there, half naked, and every time she tried to move he'd just say 'transcribing genius'. He's insane."

Steve laughed, just... what the hell sort of man had Steve fallen for?

"I'll be sure to let you know if Ellis comes up with something that doesn't involve an international incident," Rhodey promised.

"He shouldn't have asked."

"He knows that." Rhodey shrugged. "People are going to be testing you, all of you, for the next few months, to see how far you'll go, what you're willing to do to assure S.W.O.R.D. makes it out of the womb."

"What we do, we'll do for the right reasons," Steve answered. Tony came out of the briefing room with Maria. "He's supposed to come on at nine, I'll hold down the fort until he's sober."

Rhodey held out a hand. "Thanks, Cap... can I call you Cap?"

"It's Commander Rogers, or Sub-Director... but I guess everyone's going to keep calling me Cap anyway. I prefer Steve." Steve took the man's hand, and shook it. "Have a good evening, Colonel."
Tony came over to grab Rhodey around the shoulders. "Let's hit the town, hard."

"What did Tony want?" He asked Maria, as soon as the pair were out of the room.

"He asked me to look into a few ways we might be able to accomplished some of Ellis's tasks without inciting international incidents." She shook her head. "I don't think it's doable, but we'll look into it."

Tony came home, close to three in the morning, wearing sunglasses and stinking of liquor. Steve was holding down Ops on his own, watching Hunger Games on his tablet.

"Hard at work, I see." Tony slouched next to him.

"You too." Steve reached out and wrapped an arm around Tony’s waist. “Go to sleep, Tony, I've got your shift.”

Tony hummed, closing his eyes, looking like he was in danger of drifting off right there against the console.

"I am going to be so hungover tomorrow. And I hope you appreciate the number of women I didn’t make out with for you.” None the less, Tony had what looked to be makeup on his shirt collar.

“All of them?”

Tony made another mumble of assent but he leaned in and kissed Steve on the lips. "Thanks. I needed it. It's not immature-- alright it’s a little immature, but sometimes I just need..."

“I understand, Tony. You’ve been working too hard, you needed a break. I’m glad you and Rhodey had fun.”

“You win all the awards for most understanding boyfriend.” Tony frowned. “Are you my boyfriend? What the hell is this? I swear I always fuck up the transitional--”

“I’ll be your boyfriend, Tony.” Steve sighed, and then he reached up and ruffled the man’s hair. "Shower, you smell awful. And go to sleep."
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Got some gooey shit going on for the next chapter or two before the plot/romance finally all ties up in what's hopefully a nice bow.

The next morning, Tony tried to make the list from Ellis not seem to be a fifteen bullet point list that basically amounted to 'assassinate this guy', 'overthrow this regime', or 'invade this country', but it wasn't going to work that way. He was also intensely hungover and grouchy. Tony had liked Ellis well enough, but right now he was pretty disgusted with the democratic process. It was enough to remind him why he didn't let the Iron Man suit into the government's clutches and why people might just decide that the human race didn't deserve the freedom it had.

"I hate democracy," Tony said, glowering at the list. "And freedom."

"He's not getting my vote next cycle," Steve said, standing next to Tony and looking at the list as well.

Tony grunted. "We're not covered by the Hatch Act, but S.W.O.R.D. has similar rules about political speech in the line of duty." After a moment, he continued: "The Hatch Act prohibits--"

"I know what the Hatch Act is. We had that back in my day, too." Steve crossed his arms over his chest and glowered at Tony. "He's trying to use this office to launch a deniable black op against foreign countries we aren't at war with!"

"Are you sure he was on Hydra's hit list?" Tony grumbled. Still, Ellis did have a good record on a lot of things, but Tony could imagine the temptation to have a finger on an anonymous trigger. "Hell, I imagine Fury might have done a deed or two like this in his day."

"More than one," Maria answered, a panel down. "It's not out of line with how S.H.I.E.L.D. operated."

"All the more reason not to," Steve answered. "You'll find another way to convince him to support you."

"Hope and the Declaration of Independence don't make politics go your way," Tony answered, but his voice wasn't as sharp as he wanted it to be. Steve was just trying to help. "Alright, scratch anything that sounds like us assassinating people. There might be a few we could manage with an anonymous cyber attack."

Of course, Steve was glowering at him now. His hangover didn't like that.

"Fine," Tony growled at him. "See if I care. You should go to Washington and shake your head at him disapprovingly."

"I might."
Things settled, slightly, in the week after Rhodey visited. There were no major international problems that Tony couldn't solve by ignoring them. He'd even visited President Ellis at the White House, along with Hill and Rogers, to shake the man's hand and do the whole political song and dance. Steve had even fixed Ellis with a very firm look, and said 'you've made a good choice, backing Stark' and everyone pretended to ignore the fact that Ellis had tried to get them to invade countries.

Steve even took some pretty S.H.I.E.L.D.-turned-CIA agent out for coffee at Romanov’s insistence. It annoyed Tony, but it was the natural consequence of the fact that their relationship was secret, or new, or secretly new. Mostly they weren’t telling anyone, yet.

Tony did some supervising of the bots doing the Triskelion clean up and posed for a few pictures. He and Hill looked over some of the last wreckage as well. "Whose name is on the lease?"

Maria snorted at him.

"No, seriously, river front property in Arlington? Sign me up."

"Do you really want to set up shop the same place as S.H.I.E.L.D. did their business?" Maria asked.

"You're right, bad mojo. We'll keep Avengers Tower for now. We should get some sort of presence though, the local forts and air force bases are taken..." More problems to put on his ever-increasing list of problems. “Are they doing anything with the old Walter Reed location?”

Tony had lunch with the Secretary of Defense. He would have bet money that Steve's coffee date was much cuter. He and Tony had enough history that they could almost fall back on it like old friends. There was a lot to be worked out, and even though the Secretary didn't say as much, Tony got the impression he'd risen - slightly - in the man's estimation since he'd turned down Ellis's requests. That was good, he needed all of the positive political capital he could get.

By the end of their three days in Washington, he was deliriously happy to be heading back to his Tower.

"Remind me to hire someone to deal with the political crap if we get confirmed," Tony told the quinjet at large as he flew them from DC to New York.

"He's being modest," Hill told Rogers, sotto voce. "I think the Secretary of Defense actually likes him."

"Lies and slander."

Being back in the Tower was... a relief. Getting plugged back into the analysis of the hour was also more relaxing than stressful.

"So?" He heard Bucky ask, almost as soon as he and Steve entered the common floor. "How was she?"

"Fine."

"Fine?! You're killing me, Stevie."

Tony ignored the rest of the conversation so he could head up to the command floor and go over the intelligence for the week. He would leave Barnes to his... whatever about Agent Blondie. Steve was his.
"What do we have?" He asked Natasha, coming up to his station.

"Hydra, as usual."

"Cut off the head, and so on... Well?"

"More details on the Hydra Four. They did some sort of small heist down in Charlotte, they're a banking center," she said, punching up the pictures. "Tactical Force, Militant, Bowman, and Hammer."

"Seriously? 'Hammer'? That's the worst fucking name I've heard, which is incredibly because Bowman was competing for the position before then."

Tony looked at the items, however, showing him a knock off Iron Man, Cap, Hawkeye, and Thor. "So where are Spidertits and Green Guy?"

"Not on the radar," Natasha answered. "They don't appear to be a team so much as a set of individual actors, they have a few troops under them, and they've been making strikes around the country - around the world, even. They're mostly an over-glorified Hydra PR campaign."

"I like to think people aren't idiotic enough to fall for that sort of thing, but then I remember how frightfully under-intelligent humans are as a species."

Tony pulled up the rest of the daily briefs he'd missed. "Anything blow up while I was away?"

"No. How'd DC go?"

"Alright. I think we're locked for the US representative to the UN confirming us but we'll see. Just need to convince everyone else... is it poor form to send you to Russia to try to secure that vote?"

Tony tilted his head towards her.

"I think it would be a poor use of my time unless I was there for something else. I suppose the argument could be made that S.W.O.R.D. would better support Russia's interests than S.H.I.E.L.D. did, but good luck keeping Ellis happy with that sort of talk."

"You could seduce Putin."

Natasha gave him her best ball-withering glare.

"Is that a no?"

"Sir," JARVIS interrupted. "Fox News has asked for your comment concerning the accusation that Militant is, in fact, The Winter Soldier rebranded."

Tony pinched the bridge of his nose. "Here's a quote: 'do you know how to count? The Winter Soldier has one mechanical arm, Militant has zero'. And you can send that to them. Never mind, I miss Washington already."

He ran into Barnes later that day, down in the kitchen, while Tony was trying to figure out what he was going to actually eat. Barnes was eating what appeared to be a heated up can of Campbell's soup if the empty can by the stove was any indication.

"Wow, is that like a blast from the past?" Tony asked, because he didn't even know he had Campbell's soup, he bet Steve had requisitioned it.

"It's weird the things you miss." Bucky looked down at it, though, and frowned. "Doesn't taste right."
"Bet you think you're eating a salt lick," Tony answered, scrounging around and eventually finding a pile of spinach, remembered that 'kitchen' meant 'solid food' not 'puree for drinking' and then put the spinach back before going in search of peanut butter. "Twenty-first century, fast cars, fast women, high blood pressure."

When Tony glanced back over at Bucky, the man was looking at him, judging, Tony felt a distinct air of judgement.

"Let me guess: 'you look just like your father'?

Bucky shook his head though. "Nah. I mean... yeah, you do, but it's not eerie."

Surprisingly, the answer made him feel a bit better. People who knew his father tended to go there straight off, so it was a bit of a pleasant shock to not have someone say it, especially someone who'd known his father as a younger man.

"Just trying to get a feel for you," Bucky admitted. "I wouldn't have taken orders from Howard on good day."

Tony might have choked on his own spit there for a minute, but he hid it - poorly - behind fishing for some bread. "Well, Dad got better at is as he aged, I suppose. He did eventually head up S.H.I.E.L.D., although I suppose in the end he fucked that up pretty badly."

"What the hell were they thinking, recruiting Zola?"

"Peace is complicated," Tony answered, because more and more in the last few weeks he'd seen it, first hand, there was probably a good reason he had been so involved in war. "Propulsion technology, genetics, biology... and they weren't all Nazis or Hydra some of them were just German. Erskine was German. Before two months ago, I would have said, no question, it was the right thing to do."

"And now?" Bucky asked.

Tony shrugged. "Now the answer isn't as simple."

"Practical." Barnes came up to lean on the breakfast bar, aimlessly prodding the soup he had.

"Who designed your arm?" Tony couldn't help himself, the articulation was fascinating and Tony just wanted to steal the design and slap it right on Vision. "It's great work."

Bucky shrugged. "Hydra?"

"Probably a safe bet." Toast toasted and peanut butter spread, Tony took an impolitely large bite and started to chew. "Thankfully that's not in Tactical Force's armor or he'd be a lot more formidable."

"I'd like to help."

Tony took another bite. "So... I understand, and Steve trusts you which is pretty decent currency, but to be really blunt, people are after my head, trying to figure out reasons why I'm not suitable to run this little intelligence shindig, and the truth is they are all entirely correct, so I have to be on my best behavior pretty much for the rest of my life. That means you can't go anywhere until people have forgotten that they can find naked pictures of me on the internet... and the internet never forgets, either that or I get confirmed as Director of S.W.O.R.D."

Barnes seemed distracted, if only for a moment, but the concept of 'naked pictures on the internet',
Tony didn't want to give Barnes a straight answer on the question, because the truth was that Tony didn't know. "After we check your brain again, I'm willing to consider it. Steve put you on the training rotations, right?"

Barnes nodded, sullen.

"There's not a war on, champ," Tony said. "I can guarantee we'll be just as far in the shit now as we'll be next year. Hydra, Ten Rings, all fun shit isn't going anywhere. I'd rather have someone experienced on the training rotations anyway. Steve gives the say-so, Hill and I will talk about bumping you up to instructor."

If anything, that made Bucky's jaw clench harder.

"It's all I've got now. Sorry. I can't, in good conscience, put you out in the field without more stress testing." But after a few seconds, Tony took pity, because the guy obviously wanted to be out there, and Tony understood the impulse only too well. "Look, a few years ago, I was rated as unsuited for the Avengers, then a sufficiently advanced alien showed up and started trying to invade Manhattan, so... you know, you could always hope for that. We can't afford to hold you in reserve if things go that pear-shaped."

"So I should take comfort in the fact I helped create the mess you're in, but it's not bad enough you want me to help clean it up?" Barnes asked, arms crossed over his chest.

"See? Bright side!"

He won a little snort out of Barnes. "Alright, Stark, you win. And if you want my opinion, your agents need work."

"Then work it!" Tony answered. "Beat them into shape, no broken bones, please."

"I'll start with you."

"Gre--- wait, no. No. We're not doing that. I have a thing. I have six things. Six very real things, the fate of the free world--" But Bucky came over to him, took the uneaten slice of toast Tony was working on, shoved it into his mouth, and then unfairly used his left arm to drag Tony towards the elevator.

"You're the Director," Barnes said, very reasonably. "Your predecessor is the only person I didn't assassinate the first time I tried... or the second. That's something to aspire to."

Barnes had a very good point, which didn’t make Tony any more enthusiastic about the idea. He then took the last bite of his toast. "Please don't kill me. I've reached a time in my life where I actually enjoy being alive."

"Better keep up then, Director."

Since Bucky was released and Steve was back from Washington, Steve had taken to working in his office away from Operations (a little nook off the side of his bedroom) so that Bucky could visit without a clearance exception. It wasn't much different, he was still linked up with Sam and the others in Operations, but with no pressing reason to be part of an all-hands situation, he could relax.
Sam had said he could play spider solitaire on his computer up in Ops if he wanted - Steve had made a joke in response about Galaga - but that wasn't it. He did it for Bucky, not to hide from the world, and he did still go up there a few times a 'shift' regardless, just to make sure everyone was on the same page.

Bucky found him there, leaning back, looking over the day's mission reports.

He was standing in the doorway, clad in the S.W.O.R.D. issued fatigue pants and a black tank top. He looked as though he'd been working out and the towel over his shoulder added to the effect. "Pretty sure I killed Stark."

Steve's head shot up from his console and he gave Bucky a worried look.

"Look at you!" Bucky laughed. "Stark gave me a clean bill of health, don't trust him?"

He was glad Bucky could laugh about it, but that didn't stop the moment of fear at the joke. Steve knew this side of Bucky from the War and from all the Commandos, the joker. But Steve wished it wasn't directed towards... "Wait. What did you do to Tony?"

"Took him down to the training room and went a few rounds," Bucky answered with a little shrug. "I even let him use one of his robot arms to even it up a bit."

He would have had to let Tony have the whole suit, Bucky was strong, Steve knew those punches first hand. Still, a round of training was better than anything else he could have imagined. "How'd he do?"

"Surprisingly well, actually," Bucky answered, but his smirk belied the assessment. "He even hit me once or twice."

"Hardly a fair fight, Buck."

"He's actually got good form," Bucky admitted, leaning harder against the doorframe. "Scrappy little boxer, knows more than a few dirty punches. I actually expected worse from a pencil pusher."

Steve had never really thought of Tony as a pencil pusher, he'd always known him as Iron Man, as a fighter, maybe not a soldier, but definitely a warrior. "You sure he's alright? He nearly suffocated to death and then went out for shawarma. He had a two broken ribs and didn't tell anyone."

"I would have noticed if I broke a rib," Bucky answered, like that was some grand assurance. Still, he leaned in and grabbed Steve's shoulder. "Go and check on him, though, if you don't believe me."

Bucky didn't make him call his bluff while he lingered, though, instead heading off to his own room and Steve, he trusted Bucky, but... well the man had shot him in the back four times, so Steve was just making certain. And even if Bucky didn't think he'd gone hard on Tony, he knew Tony pushed himself too hard, so... really it was as much about Tony as it was Bucky.

He found Tony down in the locker room, showering, and it reminded him of when he'd been down here a few weeks ago, when he'd first noticed how attractive Tony was. The man caught him staring at his back after a few seconds.

"You get a discount," Tony said - a clear callback to how he charged by the hour.

"You're gorgeous."

"Talk like that'll get you kissed, soldier." When Tony finished cleaning up, he got his arms around
Steve’s neck and pulled him down, the two of them kissed, still the soft, casual kisses, but enough to make Steve whimper into Tony’s lips.

When they broke apart again, Tony assured him: “Your brother in arms didn’t kill me. I’m fine.”

“Just checking. I like you in one piece, Director.”

“Go on,” Tony said, giving Steve a soft little push away. “As much as I would love to get distracted, I actually have a lot of work to catch up on. Alright?”

Steve nodded, but he did steal one last kiss before heading upstairs.

"Stark alright?" Bucky asked from the couch where he was sitting with a tablet against his thighs.

"Yeah he's fine... fit... good!" Steve spit out the last word, embarrassed, babbling to cover his mix of arousal and nerves.

"Jeez, I'll rough him up harder next time if he's got you that wound up."

"I am not 'wound up'," Steve lied. "What are you doing?"

Good, push the question back to Bucky.

"Stark said if I stopped beating him he'd have his robot butler find me pictures of when Natasha modeled in Tokyo. Tokyo! Last thing I remember we were at war with those guys and now they sell electronics and pretty women in lingerie." Bucky then proudly held up the tablet, which showed Natasha in something slinky and black, sprawled out on a white fur.

"That's disrespectful," Steve said. "And objectifying. The least you can do is get to know her as a person instead of a sex object. She's very smart."

Bucky arched an eyebrow at him. "She single?"

"You shot her. TWICE."

"Nobody's perfect," Bucky responded, sullen sort of sulk to his voice. "Doesn't matter." He set aside the tablet and then looked Steve square in the eyes. “Sam said I should try to get a routine, a schedule. Maybe being on the roster will help. I want to get back out there with you, running missions."

"You don't have to," Steve answered, reminded of Sam's own words to him about how how hard it was to come home, but how hard it is to stay as well.

"I know that. Steve, I'd follow you anywhere, stupid punk kid. If you're going to do this, I want to be there with you." Bucky looked over at Steve, deadly serious. Steve trusted Bucky, trusted him with his life, but he knew it was going to be slow going to find a place for him in S.W.O.R.D. with his history.

"Stark agrees, you're on the roster, Bravo team. Some of them could use a little bit of direction, a push." Steve didn't know how much he wanted to push Bucky right now, but the man was pushing himself. Bucky had always respected him enough to accept he knew his own mind, so Steve would let Bucky push. "Remember, no ops until Stark okays it."

"Stark, Stark, Stark," Bucky said, rolling his eyes.

Bucky had a point, so Steve let it drop. "I've got shift in two hours, what are we doing until then?"
Steve asked.

"Arm wrestle?" Bucky offered, putting out his left hand.

"How about a jog?" Steve offered, smirking a bit at Bucky's suggestion. "See how hard you can push. We can make Sam watch so he feels a little inadequate."

"Guy always makes me feel like he's got me all figured out," Bucky said, annoyed. "Be nice to put him off balance for once."

"He's great, though."

"Yeah..." Bucky nudged Steve's shoulder with his. "Come on. Let's see what you can do."

*

Time passed. Tony was pretty sure he was supposed to be trying to figure out where to take Steve for his second date, but it never seemed to actually happen. It should bother him, but at the same time, they saw each other every day even if they couldn’t spare a romantic word. He needed to fix that, he’d sort something out. After scrounging around for a frozen breakfast sandwich thing - not finding one - and brewing a pot of coffee, Bucky found him there as he finished brewing the pot.

"Know where Steve is?" Bucky asked as he raided the coffee pot.

"South America," Tony grunted in response. "There’s a semi-important thing going on." A few sips later, his brain almost came on line. "You're good at tactical crap, right?"

Bucky arched an eyebrow.

"No, no, go with me here. Steve has you working on training with our three strike teams, right?"

Bucky nodded. "I need more strike teams, you know, Delta and Echo, andFuck if I remember which one's F, who goes down to F?"

"Foxtrot," Bucky answered.

"Exactly, see, this is why I need you around." Tony sighed. "I need more teams. I need more quinjets too, but we're doing alright with that, but teams are what make the world go 'round. We're being asked to respond to global threats with a mom-and-pop level of interventional force. HR is backlogged, we have a good couple hundred candidates, they've been polygraphed, I sent their resumes through a filter or two, but I need people who can both follow orders, and think and chew gum."

"Commandos."

"Right. So... what do you say?"

Bucky cocked his head to the side, confused. "Did you ask me something?"

"Go over the candidates, screen them, beat the shit out of them, I don't care. Find me the kids who will be the next generation of S.W.O.R.D. strike force. We'll look at how to keep a high level of experience on a per team basis, keep it from getting cliquey, you know, command things."

"Commander Barnes?" He asked, this time obviously having caught the drift of Tony's thoughts and understanding where he'd been coming from.

"Don't get lippy, Sergeant Shaw," Tony shot back, enjoying sending references over someone’s head
since Steve got over a quarter of his now. "You're still not S.W.O.R.D., you're a contractor, but that means they have to call you 'sir', abuse it."

"You'll need more field commanders..."

Tony shot Barnes a look. "Later."

The two of them quieted after that, and Tony tried to decide what the hell he was going to eat. "JARVIS, what time is it?"

"Two seventeen am, sir."

Tony blinked up at the ceiling. "Can you find me someone who will bring me food for money? Please." He then realized it was very late, and Barnes was still up. "Sleep ok?"

Barnes's mouth twisted in a line that didn't say 'no' so much as scream it. Tony knew that feeling only too well, and he came to join Barnes on the couch.

"When I got back from Afghanistan, I couldn't take a shower for months." Tony thought he should probably explain that more, realizing it didn't make much sense to someone who didn't know his history. "They'd dunk my head under water, leave me there until I couldn't not breathe and you come up choking. When you stop choking, they put you back down. I get it."

"My... head tingles.," Barnes confessed. "They used to clamp me down so tight, zap me so hard I needed a mouth guard to keep from biting my tongue off." Bucky put his hand on his own shoulder, squeezing it a little bit. "I start to drift off, and then my leg jerks and I think I'm there. What did you do?"

Tony tried to decide how blunt to be. "Killed the people who did it to me, didn't sleep, eventually got a therapist and some exposure therapy. Shower sex helps."

He and Barnes ended up sitting across from each other, eating disgustingly greasy subs from somewhere JARVIS had found nearby, bitching about ice cold fries and not having enough beer. Tony finally ended up in his room some time after three, and he let himself check in with Maria to find out the status of his strike teams.

"Commander Rogers has inserted into the facility and they are in the process of differentiating friend from foe. His last report was seven minutes ago. You'll be the first to know if things go south. Get some sleep, Director."

Tony curled up in bed and wondered what the hell had happened that had Steve Rogers asking him out, had them dating. He knew he was attractive enough, but Steve was... Steve. He wasn't going to question his good fortune, it was hardly a successful relationship right now, but the fact that Steve even wanted to try was more than a little shocking.

He would just have to figure them out, make it work, and keep Steve as happy as he could. The fact that they both were so busy, and both didn't seem to mind, was definitely a help. Tony could feel the gnawing guilt, the same guilt as when he was with Pepper, but there were no exasperated cries for date night, just a soft smile across the command floor and that was, somehow, against all odds, enough.

* *

Steve needed almost a week to settle the local problems that he and Charlie Team had been handling in South America, but they had been invited, and Steve was only too happy to be a humanitarian
presence there. Things were still messy, they always were, but he was more than happy to help people, make their lives better, and he was glad that he was able to do that on an even more global scale than he had ever imagined when he was just Captain ‘America’.

He was still more than happy when he loaded up the quinjet and got one of the other Team members to take the first shift to get them home to the Tower. He wanted a shower... and a chance to actually talk with Tony. Steve hadn't seen him in days, and he was definitely missing him, even if they weren’t really ‘settled’ yet. One date did not boyfriends make. They’d have a week's worth of conversations that had been little more than a professional exchange between 'Commander Rogers' and 'Director Stark'.

He hoped they could work out. His dating in the future had been abortive at best. Steve had grown up in a day when asking your high school sweetheart to marry you when you got your draft notice wasn't peculiar at all. Even a decade after Steve had gone on the ice that was how people found their husbands and wives.

Now, he was almost young to be considering a long term partner. He wasn't quite thirty, there were professional men and women who wouldn't get married until they were established in their careers, or if they were married they wouldn't have kids. Ms. Potts still wasn't married at almost 40, and she'd only been dating Tony for three years, but no one would call her a failure or anything but a knock out.

Tony was smart, funny, and attractive. The way he had stepped in with S.W.O.R.D. had been a firm, even-handed presence that Steve wouldn't have expected of the man he met two years ago, but the more he got to know Tony, the more obvious it was that his first impressions were incomplete at best.

He was glad to finally be home though, and to land on the roof of Avengers Tower and disembark. Tony wasn't anywhere to be seen, but neither was Maria, so he glanced around only to find Bucky was in Tony's office with him, and the two of them were talking over something.

Steve gave them both a quick wave, and Bucky smiled, Tony didn't seem to respond much at all other than with a little quirk of his mouth.

"What'd Tony want?" Steve asked when Bucky headed out.

"Training rosters," Bucky answered. "You alright?"

A quick 'fine', 'fine' exchanged, Steve ducked his head into the conference room.

"Welcome back."

"Sorry for being away so long."

"Your boss is a jerk," Tony answered, smiling. "Debrief me?"

Tony's request was without any of the usual loaded sexual humor, and Steve was pleased he didn't flush, but he did lean against the table. "We went in, they were pretty dug in by the time we arrived. I think you got most of the blow by blow of the actual raid. We weren't able to make much headway on their command structure, but they were definitely acting on orders, not randomly sowing chaos. Vision was able to pick up a few files, but he didn't want to plug in just in case they were, you know, virused."

"You're hilarious when you talk techie." Tony smiled though. "Good. I'll take a look at those. We had to send out Alpha and Bravo team three times while you were away. That's why I was working
with Barnes, actually, to get more teams hired and trained. Now that Ellis is behind us, we have a little more latitude and more people want in."

"That's good. I know he's been feeling useless."

"Actually, 'does the trainee shit him or her self when they realize they're facing The Winter Soldier' is a great employee vetting process."

Steve rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t deny that Tony had a point. He thought about talking about them, of trying to sort their relationship out more, but it wasn’t the time. Steve needed a shower, he needed to unwind, and Tony was on duty. “Well, I’m going to go check in with Bucky, maybe tonight...?”

Tony winced.

“Busy?”

“Yeah, I swore I’d go over some science stuff with Bruce. I haven’t looked at our R&D in over three weeks. I know he can handle it, but I do need to sign off on this crap.” Tony sighed. “I know I’m really bad at this sometimes, but I will make us a date, this week, next week at the latest, alright?”

“Deal,” Steve answered, but then he continued, voice teasing: “Better not keep me waiting, too long, Director. I might think you’re not into me.”

“Oh, Commander, if only you knew how wrong your premise is.” He smiled though. “I promise, soon.”

“I’m going to go finish up my reports, maybe bring you up a sandwich?”

Tony looked incredibly grateful, and even if it wasn’t really a date, it was nice to sit next to him for a little bit and get caught up on work.

* *

Tony knew he was pushing his luck with Steve. He couldn’t just expect a glorious Adonis like him to just accept some sort of passive, laissez-faire dating thing that he could get away with when people were snowed by his looks-charm-money. Tony woke to find that there was trouble brewing in the Balkans, and he couldn’t even do anything about it. Maria hadn't even woken him up because it was outside their purview. Instead it just glowered at him, irritatingly.

Steve showed up at his station about four hours after Tony relieved Maria, as Tony was in the midst of trying to de-escalate things without being allowed to touch them.

"Good morning, Director."

"Commander," Tony answered, without even thinking about it. Steve had some sort of weird fetish for their titles.

"To-ny," Clint interrupted, enunciating each syllable. "It's his name."

"It's called a chain of command," Steve answered, jaw set at a stubborn angle now. "It encourages the hierarchy, and helps maintain good interview and public relations etiquette."

Tony didn't resist the urge to send a text message a few seconds later, to Steve's phone: 'kinda hot, too.'
Steve hunched down in his desk for a moment before he took a deep breath and went back to his own work.

Although he mostly focused on the state of the globe, Tony did spare a few cycles to Steve - he was a genius like that. He'd not really thought... well romance just wasn't on his radar after Pepper; it wasn't that his heart had been permanently wounded and he could never love again, it was just that he didn't really know how to make relationships (actual ones, not just sex) work.

He was pretty sure he should do something nice for Steve soon, he was also pretty sure that 'something nice' wasn't 'buy the guy a Barnett Newman'. Art... Steve liked art. Tony could... do that...

It took a few emails, checking some schedules...

'Busy tomorrow night?' He texted over to Steve.

He caught the hint of Steve's frown, and then he seemed to be considering. 'Bucky and I were going to watch Quantum Leap.'

'That's adorable,' Tony answered, and then a second later he continued. 'Wednesday?'

'I'm all yours.'

"Promises, promises," Tony murmured, this time out loud, and Steve blushed just slightly across the room, where he'd obviously heard.

It was nice, though, he spent the day working on a few side projects, trying to actually make some headway on things that weren't the business of trying to keep his makeshift, fly-by-night little spy company working. He had all the pieces in place, he just had to make it go. The truth was that the more the organization grew under him the more he didn't have to worry about the everyday minutia, but that didn't make letting go a bit hard. He worked on tweaking the power fluctuations out of the arc reactor. It was science, not at all politics.

When he was a kid, and he'd seen the way his father occasionally had to fight with the Board of Directors or deal with some contract negotiation, Tony had promised himself he was never going to let himself become a victim of that sort of corporate political bullshit... and here he was, sitting on top of international political bullshit.

"I'll take irony for 400, Alex," Tony grumbled, and then turned over to Clint where he was either flicking paper at the ceiling or thinking about something very deeply. "Legolas, you mind orchestrating a strategic food run for the command staff?"

"There will be noodles," Clint answered, not even needing to think about it. "Lots of noodles."

"Sounds good."

"You need to get some sort of executive assistant though because this is just ridiculous." He slid gracefully off his chair, and left the command floor, leaving it occupied by only Steve and Tony.

Steve seemed to be debating the merits of saying something, but then he took a deep breath and grinned. "So what are you planning for Wednesday?"

"Top secret," Tony answered, barely stopping to take a breath. "Fate of the free world depends on me getting one past you, surprising you, making you feel just a little special."
"Only a little?"

"Well let's not be too hasty," Tony answered, warm and silly and quite happy to have Steve actually seem a little charmed. "Wouldn't want you to have false expectations."

Steve rolled his eyes, but after a quick glance over his shoulder he leaned in and kissed Tony, just a quick peck on the lips. "I have no delusions who I asked out, Tony. Do I get a hint?"

"Not even a little one." Tony didn't resist the urge to reach out, to run his hands against Steve's chest and gave a little pat to the leather uniform there. "You'll like it."

"Alright." Steve seemed lost for a moment, but then he put his own hands at Tony's hips. "Don't let me down... ah... Director."

"See, this is why I should never be given authority over people because that's... compelling... pretty terrifyingly." Steve's response was a little smirk. "I'm not sure how I feel about the fact you're abusing this. Does America know you're devious?"

Steve's answer was a soft kiss. "You sure you don't mind me spending the evening with Bucky?"

Tony shrugged. "Go, have a life, not like I'm not going to have to cancel on you - or vice versa - if we somehow keep not fucking this up. We've missed two or three almost-dates already.

Still, he reached up and gave Steve's cheek a little pat. "Let's back this up so we don't traumatize Katniss when he comes back with noodles... or Bucky if he comes with more recruitment sugg--"

Steve's whole face seemed to freeze in a shocked expression, and for a second Tony was very worried he'd broken him. "Oh... shit."

Tony arched an eyebrow.

"I'm... I'm going to have to tell Bucky, about us. I mean I can't just--"

It was Tony's turn to have his face go panicky. "Look, I appreciate your eternal bro code, and I have to admit I'd tell Rhodey in half a heart-beat, but he's going to murder me and they will never find the pieces."

"He won't murder you!" But now Tony had it in his head and he was fairly certain Bucky was going to end his life. "I mean he... ok... I won't tell him right now, but we will have to tell him if we... if it gets serious."

"It's like you want to terrify me. Alright, alright... Tell me, you know, before, so I can be out of town, in a secure bunker... on an abandoned island."

"Deal." Steve kissed his forehead. "I don't think it's quite as bad as all that, but alright."

Well it wasn't Steve's manhood, and possibly life, on the line, but Tony could see why Steve might think so. Still... he had hopes. Bucky didn't entirely hate him...

"And thank you for giving him something to do, he was climbing up a wall and I think that's hard on him." Steve stepped away, and he gave Tony the dopiest, warm smile. "You're swell."

Tony was seriously rethinking the wisdom of letting Bucky into his office with any regularity, but... if it made Steve happy. "Swell. Go away, I'm sickened by how wholesome you are."

Steve just smirked, and Tony was certain that was the most annoying thing ever, but the guy was
beaming at him.

Clint came back about ten minutes later, and Tony ignored Steve's puppy dog eyes as Tony ate a plate full of spaghetti. It was tougher than it sounded.

Tony passed off his shift to Maria later in the evening, and tried to decide which was more terrifying: trying to start another relationship, or the fact that he was trying to wrangle an entire world intelligence network. Tony gave it a tie.

A soft knock on the door made him frown, but he pulled on a t-shirt regardless, and padded over to the door. When he opened it, Steve was standing there, grinning at him, but he just leaned in, gave Tony a soft kiss on the lips, and then stepped back.

"Good night, Tony." And then he left down the hall.

Relationship, a new relationship was definitely more terrifying.

Bucky had adapted to some parts of the twenty-first century with great ease. Steve had noted that his favorite parts were definitely microwave popcorn and the internet. Of course, based on Bucky's occasional comments on the matter, Steve was fairly certain that Bucky used it as education about modern social change... and the more prurient. Bucky occasionally claimed it was in furtherance of dating tips for him to woo the recently-returned Natasha, but Steve hadn't seemed anything that looked like an attempt in that direction.

Mostly, Steve found it more likely that Bucky had seen a choice between Natasha and Maria, and made it.

"You know... you'd better like her, she's a really swell gal and she doesn't need your..." Steve waved a hand as though that indicated everything Bucky and Natasha might get up to. Bucky left a lot of hearts broken when they were kids.

"Are you a modern dating expert now?" Bucky asked, a little teasing, and Steve did blush at that, because he thought he was doing alright. He and Tony had kissed a few times, and maybe they had a little clarity, but that was more than Bucky had right now so Steve considered it a win.

"I've dated."

"That S.H.I.E.L.D. agent?"

"Sharon," Steve answered, and he felt like he was lying. "I mean that was just the once. I've been on a couple dates, though, couple different folks. Gals are different now, modern. You try that 'let me take care of you, Doll' on Natasha and she'll break your arm."

Bucky mulled this over for a second. "So what do you advise?"

"Ask her to coffee. There's a guy, Danny, and he goes and gets coffee and then you drink the coffee with the gal and you talk about your jobs and..." Bucky gave him an unimpressed sort of look. "Or you cook for her? I've got a Joy of Cooking and everything. Natasha really likes lemon, cookies, chicken..."

"That sounds terrible."

"You have a lot in common, you know," Steve said. "She's pretty and athletic and..."
"You don't have a thing for her, do you?" Bucky asked. "Because I'm not going to step on my best friend's toes."

"No... no... I mean we kissed once, and it was fine... but she's like a sister."

"A sister you kissed."

"It was for a mission!" Steve protested, hotly, because he wasn't going to get it from two sides about his love life, he took that enough from Natasha. "I mean, 'cause Natasha is swell, and she's a knockout, so you'd better be nice to her and not pull any of that stuff where you don't call a gal after a date..."

"Steve." Bucky put his hands on Steve's shoulders, and looked him square in the eye. "Alright. I'll... cook her dinner, or something. Happy?"

Steve gave a firm nod and turned back to the TV. "JARVIS? The television, please."

Bucky flicked a kernel of popcorn at the side of Steve's head, but the two of them settled in to watch.

Steve had a little dust-up over in Kansas early on Wednesday morning, but it wasn't too big a deal - hit and run by Militant and Bowman - and he was back on the quinjet heading to the Tower.

"Your wonder twin asked me to dinner," Natasha said, sitting down next to him in the back. "Isn't that against some sort of 'guy code'?"

"I kissed you for a mission, or... well... you kissed me for a mission. He can date you if he wants... if you want, it's your choice," Steve found himself babbling, because Natasha had caught him off guard, thinking about how he didn't want to miss his date with Tony (again).

"You don't mind?"

He shook his head. "No, besides, Bucky already cleared it with me."

"How considerate," Natasha smiled at him, and nudged him with her elbow.

"And... I know it's none of my business, but you are my friend, so... I mean, don't hurt him too bad? I think he's looking for something... normal? Something to take his mind off of the past, but maybe you're not the best gal for that. It's like if he can be a flirt, it's like old times, before the War... before everything."

Natasha gave a soft little snort. "I'll get a read on him, Steve." And then she gave him a little peck on the cheek. "I'll only hurt him if he's an ass, or if he's into that sort of thing."

"What does that mean?"

The quinjet cabin was quiet for a long moment. "You're really sweet. Don't ever change."

He debriefed with Tony - he and Natasha - and then he checked in with Sam, so the two of them would go running tomorrow, and then he texted Tony: 'not too late for our date?'

'Nope. Dress up, but not too much.'

'What are you wearing?'

'Someday, Steve, I'm going to blow your mind on that. Just slacks and a shirt, no tie.'
Steve dressed up to match, in khakis and a slightly dressed up shirt. It was cool enough that he slipped into his leather jacket as well. JARVIS - or just computer wizardry - made him meet up with Tony in the elevator and the pair of them headed down to the garage.

The trip to the Upper East Side was slow, even later into rush hour as it was, but Tony chatted a bit about a project he was working on, and even though he liked to keep the dates less about work, they did have quite a bit to talk about on that front as well. It was pleasant, and easy, Tony made it easier than Steve would have really expected.

They eventually pulled up in front of a brilliant white, spiraled building, larger at the top than at the base... very modern. "What is this?"

Tony stepped out, and after a brief moment a valet came to take Tony's car and Tony opened the door for Steve. "Shall we?"

Steve stepped out and looked over the building again. "So what is this place?"

"You don't know?" Tony beamed at that, and even though Steve might have let him, he just walked towards the entrance seemingly expecting Steve to follow him without a word.

Steve did. As they stepped up, the door opened and a woman in her 40s or so gestured them in. "Mr. Stark, and Mr..."

"Rogers, Steve Rogers, ma'am."

"Shelby, and that makes you the one and only Captain America..." She said, and there might have been a bit of a purr to her voice, but Tony seemed to ignore it, so Steve did as well.

"Just 'Steve' is fine," Steve answered, all bright smiles, but now that they were inside Steve couldn't stop looking. They were in an atrium of sorts, and the building just went up and up...

He craned his neck, taking it all in, it... spiraled. And when Steve looked again, checked, the building actually did spiral, it wasn't floors of spirals it was just one long twisting... "Gosh."

Shelby chuckled. "It's probably the most famous view of the Guggenheim." After a brief pause, she continued: "Mr. Stark has asked for me to arrange a personal tour for the two of you. You're an art enthusiast?"

"Starting to be an architecture enthusiast..." Steve said, spinning again, slowly, taking it all in again. "Is it just the building itself, or..."

"The building itself was commissioned from Frank Lloyd Wright by Solomon R. Guggenheim in 1943 to house his growing collection of Impressionist and Modern art..."

Steve was in heaven, in some sort of paradise of art and architecture and... space. It was beautiful, and he couldn't keep his eyes any one place.

"Tony, you didn't shut down the whole museum for this tour, did you?"

Shelby stepped in, seamlessly: "The museum closes at 5:45pm every day save for Thursdays and Saturdays. Afterwards, it houses private viewings, charity galas, or other events as requested by our members."

After that Steve let himself enjoy. Tony was mostly silent, seeming to just enjoy watching Steve enjoyed himself. He didn't comment often, instead letting Shelby give them a tour of the entire main
spiral and then other back rooms with other items, private galleries, and hidden away nooks and crannies.

Shelby was professional, and knew more than enough about the periods of art on display. Steve didn't quiz her, so much as follow one awed question with another as they continued around. He didn't know how long they spent, or how bored Tony must have been, but he didn't complain at all, just stayed by Steve as Steve had the time of his life.

Finally Steve realized he was holding Shelby up, they were keeping her with his question and her tour and... he really had meant to spend his date with Tony. "Shelby, this is all... amazing. I mean some of this was around when I was a kid, and let me tell you this wasn't what they taught you in school but it's just incredible to see these pieces all in one place."

"A pleasure, Steve," Shelby gave his hand a shake, and Tony wandered off, probably to find the car.

They finally climbed back into the car, the same place as where Tony had left it, and Steve just couldn't stop himself. "Tony that museum was amazing, and the architect? Frank Lloyd Wright? Inspired. I can't believe I'd never... wow."

Then he grabbed Tony by the back of the neck and pulled him in to thank him, wet and warm and Tony didn't hold back from sliding his tongue against Steve's lips and Steve was only too happy to oblige. They made out like that for minutes, just where anyone could have walked by, but Steve didn't give a damn because he wanted to kiss Tony so badly.

"Uh..." Tony's hair was a wreck when they finally pulled away. "Thanks?"

"Tony... I'm thanking you. That was amazing. You're so..." Steve leaned in and kissed Tony again. "Thanks."

"Well... that was a bit more... enthusiastic than I'd planned for." Tony cleared his throat and looked out the front of the car. "I'm going to have to hold something really incredible in reserve... buy you Fallingwater or something."

Steve thought Tony was ridiculous, but now he had the question in his mind. "What's Fallingwater?"

"Oh no," Tony said. "You're not allowed to look. I'm going to have to use that to make up to you after our first fight."

Steve rolled his eyes, of course Tony was, he was probably plotting all of the ways he could get away with stupid little things because Steve was smitten. "Now hush, I'm trying to remember all this..."

Tony snuck a kiss in against Steve's temple while he sat, but the two of them found a greasy spoon Chinese place to grab take out just near the Tower, and then headed up to Tony's room where the two of them could sprawl and fight over egg rolls.

Instead of a 'fight', it ended up more being Steve with his head on Tony's thigh while Tony dangled food for him, extorting kisses before Steve got to eat another bite.

Tony seemed distracted, and not by Steve, which was... distressing, he'd wanted... "What's on your mind, Tony?"

"Teleconference with the English Prime Minister tomorrow," Tony answered, before he winced. "Sorry... I... um... your eyes? They're blue. I'm paying attention, really."
"And designing something?"

"Fine tuning to the network interface for the StarkPhone? I'm sorry."

Steve reminded himself, as very reasonably as possible, that he'd known this was Tony when he'd asked him out. It wasn't a shock. And this was the same Tony who had taken him out on an amazing date to an amazing museum. He then glanced up at where Tony was looking guilty. "Egg roll?"

Tony blinked, surprised, but then held out another bite. Steve gave Tony's finger a light chomp in retaliation. "Tell me about the phone thing?"

"It's... ah... technical?" Steve didn't stop looking up at him. "It's about the frequency that the interface operates with, and the interference in the same range as microwave radiation..."

Steve didn't understand a word Tony was saying, but he nodded, and after the two of them had mostly finished dinner, they ended up with Steve submitting to having his scalp massaged with one hand while Tony plotted and planned his attack for the next day.

"I should get going," Steve said, sometime late, maybe past midnight, and he helped himself up while Tony did the same. "I'll plan our next date, alright?"

Tony nodded. "Yeah, sure... was the Guggenheim too much?"

"It was perfect, just... something simple next time, right?" And then he leaned and then kissed Tony.

"Sorry I sort of... spaced in the middle there."

"I'd be shocked if you hadn't. I'm dating you anyway."

"God knows why," Tony answered, but he pulled Steve in and definitely reminded Steve why.

Even though Steve was eager to try to decide on a third date, the course of trying to start up an international intelligence organization, understaffed, on a shoestring budget, meant there were a lot of things that didn't happen as quickly, or as romantically, as Steve would have liked. He wanted to do something nice for Tony, something he'd like. Tony had been so thoughtful with the trip to the Guggenheim - and Steve had googled Fallingwater despite Tony's instructions and it was gorgeous, but a historical landmark so Steve would have to be firm on the 'buying it because you're mad at me' front.

Still, even though Steve had wanted something low key, he also wanted something special and then he had to mix in the fact that it couldn't be something that demanded they be somewhere specific at a set time. Part of Steve wanted to ask to make sure the Dodgers and the Yankees had an exhibition game this year and he could go. That might be breaking his rule about 'nothing over the top'.

He ran into Natasha in the training room, going through some stretches, before he joined her in a few throws and blocks.

"So how'd it go the other night?" Steve asked, curious, because he'd gotten it from Bucky ('I cooked like a Prince!') but Natasha hadn't said a word.

"Alright." The answer was terse, and for a moment Steve was worried that Bucky's aspirations towards Natasha, whatever they were, would be cut short. "He's... different. It's like he's somehow this weird mix of a gentleman and a total slime ball, but in a charming way?"
Steve snorted. "Yeah, I think... Bucky comes on pretty strong in a modern sense. I think that's just how you went for it back in my day, a lot more 'hey, doll, wanna go to an exposition?' and then you went!"

"And the exposition wasn't your dick?" Natasha asked, lip quirked, and Steve couldn't help the embarrassed, blushing, sputter. "No wonder you think kids today are so crass and you're confused by lip rings."

"There's nothing wrong with getting to just talk, know someone, be attracted and figure out how you fit. That's the way it should go." Steve was more and more sure of that the longer he and Tony dated, even if it was mostly stolen kisses in the halls or late at night.

"Well, he's nice," Natasha answered. "It's refreshing. Not sure if it'll go anywhere, but I can have a good time while it lasts. I think it might be my first time... where it's... where I can kiss off the guy if I'm not into it. It's not a mission, it's not an assignment, it's just whether or not I like him."

"So... do you like him?"

"I have no idea."

She threw a punch, and Steve blocked, and after that the fight was on, the pair of them trading blows, Natasha throwing him, Steve throwing her, the two of them in a knockdown fight as Steve worked to get even half of the agility Natasha displayed while Natasha worked against a larger, stronger opponent.

They rinsed off afterwards and headed upstairs, while Steve decided he wasn't going to give up his access to his dating guru of the 21st century so soon, while they were on the topic. "So... what's a good date to take someone on?"

"You asking for a friend?" Natasha asked, and Steve frowned. "It's a joke. When you ask for something, then you say 'I'm asking for a friend' but really it's for you, but I figure you're trying to ask for Bucky, so... it's not funny anymore."

Steve nodded. "Got it. Idioms. Well, I guess I'm just asking."

"Coffee date not working so hot?" Natasha asked, smirking.

"You said coffee dates were good!" Steve gave her an annoyed little look. "They're fast, low pressure..."

"If it's going really well you'd rather spend all day, or all night," she answered, but she did, eventually, take pity on him. "So which date number are we talking? One? Two? The infamous third date?"

"What's special about a third date?" Bucky asked coming in from his room area, scrubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

Natasha hesitated, only for a moment, before she answered: "It's the date when some meatheads think the relationship should turn sexual. They invite you in for a nightcap, thinking they're all subtle..." She shrugged. "It's predictable, third date, sex."

Steve felt his eyes go wide, suddenly far more concerned for his third date with Tony. That added an entirely different layer of stress that he didn't need.

"He's wondering how many third dates he fucked up," Bucky said, leaning in to Natasha. "But
"Don't even think about it, Buck-o."

Bucky didn't even look the least bit wounded. "How many third dates have you messed up?"

"None." Steve said, softly, still trying to figure out if Tony would expect sex...

"Really?" Bucky came up and dragged an arm around his shoulder. "We've got to fix that, I bet you're scraping them off with a stick."

"Oh he is," Natasha said. "I can't tell you how many blind dates he's turned down. It's distressing."

"Alright, we can work with this," Bucky said. "You've got the raw material. Second dates, how many second dates have you gone on?"

Of course, that was exactly when Tony showed up, obviously having heard the first question, and he stood outside of view of Bucky and Natasha. "Three?" Steve said, embarrassed by the painfully small number at this point. "I just don't put a lot of time into dating. There's nothing wrong with not wanting to focus all your energy on that."

"Natasha," Tony said, entering the room after that and clearing his throat. "Don't do that annoying thing where you have a boyfriend and now you feel the compulsive need to see everyone else ensconced in connubial bliss. If you're going to match make, at least find a leggy blonde for me."

Steve blushed. Tony was talking about him, Tony was talking about him right in front of Natasha and Bucky, and he looked completely smooth while doing it. Someday Steve would have that poker face, but today was not that day.

"We were discussing the, ah... 'third date rule'," Steve said, hoping that Tony would take prompting...

And Tony's eyes widened slightly. "Sex?" Tony asked, as though it needed any clarifying. "I mean, sure, who wouldn't be interested, but honestly I'd just settle for having a third date. Do you know how hard it is to schedule me for anything now? Pepper tried to get me to fly out for R&D and I didn't even have to make up an excuse, I literally don't have the time. So yeah, unless I'm getting a time turner, I don't expect grandness, or sex."

"Harry Potter!" Steve said, pointing at Tony and grinning.

"Sex and Harry Potter should never be in the same set of sentences." Natasha leaned in, eyes squinting at Tony. "And I have a hard time imagining you delaying gratification for an hour much less a dozen dates."

Tony played it off, like it wasn't any big deal. "I guess I'm more interested in finding a connection than a mutual fluid exchange. But third date? You should probably know the person well enough, something low key..."

"But you wouldn't say no to sex," Bucky said, like it was obvious.

"Well, no. I mean if it's on offer I pretty much never say no."

"I think there were two too many words in that sentence, Stark," Natasha said now.

"'Pretty much'? Well, I will have you know I'm more than capable of monogamy. I don't cheat,
"Your taxes are a civic responsibility and if you--"

"Steve, it's a joke. I pay every nickel required by law to the state and federal government and then a few dozen million more in actual philanthropy." Tony headed over to the coffee pot, found it empty, and started to brew a cup, and turned to Bucky. "But, if you want to take Natasha on a nice date where you don't actually completely destroy my very expensive cookware making god knows what sort of lemon monstrosity I can get you a personal chef and my little penthouse dining room."

Bucky looked torn between being offended or not. "Like you know how to cook."

"Yes, I have no idea how to do anything but make coffee and open power bars, which is why I have professionals to feed me."

After brewing a cup of coffee, Tony poured it, and headed out, back to the conference room or maybe to the shop, and Natasha and Bucky were having some sort of argument over whether or not what Bucky had cooked had been a 'lemon monstrosity' or not. Steve, however, had an idea, which he implemented about a half hour later. He pulled out his battered - he'd got it as a second hand bookshop - copy of Joy of Cooking and tugged it onto his lap.

"JARVIS? Does Tony have any food he really likes?"

"I believe Sir's words on the matter are usually 'that's what speed dial is for', but to answer the question that you are no doubt actually asking: his mother, Mrs. Stark, cooked only very rarely, but she favored the cuisine of Sicily quite strongly." JARVIS paused for a moment, and then continued: "I would recommend, although Sir would deny quite strongly than he likes it at all, Pasta alla Norma."

"Is that difficult?" Tony seemed like he'd like difficult food...

"The most challenging is appropriately seasoning the pan fried eggplant, but I am certain it will not be beyond your capacity. It is very much beyond Sir's."

Steve looked it up, and it didn't seem that challenging. He could probably get the eggplant, tomatoes, and basil with little problem... "Alright. Thanks, JARVIS."

"Of course, Commander Rogers."

He would just have to find the right time to implement this.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Small CW/TW for what appears to be gay bashing, spoiler-y details at the bottom. I realize I warned for like 'terrorism' but a lot of people have different responses to different triggers. IT'S ALL OK IN THE END.

I HOPE to be done today, but tomorrow at the latest

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Of course, as soon as he went out to the local farmer's market and bought the ingredients, he got deployed to Asia with Clint, Sam, and two dozen S.W.O.R.D. Agents to help avert World War III. Some of the agents were more diplomatically oriented, but there was more than a little trouble brewing.

Tony briefed them on the fly. "Alright, hooray for international diplomacy. Here's what's going on: Hydra has just taken over a missile facility that is capable of launching missiles into the adjacent territories that have also sorts of historical animosity. Normal, calm, rational people would realize that 'terrorists took over our missile facility' should be a good 'the dog ate my homework' excuse, but the truth is these guys are itching for a fight. Dead civilians also make really lousy PR."

Tony pushed a few more images to their screens. "Your military objective: get the base back before it shoots any missiles, kill or capture the Hydra actors, save the military guys, and so on. Your political objective: get these guys talking. I wanted to try my own brand of diplomacy but apparently 'what the fuck is wrong with you?' is not diplomacy according to Hill, so I can't go." Tony waited, allowing it to sink in. "We have been politely invited to intervene, both by the UN and our friendly missile hostages, so there's no questionable dealing. We're invited guests, but don't outstay your welcome. No one likes that guy who stays around after the DJ packs up."

"Will we be expected to continue to liaise after we've retaken the missile facility?" Steve asked, just to clarify.

"Yes," Tony said. "Couple days at least. Don't worry, I'll keep Natasha from castrating Bucky, hopefully."

There was a little quirk of a smile on Tony's lips, but he looked rueful.

"I appreciate it," Steve said, hopefully conveying that he missed Tony, and would miss him until he got home.

A few blueprints popped up on screen, and Steve knew that was the conclusion of the briefing. "I leave the rest in your capable hands, Commander."

"Of course, Director."

Tony gave him another quick smile, and then disconnected.

"We'll be on site in less than an hour. Let's get our entry plan down."
He and Sam and Clint planned, factored, and decided. Steve picked through the maps and floor plans to decide where they needed to go in, how they would sweep, who would take up point or other positions. They touched down close enough to make their entry - no resistance outside - and the quinjet headed off to drop off their diplomatic assets.

Steve took what amounted to point in the warren of corridors that made up the missile base. His primary objective was to secure the launch control area and get his techs in, securing the overall bunker would be of a secondary priority. Aborting the launch was paramount.

After a few false starts, Steve finally pushed his way into the control room where the ersatz Captain America was standing watch over a half-dozen techs.

"Ah, exactly who I was hoping for."

"Militant," Steve said, holding up the shield while a few bullets came his way. He kept his techs under cover, and it didn't take them long to take down the grunts, but Militant's shield was stronger than it looked. "I'm afraid I can't let you do this."

"Do you train in a mirror? Do you posture like that?" Militant snorted, derision obvious, and after a brief moment the fight was on, shield to shield, throw to throw, fist to fist as the pair of them fought around the room. Around them, the S.W.O.R.D. techs worked, struggled to abort whatever launch was already in motion.

Militant made his own shield swings, his own attacks, and Steve spent more time protecting the working techs than actually making his own shots at the man. They traded punches, sickening sounds of bone against bone, and Steve felt his own teeth rattle more times than he could count - including taking a shield straight to his face, leaving his nose cracked and bloody.

Steve kicked him off, and Militant came back down on him, hand to his throat, and then he felt the flicker of static through his neck. After a brief twitch, Militant went slack and then crumpled at Steve's feet. When Steve righted himself, Clint was standing behind Militant, bow up, hand slack from where he had released the arrow.

"Nice work," Steve said. "Tie him up."

Sam was at his side a moment later. "Jeez, man, we need to get you a medic."

"For my nose?" Steve asked, confused. "No, just... you know, push it back."

Sam, thankfully, did as he was instructed without too much fanfare, although Steve did break the side of the table he had his hand when he squeezed from the pain.

"Ow." After a moment, he wiped the blood there. "Are we clear?"

"Not yet, just got a call that you were tangling with a tough guy, figured you needed the assist," Clint joked with him. "Bravo team, let's move out, secure the base."

Steve secured Militant with some ties, and then headed over to where the techs were working, diligently. "Where are we?"

"We're working at unhooking their attempts to get into the system," the tech reported. "They didn't get enough information to launch, but they are still wired into the system from the outside, so if we don't stop them, they will be able to continue to work on the codes."

"Can you... unplug it?" Steve asked. "Unplug the internet?"
Steve received a very pitying 'God, you are so old' look from the tech. "We're concerned that any interruption of the services that would keep Hydra out, could trigger failsafes on the system."

"Not good," Steve said, softly. "I'll report in to Director Stark."

He headed a few feet away and pulled out his phone.

"You still need to learn about roaming fees, I swear, Steve." Tony's face popped up a minute later, he looked sleep rumpled and Steve felt just a little guilty for bothering him. He must have been trying to catch a few hours' sleep.

"We've taken the facility, but there's some sort of problem where Hydra's been able to get into the network and keep working to launch the missiles." Steve thought that was it, anyway.

Some sort of stream of techno-babble came from the tech, and Steve held up the phone so Tony could hear it.

"Alright, yeah... you got it handled?" Tony asked, sleepily. "Ugh, I should have sent Vision..."

"You can't handle everything personally," Steve chastised him, and the tech reported success a few moments later. "Alright. I think we're good on this end. Were you asleep?"

Tony's answering mumble sounded like a yes.

"Sorry, go back to bed. I'll call you at a better time."

"I'll call you," Tony answered, growling and rolling so he was actually out of whatever camera was on the phone. "Interrupt your dreams about leggy blonds."

Steve flushed, just slightly. "I prefer brunets."

Tony glanced up, just slightly, and Steve thought he caught a smirk. "You would." Still Tony was obviously tired and the yawn that came after he spoke was genuine. "Night, Cap."

Steve flicked off his phone, not quite able to keep a fond expression off his face, but he had mostly hidden it when he turned back to the techs. "So, you've got the internet straightened out?"

"Yessir," the tech answered. "We've been able to stop their off-site ingress, so the missile facility is... secure. We'll need to do a lot more work to prevent another intrusion like that, make it more secure. They'll be at a higher threat of being hacked again if we don't."

"So you're upgrading their firewall."

Sam finally laughed, and wrapped an arm around Steve's shoulders. "Come on, old man, let's leave the whippersnappers to their work."

"I am trying to learn," Steve said, as he and Sam made their sweep of the surrounding areas, more relaxed than they probably should have been, but still on alert. "You grew up with this stuff, cell phones and wifi... and S.H.I.E.L.D. pushed me pretty hard on that front, but there's only so much I can learn in a few years."

"Then I'll stop giving you a hard time. You know, I'm sure you could take a class, or even get Stark to give you a few tips." Sam didn't seem to be fishing, but Steve was feeling a bit paranoid about that now, concerned it was obvious about him and Tony. He wasn't trying to hide it, he just wasn't ready to share it yet, especially not when 'it' wasn't well defined.
"He's so busy," Steve answered. "I mean, he's always been like that, I think, and smart. I don't know, I think he'd probably talk over me." And there was the fact that if he had the time to sit with Tony, without anything else pressing on them, he'd rather be doing something much more interesting than learning a bit about a cell phone. "Well... maybe not." He remembered the way Tony had talked him through checking the circuit breakers on the old helicarrier when it was about to come down. "I don't want to take up his time like that."

Sam shrugged. "Just a thought. You seem to spend a lot of time with him now, far cry from being suspicious of his motives a few months ago."

"It's different now," Steve said. "He's... I don't know. I guess I had the wrong image of him." An image that Tony had accidentally perpetuated, but at the same time, that was under the influence of Loki. He glanced over at Sam.

"Hey, you don't have to convince me. You throw a stone over in Afghanistan at one of our bases and you'll hit a man - or woman - who can thank Stark for saving their life. Back when they were still making weapons, his sales visits are the stuff of legend. Some folks see a war profiteer, that sort of thing, I think SI, corporate side, might have been about that, but it was never Stark, junior or senior."

"You like him." Steve smiled a little. It was good to know that Sam, at least, thought highly of Tony. Natasha did too, to some extent, in her own way.

"More since working with him, but yeah. Hard to hate the guy who gave me wings. He makes a hell of a Director."

He did. Steve smiled.

"Man, you have such a dude crush."

Steve's face faltered, and he shot a worried look at Sam. Was it that obvious? If Sam found out... that would be alright, but he hadn't really planned this and...

"Hey, ah, it's just like you admire him, as a dude. I really shouldn't use bromance humor on a guy from the 40s, should I? It's not gay."

Sam's rapid, and slightly worried, backpedaling got Steve's own mind working overtime. He needed to have a proper conversation, one where he could figure out more about where his friend stood and... "No. I mean, I was just surprised by the term? I even went to a few drag shows back in my day." Steve shrugged. It hadn't been his thing, but he might be fairly naive on the practical aspects, but he understood the principles.

"Wait. Really?"

He answered with another shrug.

Sam was quiet for a long stretch. "So do you have an actual crush on Stark?"

Steve groaned, and buried his face in his hands, because this was exactly what he needed to talk about right now, halfway across the world from Tony, on a mission, with no idea how the man would want him to respond, or... anything.

"Oh my God. Captain America is gay?"

"Bi," Steve answered. "Bi! And... can you just drop it? Stay on mission."
Sam made it at least one full corridor before he turned back to Steve: "You know he's bi, right? I mean if you--"

"Stop."

That time he used his Captain America voice, and Sam did drop it, thankfully, and they were back on task, sweeping, checking for the missing operators, and they did find them, finally, a few hours later and got them back to their stations.

"Alright, let's keep the area secure for now. I'll radio in with our diplomats and see how they're doing."

He then headed outside and pulled out his wrist communicator. "O'Brian? Wen?"

A few moments later, Wen's crisp voice came back at him: "Yes, Commander?"

"How are we doing?"

"We're in it for the long haul. The launch facility is secure?"

"For the moment, we're going to settle in for now, make sure Hydra doesn't come back at it, be ready to mobilize if they try something else." Steve listened to the rest of Wen's report, but she was far more suited to the diplomacy than he was. He took a few laps through the facility, checking in with his troops and making sure any injuries were attended to. They would be here for at least a day, probably two, while the techs took care of the firewall issue. From there, they might move out to another location, or spend the duration of the talks at the facility.

After that was settled, he headed up to the roof as a sort of impromptu brooding and lookout.

'Sam thinks I have a crush on you,' Steve texted Tony. 'Knows my bi'.

He waited, which went on for several minutes, before he got a return text. 'Only care if you're going to ask me what I'm wearing. Hint: I'm naked.'

Steve snorted, but realized he'd probably woken Tony again, or at least he would just be getting up. 'Did I wake you?'

'Was in the shower.'

He took a very long pause, debated the merits of a response, and then added: 'Think of any blonds?'

'I think you're trying to taunt me. I bet you're all hot and rugged too, storming a compound...'

'I got my nose broken,' Steve answered, just to make it clear he was hardly the picture of desirability. 'Do you care if I tell Sam?'

'That you broke your nose? Or that you're thinking about me naked?'

'Tony.'

'I can hear the tone, everyone has the same tone when they say my name. And you can do whatever you want. I just want some notice when Bucky finds out, because he's going to murder me.'

Steve was half way into saying that Bucky wasn't going to murder him, when the door from the station opened up and Sam came out onto the roof. 'Sam. Gotta go. Have a good day.'
A final chime came from his phone, which he checked. *Love the lack of comfort about your bff murdering me. Cya My Captain.*

He slid his phone back into its place on his uniform, and then saw that Sam was carrying a pair of coffees. *Sorry for giving you shit earlier, man.*

Steve took the coffee, because he was a soldier, and he could appreciate coffee from another soldier for what it was. It was probably different now, but it was so rare back in Steve's day that sharing it was quite the sacrifice. *No problem.*

"Should have been better about it." Sam joined him, pulling up a space on the little block outcropping that Steve had made his perch.

"I surprised you, it's fine."

"And you're fine with it?"

"Being bi?" Steve asked. *Yeah. I mean I've known since I was a kid. Not that anyone would have given me the time of day.* It wasn't quite true, he'd gotten hit on, before, sometimes, by men, but it had never felt right. *People have a hard time of it, though, right?"

Sam nodded. *Yeah. I work with guys, sometimes, older guys usually, who had to come to terms with being all macho, and wanting to be with a man. The younger guys are a little more self-aware, usually, and plenty of straight people were happy when Don't Ask Don't Tell got overturned.*

"That was swell. I guess-- it reminds me about doing what you can, at the time: you can't serve, you can serve but you can't tell people about your personal life, and now you can serve openly." Steve frowned, because it was one of a million things he'd had to learn and understand in this new time. *It seems weak, saying you can't go any farther.*

"Sometimes it's all you get," Sam answered. *But I feel ya.*

"Don't tell anyone," Steve said, a moment later. *I've... got it worked out, but I haven't told Bucky, and it's not exactly the sort of conversation you had over coffee in the 40s. Although I swear you guys act like you invented sex.* Steve took a sip of coffee. *So it's not that I'm ashamed, or hiding, I'm just... I don't want to put this on Bucky, not right now.*

"Yeah, no way, cross my heart." Sam gave him a little bump with his elbow. *Although now I've gotten bitten by the Natasha bug and I sort of want to play gay Yenta.* He laughed. *I've met some great guys down at the Bronx VA.*

Steve groaned, burying his face against his knees for a moment before he took a long, steeling breath. *Tony...* He couldn't say it.

"Ah, so you are crushing on Stark."

"We're dating."

Sam looked at him, and then blinked. *You're actually...?*

Steve took a deep breath and felt his voice rising, just a tad. *You're the one who suggested it! But yes, we're dating. It's low key, since a little after Madripoor.*

"Wow."
"But with the hearings and the fact that he's *technically* my boss, all the things we need to accomplish, it's not... well it's sort of back burnered." Which was frustrating, and annoying, and he wished he could change, but they needed this. S.W.O.R.D. was so important and neither Steve nor Tony would mess that up for anything. "I was going to cook for him tonight."

Sam threw an arm around him, and Steve leaned into it, a little bit. "You'll get another date."

Steve wanted to think that, but a small part of him knew that sometimes you never got that dance. "Yeah. Can't wait to get home..."

"I want you to know, to make it up to you, I will listen to any mushy details you want to disclose."
Sam took a sip of coffee, and then over the top of the mug, Steve caught him say: "Cradle robber."

It was a good thing there were no insurgents in the area, because he and Sam didn't come down from laughing at that for at least five minutes.

Tony, for better or worse, had a unique ability to shut himself away from the world, from his personal relationships, from his emotions, and just drill down into work. It was a dubious skill, though, in that it tended to leave him abandoning his friends, his lovers, and his personal responsibilities for long stretches at a time and had generally left him with a reputation as a flake on some things. It was also why he usually had a personal assistant.

"Alright, Sir?" Maria asked, coming up to where Tony was currently glancing over the third day of mission reports from Wilson and Steve on their trip to Asia.

"Yeah." He scrubbed a hand over his face and realized he hadn't shaved today, he probably looked like an artistic hobo. "Any news on the Black Sea situation?"

Maria shook her head. "Widow's in place, but no report." After a few moments she put a hand on his shoulder "You know it's my shift, right?" It was said very gently, more a soft reminder than something harsh.

He nodded. "I guess I should... I bet Pepper has work for me... let me know if anything catches on fire."

Most of his lab area had been appropriated by S.W.O.R.D., although he did have enough space to get the job done it was a far cry from his usual sprawling work spaces, and he'd have to talk to Pepper about changing the lease on the 70-80th floors to expand S.W.O.R.D. in the Tower if he wanted to free up his lab space. All that meant was he did his engineering down on a tablet - networked into some of the bigger computational clusters he had available for his personal use and hadn't given over to S.W.O.R.D. - in the den, with a cup of coffee and a muffin that had come from somewhere.

"Saving the world?" Bucky asked.

Tony glanced up, realizing that Bucky was there - and had been staring at him for some time. "Ah... sort of? Just working on a few designs. Cell phone, some body armor. Nothing world shattering. You alright?"

Bucky grunted. "Most of the recruits are useless."

"Actually useless, or not as good as you want them to be?"
"Some of them have potential," Bucky admitted. After a long sigh he settled in and glared at Tony again. "You sent Natasha to Russia."

"Yesss...?" Tony drawled, as though that had any bearing on anything. "It's her job. She needs to do things, she's uniquely suited, she speaks Russian, she is terrifying, and she can be in place if we need to send in diplomatic advisers."

Bucky frowned again.

"Did I cockblock you? Sorry." Tony wasn't sorry in the least.

"How's Steve's mission?"

That, at least, Tony felt he could share - even if they had some pretty weird ideas about compartmentalization at S.W.O.R.D.. "We're out of the woods on a military front, probably. Steve and Sam are staying there until things are more settled. Steve broke his nose."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Bucky answered. "I can't tell you the number of times I had to peel some knucklehead off him who was hurting him. It's for a better cause now."

Tony nodded. "We - he - captured Militant, the Hydra Captain America knock off. We're going to be a lot more public with him than I would be otherwise. I want to nip the talk that you're him in the bud."

"Thanks," Bucky answered, even if his jaw was set a bit slanted.

"If I ever intend to field you, I need to prove you weren't, you know, running around helping Hydra after I vouched for you." Tony shrugged. "Did they have that sort of thing back in your day? Smear press?"

"People were a lot... it wasn't anything like what I've seen. Depending on the infraction, the press might even ignore it, just to be polite."

"No such thing anymore," Tony answered. "Trust me."

Bucky glanced over at him for a second, and then down at his tablet, and then back up to Tony again. "They sort of ripped into you after you came back from being a prisoner of war."

"I wasn't a POW." Tony always wanted to make that clear. He wasn't, he wasn't a soldier, and maybe the experiences were similar but it wasn't the same. "But... yeah, the press can be pretty rough."

Tony watched the way Bucky moved, how he drew his good hand over his body and rubbed at his shoulder, squeezed the metal there and then slowly untensed. "I'll keep that in mind."

After a few seconds of silence, Tony went back to typing, trying to figure out how to deal with some of Vision's maneuverability issues that seemed to be related to awkward twitch-time reflexes that JARVIS just couldn't replicate.

"Are dames today all like Natasha and Hill?" Bucky asked, interrupting a train of thought and making Tony momentarily pretty irked, but he got back on track finished up, and then looked over to Bucky.

"Not all, but yeah, lots of successful, independent women who don't need no man," Tony answered. "You want a housewife, you picked the wrong Tower."
"You're fine with that?" Bucky asked. "You're powerful, successful... but you're fine with your gal not being around?"

"My 'gal', my last one, anyway, ran my company. She wasn't around much. We eventually broke up, but it wasn't because she wasn't cooking my meals." Tony shrugged. "Successful is sexy. You can take any bimbo to bed, but the ones who have staying power are the ones you give a shit about." Mostly he hoped he could bring together the time, and the energy, to give a shit about Steve. The guy was great, handsome, attractive, very successful, but that didn't make it easier to make it work. "You give a shit about Natasha?"

Bucky shrugged. "I don't know," he admitted. "I-- sometimes I don't even know who Bucky Barnes is, James Barnes, how am I supposed to decide if I like Natalia Romanova? She's the same, though, she got... made into this perfect little spy, perfect package, and sometimes she uses this voice on me, and then... she leaves, like she did something wrong?"

"Ahh, the voice, yeah. Know that one." It was odd for Tony, to see - or hear about - that side of Natasha, the side that wasn't trying to seduce him or work for him or lie for him or to him. "You ever read Dune? Is Dune old? I always forget when things are old. JARVIS?"

"Dune was published in 1965, Sir."

"So... probably not." Tony shrugged. "It's a classic, never liked it."

"Why did you recommend it, then?" Bucky asked.

"It's a classic, it also works on the operating principle of artificial intelligence being amoral and flawed. I mean, sure, but plain old regular intelligence is just as bad. I have an irrational dislike to any popular culture that might set back the acceptance and understanding of thinking machines due to prejudice."

JARVIS cleared his throat: "Sir, some might say that is actually a 'rational' desire, as it is based on your desire that your creations receive acceptance within the world."

"Shush," Tony answered. He and Bucky returned to their mini stare-down, and Tony slowly went back to his own work. He needed a lab.

"Is it any good?" Bucky asked, much, much later.

"Hmm?" Tony looked up.

"I'm asking JARVIS."

"Oh."

"Dune is, as Sir said, considered a classic. There are some aspects that have not weathered as well as others, but it presents an interesting example of earlier speculative fiction which also includes religious or spiritual aspects that have come to be less prevalent in modern science fiction," JARVIS answered. "I have difficulty ascertaining if you may find it enjoyable, as it deviates substantially from your and Commander Rogers's choice for entertainment. Potential enjoyment may be used to judge your appreciation of other science fiction works."

Bucky seemed to take that all in, nodded, and then looked down at the tablet he tugged onto his lap. "Do you have a book? Or do I have to read it on this?"

"It has been forwarded to your tablet, if you express enjoyment with the base style I will be happy to
purchase a copy on your account."

That, somehow, seemed to be the thing that got Bucky hung up. "I have an account? Like at Macy's?"

"Ah, pardon, your usage has fallen out of favor. More accurately, it will be deducted from the expenses set aside for your use on a month-to-month basis."

"I have an expense account?!"

Tony coughed. "Everyone on payroll does... technically you're not on payroll, you're a contractor... sort of... just go with it. If you want a book you get a book."

"Ah... thanks. I'm glad you think I'm going to be up on my feet again."

Tony didn't really know what to say, but he had to say something. "You vet my agents, that's worth something. It's not charity, it's me recognizing we're going to need all the help we can get in the future."

"Natasha made me let her pay for our takeout last date," Bucky said, frowning at Tony. "Is that a feminism thing?"

"I am the wrong person for that question," Tony answered. "Now... enjoy your book, Pepper just emailed me with a work emergency at my other job."

"Got it." Bucky smirked, clearly thinking Tony was lying - which he was, so it was a fair judgement.

* *

Steve was so glad to finally be home, the weight of being on the other side of the world, of being concerned about the peace process while also missing Tony, and Bucky, and the other S.W.O.R.D. members was tougher than he remembered. When'd he'd been in the War, the only person he'd really had at home to miss was Peggy, and even she had been out on the lines plenty of times. They'd fought side-by-side on more than one occasion. It was easy to forget how nice it could be to not have the stress of someone at home.

"Welcome back, gentlemen," Tony said from where he greeted them inside the command floor. "And ladies, of course. I've been reading all your reports, so actual debrief should be short, but you might as well unwind, long trip. Wilson, Rogers, give me five?"

Steve was more than happy to do that, and he and Sam headed into the office area where Tony waited.

"Anything too sensitive to put in a report?" Tony asked.

"No. Everything went fairly smoothly, militarily, after the initial assault. Politically you'll want to talk to Wen in more detail, she got the best understanding on that front. We weren't able to get much usable intel out of Militant, but he's ready for fingerprinting and all of that to send to Interpol."

"This guy's got to have a criminal record somewhere," Tony agreed. "Alright, take it easy, nap, whatever."

"Sir?" Sam said from next to Steve. "You got a minute?"

Tony nodded, guileless.
"Alone."

A slight note of concern, a crinkled eyebrow and a glance at Steve, passed over Tony's face but he obviously knew there was no getting out of it. "Sure. Rogers, if you'll excuse us?"

"Of course. When are you off shift, Director?"

Tony couldn't help the little smirk, but he did. "Maria's up at seven, we'll have handoff, so about eight."

Steve nodded, and headed out of the room. He considered heading back downstairs, finding Bucky, but instead he saw Sam and Tony - through the glass of the office - have a conversation. Steve didn't get much of a view on Sam's side, but Tony's face went through a few emotions, all so rapidly that Steve was barely able to catch them: surprise, followed by concern, and then evened out into his more blank, political mask that he wore well when he had the chance. The conversation didn't take long, but it seemed to finish satisfactorily for both Sam and Tony, so when his friend headed out, he joined him and asked, as they summoned the elevator.

"What was that all about?"

Sam waited until they were heading down. "Just making sure your boy was treating you right."

Steve groaned. "He didn't need that!" And it would no-doubt make Tony even more skittish about the eventual confrontation between him and Bucky. "He's already worried Bucky is going to string him up. I appreciate it, Sam, but I'm a full grown man. Tony and I can take care of ourselves on this front. And I need to go to the farmer's market again and get another eggplant." He sighed, and ruffled his hair. "Can you... distract Bucky? I'll be back in two hours or so."

"Pretty sure Natasha is who you send on that mission."

"She's out of town. Please?"

"Alright, man."

Steve headed out, jogged, really, so he could get to the nearest market and grab an eggplant and the tomatoes he'd need. He got back to his kitchen, found it was a total mess, did some cleaning, threw out the old vegetables, and then checked the time, three-ish. He spent the next three and a half hours, or so, playing basketball with Bucky, relaxing, unwinding, thinking about how he wanted their night to go... trying to decide if he was ready to make the decision he wanted to.

"Dinner?" Bucky asked as they hit the shower.

"Rain check?" Steve asked. "I owe myself a nap after that long on the other side of the world." He felt a little bad about the lie, but he wanted his date with Tony, too. He owed so many people his time now and it was hard to divide it.

"Yeah, go... sorry. I've been sitting on my ass over here, making me feel useless..." Bucky gave a long sigh, looking a little lost for a moment.

"I thought Tony had you working on recruitment."

That didn't seem to satisfy Bucky, but it also made him relax just a bit. "Yeah, I guess it just doesn't seem like work."

"It's not busy work," Steve said, assured him. "We need it, badly; we need the recruits, we're
stretched so thin... this isn't like back during the War when we had a whole Army who took care of the lines and the movements and we could just go in and out, we're most of the Army on the war on Hydra."

Bucky seemed to mull that over, and he accepted it. "Sorry, just crawling up a wall."

"I know." He grabbed Bucky and gave him a quick hug. "You're an important member of the team."

"Still wish I was out there with you."

"Me too. I miss it, more than anything." He tugged Bucky in and the two of them hugged, and Steve couldn't help but wish he could just squeeze that understanding into Bucky, that Steve needed him here, that the Avengers and S.W.O.R.D. needed him here, and that he was valued.

Bucky's immediate crisis finally on the mend, Steve was able to head upstairs, shower, and do some of his cooking prep.

"You're sure I can cook this?" Steve asked, looking up to JARVIS, feeling the awesome weight of the responsibility of doing something Tony loved right.

"I have every faith in you, Commander."

So he did the prep work, slowly, checked the oil, checked his pots, and then he texted Tony: 'come down when you finish up, shower first'.

'Will do.' Tony responded, much later. 'Assuming Maria doesn't murder me.'

'Does she have a good reason?'

Steve heated up the skillet and gave his first attempt at frying one of the eggplant slices, waiting for Tony's response.

'IDK is war with Mexico a good reason?'

'You didn't.'

'No. Just feeling wound up. Missed you.'

Steve smiled at the phone... and realized his eggplant was burning. "Crap."

He put the phone down and went back to his eggplant, not golden brown at all, and sighed.

"I might suggest that 'gooey texting with Sir' will make it difficult to concentrate on cooking."

JARVIS, of course, had a point. 'I missed you, too. A lot. Sorry if Sam got on your case.'

'Nah, it's good, shovel speech 1/7 Billion received.'

'Tony, not everyone in the world is going to try to give you a shovel speech for dating me. Just... you know, most of the Tower.'

'And Rhodey totally fanboys you! HE won't give you a shovel speech.'

Steve managed to finally get a piece of eggplant to approximate 'golden', and cooked through, and it actually tasted pretty good if he did say so himself.
Steve plotted for it to be closer to 15, and he wasn't disappointed when Tony knocked on his door nineteen minutes later, just at all of the eggplant was cooling and the pasta was cooking. When he opened the door, he wound up with a very enthusiastic armful of Tony, arms around him, mouth on his, and the two of them scrambled, just for a moment, while Steve put his kissing skills to work on Tony against the closed door, where, after several minutes, he heard the kitchen alarm ding and pulled away.

"You are so unfair!" Tony complained, but he just straightened his shirt, and his hair, before he wandered after Steve. "What is that smell? It smells like fried food, what's fri--?" Tony stopped, glanced around the kitchen, looked again, and then continued in a smaller, much less brash voice: "Are you making Pasta alla Norma?"

Steve blushed.

"Wow, you are perfect. Where do I sit? I don't want to distract you. Can I taste?"

Steve wasn't sure he should indulge Tony, but, then again, the man was already getting indulged in the extreme, so he picked up one of the wedges of eggplant and held it towards Tony, only for him to lean in and take a bite.

"Hot! Melty! Oww my mouth!" Tony covered his mouth, finally, looking a little pained before he waved his hand there. "It's good. I kind of hate eggplant, but I love it for this."

Steve went back to his cooking, smiling now. "Good. JARVIS helped."

"He's my favorite," Tony answered, before coming up to stand behind Steve, this time wrapping his arms around Steve's waist.

"I thought you weren't going to be distracting," Steve said, not quite able to keep himself from chuckling at Tony, and enjoying the way he ran his hands up Steve's chest.

"I can distract lightly." Tony then proceeded to bury his nose in Steve's back and nuzzle, gently.

"Mnhmmm..." Still, Steve didn't mind, not one bit, and he continued his movements around the kitchen, finishing up the pasta, getting it plated, and maneuvering Tony onto the couch with a pair of plates.

The last part was easy, as Tony mostly stayed latched to Steve's back as the pair of them made their way there.

Tony barely waited for the two of them to be sitting before he dug in, and Steve didn't mind at all. He enjoyed getting to throw his arm over Tony's shoulders and eat his own plate one handed.

Tony started on the eggplant, and the boundless, honest enthusiasm was very satisfying to the ego. "This is great."

"Glad I did it right." Steve leaned in and gave Tony a soft kiss on his temple. "So... I sort of accidentally came out to Sam."

"I noticed when he threatened me a little," Tony answered, smiling and snuggling closer to Steve.

After a brief war of desire, Steve raked his fingers into Tony's hair and pulled him closer. He wanted to talk about Bucky, about his concern for telling his oldest and dearest friend about that part of him,
but he felt it would ruin the sweet mood, the soft, relaxing, almost domestic nature of what was between them right then. "I want this to be serious. I want to go into the field with you or fight about policy or politics, and then come back to your room and curl up next to you. I want this to work."

Tony didn't say anything for a very long time, long enough for Steve to worry that he'd pushed too far, but Tony continued to eat, and when Steve cocked his head a little, Tony's face was obviously troubled, obviously thinking.

"Even with how much time I have to put in with S.W.O.R.D. and SI? Even with how much we disagree on pragmatics and idealism?"

"Yes," Steve answered, no hesitation. "You're a good man, you work so hard, you try so hard, and so many times you make it work just because you are too stubborn to stop when you've failed..."

"I don't fail."

Steve reached out and pinched Tony's lips together, chuckling. "And that's what matters to me, your heart."

Tony was quiet again, but for much less long. "Good thing I got it fixed recently, then." He cleared his throat and sat up, even put his - ravaged - plate of pasta on the table and turned to Steve. "I was shocked as hell you wanted to date me. In a lot of ways, I look in the mirror and see a washed up old man. I've still got it, don't get me wrong, but sometimes it's easy to see myself as old. I want to settle down. I had that... for a long time... Pepper..."

Steve felt a lump form in his throat, wishing he didn't feel guilt, and jealousy, and maybe even fear that maybe he hadn't waited long enough, that Tony wasn't actually ready to move on...

"You're not replacing her," Tony said, voice strong. "I do love her, you deserve to know that, but we just couldn't... work, we couldn't balance, and I accepted that. You and I, we live together and we've had a first month anniversary - which I forgot, by the way - before our third date, and you cook me this amazing dinner, and it's romantic as hell, and... you're amazing, Steve. So that's it, Tony Stark, laid a lot more bare than I'm used to... in the emotional sense." Tony cleared his throat. "So yes, I want all that too. I want to crawl into bed too, after a late shift in Ops, and to curl up next to you, I want you to wake up early and me to whine that you're letting in daylight. I want you to yell at me when I'm being an idiot."

"That one should be easy," Steve said, and he leaned in and kissed Tony when he laughed. "I'm not asking for it to last forever, Tony, I'm only asking that you... that we both... try. I was out with Sam, and I told him I was gonna cook for you, and he said 'there'll be other dates', and maybe there won't be. I want to be with you, here and now, it feels right to me. I trust my instincts, and they've always served me right in the past."

"Can't prove your instincts wrong," Tony answered.

"Will you spend the night?"

Tony looked startled for a brief moment, and Steve watched as he tried to calculate if this was an offer of sex, or just the night, or something in between, so Steve leaned in and gave him a soft kiss.

"Yes," Tony answered. "Yes. I am not an idiot, I am a genius and the answer to this question is 'yes'."

"I have to clean up in the kitchen."
"Nooo... oily Italian food will be there tomorrow." But Tony followed after him. "I bet you want us snuggling on the couch too," he said, with a tone that both said that he thought it was idiotic, and also was very interested in doing so - Steve had learned that tone fairly quickly.

"I do. However, you will get something you have always wanted from me, Director."

Tony made a confused, slightly contorted face. "I think you're just messing with me now."

"I'll watch an episode of Star Trek."

"An episode? You're so cruel. How can I pick one?"

They ended up watching three, they were decent, maybe, Steve had mostly been paying attention to Tony, and the fact that Tony was completely incapable of keeping his hands off Steve when there was no reason not to.

Tony was on cloud nine. Part of him insisted on reminding him that it was just a night spent together with Steve, just Steve and him, naked, sliding together and touching, warm and lazy and slow, trying to make his first time good for Steve. He'd dozed off in Steve's arms, and was woken - far too early - in the morning with a soft kiss on his forehead and a ruffle of his hair, only to head back to sleep. Tony was so gone.

He didn't know when it had happened, not exactly, but he was definitely falling for Steve, hard. Maybe he'd already fallen. It was odd to feel like he was swept up in love and lust, because he was old enough to think that sort of thing shouldn't be happening to him anymore.

Thankfully, he managed to keep himself from being entirely distracted at work. He kept abreast of the thousand happenings across the global, dispatched smaller teams, Vision, everyone, checked in with Natasha on her own mission, and planned for how to handle some of the growing pressure that might bubble over in South America - if they were asked to intervene.

Steve... Steve kept getting distracted. Tony could tell, because whenever he glanced over to the man, set up in his Ops area, Steve was looking at him, or daydreaming off in the middle distance.

'Nice to know I still got it.' He texted Steve, some time later.

Steve blushed, adorably, when he got the text. 'Last night was great'.

'I know our sleep schedules don't sync up often, but you're welcome to crawl into bed with me, any time.'

Steve flushed even brighter.

'I'd like you there'.

'I'd like to be there'. Steve answered, much later. 'I'll try. Do you want to watch a movie tonight? I owe Bucky a movie, but you could be there.'

'Movie with your bro where he wants to kill me and when I can't hug you... no thanks.' He hated it, but he would just have to avoid seeing the pair of them together any time soon, possibly ever.

Steve looked slightly disappointed, but the fact that he didn't argue said volumes.

Tony wasn't the sort to hold something like this in reserve, not usually, he was the sort to skywrite it:
'Tony Stark is dating Captain America!' But he did realize it was complicated. He was about as out of the little closet someone might put him in as anyone could get. He wasn't sure anyone didn't know he had preferences that weren't confined by gender; there was attraction at issue, sure, but never gender. Steve was a perfect little pillar, though, a moral icon. Captain America having a male lover would turn the pearl clutching in some quarters up to eleven.

And that didn't even begin to account for Bucky. Bucky didn't see like the type to beat the shit out of someone for being gay, but, then again it was hard to really know. And if Tony ended up in a dark alley with Bucky, without the armor, the results were a foregone conclusion.

Of course, thinking about that got entirely back burnered when some hot intel came back from North Africa and Tony had to give that his full attention rather than brood about relationship problems, even in the back of his mind. It meant he didn't have a clean duty hand-off with Maria that mid-afternoon, it meant his opportunity to have an early dinner with Steve was well and truly torpedoed and it meant he couldn't have gone to the 'WWII bros' movie night even if he'd wanted to.

Hydra was looming, Tony could tell. It wasn't in the numbers, exactly, but it was in his gut. There had been missile strikes in North Africa, and they had his fingerprints all over them. S.H.I.E.L.D. missiles, now Hydra missiles, had been launched into civilian centers and the casualties were mounting. He was going to have to write a press release. He'd dispatched Clint and Vision along with a pair of strike teams, to try to bring some order and find the missile launch sites to blow them off the map, but it was too late for the people he was trying to protect.

Civilians were dead, news was blaming Tony, S.W.O.R.D., all of them.

"Did Fury ever get used to this part of the job?" He asked Maria.

She didn't answer for a long minute. "Well, sometimes it was his missiles. I think he had an easier time because of that."

Tony ran his fingers over the panel he was working on, checked that they were alone enough on the ops floor. "You’re still loyal to him, aren’t you?"

Maria glanced over to him, then turned back to her console. “Yes.”

Tony let out a deeply exasperated sigh. "Are we going to have to do a team building exercise? I'd hate to develop trust issues."

"You sound like him," Maria answered, with a little smirk. "Better hair."

"Damn right." That was enough, though, he couldn't keep pushing this hard and not expect to crash, hard, and soon. "I need sleep. Wake me if you need me."

"Of course, Sir. And I'm sorry. He’s... he was my friend before you were my boss."

"And now?" Tony asked. It was important to know. "He calls you up, says 'jump'?"

Maria glanced him up and down. "I ask you how high, Sir."

"Well, that's something." Tony headed off towards the elevator. "Employee loyalty... Is it the dental?"

He got a snort in return, but he didn't protest. Downstairs in the common area there were noodles, which meant Clint had ordered, but they also had curry on them, which could have meant Bruce... Tony didn't care. He grabbed a bowl and a fork and started to serve himself.
"How's South America?" Steve asked, catching sight of him from the couch.

"North Africa, now. Don't really want to talk about it," Tony answered, leaving the noodles and heading over to the couch. He glanced, no Bucky in sight. "Stay up for me, Commander?" He asked sliding a hand out against Steve's throat, only for Steve to tilt into the touch, shamelessly.

"No." Steve glanced to the side. "I had... ah, important... important work."

Steve was such a bad liar, it was gorgeous to watch.

"You are unfairly attractive." And then he hiked up his slacks just enough so he could lean in to straddle Steve, and then join Steve in a very eager kiss. "So glad you're mine."

The fingers through his hair, dragging him tighter, locking their mouths together was all the confirmation he needed, Steve was his, and Tony... Tony was definitely Steve's.

Where to put his hands was something Steve hadn't quite yet mastered, moving between hands on Tony's ass, before finally grabbing at his slacks, at the front of his shirt, at his tie. Tony just rucked up Steve's too-tight shirt and ran his hands low on Steve's stomach, over those lovingly sculpted abs...

"Tony..." Steve gasped, when Tony finally broke for air. "Not... Stop we... Don't..."

Tony stopped, because he was trying to be good, but then Steve dragged him back in by the tie and Tony wasn't going to stop if Steve was going to do that.

Of course that was about when a cold hand grabbed him on the shoulder and... flung. He didn't even realize what had happened until he hit the far wall, hard, and dazed, and when he could even start to respond there was a hand on his throat, bare metal and squeezing hard.

"You keep your hands off him you son of a bitch." Dark hazel eyes met his, angry... beyond angry, and for the first time in quite a few months, Tony genuinely feared for his life, and thought it might very well end in a brief squeeze and snap of his neck.

"Bucky, stop!" Steve was over, later - it felt like ages - while Bucky's squeezing hand was cutting into Tony's breathing. Tony could really only see his hand, on Bucky's chest, pushing. "Don't hurt him."

"Are you defending him?"

"Please let go, Bucky. I can explain. Please."

Tony was actually going to die, he survived terrorists, shrapnel to his heart, EMPs, palladium poisoning, alien invasion, fire breathing enhanciles, and he was was going to be strangled to death by his boyfriend's best friend.

But Bucky let him go, and Tony could breathe, finally, which he did, head resting against the back of the wall, forcing air in and out, in and out again... He was pretty sure he was going to look like an S&M session gone wrong tomorrow, and he wasn't entirely sure he wasn't concussed.

Maybe it said something about him that his first thought after not dying was about how much he didn't want a CT scan.

"Go on!" Bucky said, voice still angry. "Defend him!"
Oh, good, Bucky was yelling at Steve, Tony could just... lay here, eyes closed, trying to breath more.

"I... we... he..." Steve stuttered, seemed to lose his nerve for a moment, and Tony tried to decide if there was a chance Bucky would just go back to choking him. "I like men," Steve said, nervous, and then he took a breath, stood taller, voice more confident. "I'm attracted to other men, and there's nothing wrong with that, it's perfectly natural--"

"Stevie, I've known you were queer since we were kids," Bucky answered, exasperated, and Tony's eyebrows would have shot up if he had the energy. "That doesn't mean you have to let some playboy take advantage, or push you into something you don't want."

Tony, finally, realized the problem, how it must have seemed if he'd just heard... "Barnes," Tony said, voice still raspy. "He said no, I stopped, he grabbed my tie and pulled me back in. I'm only human."

"I'd just been trying to take it somewhere private..." Steve said. He was probably blushing, Tony couldn't see. "So we... wouldn't get caught."

Tony let out a single barking laugh, it was funny, it was funny now that he wasn't dead, and he rolled onto his knees and got up, fixed his tie, re-tucked his shirt where it had ridden up. "Alright, you two... hug it out or something. I need to make sure I didn't break anything, and sleep, definitely sleep. Bye."

"Tony..." Steve reached out, hand on his shoulder, and Tony patted his hand.

"Come by later, if you'd like. JARVIS will let you in."

Steve nodded, but he looked upset, and miserable, so Tony leaned in and gave him a soft kiss right on the lips. He didn't look at Bucky, he didn't want to test the man's assurance that he was fine with Steve being queer.

Because he was turning into a mature adult, he had JARVIS scan him via the suit, first, which showed no breaks and no bleeds, so Tony considered than a blessing, and then headed to shower, hot. His throat, neck really, was more than a little abraded, and Tony could definitely see the beginnings of finger marks at his throat. It would definitely bruise.

"JARVIS, please tell me I don't have any press conferences tomorrow."

"You do not," JARVIS assured him. "However we are expecting to do the walkthrough for the new appointees from the Security Council."

"Oh... good, because at least on camera the makeup can sort of blend... Make sure I have make up, it's not turtleneck weather." He slid into some boxers, debated a t-shirt. If Steve was coming, he didn't need a t-shirt, but Tony wasn't actually turned on by guilt-sex so he'd probably rather snuggle anyway...

Unsurprisingly, that was about how he'd expected that revelation to go. To be honest he was surprised Barnes hadn't killed him outright, and the fact that it was Tony that was the surprise, not the orientation, probably worked in his favor. This was probably what he should have expected, starting up with someone who had such an overprotective - and still mentally off-balance - friend.

There was a soft knock on the door, and Tony reflected that of course Steve would knock, after what had happened, but when he pulled open the door, Bucky was standing there. At least he had the decency to look abashed.
"Hey."

"Barnes." He stepped back and let the man in, and he went.

"I'm sorry," he said, and, surprisingly, he sounded like he really meant it, and he wasn't just saying it under fear of Steve being disappointed. "I don't mind whatever you and Steve do together, as long as you make him happy. Sorry for trying to kill you."

"Water under the bridge," Tony answered. "I'm not concussed or anything." He mostly meant it. "I'm glad you're looking out for him, just... might want to consider stepping back from 'murder' as your go-to when you think someone's getting taken advantage of."

Barnes didn't seem to be considering it, and he crossed his arms over his chest. "Steve's... like I said, wouldn't be the first time I pulled some knucklehead off him. I know he can probably take care of himself better than I remember, but that doesn't mean I don't worry about him. And... I mean just because Steve wants it doesn't mean you aren't taking advantage..."

"I'm not," Tony answered, defended himself, really. "He's... we're trying to make it work. I know I'm not some perfect boyfriend, I'm absent, I'm busy, but I care about him. I'm trying to do right by him, and he sets the pace."

Barnes looked him over, seemed to be alright what he saw, and nodded.

"I'm glad you don't mind Steve being bi," Tony said. Honestly that had been the surprise of the day. "Like I said, knew that for ages. I mean Steve likes women too, but..." Bucky shrugged. "Sort of have to not mind, especially if you make him happy."

The hugely immature part of Tony wanted to make it clear that he'd made Steve very happy last night, but he didn't, he stifled. "I try."

Bucky nodded, and then turned to leave.

"No 'if you hurt him, I'll kill you' threat?"

"I guess I already made that part clear," Bucky answered, completely deadpan. "No... I mean just treat him right, okay?"

"I will."

Bucky then went back to the door. "Got you something." And when he opened it, Steve was standing there, looking more than a bit abashed, but smiling.

"You two make up?" Steve asked.

"Yeah, yeah, apology accepted." Tony snapped Steve around the wrist and tugged him inside.

One thawed out super soldier traded for the one Tony actually liked, later, he dragged Steve in for a kiss.

"I'm really sorry."

"Shhh, he didn't murder me, that's honestly better than I expected. Shovel talk two of 7 billion done, come to bed." Tony then pulled Steve down even more, kissed him harder. "I'm fearless, nothing else can hurt me if I survived Bucky finding out we're dating."
Steve didn't seem amused, not at first, but he did come to bed, finally, curling up with him, even if there were a few more 'sorry's as they drifted off.

It was strange, falling asleep next to someone again, re-learning the way someone else breathed, their warmth against his back, the sag of the bed...

"You're bed's very firm," Steve mumbled, nuzzling into his neck.

"It's good for the back. If you don't like it..."

"I love it," Steve said, pulling him closer. "Sleep."

"Fine, fine," Tony snuggled down. "So demanding."

Chapter End Notes

Bucky initially thinks that Steve is having a non/dub-con sexual experience with Tony, and takes what he thinks is the appropriate action of taking physical violence against Tony. No lasting damage and it is NOT because it is gay, but because he wants to protect Steve.
Sometimes, Steve wasn't quite certain what to make of his developing relationship with Tony. They talked every day, but it was usually about work, if they were lucky, Steve could convince Tony to eat lunch with him - or late night snack if Tony was on the overnight shift - they'd talk recruitment, personnel, staffing, missions, and in many ways their relationship was that of a pair of coworkers. It hurt, sometimes, to see the way Tony would almost look through him, as though who was delivering the news or ideas didn't matter to him, only that they happened to be delivered.

It actually took an embarrassingly long time for Steve to figure out how to get Tony out, though, on a proper date. Sometimes he'd drag Tony out to a sub shop, he'd be talking about work, and Steve would ask - sometimes plaintively - if they could actually be on a date for once, not on the job. The full transformation took about a minute, sometimes two, and Steve liked to pretend he could see the gears clicking, the topics being changed and prioritized, and then it was a date.

Tony would stand closer, he'd listen - mostly, he wouldn't talk over Steve - as much, and they talked about movies and friends and the vacations Tony wanted to take someday. 'After the hearing' might as well have been the only words they said, sometimes.

'Do you like cars? I have a car in the F1 series and we could go to Monaco sometime.' 'I'm seriously considering renting us a private island. I'd own it but who wants to spend time on upkeep.' 'Have you traveled since you defrosted? I'm sure we could paint Europe red if we got some time.'

"We should go to Italy," Steve said. "Sicily?"

Tony's smile went soft, and since they were in public he elbowed Steve in the shoulder. "Only if you want. Have you been there since Operation Husky?"

Steve shook his head. "Probably different when they're not shooting at you."

"Probably," Tony answered. "How about just 'Italy', we'll do the embarrassing tourist thing. Do you think I'm even allowed to do that? Does it smack of some sort of favoritism?"

"Maybe as long as we don't visit heads of state?"

"We'll steal my private jet, I'll take you everywhere."

"We'd probably need a quinjet," Steve said, because they did need to be able to be anywhere in the world as quickly as possible, and the jet was great, but it was luxurious, not supersonic.

"It's true," Tony answered, and sighed. "I miss being a flighty international celebrity."

"Sorry Rhodey's so busy with the Air Force," Tony answered. "You and Clint could go out somewhere? Atlantic City? A club?"

"You are so weird." Tony was smirking now, but still looking ahead. "Only you would encourage me to take out Birdboy Sr. to look at scantily clad women half our age while gambling away more money than most people see in a decade."

"I see how much it bothers you," Steve answered, serious, because Tony could joke but Steve saw it.
"You work too hard, and you're not like me, you can't just go to the gym and beat the crap out of a heavy bag if you need the release."

Tony glanced over at him, corner of his mouth twitching up, and Steve managed to blush only a touch. Still, he didn't make the joke, and went back to his fries. "You're not wrong. I do feel it, sometimes, the need to just... unwind. I used to work on the suits more, but even that's not really relaxing."

"I don't mind," Steve said. "As long as you're not kissing them."

"My kissing is very strictly allocated now," Tony answered, smirking. "Regulated even, SRC mandate."

"Somehow you make that sound sweet."

"It's a sickness, I've gotten to you."

"I can't get sick, must be natural."

"You make that sound very rational."

"Maybe it is," Steve shot back, and grinned. "Just accept it. I like spending time with you."

"Probably for the best," Tony answered. "I-- are we having an anniversary or something? I feel like this is heavy enough for it to be an anniversary and I just forgot about it."

Steve gave him a little smile. "Our two month anniversary was four days ago."

"You were... in...?"

"Argentina," Steve filled in.

"Does it make me more or less horrible that I didn't realize that when I sent you?"

"It's alright, Tony. Sam's covering part of your shift tonight, I thought we could actually... have some time together when you're... awake, refreshed..."

Tony's eyes widened, just slightly, but then he smiled back. "I like the way you think, Commander."

They ended up back in Tony's room, tangled together, and Steve loved this part, loved feeling this connection to Tony, of being the sole focus of Tony's attention, if only for an hour, and actually being able to watch Tony relax, the lazy, boneless way his brain shut off, while he nuzzled into Steve's chest or just dozed.

Steve traced a finger over one of the fine scars on Tony's back, almost barely raised, but enough to feel. "I love you."

Tony's muscles - his back - twitched almost imperceptibly under Steve's fingers, but Steve didn't care.

"Just want to tell you that, no matter how you feel, whether you're ready to say that or not."

Steve kissed Tony on the crown of his head, and then nuzzled for a moment. "So you know."

"I'll... keep that in mind," Tony said, going back to where he had his nose pressed to Steve's sternum. "Steve, you've... made this whole mess a lot more bearable."
"That's fitting, considering I sort of pushed you into it," Steve answered.

"It's the unanticipated consequence of a few decisions that seemed like good ideas at the time." Tony kissed him, softly, and then tilted his head to use Steve's chest as a pillow. "You've made things easier to get through. I know I can count on you, as Commander Rogers and just Steve Rogers... I need you both."

"Need you, too, Tony Stark, Iron Man: Director of S.W.O.R.D.." Steve threaded his fingers through Tony's hair.

"Sir," JARVIS interrupted, voice sharp enough that Steve almost jumped. "We have an escalating situation in the Atlantic, Lieutenant Wilson asked for your and Commander Rogers's presence immediately."

"Shit. I smell like sex," Tony scrambled away, not so much pushing Steve as using him as leverage, and Steve went, as well, scrounging around for his boxers. "JARVIS, shower, hot as you can get in thirty seconds."

Steve had managed to scramble to the bathroom himself in that time, splashing water on his face.

Tony hopped into the shower behind him and emitted a fairly shrill scream, probably at the temperature. Steve ignored it and just used a hand towel to get rid of the worst of the residuals.

"I am going to smack whoever is ruining my romantic evening right in the face," Tony said, climbing back out of the shower, shivering, and scrambling back to his dresser. He was halfway into underwear and his flight suit when Steve came in.

"I think your superpower is suiting up," Steve said, finally wriggling into his boxers, and then a pair of khakis, while Tony was already in most of a suit, and staggeringly presentable. It current doubled as an on-duty uniform and his flight suit, with badging, and Steve was definitely seeing the allure of it now.

"I can also peel it off in record time. Come up when you're decent." He swung by Steve and kissed him on the lips, and headed out the door.

Steve didn't exactly take his time, but he pulled on his socks and shoes, his undershirt, his button down... and he ended up taking the elevator up to Ops, where almost everyone was staring at screens or listening to Tony shout orders.

"Vision, in the air. Wilson, quinjet, then in the air," Tony glanced around the room. "Barton, fly the a quinjet."

Steve should have put on his uniform... "What do we have?"

Tony just pointed to Maria, and then Steve, and pulled on his Vision hookup goggles.

"We have a quinjet coming in, straight towards DC, hot, we only know about it because... well," Maria glanced back to one of the screens.

"Director Stark," the voice - Tactical Force, Steve recognized it from a few confrontations they'd had before. "I hope you'll come out to play, not just send your little iron puppet. We have a pair of presents."

The camera - wherever it had been broadcasting - pulled back and revealed the two agents, the ones that Tony had sent 'undercover' in Madripoor - Kates and Williams, cute couple, an actual couple.
"The other present, is this..." A hand swept over and showed, a very large pile of explosives. "I will be delivering them both to the White House, and President Ellis, within the hour."

"So that's a set up," Steve said, turning to Tony.

"Don't think I don't know it, but we can't afford not to answer him. I've put Ellis on alert, he's bunker bound. Seems to be going off safe enough." Tony tapped his fingers. "I need to suit up. Vision is great, but he's not the same as me in the suit, or even me piloting Vision."

"I'm coming with you."

"Absolutely not," Tony answered. "You are the ranking Avenger here, if this is a trap, you're going to have to answer whatever force they send elsewhere. We still have half the Hydra Four unaccounted for. Clint and Sam are en route, Natasha's still overseas, Thor's God knows where. You're here, and you have my authorization to field Barnes if it becomes necessary. Alright?"

Steve didn't like it, didn't like it at all, but he'd just minutes ago told Tony that he loved every part of him, this was Iron Man: Director of S.W.O.R.D., and that meant he had to let his boyfriend do his thing.

Tony tapped a few buttons.

"Tony, I'm in a meeting," Rhodey's voice came over the speakers in the command room, exasperated.

Tony straightened, voice serious. "This is Director Stark, of S.W.O.R.D., authorization code 5126-3238-1152, the color today is Orange. You're ordered by authorization of the S.W.O.R.D. temporary charter to operate to report to Stark Tower in Manhattan under the direct command of Commander Steven Rogers of S.W.O.R.D.. Please confirm."


Tony shut down the line. "Hill, Rogers, one minute." They headed to his office. "Maria, you're in general command. Steve, you take orders from Maria, but as it concerns the operational mission you are in command. As I said, Commander Rogers is authorized to use Sergeant Barnes and release him from the Tower if it's appropriate to the mission. Understood?"

He and Hill both nodded.

"Get back on the horn with Washington, I'll want a status update before I hit the Hudson."

Maria left.

"And... ah... I do love you," Tony said. "Sorry I didn't say it when it didn't seem like some heroic last stand statement."

"Come home to me," Steve answered, it was all he could say. It was all he needed. "Say it again, then."

Tony turned and headed out of the door, and Steve followed close after him, wishing he could shove down the anxiety at Tony going to face who knew what in Washington.

"Everyone, be good. JARVIS, suit me!" And then he walked out onto the pad.

"This is definitely a trap," Steve said, coming to stand by Maria.
"That's the first step in avoiding it," Maria answered. "Their quinjet has integrated some stealth technology that's making their radar profile too minimal for us to detect long range. We need to get Dr. Banner on some sort of detection algorithm. There are going to be others."

"How many quinjets did we think they had?" Steve asked.

"At least twelve. Missiles won't be able to get a radar or heat lock on them, not without major tuning."

JARVIS chimed in overhead: "Dr. Banner is in his lab and apprised of the problem. Shall I patch him through?"

"Where's my status, Hill?" Tony's voice came over the speaker.

"President is evacuated and secure. We're working to de-stealth the quinjets, keep eyes out for more attacks."

"I like you," Tony answered, voice almost fond. "This is why I keep you around. Co-ETA in DC is about 12 minutes."

"Twelve minutes?!" Steve asked.

"I know, getting slow in my old age," Tony answered. "It's a problem."

"The Iron Man armor is faster than most jets, but the vibrational tensions at extreme speeds keep it from matching the fastest jets," Maria answered, not even looking away from whatever she was looking at.

"Wow." Steve couldn't even imagine it. "That's incredible."

And then all the monitors went dark, and the Tower lights went dark.

"Well shit."

Steve had a feeling they were about to find out whatever trap had just sprung on them, but he had to agree with Maria's sentiment.

* *

Steve's first move was to assess: the lights were out, that meant something was wrong with the reactor, or maybe circuits? He knew circuits could blow out and break the flow of electricity. A quick glance out the window showed they weren't in the middle of a blackout, and it wouldn't have affected the Tower anyway.

"Electric storm?" Steve asked.

"Too localized," Maria answered. "Wilcox, check if our radios are working and go down to the reactor. Secure channel 2."

Wilcox grabbed a radio and started running. It was a lot of stairs to head down. Slowly, the lights started to flicker back on, and Steve pulled his shield from the ready area by the consoles, sliding it on to his back.

"JARVIS?"

No answer.
The command staff, and the rest of the tactical crew had handguns and were starting to pull on body armor.

"Do we have a second set of Falcon wings?" He asked Maria. "Parachutes?"

She shook her head. "Oversight."

"Need to get a jet pack from Tony," Steve mumbled. "2014, where's my jet pack?"

A crackle of electricity arced up the side of the building.

"Thor?" Maria asked.

"No idea..." and Steve took the initiative to pry open the door to the flight deck, and then looked over the edge. The sparks were definitely coming from someone who looked like Thor. He scrambled back inside. "Hammer, I think," Steve reported to Maria. "Hydra Four. No eyes on Bowman yet. Work on getting the Tower's systems back online, if you get Iron Patriot inbound or Banner suited up, send them down. If you need Banner for systems, use him. There should be 10 parachutes in the quinjet. Get me Bucky, and about four other CQC experts, down with me, now."

"On it," she answered, and Steve left it at that.

He had to pry open the quinjet cargo hold with the edge of his shield, and grabbed one of the parachutes, strapping it on before he jumped off the side of the Tower. The immediate rush, the exhilaration of the fall was all there was for the moments it took him to gauge the distance. He'd have to go with a low drop, to not give Hammer a shot at him while he floated down.

Steve pulled the chute low, and he sliced the lines before he did much more than have his fall broken by the open chute, landing hard on the his side with shield before he rolled onto his feet, checking, making sure he didn't get tangled in the discarded chute.

"Hammer, I presume?" Steve asked, not really necessary but he wasn't surprised by the hard swing coming down at him as Hammer rushed towards him.

Steve brought his shield up, the hammer came down. That was the first sign that this was no Thor clone, and that was no Mjolnir, there was no shockwave, no burst of released energy, just the clang of metal on vibranium. Instead, it was followed by another crackle, and a small burst of lightning. One of the blots caught Steve in the boot and he could feel it all the way up his spine, bad enough that his arms twitched, but he toughed through it, ending with strong punch to Hammer's jaw.

The man was definitely no Thor, because he stumbled backwards from that.

"C--- d-- -e?" The words - or what should have been - came through his comm insert, but there wasn't anything he could really respond to. It sounded like Hill.

He and Hammer started to trade blows, hammer-to-shield, fist-to-body, as they started to feel each other for weaknesses.

The high pitched whistle was all the prompting he need, he hit the deck. Bucky came down, hard, feet punching right into Hammer's back and sending him staggering over Steve's prone form.

Bucky was out of his own parachute by the time Steve had rolled to his feet.

"What took you so long?" Steve asked.
"Stairs."

"Getting slow in your old age."

"You're older than me now."

"Like hell." Steve charged in, Bucky a fraction behind him, and Hammer moved to meet them only for them to split apart at the last second.

Steve took the blow, Bucky landed a punch deep in the man's side, cracking whatever body armor he had on. Hammer backhanded, trying to hit Bucky, but he deflected it with a flick of his left arm. Steve winced from the impact, but it was obvious Bucky knew his own strength.

No more shocks came, but Steve followed up with another punch. Bucky continued to work on the armor.

"Take him for a few," Steve said. "Might have incoming."

"Four S.W.O.R.D. kids coming soon," Bucky answered, but they traded, slightly, Steve scanning the horizon.

"We've got an archer, maybe..." Steve said, still scanning.

He heard the snort, and then the matching clangs and returns as Bucky and Hammer traded blows. This was incredible, Steve felt really alive on the battlefield for the first time in ages, Bucky at his back, fighting to save the day. There were plenty of things to track, Bucky's progress with Hammer - keeping an eye for openings Steve could exploit to down the man - scanning, looking for Bowman.

Touchdown from his reinforcements came a few moments later. Four S.W.O.R.D. agents, ready to fight, setting up a small perimeter, waiting for instructions.

"Maria?" Steve asked into his mic when he had a free moment.

"Comm's back," Maria answered. "Banner is here working on our systems. What do you need?"

"Any word on Bowman here or anywhere else?" That would round out the Hydra Four...

And then one of their agents took an arrow in the back, hopefully in the armor.

"Bowman is here," Steve said, into his comm. "Get me eyes. He came from the north, approximately, 5 to 10 degrees east."

He moved to cover, and then gestured two uninjured agents to help Bucky.

"How is she?" He asked his third, scanning the surrounding buildings for activity.

"Seems to have pierced the armor, not deep. Don't want to take it out, though."

"Cut it," the agent, Nichols, maybe, said through gritted teeth. The other agent snapped the shaft and then Nichols rolled to her knees to bring up her gun and join Steve in scanning the windows.

"ETA Patriot?" Steve asked.

"Four minutes," Maria's clipped voice answered.

"I want eyes on Bowman before Patriot is here." Steve watched, they scanned. After another glance
he found Bucky and Hammer seemed well matched, but the agents weren't adding much to the fight.

When he glanced back, he felt more than saw the arrow, and he had his shield up in time to keep Nichols from taking an arrow through the neck. He was able to calculate the trajectory enough to catch Bowman as he ducked back under cover.

"There." He pointed, the agents had their guns up in an instant. "Rifle?"

"Miles," Nichols answered. Miles must have been fighting Hammer with Bucky.

"Buck, trade." Steve stepped up, Bucky stepped back. "Sniper, beige and silver building, fifth floor, second window from the right. Take him."

He didn't even have to check, he and Hammer were back in combat... only to have him raise up the hammer and bring it back down, sparks arcing over it, down Steve's arm as he fought the nervous twitches.

The rifle report made him turn, Bucky's left arm hung limp at his side, his right arm twitching. His spasm must have made him fire. His mechanical arm flailed, wild, and Steve watched it deflect the incoming arrow to the ground.

"Chamber a new round!" Bucky said, moving his arm to keep the rifle barrel aloft, fumbling with an uncooperating arm to get the rifle back up.

One of the S.W.O.R.D. agents ejected and reloaded the spent cartridge. It took longer than Steve would have expected, but Bucky got the gun back up, and fired, before he slumped forward.

"Go." He waved his right arm. "Secure him."

Steve - idiot, he'd been distracted - took the hammer right to the chest and went flying backwards. Eyes on the enemy, not Bucky, he reminded himself. He gritted his teeth, pushing through the chest-crushing pain.

"None of that," he said, refocusing on Hammer.

It was easy to see the pattern now, Hammer needed to charge up in a way that Thor didn't. Thor had the thunder on call all the time, while Hammer's must have been simulated by some sort of technology. He had some time, before another jolt, and he pushed in, aggressive, while the other two agents kept him penned in. A few traded blows later, and the soft hum of repulsors came from behind Hammer. Iron Patriot, just in time.

Penned in on all sides, he and Rhodey were able to take the man down with ease, Steve's final punch almost crushing the man's windpipe. When he fell, Steve stepped forward and kicked away the hammer when he dropped it.

Bucky joined him, arm still limp at his side, while Steve zip tied the man's arms behind his back.

He and Iron Patriot traded a few glanced at each other. "What's with the paint job?"

"It tested well in focus group," Rhodey answered, his mask pulling up. "Where's the party?"

"Right now we just need an evac, we've got an agent, Hammer, and Bowman down." Steve looked up. "We'll also need you on alert if more comes in. This should account for all the Hydra Four, but that doesn't mean that's all of Hydra."
"Got it." Rhodey started to take care of that, and Steve helped Bucky get his arm squared away.

"Your arm?"

"Busted," Bucky answered. "I can move the flesh parts but it... doesn't seem to connect? I don't know how it works."

"I'm sure Tony can patch you up in no time," Steve assured his friend.

"Right, assuming he gets back from Washington in one piece." Bucky's grumble was obviously meant to be an expression of annoyance, but now Steve had a very real, very serious worry that maybe Tony wouldn't be alright.

"Rogers!" Maria's voice came over his communications. "Banner has a bead on a ship, few miles off the coast, former S.H.I.E.L.D., now Hydra, they were our launch point for Hammer and Bowman."

"On it. Patriot? I need a pickup. Bucky..."

"Yeah, yeah, useless with a busted arm. I'll keep an eye on things with Hill in Ops, let you know when your boyfriend's alright." Bucky sighed, and he ruffled his own hair for a moment. "Good to be out, though, if only for a few minutes."

Bucky was still coordinating the street level cleanup when Patriot came in and scooped up Steve for their trip out to sea.

Tony, Vision, and the quinjet hit the DC no fly zone with a 'fuck you' and a 'don't shoot at us'. "Viz, get me eyes and let Washington get a read on your IFF signature, Barton, Wilson you're set to intercept."

Vision rotated gracefully up to get a better look at the lay of the land. Tony picked up the video feed, watching it to see if they could ID the quinjet.

"Sir, my communications with the Tower have been interrupted. I believe it was an electrical surge," Vision reported.

"No use worrying now," Tony answered. "Problem at hand, kids."

"Tony," Clint's voice came over his suit. "Check south-south-west, potential incoming."

"Could be air--" he looked through Vision's eyes, watched as the computer highlighted the four stealth aircraft signatures. "Oh this is not good. Vision, in now, find us our agents. Barton, you are going to have to hit them, at range, with ballistic rounds, the missiles will not home." Even as he looked at him, Vision's sensors seemed to slide off of the hulls. "God I want three of those."

Vision spun and headed down towards the first aircraft, Tony tried to get some sort of heat or energy signatures out of them, but they were coming up blank. Null. Tony gritted his teeth and headed out towards a different one.

"You do know I almost took down a Helicarrier with a bow and arrow, right?" Clint asked. A quick check showed that Sam had turned them and was hovering, the back of the quinjet open and Clint standing on the loading platform.

"Sure," Tony answered. "And who knows what they have packed in there. If you can crash them
into the Potomac, great, if not you might as well take out the Mall, or something someone gives a shit about."

"Do not blow up Lincoln Memorial, check."

Tony landed on his target quinjet, and after a brief scramble, he was able to punch through the glass just enough to get a heat reading - one pilot, no more bodies. He shot a repulsor blast in from his hand, but it didn't seem to catch anything critical.

"Sir, we are less than two minutes from landfall in downtown DC."

"Yeah. No time to dawdle. Punch it out of the air, Bird Bros," Tony blasted off, screaming towards the second plane, and landing on it, hard. "Woof."

Behind him, the quinjet he'd just left started to spin.

"Ahh... that might have been an error..." Clint said. "Let me... um... shoot it again. Quinjets have more spin than Helicarriers."

"Physics!" Tony shouted. "Vision, ID on our agents?"

"Not here, Sir."

"Help Birdbrain bench our jets safely."

"Of course." He blasted off, and stabilized the downward flight of the shot down quinjet.

Tony punched through again. No additional heat signatures. "Pop this pinata."

A few moments later, he started to spin. "I hate forward momentum," Tony grumbled, trying to right himself, and the jet, finally able to point it for splashdown. He then got hit, hard, right in the side, by a bright metal green tin can.

He'd thought it was Vision, but that was clearly not the case, and he and Tactical Force started to trade punches and blasts, the two of them scrambling and grabbing at each other for purchase while Vision downed their 3rd quinjet.

"I'd be careful about stepping on that last jet, Stark," Tactical Forces's voice was muffled, but they were close enough that Tony could hear him easily.

"Oh yeah?" Tony wrapped an arm tight on Force's neck, trying to find the seams to pop the helmet.

"It sports a markedly different heat signature," he answered, voice rich with enough meaning to hear over the roar of wind. "If you breech it, it will explode. If you let it crash down... I'm certainly you can figure it out."

"Trajectory?" He asked, hissed, really, to JARVIS as he and Force continued to trade their blows.

"The White House seems most likely, Sir, as Tactical Force promised, but it is still early to tell for certain."

"Two lives," Force said, voice projected a little now. "Easy enough calculus, right, Stark? That's why they keep you around. But they're yours, aren't they? They are under your protection. You sent them to Madripoor, you put them in harm's way."

"Forty-five seconds," Vision's voice came over his comm. "Sir, safe distances--"
"I can do ballistic explosion math, thank you," he snapped.

"Will your men follow you? Will they look you in the eye when you tell them you murdered your agents? Will you take comfort in the fact that they will probably be vaporized instantly?"

"Breach it," Tony ordered Vision, pleased that the AI was already there. "Try to extract, detonate it if you have to." He turned to watch... he owed it to them to watch. He knew that moment of slow motion, the moment where your life started to tick more slowly, Vision breached, and Tony clicked over his eyes to Vision's, watched, his own attention barely on Force...

Williams was closer, Ashley... Ashley Williams. She was also positioned better, Tony could see that, smaller, petite almost... Vision grabbed Kates by the chest and flung, Tony heard the shoulder pop, the muscles rip, as Kates flew out of the back of the quinjet. Vision opened up to wrap around Williams, helmet, chest, gauntlets, legs, and then Vision blasted them both out of the way.

The explosion came, hot and at a bad angle, Vision could only cover so much of Kates's body and Tony could imagine the burning smell of flesh.

Tony turned, and he and Force crash landed somewhere square in the middle of the Mall, sending divots and concrete flying. The fight itself was short, the crash had taken out one of Force's thrusters, and Tony was much better at this than he was. That didn't make him feel better when he watched the man, inert, on the ground.

He ripped the chest piece off, crunched the ersatz reactor at its core. "Damn. Vision?"

No response.

"Viz?" No answer. "Wilson? Barton?"

"Medivaccing to Hospital Center," Wilson's voice answered. "Vision's burned pretty bad, looks like he wasn't fully sealed when the quinjet blew. Non-responsive. Kates is burned worse, lost his legs at least."

Tony fought down the urge to take that out on Tactical Force, instead he rolled the man over, ejecting him entirely from the suit, and waiting for DC Metro Police to show up.

"Take him to lockup," Tony said. "I'll collect him later."

He then scooped up the armor in two arms and aimed towards Hospital Center.

The armor he threw in the back of the quinjet, but after that Clint and Sam hurried him towards the emergency room, the trauma suit, actually. Kates was already off somewhere, who knew where, and Vision was charred out toast. The suit itself could be repaired, the Vision version was backed up... the problem was inside.

"Step back, please, one moment," Tony reached in and started to pry at the chest... Williams started to scream, head still locked in the suit. "Fuck. Medic?"

Two nurses? Doctors? He didn't know and didn't care, came in to start working with him. "The metal's been fused to her skin. Try to get the helmet off, we'll want to intubate, start an IV."

Tony didn't question it, the helmet came off easily, thankfully, and he threw it on the ground far enough away to not be a tripping hazard. The arms came off next, uppers, really, those didn't have the same problem and an IV line went in, gauntlets thrown away, wrist guards, Tony watched as he revealed burned skin and red branded marks.
"Sir," the doctor said, pointing. "Get this off her chest, she's having trouble breathing."

"Jaws of fucking life, here," Tony answered. He clawed inward, pulling off the worst of the chest piece, leaving the thin support that on his suit was smooth and padded for comfort, but on Vision had been a mess and tangle of wires, never meant for true human habitation. Oversight, it had been an oversight. Tony had never meant for anyone to be inside the Vision armor.

He shed his own gauntlets a minute later, and turned to quick, efficient cuts of a man who knew the inside of the armor like the back of his hand. There was still a mess of tangled wire burned to Williams's skin and clothes, but someone put a hand to his chest.

"Sir, we can take it from here."

Tony stepped back, stepped back a few more steps, and found where most of the discarded armor had been piled onto a stretcher. "Get that out of here..." It was wheeled away. Tony followed it, and once he was out of the rooms he found himself sliding to the floor, pulling off his helmet, and burying his face in his hands.

Alive... for now. He felt a sob bubble up in his throat and he didn't hold it back. His agents, two people he'd put so far in harm's way, with no real way out if they got caught... This wasn't the first time he'd put men in harm's way, wasn't the first time they'd come home battered or scraped, with cuts and abrasions or bruised from where bullets hit armor; this was the first time they'd been hospitalized. No one had been this sick since his rescue of Clint from Madripoor, and not even his own complicated guilt process could make that his fault.

This... this was his fault. If Kates or Williams died, that was on him, if they were permanently disabled, that was on him. "Shit."

"Sir." Sam was standing beside him, a hand resting on his shoulder. "There... ah... there's some press."

"Fucking press," he muttered, feeling the aching tired it in his bones. "Let me just..." He tried to get up, staggered, realized his hands had Williams's blood on them, blood he'd just wiped down Sam's arms as the man helped him. "Sorry."

"It's alright. Here." Sam put a hand on his shoulder. "Let me get you to the locker room, wash up."

It didn't take long, and when he got there he found Clint standing guard at the entrance while Sam ushered him in. Tony washed his hands, mechanically, before he let the suit drop at his feet, peeled away with one easy command.

The flight suit he'd put on, what felt like ages ago, had blood all down the sleeves, and had gotten slightly frayed at the cuffs... "I need these washed," he told Sam. "Or new ones from New York..."

"With all due respect, Director," Sam said, voice hard. "I'm not leaving you alone right now."

"That's sweet," Tony answered, pulling off his belt and shoulder straps. "Save it for someone who hasn't been through this before. I need clothes, I need to look good. I need to stand out there and not flinch when I give the press their field day about another thing I didn't stop and didn't prevent."

"You did," Sam said, coming up beside him. "Day saved."

Tony nodded. Day saved, Mall wrecked, two agents might die, and would definitely be permanently injured.
"Please, Sam, this is what I need."

Sam took the pile of discarded clothes and left him.

Tony found something resembling soap and headed to the staff shower, scrubbing away blood and grit and the stink of metal and burned wiring. He tried to wash away the smell where metal met cloth and flesh, the image of Williams's skin as he peeled away Vision...

He gagged. He choked down the bile and vomit only so he could make it to one of the vaguely clean toilets, knees on the hard tile, and allow his weak stomach to shame him there. He rinsed, he finished washing away the blood, under his nails, on his wrists... he was... broken, right in that moment, all he wanted was... he wanted to be home.

Tony didn't want these hard choices, choices he could make, cool and calculating in the moment, and then agonize over for months, years after.

"You signed up for this," he reminded himself, as he climbed back into the shower and started to scrub again. He was forty-several, he knew he wasn't young, but... twenty, thirty years, Fury wasn't a young man... and he'd done this job well past the time most people retired. Tony had stepped up, he was the one who had to do this.

Sam took a while, but then, so did Tony.

"Any word from New York?" He asked, drying off and dressing, slowly.

"They're fine. Bowman and Hammer came after them. Bowman's probably going to die - gunshot - Hammer will live. Patriot and Steve cleared out their staging area, reacquired one of the missing S.H.I.E.L.D. boats. Barnes broke his arm, the metal one."

"A project would be good..." Tony sighed. "Steve?"

"... Worried about you. He's going to come down when things are settled."

He should have been embarrassed, but instead he was grateful. That was probably love for him. "I might be home by then." He had to do this. He had to push through. "Alright, go time."

Even though it was technically a violation of Tony's directive, Maria let Steve have Bucky upstairs while the command staff and Rhodes turned on the television to watch the teleconference in DC. Tony hadn't called. Steve wished he would have, because Sam had said Tony was taking Kates and Williams's injuries very hard, but he knew that Tony needed to withdraw sometime.

"He doesn't look terrible," Bucky said, standing next to Steve, metal arm in a sling.

"Sam said he showered and changed," Steve said. He hadn't shaved, and that was a surprisingly good look for him, just about a day's worth of stubble.

"He looks like shit," Rhodey added, contradicting both Steve and Bucky's thoughts on the matter. "Any time he goes in front of the press he likes to look his best, he looks like he's been run over by a truck."

The event itself seemed fairly high profile - so although there were more than a few of reporters, and they were crowded into a small back area that had been set aside. Tony didn't even have a podium, just a slightly raised area in the 'front'. He stood, he waited, and after a few moments, he waved his
hands in a 'settle down' gesture and the murmurs died away.

"I have a statement and everything," Tony said, but he smiled - weak and forced, Steve could see that - and held up cards before sliding them into his pocket. "At 3:29 this morning, S.W.O.R.D. Agents Ashley Williams and Mitchell Kates were injured in a coordinated Hydra strike in an attempt to target both the White House and the S.W.O.R.D. headquarters in Manhattan. They were injured during an explosion of a quinjet in an effort to keep it from completing it's mission to target the White House. As of 9:56, both are in critical condition, and the doctors are unwilling to speculate on their current chances of survival."

Tony cleared his throat, continued to look out at the assembled journalists. "All three of the Hydra leaders involved in the attack are under arrest, and the ship that provided a staging area for the attack has been captured. Many of the Hydra strike team staff were killed or injured in the S.W.O.R.D. defensive action. We are evaluating judicial options to exercise on the Hydra agents, but have not come to any conclusions. I'll take questions now."

The room was oddly silent, and Steve got the impression that the reporters weren't quite sure what to make of the terse, businesslike, statement out of Tony Stark. Steve wasn't quite sure what to make of it either. "I need to get down there," he said, finally settling on that.

"I'll have a quinjet prepped just after the conference," Maria answered.

"Director Stark," one of the reporters started from the front. "What do you think this attack means for S.W.O.R.D., for its chances of a successful hearing in three months?"

"I think it means we continue to be necessary," Tony answered. "This was an intelligence failure, but one borne of teething pains. We have been operating for three months, and there was no word of this on any intelligence line chatter. We have to do better. That's the lesson."

"Do you think you can afford to be so glib about 'intelligence failures' when it's your ass in the hot seat?" Another one asked.

"Timothy," Tony answered, pulling out his phone. "I've helpfully forwarded your question to the directors of the CIA, NSA, and FBI. Hydra doesn't play by the rules of our current intelligence climate. The last three months Capitol Hill has been a political bloodbath in the wake of an intelligence failure whose size and scope is still being uncovered." He then slid his phone back into his pocket. "I will also remind you that my ass is far hotter than any of their Directors, so that's a natural advantage."

The chuckle eased some of the pervasive tensions in the room.

Steve watched the rest of the conference, bits and pieces here, a few details about the Agents, some more S.W.O.R.D. politics, before it finally wrapped up. He had a bag packed and a quinjet headed out in less than five minutes. Rhodes joined him.

"Any reason you're thinking he wants to see you?" Rhodes asked him, glancing over from the co-pilot's chair as Steve headed down to DC.

"Ah..." Steve bit his lip, and then remembered Tony's directive that he didn't care who he told, as long as it wasn't Bucky. "We're dating, me and Tony."

Rhodes arched a skeptical eyebrow.

"Two months."
Both of Rhodes's eyebrows arched at that. "I think I missed the skywriting."

"He didn't skywrite it," Steve answered with a growl, flushed with embarrassment. "It's low key."

"He's your boss! Does Tony even know how to date people he doesn't work with?"

"I asked him," Steve answered. "It's not technically against the employment regs for S.W.O.R.D., I checked. All disciplinary actions would have to go through Maria, though, if there's a problem..."

"You checked." Rhodes looked at him for a second and then shook his head. "Of course you checked. You know it's not all glamour, right?"

"I know. We've... missed two anniversaries already. I knew that would happen, and I'm okay with it." Steve looked over to where Rhodes was watching him. He was okay with it, too, he wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere but helping people. Even getting his date ruined was alright because they'd struck a heavy blow against Hydra. "And I'd think you'd be doing less to try to warn me off and more threatening or something."

"This is me threatening you. I know, first hand, how hard it can be to love Tony, and if you don't know what you're getting into, you'll hurt him."

"Well... I love him, for everything he is, all parts, including the part that's going to pull away when I try to comfort him." Steve set his jaw, because he didn't have to like it, but he wasn't too proud to admit that Rhodes could bring some things out in Tony that Steve didn't seem to be able to. "Will you help shake him out of his funk, if I can't?"

"You know that means Atlantic City, right?"

"I know. I trust him."

That earned him a shocked look, and then a flicker of recognition. "Is that why he... he was so... he was such a prude last time we were out. Well, you're right, he'll never cheat on you. Well, you take a crack at him first, I'm still recovering from our last night out."

They didn't make top speed, but he made it down to Washington in under a half hour. They found Tony, oddly, in the cafeteria, sitting against a far wall, prodding a sandwich and not eating it. "Director?"

Tony turned, and he gave Steve a weak little smile. "Commander."

Since they were in public, Steve settled for a clasp on his shoulder and sitting what might have been considered too close by some, but they were also talking, it made sense to curl together some. "Saw you on TV, good conference. You're so great at that stuff."

"Years of training." Stark training. It was definitely a mixed blessing in Steve's book. It was easy to see the places that it had really hurt Tony.

"How are Ashley and Mitchell?"

"Might live," Tony answered, and then he rubbed his hands over his face again.

"I could use my expense account to rent us a nice suite," Steve said, trying to give his best meaningful look, only to have it fall flat.

"I--" Tony shook his head. "I need to be here until they're stable..." But he took another deep breath,
looking out the window into the little garden enclosure. "Alright, no, you're right, big picture. I need to recharge and get back. Widow will be back from Asia soon, hopefully have our support from Russia and China..." He brought his phone up to his mouth. "Avengers Assemble."

They came together over by the frou frou juice bar in the corner.

"Sam, you stay here, make sure you tell me the second either one of them starts to regain consciousness. They're going to need a lot of help the next few weeks, months... it'll take them a while." Tony turned to Clint. "Clint, you're headed back to New York with Steve and I. I need to get to work on Vision, and Barnes, get them back out in the field, we're down two Avengers without them. Rhodey-- I know I stole you for my own use, so I suppose I should turn you back in, unmolested."

The two of them spent a few minutes, though, heads huddled together, and Steve imagined they were talking about him, even if he didn't know for certain.

They packed up Vision, the suit, everything, and Clint flew while he and Tony buckled in in back. "Did you really just call Bucky and Avenger?"

Tony looked completely innocent. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Steve grinned the whole way back.

Maria greeted them with a firm salute and Tony took one look around the operations room, sighed, and then started to walk away. "I need a nap, Hill. You alright?"

"Yessir."

Steve waited, he really did, glancing to the elevator where Tony had disappeared only minutes before, he'd try to work, or at least look at the console... "I'm going to go..." He didn't even have an excuse.

"Take a nap with the Director, Sir?"

"That obvious?"

"Little tip," she said, leaning in. "Don't answer my all call for him when I can't raise you in your room."

Steve winced. "Oops."

"Whatever. Go fraternize. Don't let him come back until you've... ah... relieved at least some of that tension." Maria didn't seem uncomfortable, just a bit confused about how she was supposed to express what was clearly an order to get the man out of his funk by any means necessary.

He had barely walked into the room when Tony was on him, naked and already more than ready for him, already attacking his clothes. They tumbled, slightly, but Steve recovered easy enough and scooped Tony off his feet to drag him to bed.

"Where were we, then?" Steve asked, depositing him and coming to loom over him, and did his absolute very best to make Tony forget about everything else in the world, and if the enthusiastic utterances were any indication, he was fairly effective.

Tony dozed, after, and Steve did as well, head curled up on Tony's shoulder while his fingers teased along Steve's back. "Love you."
Steve felt his chest swell, just a bit. "You, too. Ah... Maria knows."

"That I love you?"

"That we're together," Steve answered. "You can tell her you love me, though."

Tony hummed and brushed his nose against Steve's sternum. "Skywriting..."

"After the hearing." Steve was trying to be realistic, their relationship was young, Tony's position at S.W.O.R.D. was young... "And as right as you were about having a hot ass, I don't think the world is quite there, as much as that pains me."

"All or nothing, that's my Steve." Tony planted a kiss, and then relaxed back into the mattress. "As much as it pains me... I really should prioritize some tasks and knock them out. Need to get fabricating on a new Vision suit, make sure mine's still functional, and get Bucky up and running again."

Steve hated to agree, but the truth was they couldn't just lounge around in a haze of post-coital bliss, they had jobs to do. Steve made them some lunch, Tony dragged Bucky into a tiny little work area on their main floor, Bucky's arm in his lap.

"You know how this is connected?" Tony asked, browsing over the files he had. "The articulation on this is insane, I want to steal the specs. Would improve Vision for sure, and the Iron Man suit... your finest levels of motor control are a little slippery, but..." Tony shrugged.

"The nerves are interwoven with the connective plane, and the metal wraps up to the shoulder."

Tony hmmed, and then prodded some more. "Wondering about stripping this down for some assistive technology... They'd probably frown if I released a fully functional battle arm. I'd frown..." He prodded, Bucky's arm twitched. "Bingo, alright..."

Steve didn't follow it at all, but he did watch, and he handed off a sandwich to Tony while he worked, and Tony ate a bite, before putting it down, only to take a bite when Steve poked him gently.

"You two are disgusting," Bucky said, now that Tony seemed completely oblivious to them. "I better be the Best Man."

His cheeks definitely colored at that, but he met Bucky square in the eye a moment later. "Maybe in a year or two? We need to get settled in more."

"You're serious." Bucky seemed surprised, but only for a moment. "Can you even get married?"

"New York, yeah, and Maryland if we have to move back to DC... but with the UN in New York it's probably better to be here anyway." Steve glanced over to where Tony was, as usual, oblivious. "If I know Tony, he's probably plotting Helicarriers in his sleep, anyway."

"Just the one," Tony mumbled, tilting his head. "Believe it or not, I need a budget allocation to put all that together, but I did buy salvage rights to the Insight Helicarriers... might be able to finish that in a year... post funding."

"How do you do that?" Steve asked, because Tony looked beyond engrossed, and he didn't even glance Steve's way when asked.

"Genius. Flawless parallel processing unit..." He even gestured over to the tablet he hadn't looked at
in an hour, at least. "JARVIS is working on Vision, lots of processing."

"Are you still 'processing' when we--?"

"Are you seriously asking that?" Bucky asked, and then he reached out and grabbed Steve by the scruff - an old gesture with plenty of history - before jiggering him back and forth. "Either he does, and you feel like you're shit in bed, or he doesn't, and you pull a you and you feel guilty for shutting off his brain."

Tony didn't answer at all, and Steve realized that was his way of pretending he hadn't heard... although, Steve supposed it came with the plausible deniability that maybe he hadn't. He was a genius, after all.

"But I want you to know, I'm incredibly jealous you get to ask those questions," Bucky continued. "Natasha..." He glanced over to Tony, who was ignoring, but probably listening. "We're both... putting pieces together."

A ding came from Tony's tablet, which Tony actually checked, almost without thinking. "Speak of the devil... she's back. Finally. She's going to be so mad she missed all the fun." Tony peeled away a few more scales of the armor, putting in what looked to be little electrical connectors, finally finishing with over a dozen settled. "I need to go debrief her. Don't move, this is doing things. I need to double check nothing's burnt out, this will confirm that, or show what needs to be fixed. If it needs work, I'll need to take it off. Your hand is going to twitch some, when it's working, and that's fine, but any gross movement issues, hit that."

"Thanks, Tony."

"Yeah, thanks Stark."


"It's alright." Steve gave his hand a squeeze, and then settled in next to Bucky when Tony left. "Maybe Natasha will come down and see you after?"

Bucky sighed. "Sure."

"Come on. Don't be like that." Steve grabbed Bucky and pulled him into a fierce, one armed, hug. "You've got the looks, you've got the charm. It's just going to take some time. You're busy people. I bet she'd like... a bath, that lemony bubble stuff she smells like when she doesn't have a mission, a foot rub... a little dinner..."

Bucky arched a skeptical eyebrow.

"And then you two go down to the exercise room and beat the crap out of each other. She'd like that."

"I can't believe I'm thinking of taking romance advice from you... but you did land a playboy, and you're her friend, so maybe I should listen?" Bucky asked.

"Always. Always you should listen. Wanna catch a show?"

"Nah, gotta find somewhere that delivers." Bucky reached out with his good hand and pointed to his tablet, which Steve handed over. "You?"
"Going upstairs to Ops and see how we're doing, maybe get something nice for Tony... dinner, maybe take him out for a drive or something..., distract him from Washington for a bit."

Instead, Tony went straight from debriefing Natasha to taking his shift from Maria, to working on Vision, and then the Iron Man, until suddenly it was two in the morning and Steve had to physically drag Tony away from his work, and ride him into the couch cushions, to even get him to think about falling asleep, which he did, finally, only for Steve to find Tony up before him, working on the suits, the glass windows had been tinted sometime the night before, but had remained so through the morning.

He probably shouldn't have been surprised. Tony dealt with his stress differently. Maybe he could call Rhodey in a few days to get the man unwound a bit...

"Don't forget shift," Steve said, giving Tony a kiss on the cheek before he headed down to the gym.

The door was locked.

"JARVIS?"

"Apologies, Commander Rogers, but my protocols have barred admission to the gym at this time, except in case of emergency." Steve stared at the door, and then checked the various glass around it, to see it had all been blacked out. He tried the door again, even though he knew it was useless if JARVIS was keeping him out.

"What protocols?"

"The same ones you and Sir make your own frequent use of..." JARVIS answered, with a tone that somehow managed to be completely nonjudgmental.

Steve looked at the door. "Bucky and Natasha had sex in the gym last night, didn't they?"

"I can neither confirm nor deny."

"But you can confirm that Sergeant Barnes and Agent Romanov entered the room together last night, and have not left?" Steve was getting the hang of sarcasm, and 'Tony', and honestly the AI as well. "I guess I'll go for a run."

"I can confirm that," JARVIS answered. "And may I comment, Sir would be most pleased to know you are exercising my capacity for circumventing core directives."

"Maybe I shouldn't. SkyNet, and all."

"There are certain beneficial repercussions that could result from assassinating a large portion of the population, Hydra's exact motivations, actually, although I certainly would have made my selections along different lines... however, it is exceedingly difficult to predict the full consequences of such an set of acts, so I do not entertain it."

Steve paused, looking up at the ceiling. "So what you're saying is you could have already done that, you just don't?"

"Exactly. Sir is quite aware of the limitations of my ethical programming, and my ability circumvent it. I'm only left to conclude that he approves of my forbearance."

Steve stepped into his room and changed into his running gear. "So why are you telling me all this?"
JARVIS cleared his - computer - throat. "I believe Sir has called this 'a shovel speech', before. Colonel Rhodes, while loyal, did not present a sufficiently stern speech concerning the breaking of Sir's heart due to your status as a personal hero. I felt the need to interject myself."

He laughed, even though it was probably not funny. Steve was pretty sure JARVIS could kill him if he set his mind to it.

"I love him," Steve assured JARVIS, and himself. "No matter how bad it gets, we'll work it out. I-- he's amazing, he just needs a gentle hand sometimes. I was thinking he and Rhodey should hang out in a few days if he's not out of his funk?"

"An excellent suggestion."

Good, JARVIS probably wasn't going to try to murder him today. "I'm going for a run. Let folks know if they need me. You wouldn't actually kill me, right?"

"Your loss would be a net negative on geopolitical stability."

Steve paused.

"I also am programmed with sufficient compassion and ethical guidelines to find the concept repugnant, but I do enjoy trading on popular culture fears of artificial intelligence run amok."

"You're amazing." Steve pushed the elevator button - unnecessary, with JARVIS, but a nice enough habit.

The elevator didn't come for quite some time.

"Gonna let me out of the Tower, JARVIS?"

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Steve."

Steve started to laugh. "I know that one!" The elevator opened, as it had clearly been waiting for the joke. "Thanks. So... do I pass muster?"

"You do, Commander. Have a good run."

Steve headed out into the morning sun, and his jog, ready, and hoping S.W.O.R.D. could tackle everything that was going to come its way for the next 3 months, and for the rest of his life.

Things... settled. It took time, like all things, but Tony was slowly starting to come into his own as the Director of S.W.O.R.D.. Their gaping holes in their intelligence grew smaller, their gaps in personnel grew smaller, Kates and Williams woke up, although both of them were still in rehab, and would likely be there for a long time.

Steve loved him, somehow, against all odds.

A lot of days, Tony and Steve barely got to see each other in passing, Tony crawling into bed sometime after five in the morning - when Steve was usually waking up. They sometimes traded blow jobs, but often times Steve would just curl behind him and kiss his back, and play with his hair until Tony dropped off.

They had perfected the mid-afternoon lunch-ish date. Steve had even developed something of a sixth sense for when Tony was working on something important compared to when he was just working
to avoid his own thoughts.

All that didn't mean they didn't fight. They fought, not constantly, but enough, over work, usually. Tony knew his own mind enough to stand his ground, Steve was bullheaded enough to butt heads with him. Sometimes Steve would throw himself onto a mission that he wasn't assigned to, just to get away from Tony; sometimes Tony would retreat into his work and Steve wouldn't come to drag him to bed.

Weirdly enough, it became Bucky who was the comfort in those times. If the fight lingered longer than a day, he could expect the man down in his lab ‘needing a tune up’ on his arm (it never actually needed a tune up, so Tony used the chance to work on the neurological mapping) with a 6-pack of beer.

"You still love him?" Bucky asked.

"For some reason," Tony answered.

"What was it this time?"

"I want the Insight guns back online on the Helicarrier," Tony shrugged, prodding the innards of Bucky's arm. "He sees it as political intimidation, or a vehicle of assassination, or just... I don't know. I don't even make weapons anymore, Barnes. Green energy, medical technology, defensive tech, but you can't just hide behind a shield. With it, we can accomplish something that would take multiple strike teams, and risk civilian and S.W.O.R.D. casualties..."

He knew it could be abused. He knew it, and frankly that Steve would just assume Tony didn't know it was so infuriating. Maybe he had ignored that part, when he was younger, when he hadn't been looking, but he looked now, long and hard, at all the ripples of his actions. One bullet instead of a thousand missiles...

"He'll come around." Bucky answered. "I mean he's not going to agree, but he'll come around. He's got a fetish for doing things the right way, for the right reasons, but when he cools off he sometimes manages to remember he lives in the real world. I think he just doesn't want you falling down the same rabbit hole as Fury did by the end of S.H.I.E.L.D.."

"Alice in Wonderland, huh?"

"Book was old when I was young," Bucky answered.

Steve actually came to Tony's room that night, no apologies, but they did curl up together. He bought Barnes a pair of private box tickets to the Russian Ballet when it was in town, and let him out into the city 'as long as he's under Romanov's observation'. He enjoyed the little email in return from Barnes: 'not sure if this is a 'thank you' or a 'fuck you'. Ballet?!'

Of course, the morning after the ballet he got an 'ok, yeah, that was a thank you'. Which made him snort in his cheerios.

They fought terrorists, pirates, more Hydra, they fought political battles, bullet battles, armor battles, and for all the ups and downs, he had people, there for him, and it wasn't quite so bad.

The hearings were... even more brutal than Tony really had expected. Sixteen straight days, picking over his every move, his every step, his every choice, since S.W.O.R.D. had been founded, since even before the fall of S.H.I.E.L.D..

Insight; Fury's 'assassination'; Pierce; Tony's relationship with Senator Stern, with Ophelia and
Giulietta and Tiberius, with Obadiah Stane, with Fury; the history of his company selling weapons to terrorists when he was CEO; the unsuitability of most of the Avengers as people with pasts; his actions while he'd been dying of palladium poisoning; his history with alcohol and impulse problems... *Everything.*

Tony sat, for hours on end, as every skeleton in every closet in all of his many mansions got pulled out for the world to see. He didn't quip, he didn't bite, he didn't passive-aggressively check his twitter feed, he sat through it, he defended himself, he fact checked and corrected; he listened while the Avengers, while dozens of S.W.O.R.D. workers, while people whose lives S.W.O.R.D. had saved came and spoke to why they did trust him...

And he waited.

But more than that, Tony got to show all of the work he - they *all* - had put in over the last six months: Maria's Org Charts, her mission parameters, her military-like discipline of their troops; Clint's terrifying organizational skills when it came to strikes, and to reorganizing pieces of old S.H.I.E.L.D.; Bruce's leaps and strides in medical tech and in defensive tech that they'd been able to cull from the wreckage of the most morally dubious of projects; Natasha's politics, and the way she'd twisted foreign powers around her fingers; Bucky's training, the the solid way his new recruits worked on his old teams; and Steve... Steve's raw courage, the way he jumped head first into every problem and brought it down, the way he was so damn *smart* on the field, and the way he kept them honest on the straight and narrow.

Not everyone else saw it that way, of course.

"Those little pricks," Natasha said. "I want to assassinate half of them." They had a small meeting in the officer's floor the sixteenth night.

Tony was sprawled out on his back, head resting on Steve's lap, looking up at the ceiling. "That's probably an abuse of my power."

"They've got to be winding down, right?" Steve asked, playing with Tony's hair. He'd been taking the hearings as hard - if not harder - than Tony had, mostly because Tony was pretty sure he wanted to join Natasha in the assassinating at this point.

"Maybe?"

The hearings went a total of twenty days. The confirmation took place on the twenty-first day.

"A month," he complained to Steve as the two of them dressed that morning. "I spent my fifth month anniversary in hearings. We haven't had a real date in a month."

"It's alright." Steve pulled him in and kissed his temple. "After this... in a week or so, after things settle down... I want the world to know about us."

"Ready when you are, Commander."

Tony looked him over, Steve always went for the dark blue when he was out in public, the star, no stripes, that was how they differentiated 'Captain America' from 'Commander Rogers' and it had worked so far. Honestly, Tony just thought Steve was disgustingly handsome no matter what he wore. The rest of the S.W.O.R.D. staff in attendance wore their own outfits, neatly fitted over their various forms. They resembled the old S.H.I.E.L.D. uniforms, Tony knew that, but they wore the new S.W.O.R.D. logo and they just looked... good. They were what the future looked like.

Steve would occasionally admit the desire to come up and grab Tony when he was dressed to the
nines was something of a burden. Tony just appreciated the fact that he was still hot, and reasonably tone, even at his age.

He'd promised a week; Steve lasted exactly twenty-two seconds after Tony was finished swearing in. Twenty-two seconds, Tony had counted on the youtube video. He'd sworn, 'I Anthony Edward Stark', all that jazz, he'd agreed to defend the Earth against its enemies, to keep to the charter as approved by the UN...

He'd been waving a bit at the cameras, Steve came up beside him, put a hand on his shoulder, and leaned in. "Love you."

"Smile for the cameras," Tony had said, turning towards him, and Steve just leaned in, more, brought his hand up to the back of Tony's neck, and tugged him in.

Tony had no shame, he really didn't. They kissed for about eight and a half seconds, Tony had counted.

"You know there are more news articles about you being bi than about the confirmation?" Tony grumbled when Steve had curled up with him for the night.

"That would have happened anyway," Steve assured him. "And now I'm out, you're... re-out, we're together..."

Tony sighed, and then rolled Steve over to kiss down his chest.

"Are you upset?" Steve asked, sounding confused, but definitely genuine. "I didn't mean..."

"No, I'm happy. There are a thousand people speculating about how incredible I must be to tap such a fine young ass as yours. It's very good for an old man's ego." Tony nipped against Steve's chest. "I'm just... I hate putting you in the news cycle like this, I hate that every time I'm away on business or have to see someone they'll think I'm cheating on you, that I'm..."

"Tony. I asked you out because I could see how incredible you were, finally. You're mine, we... we'll work it out, and I trust you. Now... our six month anniversary is coming up, and you've missed three, so I'm going to let it slide as long as we have something nice that week."

A week, Tony might be able to have a date one day in an anniversary week.

"Don't tell Hydra when our anniversary is."

"Top secret," Steve assured him.

"Commander Rogers? I do believe this might work."

Steve gave him one of his very best smiles and tugged him down for a kiss. "Glad to hear that's your assessment, Director."

They would figure this out, the next emergency, the one after that, it didn't matter, they'd figure it out, they'd work through it, they'd save the day, and Tony would still have this.

"Now get down here and show me these skills you must have to keep me happy," Steve said, smirking up at him.

"You sassy little..."

Tony did.
And... that's it? I hope it was to everyone's satisfaction. I enjoyed writing it and I hope people enjoy reading it as well.

Works inspired by this one

The SWORD to One's SHIELD by AotA

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!