The Theories Of The Universe

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Summary

Toni Stark is four years old when she understands the truth. Her father wanted a son and she never will be good enough for him. It's the words her Aunt Peggy leaves her with that define her life: plant yourself like a tree and make others move.

Years later, she still holds that lesson to heart to fight for what she believes in.

Notes

This is my first story for this fandom and I'm excited to share it with all of you! So far I have
roughly 30 chapters planned out but it probably will end up being longer than that. I will be updating every Sunday, given nothing comes up, and I hope you all enjoy! Be sure to comment and let me know what you think
Where It Begins

Antonia Stark is born the same way she lived most of her life; grasping the attention of everyone in the room with just one action. She’s born in a private hospital room on a late spring day with her father pacing nervously outside and her mother inside the room. The room is bright around her and she cries out, begging for attention and the love of her family. The world is set ablaze with just one action, and the world will never more be the same.

Howard entered the room after it all was done, and saw his wife lying on the bed, exhausted from childbirth and frowned as he looked around the room.

“Where’s my son?” he asked gruffly and the nurse in the room came over, holding a small bundle in her arms as she placed it into his. It was the first time he’d ever held a child, and he knew it would be the last time. That’s what they had Ana and Jarvis for; they could take care of all that while he was out doing more important things.

“It’s a girl, Mr Stark,” the nurse said meekly as she uncovered his daughter’s face slightly. He frowned once more looking down at the tiny girl in his arms. He needed a son; a son who would take over Stark Industries, who would continue to build weapons and change the world. A son who would continue his search for Steve Rogers until his body was found. His legacy needed a son to take it over. And instead he was given a daughter.

What good was a girl when the world was run by men?

“Take her back,” Howard said in a huff as he handed the girl off to a nurse and existed the room. He needed a drink, not to be around any of this any longer. He needed to get out of this room, out of all this stuffiness, and the cries from around him as his daughter was carted off to another room to be cared for. They didn’t need him, not when a daughter was no use to him.

“How’s the boy looking?” Obadiah asked him with a grin as he waited outside the hospital room, holding a bear in his hand for the son he didn’t end up having.

“It’s a girl,” Howard breathed out loud with a sigh and Obadiah’s smile slipped off his face just as quickly as the words left his lips. “What use do I have for a daughter?”

“Maria is still young; there’s still time,” Obadiah said giving him a sympathetic smile. Easy for him to say; his wife had already given him two sons. And his own wife had barely been able to carry one child to full term. The chances of her having another child after this was rare, and they both knew it far too well.

“Let’s get out of here,” Howard said with a shake of his head, wanting to drop the subject. “I need a drink. And then I need to get back to work. If I cannot have a son to take on my legacy, then at least I want to make sure my legacy will remain strong after I am gone.”

“Of course, Howard,” Obadiah obliged, dropping the bear on the chair of the hospital, as he turned to leave.

“Sir?” Jarvis asked as he came to the hospital holding flowers intended for Maria. “Has the child been born?”

“Yes,” Howard breathed, “A daughter. Take care of them, will you, J? I need to step out for a bit.”

“Very well, Sir,” Jarvis said, and Howard could hear the disapproval was clear in his tone, but he
didn’t care. He needed to get out of the hospital. It was just another way he had failed. He had failed to bring Steve Rogers home. Failed to give Peggy a body to grieve over. Failed to recreate the serum. And failed to have a son to carry on his legacy when he died. Perhaps this was what his legacy truly was. That no matter what he built or what he accomplished, he would only ever be defined by his failures.

If he couldn’t have a son to take over his legacy, then he would be damned if he died without anything. Steve Rogers would become his legacy. He would be remembered for the work he did on Project Rebirth and he would recreate the serum, one way or another. Blast Carter for dumping the vial of blood that they had of Steve. It was his best shot at reproducing something which had been his greatest feat.

But none of that would matter if they recovered Roger’s body. Then he could take as many samples as he needed. He could change the world.

And he could finally lay his friend to rest. His friend, a hero, who had died saving the world, and lay in the middle of the ocean.

“Obadiah,” Howard said, on the way to the car. His friend looked up at him, curious to see what he wanted to say, and he continued, “I want to increase funding into Project Valkyrie. I want to find that plane and Steve’s body, one way or another. He will be my legacy. He will be what I leave behind in this world.”

Obadiah smiled and nodded in approval, clearly understanding where he was coming from. Besides, it would be good for Stark Industries if they were able to recreate the serum.

He might have a daughter, but he would still leave behind a legacy worth remembering.

Antonia Stark is four years old when it finally clicks in her head.

She’s known that her father has always looked at her in anger for years. It seemed that nothing was ever good for him, not her attempts at circuitry or her attempts of building herself any toys. She’s tried to make a toy car that would move without her having to push it but the wiring on it didn’t quite align and she ended up setting it on fire and burning her hands.

And her father was mad when he saw it; not because she could have hurt herself, but because she could have done some serious damage to the lab and ruined the other things he had in there. Things that were actually important. Things that would make Stark Industries money. Not a stupid toy car that moved.

So from then on she tried to only make things that were useful. She tried to build things that her father would be proud of. It’s how she ended up putting together the circuit board. She’d seen her father’s designs for it in his lab and she wanted to try and work on it, to help him. She could see that his design wasn’t quite complete; it was too big to be functional.

She worked on it every day for the better part of a month, delicately placing all the wires and pieces in place and she feels so pleased with herself when she finally got everything to lay flat. She’d done it. She’d put together her first circuit board and she wanted nothing more than to show her father.

She ran through the house, despite knowing fully well that Jarvis would be unhappy with her if he saw her.
He’d warned her plenty of times about running in the house, but she knew it didn’t matter. There are more important things than a few rules.

She carefully held her circuit board as she ran into the room where her father is in and she freezes instantly when she realizes that Uncle Obie is there and knows immediately that she’s made a mistake. She should have knocked, should have waited until he was free to see her. Instead she runs in head first.

“Antonia,” her father said, holding a glass with a drink she’s seen him consume far too often.

“Father,” she whispered, trying to gather up the courage that seems to be leaving her all too quickly.

“What have I told you about knocking?” he asked, raising a brow at her.

“I’m sorry,” she said dropping her head.

“What do you have behind your back, Annie?” Uncle Obie asks her, and she shyly places the circuit board on the desk in her father’s study.

“I made a circuit board,” she said, looking at her father carefully as she took a step back. “I followed the directions in your lab and put it together.”

“Those sketches were incomplete,” her father frowned, “The pieces weren’t fitting together. How did you manage to complete it?”

“I shrunk it down,” she said softly, “And change the voltage flowing through it by adding an extra resistor. I also reversed the current flow and added some extra pathways. It works. I tried it before I brought it down here.”

“We’ll test that out, now won’t we,” Howard shrugged, as he placed it into a piece on his desk, something she’d seen him use many times to test the basic flow of current. And she held her breath as he flipped the switch. He held the multimeter in his hand and placed the pins on the board.

He frowned as he looked at the reading on the meter. He placed the pins on another point then glanced at her carefully. Uncle Obie looked curious at the actions and leaned over to read the meter himself before bursting into laughter.

“Looks like the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree, Howard,” Obadiah clapped her on the back, “Little Annie here is a genius. There might be hope for the future of Stark Industries after all.”

She beamed proudly and her father had a challenging look on his face.

“Apparently so,” he muttered, “Call the papers, Obie. It seems as if we need to alert them of the fact that my daughter is a genius.”

It’s how she found herself later that day, in front of her father as his hand grasps her shoulder, and he’s telling them all about the circuit his daughter has managed to produce and how they will begin production onto the circuit board, using it for their newest radio technology to serve in the military. He’s showing her off to the world, as a brilliant prodigy and she felt proud of the fact that she’s finally won her father’s approval. She’s done it.

And when she’s given a moment to talk about how she came about it, she talks about how she tried different path ways and did calculation onto how different conductors would work far better than what she’s tried before. She talks about pathways and resistors, and she knows that the world believes that it was her who came up with it, despite a few earlier questions where it was clear that
they didn’t quite believe her.

She was proud later that night when she went to her father’s workshop once more, wanting to create, to build, to make something, anything.

But that had been her mistake.

Her father was standing there, looking at her designs once more, a bottle of whiskey in his hands as he went over the calculations.

She accidently closed the door a bit too loudly and she sees him turn around and fear begins to set into her. She’d seen him that angry before. Yelling on the phone at investors, and board members. She’d seen him yell at her before, for playing with toys instead of learning. For reading fictional books instead of factual. For constantly being a disruption.

But this time it’s different. There’s a different sort of rage in his eyes.

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” he said, standing over her. “Creating that circuit which I’d tried for months to perfect. You think you’re such a little genius? You’re nothing more than a little girl. And you will never be good enough. What use do I have for a genius daughter when I should have had a son?”

It feels like a punch to the gut, and she begins to shake as finally the pieces begin to fall into place.

The slap comes a moment later, but the sting of the blow had already landed from his words. She feels herself falling to the ground but doesn’t react, not in time to stop herself or steady herself. Her head catches on the counter on the way down and she can feel a drip of blood fall down her face.

She finally understood in that moment why her father had always been distant, why he’d always hated her.

It has nothing to do with the fact that she’s not good enough for her father. Because that’s always been true in itself. But she’d just proved herself. Every time he throws a fault in her face, she’s always improved it.

She stopped reading fairy tales and began reading physics books. She stopped playing with dolls and instead started playing with tools. She stopped wearing dresses, even if her mother still tried to force them into it. She stopped wasting her free time, and instead started trying to create something great.

It didn’t matter how hard she tried, how hard she worked, how far she pushed herself.

She could never be the son that her father wanted. She could never give him what he needed.

She would never be good enough.

And somehow, that hurt far more than anything else.

She almost didn’t feel the boot come crushing down on her moments later, and when she heard the crack, she didn’t even cry as pain flooded her body.

“Miss Stark,” she heard a gentle voice call out as the darkness surrounded her. “Miss Stark, can you hear me?”
Her eyes flickered open and see Jarvis sitting on her bed, dropping a towel tenderly on her face, trying to comfort her.

She felt the crushing pain fill her as she tried to sit up; pain from the memories of the night before, of the words that her father had revealed to her. The words of her uselessness, and now no matter how hard she had tried, she’d never be good enough.

There’s a throbbing feeling in her head, and she grasps at her torso, trying to figure out why it hurt so much.

“Hurts,” she whimpered slightly, knowing Jarvis never faulted her for pain. He had been there with her the year before when she had broken her arm by falling out of a tree and had made sure that she never spent a moment alone. Her father couldn’t even bother coming to visit her while her mother had spent the day with her, wanting to make sure she was okay.

She knew now why it was that her father wasn’t there.

Because he didn’t care. Because he wanted a son and had gotten a daughter. Because he wanted something she was not. And nothing could make her a boy. Not when the universe had cruelly made her a girl to punish her.

“I know, Miss Stark,” he said softly, and she could see the anger in his eyes as he cupped her face tenderly. “I have some pain medication for you that the doctor left after his visit. It will help ease your discomfort.”

Nothing could make her feel better, despite the physical pain she was in. But she nodded any ways and Jarvis left the room, leaving her alone with her mother.

“Oh Toni,” Maria Stark breathed as she sat down beside her. “I was so worried when I saw you down in that lab. You know better than to go down there, especially when your father has had a drink too many. He didn’t mean to hurt you, it was the drink that made him do it.”

“Why doesn’t he love me?” she asked, voice cracking slightly, and her mother stilled. “Why am I not good enough for him?”

She felt tears fall down her face before she could stop them, but she didn’t care.

“He wanted a son,” Maria whispered, closing her eyes. “It’s the way of the world of man. They will always look at us and see weakness and inferiority. That we aren’t the same as them. He wanted a son to give him an heir to his business, but I couldn’t give it to him. Every time he sees you, he sees the daughter he got instead of the son he wanted.”

“It’s not fair,” she whimpered slightly, “I can do everything the boys in my class can do and more! Why does it matter if I’m not a son? Why does any of it matter when he has me? Why doesn’t he love me?”

“You are brilliant in your own right, Tesoro,” Maria told her tenderly as she gently ran her fingers down Toni’s hair. “You will bring the world down to its knees and show them all in time that you do not fall down to their expectations. Give your father some time. He’ll see that you can be everything he wanted, despite your gender. He will come around. He loves you, in his own way.”

And yet he broke my ribs, she thought bitterly. He had wanted her to hurt just as he did, and he had taken his anger out on her first hand, because she wasn’t what he wanted.

It was the day she learned the unfortunate lesson that would become her reality. That the world
would always look at her and see a daughter when they expected a son. And she would have to fight them every step of the way, just to stand on the same ground as they did. She would have to battle them tooth and nail, just to be able to take what she wanted.

And it was a lesson she held close to her heart from that day forward.

She’s eight years old when a beautiful woman with long brown hair and lipstick so red it glows enters her life. She sees him get whisked into her father’s study and curiosity fills her as she watches the closed door of her father’s study.

She’s seen her in pictures in her father’s things, knowing that they must have served in the war together, and she can’t help but wonder why the woman hadn’t come to visit if she was such good friends with her father.

It was the middle of the night by time the woman left the study, and she was sitting at the kitchen table, reading in her duck pyjamas that Ana had bought her despite her insisting she was far too old for such a thing.

“Hello there,” she hears a soft voice call out and she looks up from her calculus textbook to see the woman standing over her. She has a gentle smile on her face, and Toni Stark feels comfortable around her, “You must be Antonia.”

“Toni,” she corrects slightly but sticks her hand out in an effort to be polite as her mother insisted in her society lessons. Her mother may not be able to convince her to wear dresses, but she knows how to act in public, and how important her image may be.

“Toni,” the woman smiles brightly, and shakes her hand, “My name is Peggy Carter. I’m your godmother.”

“Why haven’t I ever met you before?” she couldn’t help but ask, “If you’re my godmother, shouldn’t I have met you before?”

“I used to visit you when you were younger,” her godmother tells her as she sits down beside her, “But you would have been far too young to remember that. I haven’t been able to for a few years because I’ve been working on a secret project and it’s taken a lot of my time away from me.”

She sits up curiously at the glint in her eyes.

“What kind of secret?” Toni can’t help but ask, despite knowing it was probably a secret for a reason.

“A secret sort of club,” Peggy gave her a conspiring smile. “To catch bad guys that have secret weapons or powers.”

“Like Captain America?” she asks again, slightly in shock.

“Like Captain America,” Peggy nods at her with a smile, “The world needs more heroes like him. I want to help keep his legacy alive. Steve Rogers was a hero, not because of his super powers, but because of his kind heart. He was brave and would do anything to fight for those he loved. If we all could be a bit more like him, then the world would be a better place.”

It’s the first time she’d ever heard anyone talk about Steve Rogers as a person apart from Captain
America. The comics always talk about how strong he was. How much of a hero he was. And how he got his powers. But none of them talk about the man as a person, and it’s a concept to her that’s so astounding. Perhaps it’s why her father is gone for months each year, searching the artic, desperate to bring him back. Because Steve Rogers was a good man, and she knows that it must be why even if she were a boy, she would never be good enough for her father. But none of that mattered, not when at the end of the day, she still was a girl, and she would never be good enough for him, no matter how much she wished she could have been.

“Even as a girl?” Toni can’t help but whisper. It’s strange to her to see this woman demand her father’s attention. Her father clearly respects her, and she can see from the pictures in her father’s study that she must have been in the military at some point.

“Let me tell you a secret,” Peggy told her gently, “The world will always look at you as a girl and tell you what they want you to be. They’ll tell you where they think you should stand in their eyes and will not accept anything less. And for that, you must decide the truth of your position yourself. Your entire life will be a fight, a war against society. You will have to fight to get every single thing in your life, Toni, and you must listen to your heart. If it’s something you can compromise on, then do it. But if it is a battle you must fight then don’t. Even if the entire world is telling you that something wrong is right. Even if the entire world is telling you to move, it is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye, and say ‘No, you move’. Otherwise the world will continue to walk all over you, and you will have to accept the place they give you.”

She paused then, looking carefully at Toni and offering her a smile, “I have a feeling that you will change the world, Toni Stark. You will unmake the world as it is and write it in your image. And I know that you will make it much better than what it is now. Let me tell you the story of how I got involved in the army.”

She listened to her godmother, as she told the story of how she got involved after she had gotten news of her brother’s death, and how she had known she’d needed to fight in the war. How she had joined despite everyone in her life telling her that she couldn’t do it. How she had worked for MI5 and the SSR, and how she wanted to start a new organization now to change the world.

She smiled back at her godmother, feeling hope for the first time in a while since she had learned of her father’s hatred of her over her gender. This woman, who fought tooth and nail for everything in her life but had defied the odds that had been placed upon her. She was an inspiration.

“Peggy, you’re still here?” Howard said, entering the kitchen as he saw the two of them. “I hope Antonia has not been bothering you. I know she can be rather talkative at times, and the last thing I want is for her to talk off your ear.”

“She’s been a gem,” Peggy smiled at her, “Toni is brilliant, Howard. You must be so proud of her.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Howard soured at the use of her nickname. Toni, because Antonia was too feminine, and because Toni gave her more power over her life. Howard simply brushed her off as he glanced back at Toni. “I just got off the phone with the President. We’ve been given the funding to start the project.”

“That’s remarkable,” Peggy said, standing, as Howard tried to usher her out of the room. “I enjoyed our chat, Toni,” Peggy said looking at her. “I hope that next time we can talk some more? I would love to hear about some of your projects.”

She lit up at the idea of her aunt coming back, knowing it would be incredible to have the chance to spend more time with her. Howard looked unhappy at the concept but didn’t disapprove of the meeting and Toni found herself eagerly nodding.
It was how she found herself later that afternoon, trying on her mother’s makeup for the first time, and painting her lips in a colour her mother almost never wore; a bright red. She stared at herself in the mirror and felt powerful for the first time in years.

By time she’s thirteen, she’s more familiar with her Aunt Peggy, given the fact that she and her father are working on their secret project. She comes over for dinner often, and she knows Jarvis is fond of her, having many stories of their adventures together before her father’s marriage to her mother. She knows it still hurts Jarvis to talk about his late wife, Ana, who passed a few years ago, and she doesn’t blame him. Ana had been family to her too and she had locked herself in her room crying for a month when she had first found out, only opening the door when Jarvis had asked her. He had held her tightly and she had tried to comfort the man who was far more of a father than her own to her. He told her stories of Ana and how they met, and she hated that he lost the love of his life.

Ana Jarvis was often featured in Peggy and Jarvis’ stories, and she felt herself always wanting to know more. Aunt Peggy would bring over her husband, Uncle Daniel often, and the man always had time for her, listening to whatever she had to say with a fascination that her own father never held for her work. Despite his limp, she knows he could be very strong in a fight. He works alongside Aunt Peggy and her father on their secret project and sometimes after their missions he always brought her little souvenirs from where ever he’s travelled recently. Their children, Harry and Ava come over often when their parents are busy, and despite the fact that they are both younger than her, she can’t help but take them under her wing. She’s never been close with the kids at school, given the way her parents have made her skip more grades than anyone before. But Harry and Ava are different; they understand the kind of life she’s grown up with, with parents who constantly have secrets and cannot reveal themselves to her.

But today wasn’t like most days. Her father wasn’t busy because of some mission or the other. And yet he was missing one of the most important days of her life so far. The day she was set to start school at MIT. She hadn’t really been surprised when he took off two weeks ago, saying he had a new lead as to where Steve Rogers may be, but a small part of her had hoped that he would be back before she left for school. She wasn’t surprised though when the morning arrived, and he still was in the middle of the Artic.

“Do you have everything you need, Ducky?” Aunt Peggy asked her. Ever since the pyjama incident when she first met Peggy, the woman had bestowed the nickname onto her. But she didn’t care, knowing that Aunt Peggy loved her as she loved her aunt.

“I do, Aunt Peg,” she smiled as she loaded the last box into the car. “You don’t need to all come, you know. I’m capable of getting to school by myself. Jarvis can just drop me off.”

“As if I’d miss my favourite niece starting school,” Uncle Daniel scoffed and Peggy hit him slightly, “If Michael hears you say that, he won’t be pleased,” Peggy argued.

“Michael only has sons,” Daniel grinned. “Toni still is my favourite niece.”

She grinned at the both of them as Jarvis closed the trunk of the car.

“My daughter is starting school already,” Maria said, sighing softly as she cupped her face. “You’re going to do brilliant, there, Toni.”

She’d left home before for boarding school, so it was hardly the first time she’d left home. But she
knew that this was different. This was her growing up and starting her life. She was doing most adults did, and yet she was just a child.

“I’ll miss you, Mama,” Toni told her softly and Maria held her closely.

“Come home often, alright Bambina?” Her mother asked her, and she held onto her mother tightly.

“Let’s go!” Harry called from the car, and Toni grinned at her cousin as she sat down beside him in the van Jarvis had brought out for the purpose of moving her.

“Harrison!” Peggy scolded. “Your cousin is going off to school and you will not see her for months! At least do not rush her out of her own home.”

“Sorry Toni,” Harry gave her a sheepish look and she couldn’t help but laugh.

Her father might be too busy to come see her off before she started college, but it didn’t matter to her. She’s surrounded by her family; her loved ones, and they were all she needed. Her aunt and uncle who had taught her many lessons over the years, Jarvis who had been more of a father than her own, her mother who had always watched over her, and cared for her. She didn’t need the man who looked at her and saw nothing but failure. No, she was getting out of this house and far away from her father.

She was finally free.
At thirteen years old, Toni Stark was far younger than the rest of her peers. She was used to being a lot younger than everyone else in her year, as she has been forced to skip grades for her entire life.

She’d never minded it before, given the fact that the work at school still wasn’t challenging for her, and more often than not she found herself drifting off, drawing her own designs in her notebooks. She couldn’t help it, she probably could write the examinations for some of these courses within the first week or so of lectures and do as well as she would when the semester was over. The material wasn’t challenging in any way and she hated that she was forced to listen and attend when she’d rather be creating, building, making anything.

Instead, she was at a lecture where attendance is mandatory, but had no intention of listening to with full attention. She can hear the professor lecturing the room and she frowns as she realizes that the room got quiet all of a sudden and she looks up from her notebook to see the Professor looking at her expectantly.

“Miss Stark, I asked if you would like to try solving the differential trigonometric equation?” The old professor asked her. He was an old white man, and like the rest of the school, seems to believe that the only reason she got into MIT was because her father bought her way in, and not because she has any merit of her own. She sighed to herself, knowing that if she didn’t solve the equation, she’d be proving them right. But if she did, she’d be setting a target on her back.

Either way she’s lost before she’s even started.

She’d never been ashamed of her intelligence or her desire to learn. It was what drove her most days and helps her keep on task. She knew who she was and what she wanted to do, and nothing will ever be able to take away the passion she feels when designing something.

So, she stood carefully, hearing the snickers around her as the room expected her to fail before she’s even written anything. Instead, she stood up and walks to the front of the room and stares at the problem in front of her.

\[ g(z) = \frac{x \csc x}{3 - \csc x} \]

She’s slightly insulted by the problem, it’s nothing difficult and this is what she’s been expected to solve. She studies it briefly and does the math in her head, before writing out the answer on the chalkboard in front of her.

\[ g(z) = \frac{\csc x (3 - \csc x - 3x \cot x)}{(3 - \csc x)^2} \]

The professor rapidly looks down at his notes, clearly not having expected her to write down the answer without any steps but she simply drops the chalk down and dusts off her hands.

“How did you get the answer?” the professor asks, peering over at her, “You didn’t even do any of
She sighed once more and branches off talking about products and quotient rules, and how she made various jumps by writing out the steps she’d seen in her mind as the problem solved itself. She wrote slower than she could think, and it’s slightly distracting to have to try and get all the numbers on the page. The professor looked confused by some of her steps and she was sure that it’s because it’s different than whatever he had written down on the page. But she argues her reasoning for those steps, and she can see from the frustrated look on his once smug face that she’s right.

The room is quiet when she returned to her seat and there are looks of annoyance her way instead of contempt. Just as she had been sure, they’d already begun to hate her before she’d even started trying to stand out.

Instead, they look at her and see everything that was wrong with the world. They saw a girl in a school full of men. They saw her as she really was, the child genius who is far beyond her years in intelligence and doesn’t need to be in the same classes as she’s in.

But she stays anyways, until she can find a way to get out of the hell that is the first-year engineering courses she’s required to take for her school. It’s dull and uneventful and she’d rather be in her lab, building something, anything. And instead, she’s surrounded by her classmates who have made it all too clear that they dislike her.

It stayed that way for a few weeks. Professors only tried to call her out when they’re certain they got the better of her, but each time she proved them wrong, and showed them up. She was aware several of them have complained about her to the dean but other than getting the correct answer in a different way than what they’ve been teaching, she hadn’t actually done anything wrong.

“You think you’re so clever, don’t you?” she heard a voice whisper in her ear one day after lectures and she looked up to see Tiberius Stone behind her, far too close for her liking. “A brilliant little girl with a bigger brain than she has anything else.”

He leered over at her, and at thirteen years old, she felt uncomfortable by his gaze. She was well aware of the fact that he’s much older than her, by at least a few years and she pulled herself away as swiftly as she could.

“You’re not as smart as you seem to think you are,” he told her as he pushed her back against the bricks of the building that she’d just had a lecture in. She doesn’t want to be scared; she’s quite a bit smaller than him, given the age and gender differences, and she hates how small she feels.

She wondered briefly if this was how Steve Rogers felt all those years ago when fighting against bullies twice his size that he had no chance in defeating. And yet he stood strongly against them without a fear in the world. He did it because it was the right thing to do.

She thought of Aunt Peggy and the various lessons she’d taught Toni over the years on how to defend herself. Because girls like her who tend to end up in positions where they need to fight for themselves when no one else would need to be able to protect themselves. Girls like her who defied the odds and spoke out against the world needed to know how to fight.

She wanted to spit in his face but instead she counted down from ten, waiting for the perfect moment.

*Ten.*

*Nine.*
Eight.

So when Tiberius Stone came closer she held her breath, and clenched her fist.

Seven.

Six.

Five.

“Girls like you need to be put in your place,” he says brushing a strand of hair out of her face.

Four.

Three.

Two.

“Girls like you need to know that they do not belong in this world, no matter how much they wish they did,” Stone snarked. His lips moved to brush against her neck and she continued to count.

One.

He was close enough now and she brought her knee up to knee him in the groin. She took her elbow and slams it against his face. He winced and fell to the ground.

“You little bitch,” he groaned, and she towered over him.

“Girls like me belong at the top,” she smirked at him, “Don’t ever come after me again, Stone.”

She holds her breath, as she quickly walks away from the scene. The last thing she wants to do is draw a crowd to what had been going on. If Stone is smart, he won’t make a big deal out of what had happened. After all, he had attacked her and then fallen on his back when she defended herself. And as much as her father might hate her, she still is a Stark. And Starks are made of iron. They do not bend, not for anyone.

The words that her father had once drilled into her at the signs of her weakness become a prayer in her head. She repeated the words over and over in her head. She was a Stark and she will not break.

Instead, she’ll show them all what she was really made out of.

She got out of her first couple years of school work by insisting on writing advanced material. Her father backed her up and she knew they’re afraid of him pulling his funding from the school. But despite his money, she still needed to prove that she was capable of writing the advanced examinations. She knew no one expected her to pass, and yet she flew out of the tests well within the time limit each time, and she knew that nothing there is nothing they could throw at her that she couldn’t handle.

They seemed furious, but she didn’t let it get to her. She was used to their looks of annoyance by now.

She began a double masters in conjecture with her bachelors within her second year of schooling, combining Advanced Mechanical Engineering degree with a Physics Masters. She wanted to build,
to create, and to make. And she cannot do that if the school insisted on holding her back.

She was given a lab to work in and for the first time she felt like she truly could breathe.

It was the first place she truly felt at home since starting school.

She might have her own private dorms, but it never felt at home. It didn’t have Jarvis there. It didn’t have her mother there. And no matter how often they visited and helped her decorate the place, she can’t make it feel like home.

But the lab is different. There’re so many tools around her. There was so much potential around her. And she got to work, building things she’d always wanted to but never even dared to dream of when at her father’s lab.

There was another boy in the lab, an African American who hunches over his own station, working without as much of a word.

She though that the two of them were placed together like the inconveniences that they were. A black boy and a girl at a school full of rich white boys. Two people that don’t belong shoved off into a corner where they could remain hidden.

He offered her smiles and friendly ‘hellos’ whenever he entered the lab but that was as far as their friendship tended to extend.

She doesn’t care though; she might never make a single friend in school, but at least she can build herself one, so she doesn’t feel so alone.

The mathematics are on the page alongside the logic for what she would need to do to even get such an AI to work, but she’s determined. Her thesis professor had already tried talking her out of creating Artificial Intelligence, claiming such a subject to be nothing more than science fiction and not possible. She didn’t care. She’s Toni Stark. She’ll find a way to make it work, one way or another.

She was on her way to the lab when she hears the jeers being called out, and she sighed to herself. She knew it’s not directed at her. Because despite the disdained looks she still got from time to time, no one can question her place at the school anymore. Well, it didn’t stop a few from trying, but for the most part, people have simply taking to ignoring her, like they did with anything they found inconvenient to their way of life.

She saw a group of students in an alleyway between two buildings, and she was unsurprised to see Justin Hammer standing there, with a group of students behind him. He’d quickly become a thorn in her side, trying to prove time and time again that he was better than her, and yet is innovations barely ever reaching their mark. At least Tiberius Stone was capable of building a basic circuit board.

“You should go back to where you belong,” Hammer sneered as he kicked her lab partner, James Rhodes, who was on the down to the ground already. “Your people are not welcome here.”

“At least he’s capable of holding a blow torch and not searing off his front hair,” Toni said coolly as she crossed her arms.

“At least he’s capable of holding a blow torch and not searing off his front hair,” Toni said coolly as she crossed her arms.

“Go back to your little lab, Stark,” Hammer said, barely glancing at her, “The men are talking here.”

“The only man I see is the one on the ground while a bunch of stuck up boys are around him,” she said, moving closer to them.

“He needs to be taught his place,” one of the other boys glared at her, “Something you clearly do not
understand either. Daddy might be able to buy you a place in this school, but he can’t buy your friends, can he?"

“Clearly yours can’t buy you class or manners,” she sighed as she gestured around her, “Or you lot wouldn’t be standing over a fellow student and kicking him. For what? Because he’s black? Are you really that insecure about your own abilities that you would bully someone else for being better than you? I suppose I shouldn’t expect anything different from Hammer Industries. What was your last great product? A missile which exploded prematurely almost every time? Like father like son, I suppose.”

“At least I’ll be able to take over my family’s company,” Hammer sneered at her, “Your father will never let a girl take over.”

“Maybe not,” she shrugged, “But I’ll still be great by my own right. You will only ever be defined by the last name you hold. Which is a shame really, because could you imagine being defined by the Hammer name? What an embarrassment.”

“Let’s go,” one of the students said, as a security guard walked past. Figures, they were all comfortable beating up a student but didn’t want credit for such a task.

She watched as they left before she walked up to her lab partner and helped him up.

“You should have fought back,” she told him softly as she helped him stand. “Bullies like them need to be put in their place.”

He shook his head, “The world never sides with a black man for standing up for himself. I would have if I was in any real danger, but nothing they could have done to me would have been worth the scrutiny I’d face. I have a scholarship to be here, and I can’t afford to lose it. Not if one of them complains to their parents.”

She sighed, the two of them walked back to their labs.

She was angry, that the two of them were constantly targeted, and for what? Because they weren’t the same as the rest of them? She swiped her key card, letting themselves into the lab.

It was unfair. Unfair that he couldn’t even fight for himself without fear of retaliation.

“I’ll protect you,” she told him, offering him a soft smile. “The Stark name carries far more weight than the Hammer name.”

He laughed softly at that as he sat down at one of the chairs and she took a wet paper towel and cleaned up some of his wounds gently.

“James Rhodes,” he said, offering his name to her. “My Mama would kill me if she found out I haven’t bothered introducing myself to you in all this time. But I didn’t want to intrude on your lab time. I am well aware that my presence isn’t always welcome.”

“You are always welcome here,” she said firmly. “A bit of a mouthful though. And a bit generic.”

“James is too much of a mouthful for you?” he raised an eyebrow at her in disbelief. He ignores the part all together about the generics of his first name.

“Mm hm,” she nodded, as she placed a band-aid from one of the lab’s first aid kits on the corner of his forehead. “What about Rhodey?”
“How is that less of a mouthful?” he asked her, “It’s longer than James.”

“Too late,” she shrugged, “I’ve named you Rhodey.”

“What do I call you then?” he asked, and she looked at him in surprise. Her name was hardly unknown in their school. “I’ve seen you wince when people call you Antonia,” he explained, “I figured you preferred a different name.”

“Toni,” she smiled at him and he nodded with a smile of his own.

“Toni,” he echoed, and she grinned up at him. “How about I buy you some food?” he offered, “My treat. The least I can do after you all but chased those boys off.”

She intertwined her arm through his, “I have a feeling that this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship, Rhodey,” she beamed, and he laughed as he simply shrugged.

It was her second year of school before she decides to go home with Rhodey for Thanksgiving. It was a surprise to her when he asked, even though they’ve been friends for a year.

More than friends, really. He was her family, and the last year has only gone to show that he didn’t care about the fact that her family had money. It’s more than she can say for any of her other friends that she’d had over the years. She’s learned long ago that most people are friends with her because they hope she’d buy them expensive things. But not Rhodey; he’s never asked for anything, and full on refused to allow her to spend money on him despite her insisting that she has more than enough to spare. If he’s playing some sort of long game, she hasn’t seen any sign of it yet.

It’s slightly over a month when Rhodey turned to her in their shared lab.

DUM-E, her AI is still a work in progress, with his exterior built but his personality is still a slight mess. He doesn’t listen to any of her commands and she’s starting to think it’s a personality defect versus a fault in her coding.

“What are your plans for Thanksgiving?” he asked her, placing the wrench she needed on the bench for her to take.

She couldn’t tell him why she hated being handed things, couldn’t tell him it was because of years of her father handing her scalding iron rods or sharp knifes by the blade and asking her to hold it. She couldn’t tell him of the abuse she faced.

But he doesn’t treat it like an inconvenience to him, like she’s being stupid like so many others have made her feel. Instead, he accepted it.

She picked up the wrench she needs to adjust DUM-E’s bolts. She hoped it might give him a bit more coordination, but she wa starting to suspect that nothing can help with that.

She shrugged, “My parents have a gala that they usually attend,” she said with a sigh. “For orphans. It’s a good cause, and full of people who love to throw around their money. I don’t usually attend so I usually stay at home and eat pie that Jarvis made.”

“What about your family?” Rhodey frowned, looking at her.

“It’s just the three of us,” Toni said, dropping the wrench on the lab bench, before picking up a
screw driver. “Aunt Peggy is in Europe this year visiting her family. And Dad will be busy with work all weekend. Mom usually is busy helping for the Gala. And on Thanksgiving Jarvis usually goes with them since my dad always indulges in one drink too many and can’t drive home. So I usually spend it in the lab, doing what I do best.”

“All alone?” he asks, looking unimpressed by her plans. “You shouldn’t be spending a holiday meant for family by yourself.”

She simply shrugged. It was the truth of how she spent most holidays, so she wasn’t really sure why she would expect this one to be any different.

“You should come home with me,” he said suddenly, and she dropped the screw driver she’d been holding.

“Wait what?” she asked, looking at him, “Did I miss something?”

He shook his head at her, “Toni, you can’t spend Thanksgiving alone. Besides, Mama has wanted to meet you since I mentioned the insane girl that I’d become friends with. The one who has changed my life in more ways than one. And don’t think I’m not aware of the fact that you must have done something that I do not know about to get those boys to leave me alone. Spend Thanksgiving with us. If not because you have no other plans, then because my mother always cooks far too much food than we know what to do with.”

And that was how she found herself at the Rhodes family Thanksgiving.

“James,” his mother greeted warmly as Rhodey lead her through their home and into the kitchen where his mother was busy cooking up a storm. And from all the pies, cakes, turkey, and other dishes in front of her, she knew that Rhodey hadn’t been lying when he said his mother always cooked too much food than she knew what to do with. “And you must be Antonia.”

She smiled at the woman who raised her best friend as she handed her a bouquet of flowers she’d brought. Coronations, since it was what Rhodey said she would like.

“Thank you for inviting me, Mrs Rhodes,” Toni said as Mrs Rhodes took the flowers from her.

“None of that now,” the older woman said, swatting Rhodey as he tried to take a cookie from the tray in front of him, “Call me Mama Rhodes. It’s what everyone else around here does.”

“Jim brought home a girl,” she heard a teasing voice from behind them and she looked up to see a young girl enter the room, looking far too pleased with herself.

Rhodey groaned as he saw her, but quickly pulled her into a tight hug. “It’s good to see you, Jeanette. Now leave my friend alone and tell me more about this boy Mama says you’ve been seeing.”

Jeanette stuck her tongue out at him, and she couldn’t help but laugh. She’d never had a sibling growing up, knowing her mother had been unable to carry any other children. It was why her father was stuck with her, even if he had wanted a son.

“How did you meet my brother?” Jeanette asked as she took a seat next to her at the table, ignoring her brother all together. And from the glance Rhodey gave her, she knew that he mustn’t have told his family the truth of how they’d become friends. And she wasn’t about to expose a secret that he didn’t want known. She knew all too well what it was like for one’s family not to know secrets that they guarded far too close to their heart.
“We share a lab at school,” she said simply and Rhodey gave her a grateful look, “Someone needed to make sure that he took care of himself.”

He snorted at that, “That’s absolutely rich coming from you. If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even remember to eat half your meals. I swear you would live in that lab if you had any say in the matter.”

She grinned at him, “How do you know that I don’t just sneak back in there after you make me leave?”

He threw a cookie at her and she caught it as his mother swatted him again. She ate it carefully, savouring the flavour. Her mother might have been many things: beautiful, talented, and able to mingle well in society, but a cook was not one of them.

She watched as the Rhodes family interacted, and she felt grateful that Rhodey had invited her home with him. She’d seen in films families interacting on holidays and the friendly banter, but it had never been anything she’d experienced. Aunt Peggy was not a cook in any way and Uncle Daniel often took over Thanksgivings. But her parents had rarely let her attend, claiming she’d only get in the way, regardless of what Aunt Peggy would claim.

She gained a second family that weekend, and she knew that any time she wanted, she’d have a place in their home.

She got the news when she was sixteen and halfway through her third year at MIT. She hadn’t been home since Christmas, and she knew her mother understands. It was hard for her going home. Especially each time when her father makes it clear just how much he disapproved of her actions.

The worst part, she though, that he actually believes what the papers print about her. That when she tripped on a rock, the papers print that she was out drinking too much and stumbling around. And all of a sudden, she was an alcoholic. Or a guy holds onto her, and before she can get him off of her, she was labeled a slut that sleeps with everyone and everything that moves. It was like that with every story, and it didn’t seem to matter how far from the truth it really is. All that mattered was that her father is displeased with all her transgressions. All that matters when he hits her is that he believes it.

She’ll never be the perfect son he wanted. Or apparently a perfect child either. She’s filled with enough flaws to fill so many books that she could start a library.

She didn’t go home because she couldn’t stand to look her father in the eyes while he told her how much of a disgrace she was. Because he always insisted that she showed him the respect he deserved and that she looked into his eyes while he told her how useless he really thought she was.

She’s long since given up trying to please her father. She never will and trying to make him happy will only lead to her own heartbreak. She’s tired of knowing that she’ll never be good enough for him or Stark Industries.

She missed her mother and Jarvis. Her family. One she couldn’t even see that often because it meant going home. Because it meant seeing her father.

She still talked to them on the phone often, and Jarvis drove up her mother at least once a month so they can get lunch and do some shopping that her mother always insists on. No matter how much she insists that dresses aren’t practical for her field, her mother always insists on buying some in case she has an occasion to dress up.
She’s in the lab when the phone rings. She doesn’t even look up as Rhodey picks it up. DUM-E is almost complete, and she has so much to do before the semester ends.

“Tones, it’s for you,” Rhodey said, and she lets out a disgruntled sound, before going to pick up the phone.

“Hello?” she asks, despite knowing there are very few people who would call her at the lab.

“Toni,” her mother breathes, with a watery voice. “Toni, you need to come home.”

“What’s happened?” she asked, heart stopping. Her mother would never ask her to come home in the middle of the semester if something wasn’t wrong.

“It’s Jarvis,” her mother says softly, “He’s been admitted to the hospital after having a heart attack. It doesn’t look good, Bambina. The doctors don’t think he’ll make it. You need to come home.”

She dropped the phone and Rhodey instantly is at her side. She can’t breathe.

The world stops around her, and she doesn’t know what to do. Rhodey has taken the phone from the ground, talking to her mother, trying to find out what happened, and before she knows it, his arms are tightly around her. She couldn’t bring herself to cry, can’t bring herself to process what’s happening.

She was at the hospital less than six hours later, having caught the first flight home. Rhodey insisted on coming with her, and she’s grateful since she can’t even bring herself to say a single word since she got the call.

“Jarvis,” she said softly, as she sat by his bedside, “Jarvis, please.”

She knows begging won’t fix his condition. Knows from the grim looks on the doctors faces what’s to come. She knows but she doesn’t care. She begs anyways.

“Antonia,” Jarvis says gently, despite it being hard for her. “My sweet, brave girl. You’re going to change the world, Toni. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

“You’ll be fine, Jarvis,” she tries to assure him. She can’t bear the thought of losing him. The man who raised her. Who helped her take her first steps. Who bandaged her up every time her father was far too rough with her. Who drove her to school every single day until she was forced into boarding school. Who was there for her through every heartbreak, and every tear. Who held her hand when she felt so alone in the world. Jarvis, who was far more of a parent than her own father. She couldn’t lose him.

“I love you, sweet girl. Keep shining brightly,” he told her, and his eyes close. She knows what’s happened even without the sounds of flatlining on the monitors. Tears flood her eyes and her vision is blurred.

She felt arms wrap around her and she cries as Rhodey holds her tightly. Her mother placed a hand on her shoulder and they stayed like that for a while.

The funeral was small, and she still was unable to bring herself to properly accept what it means that he’s gone. Her mother is in tears, but she is graceful in how she wipes them away.

Aunt Peggy was there with Uncle Daniel, Harry, and Ava. Peggy told a story about how they went on a mission together, and how he patched her up afterwards. How he taught her that she doesn’t need to always carry the weight of the world on her shoulders. How she needed to rely on others. He
was always there for her, a true friend who would be missed.

Toni talked too, because she can’t bring herself to stay silent any longer. She told the story of how Jarvis taught her how to ride a bicycle when she was upset about never having learned. She left out the part where her father refused to teach her because he considered it a wasteful skill, knowing it wouldn’t help the story. Besides, her own father couldn’t even bother to come to the funeral.

She talks about how he taught her the importance of always getting back up, whenever she’s knocked down. She talks about how he taught her the world will constantly knock her over and how she needs to fight for what she wants. Jarvis was everything to her, and she doesn’t know how to continue in a world without him.

Rhodey stayed with her through the funeral despite his own classes. She told him that he should go back but he refuses, telling her that family comes first, always. And so, she let him stay.

When she got home, her mother handed her a letter. Jarvis wanted her to have it in the case of his passing, so she wouldn’t feel alone, and she had tears fill her eyes before she even opened it.

She was careful when she unfolds the pages. These will be the last words Jarvis ever said to her, and she wanted to make sure she didn’t ruin it like she did everything else in her life.

*Dearest Toni,*

*Sweet girl, I see the way you feel as if you are fighting against the world, and I want you to know that you do not need to feel so alone. I care for you so much, as if you were my own daughter, and as such, I want nothing more than for you to have happiness in life. There are so many in your life who care for you, your mother, Peggy and Daniel, your friend, James Rhodes, and I.*

*Ana loved you, just as I did. You may not have many memories of her, but she was overjoyed when your mother brought you home from the hospital. The two of us cared dearly for you, and we will always be with you in your heart.*

*You are worth so much more than what anyone else makes you feel. You are brave, intelligent, strong, and the kindest soul I ever have met. You deserve a life of happiness, and my greatest regret is that I will not be around to see all the things you will accomplish.*

*My greatest regret is not being able to protect you. To keep you safe from the world and from the pains you have faced. I wish I could have stood up for you more. That I wasn’t afraid that if I intervened that I’d be forced to leave you all alone. Still, it does not excuse my inaction, and I can only pray you forgive me.*

*Shine bright, my sweet girl, and know that I will always be with you. You will never be alone.*

*Love,*

*Edwin Jarvis.*

She sobbed loudly, and she places the letter down, not wanting to tarnish his final words to her. She can’t stop the pain from flooding her chest. She missed him so much and it hurt to know that he was gone from her life.

She heard the door slam shut loudly, and she knows her father is home. The same father who couldn’t even make time to come to his own friend’s funeral.

She wiped her tears and stood up firmly. She was done hiding away in fear. If he couldn’t respect the
dead, then why should she show him any respect either?

She marched to the lab where she saw him, drinking straight from the bottle of whiskey and she knew that he’s drunk. She was furious; how dare he skip the funeral of his friend to get drunk instead?

“I see you were able to make time for the things you find important,” she said, crossing her arms. He turned to face her, anger filling his face. While she might have cowered back before, she refused to stand down.

“What did you say to me?” he asked, taking a step in her direction.

“You couldn’t even make time to come to the funeral,” she said angrily, not caring about what she knew was to come. “I get that you don’t care about me or any of my accomplishments. But he was your friend. How could you not even come to his own funeral?”

“I had work!” her father shouted, “I run a multi-million-dollar company. I can’t just take time off because of personal reasons.”

“You own the company,” she shook her head, “They would have understood. But I guess business waits for no one.”

“It doesn’t,” he stepped closer. “Something you would know nothing about. When have you ever had to take anything seriously, Antonia? You have everything you do because I work as hard as I do.”

“I have everything I do because I work hard,” she said simply, “Your money might help but I got myself into MIT. I got myself into the dual Masters program. That had nothing to do with you. I don’t need you. And why would I, if clearly you can’t bring yourself to give a damn about your own friend’s funeral? Jarvis is gone, Dad! How caught up in your own world can you be to not attend? And here you are, drunk. Did you even care enough to visit his grave? Or do you not care because he was on the payroll?”

The slap lands on her face but she didn’t back down. The pain is nothing compared to what she felt from the loss of Jarvis. He could hit her all he wants but it didn’t change the fact that he was too selfish to even care about Jarvis’ death.

“I’m done,” she told him without giving the satisfaction of showing the pain. “I don’t care anymore if I’m not good enough for you. You didn’t get a son, you got a daughter. Stark Industries is meant to be passed down to the oldest child upon their twenty-first birthday, as per grandfather’s instructions. He didn’t specify male, either because he didn’t care or because he assumed Starks only have sons. Either way, read the succession document that Grandfather wrote, it’s clear in there. I don’t care anymore if you don’t think I’m good enough. I don’t need your approval, and I’m done trying to get it. You can’t hurt me anymore.”

And with that, she left the room, cheek still stinging, and head held high.
DUM-E

Chapter Summary

Toni graduates from school

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Toni Stark worked harder on DUM-E than she probably had on anything else. It took the better part of her Master’s Degree just to get him to respond properly to commands and not just beep at her in confusion whenever she tried to get him to do anything.

She wasn’t surprised though, given the level of complexity of what she was trying to do. Because she was not just making circuit boards or designing weapons.

*She’d created life.*

She knew she’d have to be careful with how she presented her robot. Terminator was still fresh in the minds of those around her and she knew the growing fear about AI is all too real. But at the same time, she cannot downplay the intelligence in her child. DUM-E might still have the occasional issue following her commands properly, but he understood what she wanted. He felt pain and she knew all too well she could hurt his feelings.

His name was entirely an accident. He whirred to life the first time she turned him on, beeping at everything and anything. And she supposed the fault laid on her, for the beeps were all too similar to a newborn’s cries. Instead, she sighed and called it a ‘Dummy’ and now her baby bot refuses to answer to anything else.

The room was silent around her, as she took a deep breath and walked into the room, her head held high. She has taken to wearing a bright red lipstick like her Aunt Peggy, for she was done being treated like a little girl. It got her far more attention from the boys, and it meant the press found more and more reasons to write trashy articles about her, but it was worth it. It was worth the look on the faces of those who doubt her when time and time again she proved them wrong.

DUM-E wheeled in behind her, and the thesis professor who constantly tried to talk her out of her project looks a little stunned. She wasn’t that surprised however. Robots weren’t all that useful in her age. But beyond that, she created life, not just some bot programmed to do a pre-set list of commands.

The room is set up for her presentation, with a set of tools on the workbench for DUM-E to show off. She’d coaxed him before, practising different things that they could ask, and trying to work up DUM-E’s skills. He was a learning AI and everything he knew how to do is because she’d spent hours training him in being able to do so. And she was proud of her bot and will still be regardless of what happened in the room today.

“Miss Stark,” the head of her thesis panel acknowledged her, looking at the bot behind her. “I understand your thesis project for your Mechanical Engineering Degree entails the use of an Artificial Intelligence Robot. If you do not mind, may we ask you a few questions to gain a better
understanding of your project before you begin?”

She knew what they were trying to do. They want an understanding of her project, one that makes sense to their minds.

“Of course,” she said casually, while a bundle of nerves grows in her stomach. This was her baby and of course she wanted to do well on it.

“When you claim this project contains the use of Artificial Intelligence, what exactly do you mean by that?” one of the old men on her panel ask her. “Are you perhaps referring to the fact that your robot can perform certain, programmed tasks?”

She could hear what they’re not asking. Did she brute force her robot to hard-code in certain commands so that it can perform different tasks. She’s not surprised by the question, given so many of her peers in these presentations cannot actually complete their tasks and fakef their presentation to appear one way when really the functionality is far more limited than that.

She shook her head, “No,” she said simply and looked at the panel. “My robot, DUM-E is a learning AI. So he is limited in what he can do, given that he has not been taught how to do all the things he eventually will be able to. But with every lesson he learns more and more. If you were to ask him how to do something, and he was unable to, but you taught him what to do, the next time you asked, he could perform the task. With a programmed bot, unless you explicitly included it into his code, he would be unable to learn what you wanted him to do. DUM-E will write it into his own code.”

“I’m sorry,” one of the other men, a bald one who looked like he was in his mid-sixties, asked her. “Are you actually claiming to have created artificial intelligence?” he asked, sounding a little disbelieving of her.

“I did,” she said, giving him a smile, knowing they smelt blood in the water like the sharks they were. It didn’t matter what nerves she had, she was Toni Stark and she would show them all not to doubt her. “Perhaps it would be better if I showed you?”

She gestured to DUM-E and the room watched raptly as she turned to her bot.

“Hi DUM-E,” she said to her baby and the bot beeped gladly at her, earning whispers from the room. If they thought this was impressive, they haven’t seen anything yet. “DUM-E, can you wave to the room?”

Her bot beeped again, and the bot moved its arm at the room, gesturing it back and forth like a wave of sorts.

She could hear the professors around her taking notes of her bot and she continued her presentation.

“DUM-E can you hand me the Socket Wrench?” she asked again, and her bot moved over to where she’d laid all the tools in front of her. She held her breath as she watched DUM-E’s arm move over the different tools on the table, before landing on the correct wrench and picking it up. She watched him drop it accidently, before picking it up again and moving towards her. Her bot stopped in front of her before it handed her the wrench.

“Thank you, DUM-E,” she said with a smile and DUM-E beeped cheerfully back at her. “If you would like to try it yourselves, you may ask him any command. If he is unable to respond, he’ll try and figure out what it is you want and respond accordingly.”

Her thesis professor, the one who said she couldn’t do it, looked astounded as he stood up and moved towards her robot.
“DUM-E, can you hand me some water?” her professor asked, wanting to throw the bot off as he asked for something not on the table. DUM-E looked at her, slightly confused and she gestured to the professor, giving it permission to respond to him. Rhodey had been helping her in training it, trying to get it to respond to different voices and people, as it had been something she’d been worried about.

DUM-E moved towards the table with the tools and hovered, trying to find the water on the table. But when it was unable to, its cameras scanned the room like she’d taught it to and spotted a glass of water beside a professor who had been scoffing at the entire presentation. DUM-E carefully moved and picked up the glass before handing it to her thesis professor with a beep.

“Remarkable,” her professor whispered as he took the glass. The entire room is sitting on the edge of their seats, watching the interaction. “There are some slight flaws, but it seems as if Miss Stark truly has created Artificial Intelligence.”

Her eyes twitched slightly at the mention of errors. DUM-E was the way it was because of its personality. It was one thing for her to make fun of them for that, and an entirely other thing for these old men who thought they knew best to be able to do so.

“Well done,” the head of the panel said, giving her a smile. “It seems as if you have given us much to think about. Congratulations on the completion of your project.”

The others get up and try to confuse DUM-E, wanting to see her bot fail, but it beeped cheerfully and does everything they commanded of it. And when the presentation is over, she left the room feeling accomplished and proud of herself.

This was only the beginning, and Toni Stark was going to change the world.

It was a few months after that when she donned her blue graduation gown and cap. The rest of the class she started with is graduating with their Bachelors’ degree, and she with that and her two Master’s degrees.

She paced back and forth, and she looks out onto the crowd that’s starting to form as the ceremony draws closer.

“Toni,” Rhodey greeted her as he wore his own robes.

“Rhodey Bear,” she beamed at her friend and he pulls her into a tight hug. “Are you ready to leave this all behind?”

She gestured at the school behind her and tries to get it to encompass their entire schooling. If she had to pick just one thing that she loved about the school it would have been meeting him. For he’s quickly become her entire world and she knew that once they left the school, she’d keep him in her life for as long as she could.

“I am,” he said, hugging her tightly. “After this we need to talk though, about our futures.”

“What about them?” she asked him, feeling slightly nervous and he shook his head.

“It’s nothing to worry about, Tones,” he assured her, but she couldn’t help but feel worried.

The ceremony began and James was a few seats away from them, separated only by a few students
with names who fall between ‘Rhodes’ and ‘Stark’.

She watched as one by one they all made their way onto stage to collect their degrees and shake hands with the Dean and others that they invited to the ceremony.

She stood when it was time for her row and she cheered loudly as Rhodey took the stage, graduating with honours and she is proud of him for everything that he’s managed to achieve.

When it was her turn, she steps up the stairs of the stage, her heels clicked with every step. She was given the title of graduating with highest distinction, but the entire class knows that she’d topped the class, even if they didn’t give her the Valedictorian title. It was all politics, with the school still unable to fully acknowledge that a girl was better than everyone else. It certainly didn’t help that Justin Hammer’s father made a sizable donation right before the selection to the committee that picked.

But it doesn’t matter, she knew that she was better than the rest of them, even if they do not acknowledge it.

She walked across the stage, stopping in the centre as she shook hands with the Dean. He gave her a nod of acknowledgement and she turned to where Aunt Peggy was holding a camera, taking pictures of the entire thing. She beamed at her and Uncle Daniel who had driven along with her mother and cousins for the ceremony and her heart warmed at the sight of them.

Of course, her father couldn’t bother making time for the event. She’d told him about it in passing, for politeness over anything else, but he had simply shook his head and said it would be a waste of his time. A Master’s degree, even if a dual degree, was nothing impressive. Not when it was something that just anyone could get. She’d rolled her eyes at that, knowing all too well that it wouldn’t matter that she was only seventeen and graduating. She was pretty sure that nothing would ever be enough to impress her father, not when she’d been a constant disappointment to him from the moment she’d been born.

But she was beyond caring. Her family, those she loved, had made it to the event and that was all that mattered to her. She’d long since given up trying to make her father love her when it was a futile endeavour.

Her Uncle Daniel is beaming at her, and she grinned back at him, waving to her family in the audience. She heard a loud whistle and looked over to see Mama Rhodes and Jeanette standing and clapping.

She took her degree from the professor and continued walking across the stage. She could hear the whispers in the crowd, questioning how a girl could do better than the majority of the class, but she refused to give their questions a second thought. She’d done it, despite all of their doubts and questions, and she knows that no matter what life throws her way, she’ll continue to come out on top.

When the ceremony came to an end, she weaved through the crowd, and found her family waiting for her. Harry was holding a bouquet of flowers and she took it from him, as she kissed her younger cousin on the cheek.

“Thank you, Harry,” she told him, and Ava handed her a graduation bear. She was far too old for such things, and her father made her throw away the few toys she ever had as a kid. But it was a sweet gesture and she appreciates it. “Thanks Ava.”

“We’re so proud of you, Toni,” her Aunt Peggy said, smiling at her, “You’ve done so well, Ducky.”
“You’ve made us so proud,” Uncle Daniel grinned at her, as he clapped her on the back, “My smart niece is growing up so quickly. I still remember when you made the toaster explode because you wanted to optimize the toasting time to get it to toast instantly.”

“I got it to work eventually,” she pouted at him and her mother laughed.

“After you went through five toasters,” Maria reminded her. “But I’m so proud of you, Bambina. You’ve done so well. I’m so proud of all you’ve done so far, and how far you’ve come. My brilliant little girl is growing up. I love you so much Tesoro. You’ve done so well, Darling.”

“I love you too, Mom,” she said, breath catching in her throat.

“Toni!” she heard a loud voice and watched as Jeanette Rhodes barreled towards her and pulled her into a hug. “Congratulations on graduating.”

“My own sister wasn’t even this proud of me,” Rhodey said with a sigh as he and Mama Rhodes followed from behind her. “Of course she likes you better than me.”

“Toni sends me chocolate,” Jeanette said, looking unapologetic.

“I send you chocolate!” Rhodey argued, “Toni just adds her name to the end of the letter.”

“I still like her better than you,” Jeanette said with a shrug as she stuck her tongue out at him.

“Congratulations, Antonia,” Mama Rhodes said with a smile as she pulled her into a tight hug. “You’ve made us so proud.”

“Standing right here,” Rhodey said with a roll of his eyes, and Toni laughed.

“Give it up, Rhodey Bear,” she grinned, “Your family loves me better than you.”

The group laughed and she watched as her mother began conversing with Mama Rhodes. She looked over at Rhodey, as she felt a pit of worry fill her stomach, wondering what it was that he wanted to talk to her about.

“We should talk now,” Rhodey said, clearly understanding what she had been worried about. He led her to an area where none of their family could hear, wanting privacy and she followed without a word.

Finally, he stopped and looked at her, and she took in his expression carefully.

“We haven’t really talked about our plans for post-graduation, have we?” she asked him, and she sighed. They hadn’t. For all the hours they’d spent together, neither of them had talked about what they wanted to do once they were done with school, neither one of them wanting to think about the future and the roles they would be forced to play. A smart black man and girl had no place in the world as it currently stood. And they both knew that they would be met with stigma with every step they took.

“I was planning on doing a PhD,” she offered, “In Physics. I want one in Mechanical Engineering as well. Obie wants me to get more involved in the company so I’m going to start doing some consultation work and begin sketching up some designs. But Howard is only interested in weapons so it’s not like I’d ever be able to create anything I really want to anyways.”

She sighed at that, knowing it to be all too true. There was no market for the innovations she wanted to create, so she had been told. And it broke her heart, knowing that no matter what she created, if
her father did not approve, it wouldn’t happen. And her father rarely approved of anything she made.

“I’m joining the Air Force,” Rhodey blurted out and her heart stopped as she froze. “I want to make a difference, Toni. I want to fight for our country, to make the world a better place. I want to save others and the Army will let me do that. They don’t care that I’m black.”

The Not the same way the rest of the world would goes unsaid.

“Rhodey,” she breathed, “You can’t. It’s dangerous. What if something happened to you? What if you got hurt?” Because god help her if he got hurt. “I can’t lose you. Please.”

“I’ve already enlisted,” he told her softly. “Toni, I want you to understand that I’m not doing this because I want to leave you. I’m not doing this because I do not want a place in your life. I’m doing this for me. Because it’s something I need to do. Something I have to do. I want to save lives and fight for those I love. I want to make the world safer. I want to make sure that war never breaches our shores. Please, you have to understand. I love you, and I never want you to think that this is about me not wanting you in my life. This is about me wanting to fight for what I believe in.”

“Okay,” she said simply, because really, what else could she say? His mind was already made up, and whether she chose to accept it, he was enlisted in the Army. He was leaving her, just like everyone else did, and she knew that nothing she said would be enough for him to stay. Nothing would be enough for him to accept that she wanted him to stay.

“I love you, Toni. I promise, this isn’t me leaving you. Nothing will ever be able to make me leave you,” he told her as he pulled her into a tight hug, and she didn’t fight it. Instead, she grasped onto him tightly, hoping that it would be enough. Because he was leaving her. Her brother was leaving her. And she had no idea when she would see him again once he left.

“I love you too,” she whispered, fighting to keep the tears out of her voice. Because she was terrified. Terrified that he would go off to fight the good fight and that he’d never come home. That something would happen to him and she’d lose him forever. She was terrified that something would happen, and she would never see him again.

“We should get back,” he told her softly, and she took a deep breath as she pulled out of his arms.

“You go ahead,” she said, swallowing, “I need a minute.”

“Toni,” he said carefully, and she shook her head.

“I’ll be fine, Honey Bear. I just need a minute. Just give me a minute, and I’ll be fine. I promise,” she said, giving him a watery smile.

He looked concerned, but he didn’t fight it as he turned to leave.

She took a deep breath as she wiped away her tears, not wanting anyone to see and take a picture. God help her if another news article came out about her and Rhodey’s relationship. He might be fine with it, but she hated him getting dragged into the press because someone wanted to make a quick dollar.

“Toni,” she hears a gentle voice from behind her and she nearly jumps as she sees her godfather, Obadiah Stane, behind her.

“Uncle Obie,” she said, trying to hide the pain she was feeling, “What are you doing here? I thought you had an important board meeting.”
It was why her father couldn’t attend after all.

“It ended early,” Uncle Obie said as he moved closer. “Or rather, I ended it early. Some things are more important than work after all.”

She gave a noncommittal sound, for what could she really say? Even without the excuse of work, her father still hadn’t deemed her graduation important enough of a thing for him to attend. What was she supposed to do about that?

“Are you alright?” he asked her after a moment. “It looked like you and your friend were in the middle of something.”

“He’s joining the Air Force,” she sighed, and he looked understanding at that.

“It’s a brave thing of him to do,” he said, and Toni nodded. “He’ll be in good hands though. The majority of the weapons that the military uses comes from Stark Industries. And our weapons are the best. If he’s fighting using our weapons, then he’ll be safe.”

She didn’t admit it out loud, but she knew he was right. Stark weapons were the best. They rarely had any defects in them and always did what they were expected to do. If Rhodey was fighting using the weapons her father designed, then he’d be safe.

However, she knew he’d be safer if he was using weapons that she made. Weapons that would be better, stronger, and more powerful. He’d be safer if she was the one designing his weapons.

Even if she hated weapons all together.

Stark Industries would never stop making weapons. Why would they when it brought in the most money. It didn’t matter what she thought of them or how much she wished she could shift the company’s focus toward clean energy and other technology.

At least a Stark weapon was better than a Hammer weapon.

“It’s the way of life,” Obadiah said, placing a hand on her shoulder, “People will come in and out of your life constantly, Antonia. They will use you and abuse you for your money or go on their own little quests for themselves. Your father, for example, is always going to put the business ahead of his family. It’s just the kind of person he is. And your mother will be busy with her own galas and charities. Even your Aunt Peggy is busy with her secret government life and disappears for days at a time. James Rhodes is just the next in what will be a long line of people who come in and out of your life.”

He was right, despite what she may have wished for. Everyone’s lives would take them on different paths. And whether she liked it or not, most of their paths would not be focused on her.

There was someone, she knew, who would have been there for her no matter what. Who would have stayed by her side and helped her in anything she chose to do. Jarvis, whom she loved more than her own father. Who had raised her and cared for her. Jarvis never would have left her side if he didn’t have to go.

But he was gone, and whether she liked it or not, she’d never have any one like him in her life again. He was gone, just like everyone else in her life who flitted in and out of it easily.

“I’m telling you this because I want you to know that I’m here for you, Antonia,” Obadiah told her softly, “I’ll always watch your back; I’ll always be here for you, until the very end.”
She smiled at her godfather, and as much as there were others that she knew loved her more than him, she knew he was right. He had been there for her far more often than her own father, coming to her science fairs and presentations. Who had received her designs and suggested improvements, before getting them pushed into production. He’d always been there for her, even when no one else had been.

“I know,” she told him, giving him a nod. “Thank you, Uncle Obie.”

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to say that the response to this so far has been remarkable! Thank you so much for all the comments, kudos, and subscriptions! I love reading what you guys have to say, and hope you enjoyed this chapter

Chapter Summary

Howard and Maria Stark leave for the Bahamas on that fateful day.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was the winter of 1991 when Toni Stark laid idly on her parent’s sofa with a plethora of notebooks scattered around her, as her eyes closed for a few moments.

She was exhausted, having spent half the night staying up drawing up new sketches for SI of items they could be producing other than just weapons.

With the launch of the World Wide Web only months ago, they were all seeing a revolution in the technology era. New scripting languages such as HTML and Python were being introduced to allow for more options, and with each passing day it seemed as if more and more technologies were being put out into the world by every company.

That is, every company but Stark Industries.

It seemed like no matter how hard she preached, no matter how much she claimed it to be the future, her father refused to even look at her designs.

They never did have a close relationship, but her father was choosing ignorance than trying to bring their company into the twenty-first century.

Her revolutionary father, the one who once wanted to build a flying car, had lost his vision of the future. He was getting old, unable to see where the future was headed, and she knew all too well what would happen to the company if they didn’t shift some of their focus to getting involved in the technology game.

At least Uncle Obie seemed willing to produce her products on smaller scales on a trial run to see how well they did, before slowly giving her somewhat larger contracts.

Stark Industries always would be about weapons, but that didn’t mean that she couldn’t still try and make them more of a household name. It didn’t mean she had to solely produce weapons.

But with Rhodey in the army still, she knew they couldn’t get out of the game. How could she keep her best friend safe if he was out there fighting with weapons that only went off properly half the time? To her, anything less than a hundred percent success rate was unacceptable. They were the real heroes, keeping their country safe. The least she could do was ensure that the weapons they used would keep them safe.

She heard her mother’s soft voice fill the room as she sang out from the piano, singing about September and the beauty in the world. She thought in that moment that her mother truly was all that was good in the world. She was gentle and sweet, and she cared about Toni, even when her father couldn’t bring himself to even look at her unless he was drunk and abusing her.
“Wake up, Dear,” she heard her mother say gently, as she continued to play. The red blanket that had been covering her head to stop the light from getting in was lifted as the cool air around her drifted in. “Say good-bye to your father.”

She wanted to laugh at that. As if Howard Stark ever would notice or care if she wasn’t around. Hell, she knew the reason he went away more often than not, was so he had a chance to forget about her and leave her behind.

“Who’s the homeless person on the couch?” her father snarked slightly and she simply rolled her eyes. She knew that no matter what she did, he’d always think it was about the partying. That she was exhausted from alcohol and drugs, and not the fact that she hadn’t slept properly in over seventy-two hours. None of that mattered to Howard Stark, and she was done trying to change his mind that she was anything other than what she was.

“This is why I love coming home for Christmas,” Toni sighed softly. The days of her being afraid of talking back to her father were long gone. He didn’t respect her, he didn’t care about her. So why should she treat him any differently? “It’s right before you leave town.”

Even if he always took her mother with him. Even if it meant that she would spend the holidays alone. She supposed she could make a trip up to spend with Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel. It had been a while since she’d seen them, and she missed Harry and Ava when she was away at school.

“Be nice, Dear,” Maria said, sighing slightly. She knew by now nothing would endear Howard to Toni, so she wasn’t sure why her mother still tried, “She’s been studying abroad.”

And she had been, finishing up PhD’s from Oxford and Cambridge at the same time. Not that any of it mattered to her father when he only still read the news the papers printed about her. Not that he cared about all the patents she had filed already under her name. Not that he cared that she now not only had one AI, but two, in the form of DUM-E and Butterfingers.

“Really?” her father mocked, “Which broad? What’s her name?”

She sighed as well, knowing her father was referencing the pictures that had surfaced of a girl all over Toni. And it had made headlines for weeks. None of it mattered that the girl had been wasted out of her mind and had fallen over on Toni, and Toni had struggled to get her home safely. All that mattered was the story the press spun about her forbidden affair with the girl, and how scandalous it was. Which was utterly ridiculous. She liked girls as much as she liked boys so for them to spin the tale one way or another as if it made a difference was horrendous. Except all the stories they spun about her were lies.

She knew she should consider dating. But dating involved effort and time. It involved knowing how to love someone.

And was she really worthy of love if her own father couldn’t even love her?

“Margaret,” Toni said simply. Which wasn’t technically a lie. She was currently doing research on Margaret Hamilton’s work on Apollo 11. Her work was truly remarkable, and she always enjoyed reading about successful women in engineering.

“Do me a favour and try not to burn the house down before Monday?” Her father mocked her, and she took a deep breath, struggling to keep everything in.

“Oh, so it’s Monday?” she confirmed in a falsely positive voice. “That is good to know, I will plan my toga party accordingly.”
If her father thought she was a party girl with no aspirations despite all the proof otherwise, then she had no inclinations to change his mind. Either way, she was twenty-one and her process of slowly transitioning to a more vital role in Stark Industries had already begun. Her father had tried to delay it, of course, insisting on her schooling be complete, or whatever other reason he gave her that day, but it didn’t matter. The succession of Stark Industries would pass on to her sooner or later anyways. And her father could try and hold back and ensure Stark Industries remained solely a weapons company, but it didn’t mean that she wouldn’t take their company into the future.

“Where are you going?” she asked her mother. She had long since given up on being included on their family trips, as her father always insisted it be a special getaway for just the two of them. It was better really, the less time she spent with her father the better.

“Your father is flying us to the Bahamas for a little getaway,” her mother said softly, fingers still sliding over the piano keys, and Toni nearly laughed. Her father never did anything small. She very much doubted it would be a simple little getaway.

“We might have to make a quick stop, at the Pentagon,” her father said, and Toni rolled her eyes. He was showing her how important he was in comparison to her.

‘Personal Computers are not the future, Antonia,’ he had said to her many a time, ‘Stark Industries deals with million-dollar government contracts, and you want us to make something so trivial? Do you have any idea what it would do to our image?’

She didn’t ask why, nor did she care. It wasn’t as if Howard would tell her anyways.

“Don’t worry, you’re going to love the holiday menu at the Commissary,” she said sarcastically as she knew if her father had his way, he would spend all his time at work and none with his family.

“You know they say sarcasm is a metric for potential,” Howard said, and she rolled her eyes. “In men, anyways.”

The smell of whiskey was clear on his lips and she sighed. Of course her father was drinking in the middle of the afternoon. It was the only way he could stand to be around her. She wasn’t really surprised, not when most of her childhood had been him drunk.

Her father looked at her, shaking his head at her, and she felt resentment toward him. Resentment that he never loved her, that he never cared about her. It was hard not to, when she was running off of little sleep, and her father was doing what he did best, and he showed her just how little she meant to him.

She wanted to snap at him; it had been twenty-one years, and he still couldn’t accept that he had a daughter instead of a son. She was doing more than half the other heirs of her age were. She was successful, working her way towards two PhD’s, had half a dozen patents already filed, and had created life. Yet it never would be enough for him.

“I’ll get the bags,” Howard said, turning to leave the room, and she stayed silent.

“He does miss you when you’re not here,” her mother said softly, and Toni wanted to laugh. Maybe he missed getting drunk and hitting her. But she doubted very much that he missed her.

“It’s time to go, Maria,” Howard said, and her mother stood.

“I’ll miss you, Bambina,” her mother said, and Toni hugged her mother gently.

“Have a nice trip, Mom,” she said, and Maria kissed her gently on the head before following
She was in the middle of another project, trying to tweak Butterfingers ever so slightly so he just stopped *dropping things randomly.*

She knew it was part of his personality, and she probably will be unable to change it, just like she cannot make DUM-E understand all commands perfectly. But she has to at least try.

What good is having learning intelligence if they are unable to actually *learn*?

“Toni!” she heard a voice call out and she immediately recognizes it as Aunt Peggy.

“Aunt Peggy?” she asked, leaving her workshop, tiredly. Her aunt had visited her in England a few times, but it was rare of her to drop by unannounced.

She saw her Aunt standing there in the middle of the front hall, looking so tired and for the first time since she knew her, *exhausted.* And not just in a sleep deprived way.

“What’s happened?” she asked, immediately knowing something must have happened. Something which made her Aunt show up out of the blue.

“Toni,” her Aunt said, coming closer, “Something’s happened. There’s been an accident.”

She felt her heart stop, possibilities racing through her mind.

“Who?” she asked softly, not really wanting to hear the answer.

“Your mother and father,” Aunt Peggy said gently, and she felt her knees nearly give out.

“Are they okay?” she asked, and her aunt did not answer.

She dropped to the ground, unable to breathe as she knew the answer.

Her mother was dead.

“How happened?” she asked, needing to know.

“We’re not sure yet,” her aunt said, slightly hesitantly, “Your father was behind the wheel, and it seems as if they crashed for some reason, but there is no wild life in the area that could have jumped out and hit them. It is possible that another party was involved but we haven’t seen any proof of anyone else at the scene. We are still waiting on the autopsy reports, however.”

Her father had caused the accident.

Her father who had been drinking before they even left had crashed the car.

And now her mother was dead.

Her mother, who had loved her despite her flaws, who loved her when her father despised her. Her mother who encouraged her, cared for her, and had protected her. Her mother was dead, and nothing Toni did would ever be able to change that.

The sob erupted from her before she could control it and she felt her vision begin to blur as tears
streamed down her face.

“I’m so sorry, Ducky,” her aunt said, sliding down beside her as she pulled her into a tight hug. “I’m so sorry.”

She leaned into her aunt, crying as Peggy simply rubbed her back and reassured her.

“I’ll take care of everything,” Aunt Peggy promised her, “You won’t have to do this alone.”

Oh god, she would have the plan a funeral now. She would have to deal with the succession of Stark Industries, and whatever other bullshit her father wrote in his will.

She would have to take over her mother’s charities and keep them running.

Fuck, she really needed a drink.

But she didn’t move, simply staying there with Peggy’s arms around her, as she cried for her loss.

She would never see her mother’s kind eyes ever again, and she thought that was what would hurt the most. Her mother never being able to tell her that she loved her ever again.

Peggy Carter knew something was wrong with Howard and Maria’s deaths since the moment she laid eyes on their body. And how could she not, what with the fact that Howard’s skull had been bashed in multiple times, not at all consistent with a car crash where the impact would have been singular.

And Maria; poor Maria had strangulation marks on her neck. There was no way that was caused in the car accident.

And given the fact that Howard had been transporting five vials of super soldier serum in the trunk of his car which were now missing, she knew something was amiss.

Which meant only one thing; the Starks were murdered.

She couldn’t tell anyone, not when she knew what it must have meant. If the news about having super soldier serum got out, it meant there must have been a leak. And such a secret had been kept under lock and key with only very few people had known about it.

SHIELD had a leak, and she knew she needed to get to the bottom of it. If they were willing to take down Howard Stark when he was worth more alive than dead, then she knew they meant business. And the last thing she needed was to end up the same way as her friend.

She couldn’t tell Toni; not until she was sure. She needed to make sure they were murdered and make sure the proper parties were brought into justice first, otherwise she was putting them all in danger.

It was how she found herself, digging deeply through SHIELD’s files, trying to find out what had happened to the Starks. How had the news gotten out, when only those with level nine and ten knew?

It definitely brought down the number of suspects, given that very few had that high level of clearance.
There was her, Daniel, Howard, Pierce, her mentee, Fury, and a handful of other agents, none of which she thought were capable of giving away the secret. Fury was secretive and kept his emotions close, but that was what made him a good agent, not a suspect.

And she definitely did not suspect her own husband of selling secrets to other sources. She knew that the ones who were closest to a person were the ones who were capable of doing the most damage, but she knew her husband and he wasn’t that sort of man.

Besides, he could have betrayed her in so many other ways if he wanted to, and he clearly hadn’t.

She looked through the logs of the files on the computer, trying to figure out who had accessed the information recently, to try and see if she could figure out who was responsible for the breach.

It didn’t make sense; only three people had accessed the information about when Howard would be transporting the vials.

Howard, to log the information, herself to verify the transfer.

And Alexander Pierce.

Why was Pierce looking at the files? She knew that it must be more than blatant curiosity. He didn’t need to access the files, especially one so high class as that.

She frowned as she stared at the screen, unable to completely process what was on it.

She clicked through other reports; other cases where the mission had gone sideways recently. Either the people they were tracking knew they were coming, or something else had gone horrendously wrong, more often than not resulting in the deaths of agents.

And on each one, Pierce had accessed it.

“Bloody Hell,” she breathed, and took a step back from the computer.

“You really shouldn’t have accessed those files,” she heard a voice say and she looked up quickly to see Pierce standing there, pointing a gun at her. He had two agents behind him, pointing guns at her as well, and she felt the pieces fall into place.

“Why?” she questioned him, “Why were you selling information?”

“I wasn’t selling it,” he lied, and she frowned at him. “I wasn’t selling it. We were using it to bring you down. You never should have brought Zola into SHIELD.”

“You’re HYDRA,” she realized, and she carefully tried to reach under the desk to trigger a warning. If she was going to die in here, then she’d be damned if she let him get away with it.

“And you know what they say about HYDRA,” Pierce smirked at her, “You cut down one head and two more appear.”

“If you kill me, they’ll know it was you,” she informed him, “There’s security cameras in this room. It’ll blow your cover and expose you.”

“Except I won’t kill you,” he shrugged, “It would raise too many questions. Especially so close to Howard Stark’s death. Instead, I just need you to forget. Let the world believe Howard killed Maria in a drunk driving accident. You’ll forget ever seeing anything here today.”

“How do you plan on doing that?” she scoffed, and he grinned at her, holding up a needle.
“The memory loss serum Howard had worked on shortly before his death. It’s a shame we never got to properly test the long-term effects, but either way, we know it will work and make you forget. But just to be safe, we’ll give you slightly more than usual,” Pierce said, coming closer to her.

She thought about fighting, but she knew she was no longer as young as she once was. Either way, she couldn’t just let him wipe her memory. Not when she had just learned that her organization had been infested with vermin.

She elbowed Pierce, as he came closer, but a warning shot was fired by one of the agents, still with the guns trained on her.

“Fuck,” Pierce swore, as he wiped the blood from his nose. “I always hated you, Carter. I’m going to enjoy this.”

She struggled, as he moved closer and placed the needle against his neck. She’d rather die than let him inject her. She tried to stomp on his foot, and while he winced, it didn’t stop him from injecting her slightly.

Her eyes drooped slowly, and she felt her mind draw black as her body grew limp.

“Good night, Carter,” Pierce taunted her, as he placed her gently in her chair. “By time you wake up, you won’t remember any of this.”

Toni Stark sat in the middle of her parent’s mansion, a bottle of her father’s whisky in her hand, as the tears streamed down her face.

The house was empty, as the staff had all been sent home to give them some time off. She wanted to be alone, and despite their condolences, they respected that.

Her mother was dead.

Her mother who had taught her Italian and how to play the piano. Her mother, who had often looked at her with fond looks of exasperation when she wore anything but a dress because they got in her way. Her mother who had loved her and protected her from her father. Her mother who drove up to visit her when she was away at school just so they could get some tea together because she simply missed her daughter.

Her mother who was her only true parent was dead, and the pain weighed down on Toni so heavily that she felt like she might burst.

She would never walk through those doors again.

Toni would never hear the sound of her beautiful voice as she sang and played the piano, without a care in the world, as her music transported them to another world.

Toni was truly alone, in this big house, and in the world.

Ana was gone. Jarvis was gone. Her mother, and even her father had left her.

Who did she truly have left in her life?

Rhodey, who had joined the Military and she heard from once every few weeks?
Aunt Peggy who led a life of secret missions and travel? Uncle Daniel who she saw maybe once a month or so if she was lucky?

Uncle Obie was right; in the end everyone really did leave her.

She wasn’t sure what she wanted to do, if she wanted to scream or shout, or continue to drink away all her pain.

She had already worked her way through one of Howard’s expensive bottles. The kind he’d drink after a long day at work, before he’d find her and let her know just how much he hated her. It was how she ended up with a broken arm at the age of five, burnt palms on more than one occasion from him insisting she took objects that were far too hot to be handled by human hands without any sort of protection. It was how she ended up with a black eye at the age of seven, and a total of twenty broken bones from her father alone before she was twelve years old. It was how she learned how to use concealer to hide the bruises her father left on her skin.

If her doctors ever suspected anything to be amiss with her injuries, then the money her father had thrown at them was more than enough to stop them from asking any unwanted questions. God forbid the press found out how horrid Howard Stark truly was.

She looked down at the bottle, and felt a strong pain fill her. If she ever had kids of her own, would she be as horrible to them as Howard was?

It hurt her to think about, to treat a child with so much hatred and anger. How could anyone do such a thing to a soul who was innocent of all the crimes their parents hated them for? How could anyone take any pleasure or satisfaction in hurting a child?

She felt a new set of tears fill her eyes. The papers had already started talking about what a gap Howard’s death would leave in the world. Yet none of them seemed to care enough to mention her mother. As if she was nothing more than a simple wife to her father’s genius. As if she never accomplished anything of substance herself.

They were wrong.

She didn’t mourn the loss of her father.

She hated him, hated that he had to go and kill himself in a drunk driving accident. But more importantly, he had taken her mother from her as well. He had taken her mother, who was innocent of all his crimes and his abuse, from her.

She was alone, stuck in this ancient house which felt like a mausoleum, filled with memories of a former life. This ancient house which felt like a museum with the memories of those who once lived in it and those who were long gone.

Ana.

Jarvis.

Howard.

Mom.

All of them were gone, leaving her alone in this world that wanted nothing to do with her. Leaving her in this world where she would have to fight for everything that came her way, without even an ounce of support left in her corner.
She took a swig from the bottle, crying out as the mascara dripped down her face. She didn’t care. She didn’t need to be a pretty picture of perfection, put together for the world. Because she was alone, and no one would be any wiser.

She was at a funeral again, and the gap between that and the one of Edwin Jarvis’ felt all too short. It wasn’t fair that she had to come to one again so soon, and she hated the fact that she had to wear this tight black dress, one her mother had selected for her to wear to some gala or the other, and one she now donned to her mother’s funeral.

It was irony, to say in the least. That it took the death of her mother to get her willingly into a dress.

But wearing anything else felt disrespectful. Wearing anything other than what her mother wanted her to wear at least once felt like a sin.

But her sins seemed to be piling up, faster than she could stop them.

She should have pleaded with her mother, begged her not to get into the car. She should have insisted that Howard go alone for something so dangerous. How could he bring his wife with him when he knew he had an important delivery? How could he be drinking so heavily when he knew his wife was in the car with him?

Her father had killed her mother.

She had never truly hated her father for his distaste of her. She understood his mentality; it was the same prejudice she had faced her entire life, for being a woman in a man’s world, who dared to defy them and thrive to heights so much further than they could ever dream of aspiring to reach. But she didn’t hate Howard Stark for hating her. Even when he hit her, even when he threw her to the ground and broke her bones.

But she hated him with so much strength for what he did to her mother.

It wasn’t enough that he could never love her. He also had to go and take the one person in her life that loved her. He had to steal her mother from her. Her mother who had loved her from the moment she was born. Her mother who she loved more than anyone else, was taken from her, all because her father couldn’t get through the day without drinking a bottle of whiskey.

And now she would have to stand here at this funeral and talk about what a great man her father was, while they all pretended he wasn’t drunk at the wheel. Like it was some sort of accident. Because Obie had insisted it would be better for the company if it was an accident over if it was known that Howard Stark had killed them both by driving under the influence.

She hated him so much more for forcing her to lie about how he killed her mother.

“I want to thank you all for coming here today,” Toni said, when she was called up to deliver the eulogy. She could hear the whispers in the crowd, wondering what would happen to Stark Industries now that Howard was gone. Who would take over? What would it mean for the future of innovation in the world? But all of those were questions for another time. Questions for a time where she wasn’t about to bury her father and mother. Questions that were hardly appropriate for now.

“Maria Stark was an angel,” Toni said softly, trying to keep her voice level. “She was involved in so many charities, giving to so many in need. Her work in philanthropy is unparalleled, and she was a shining light of good in this world with so much darkness. She loved with her entire heart, and
always made you feel as if you were the most important person in the room when she spoke to you. For those of you who ever had the pleasure of hearing her play the piano and singing, can attest to the fact that her voice could move mountains with the amount of emotion she poured into it when she played. My Mom was everything to me. She supported me through some of the most difficult decisions in my life. She supported me when I wanted to go to MIT despite being only thirteen years old. She stood behind me when I insisted the work there was too easy and wanted to test out of it. She supported my decision to move to England for a year to work on PhD’s. She might not have started a company or changed the entire world, but for those she helped, she changed their lives forever. She’ll be missed, a guiding light in this world that is all too dark.”

Obie gave her a nod and she took a deep breath, knowing who they really all wanted her to talk about. Because her mother was dead, and they all wanted to hear her talk about Howard Stark. As if her mother meant nothing to the world.

And she hated them all for it.

“I don’t know what to say about Howard that you don’t already know,” Toni said, placing a strong look on her face. It wouldn’t do her any good to break down now and burst into tears of anger. Her father killed her mother and she needed to talk about him as if he hadn’t. “He was involved in Project Rebirth, which famously created Captain America. And the Manhattan Project which won us the war. He was a revolutionary who created weapons to keep our country safe. His work was years beyond the rest of the world, and he truly made the world a little safer. With his loss, the world will be a little less bright. May both Howard and Maria Stark rest in peace.”

She knew she had kept her eulogy of Howard drier than Maria’s had been, but she didn’t have any good anecdotes of him to tell. What was there to say when he had hated her from the moment she had been born? What was there to tell when Howard never loved her and only ever wished for a son that he couldn’t have?

She took a step back from the podium and headed towards her seat as the funeral continued on. And when the time came to lay her parents to rest, Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel stood by her side, both of them looking saddened by the loss. Harry had placed an arm around her, and Ava had held her hand tightly.

She wore sunglasses, trying not to let the world see just how much of a mess she was, as she watched their caskets be lowered into the ground, and the dirt began to pour over them.

And just like that, her parents were put to rest, and the world continued to move on. Even if she felt like her entire world was falling apart.

She was in her lab again, trying to do anything to distract herself from how lonely the house felt in her parents’ absence. With her PhD’s completed, she had no reason to return back to England. So instead, she stayed in this house by herself, rattling away as the world moved on without her.

The will reading was scheduled for a few days from now, so she couldn’t even run away if she wanted to. Because she really wanted to move away from New York. To go to Malibu or anywhere other than here. She hated being in this city, when it reminded her every moment of everything she had lost. She hated it, and she couldn’t wait for it to all be over and so she could finally leave.

“Toni,” she heard a soft voice call out and she nearly dropped her wrench as she saw Rhodey standing in front of her, completely in his military outfit.
“Honey Bear?” she asked him, struggling to compose herself. “What are you doing here? How did you get in here?”

“One of the staff let me in,” he said gently. “They were worried about you, Toni.”

“Why are you here though?” she questioned him, “Aren’t you supposed to be overseas?”

“I requested some personal leave,” Rhodey told her, moving closer to her. “I would have come sooner, but it took them a few days to process the paperwork to approve the request. I’m so sorry, Toni. I wish I could have been there with you through the funeral. I should have been there with you.”

He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her in tightly and she felt herself crumble as she took comfort in his embrace.

“My mom is gone, Rhodey,” she said, a sob erupting out of her. “I miss her so much. And she’s gone because my father wanted to have a drink or three before they left the house. He always hated me, and now he’s taken the one person who loved me from me too.”

“I’m so sorry,” he murmured, rubbing her back gently. “It isn’t fair. It isn’t fair that they’re gone, and that you had to deal with this all on your own. I’m so sorry I wasn’t here to help you with all of this sooner. I should have been here for you, Toni. I should have been there for you. I’m so sorry that you’ve been going through all of this on your own.”

“You came,” she said softly, “That’s enough, Rhodey. Thank you for coming.”

There was a been behind them, and she saw Rhodey startle as he saw DUM-E and Butterfingers approach him.

“You made another one,” he said, looking at her fondly. “Hello, DUM-E, how have you been?”

DUM-E beeped back at him enthusiastically, and Butterfingers looked at her with a worried look on it’s face, as if it didn’t know if it could trust Rhodey.

“This is Butterfingers,” she said, introducing Rhodey to the bot, “Butterfingers, meet Rhodey. He’s the best person in this entire world.”

Butterfingers beeped back at him, trying to raise it’s arm to shake Rhodey’s hand. Her Honey Bear simply laughed, as he took the bot’s hand in his own and shook it. While her AI made a lot of the world uncomfortable, Rhodey had always been supportive. He had seen DUM-E come to life and had helped teach him half the things that he knew.

“I want you to come home with me for a few days,” Rhodey told her gently. “You can come back before the will reading, if that’s all that’s keeping you here. But I think it’ll be good for you to escape this for a bit. Mama wants you to stay a few days and let her take care of you. I think you could use the break.”

He gestured at the bottle of whiskey that she had finished today itself and she shook it off simply. She didn’t have a problem, not really. It was just a way to help her numb the pain. She wasn’t like Howard. She wasn’t. She would never hurt another person while drunk. She would never kill another person.

But she couldn’t argue that some time away wouldn’t do her some good. It would be nice to escape the city for a few days when the entire city seemed to still be grieving Howard’s death. She needed a break after all.
“Okay,” she said with a nod. “Let’s get away from here, Rhodey.”

Chapter End Notes

It actually broke my heart to write this chapter, even though we all know Howard and Maria would die. Hopefully I did their deaths justice and you liked this chapter!
Chapter Summary

Toni attends the Will Reading and must deal with the aftermath; Peggy is losing memories.

Toni Stark walked into the room, eyes covered by large sunglasses and lips painted a deep red as her heels clicked on the floor behind her. She knew all the heads in the room immediately turned to look at her, but she pretended not to notice as she took a seat in the chair towards the head of the table, looking out at the room in front of her.

“How are you holding up?” Obie asked her, giving her a sympathetic smile, clearly expecting her to still be a mess over the death of her parents.

And she was. It had only been a week since she had attended their funeral after all. But now was not the time for such emotions.

Starks were made out of iron. They did not break, nor did they bend. And she knew all too well that showing weakness now would undermine the Will reading that was about to occur.

“I’m fine,” she said, indifferently, as she took off her sunglasses and crossed her legs, before gesturing to her late father’s lawyers to continue.

Her Aunt Peggy gave her a gentle smile, and Toni smiled back. Her Aunt had picked her up from Rhodey’s house, refusing to let her come alone, and Toni had been grateful. The press always did have a way of getting up in her face, but since the death of her father and the succession of Stark Industries seemed unclear, she had been getting more attention than usual.

She was well aware of the fact that even in his death Howard Stark would not make her life easy for her. She already was prepared to have to fight his Will just to be given the basic rights that belonged to her.

Her father’s lawyer, the designated executor of his will, cleared his throat, looking onto the room in front of him, “We are here today to read the Last Will and Testament of Howard Stark.”

She held her breath slightly, as he began reading from the Will.

“To Ms Peggy Carter-Sousa,” the old man read out, “I leave all my possessions and research pertaining to our work with SHIELD as detailed below.”

As he began to read out the works, Toni glanced at her aunt curiously. She knew the two of them worked together on a secret organization, and while she had heard whispers of the name, she never had been given much details on the matter. The only time Howard had talked about it had been during drunk ramblings of how he and Peggy were trying to keep Captain’s legacy alive, because he was a true hero. And if he never could find Captain America himself, then at least he would keep his legacy alive. Steve Roger’s legacy would become Howard’s as well. The fact that Toni was not his legacy went unsaid.

Peggy had a sad smile on her face, but she nodded acceptingly as the lawyer continued.
“To Mr Obadiah Stane, I leave my prized Golf clubs, for I hope he will continue to play the game, even in my absence,” the executor read out before pausing.

Wait.

Her father had left his golf clubs to Uncle Obie, and nothing else? She glanced up at the man, waiting for him to continue, knowing there had to be more.

“To Miss Antonia Natasha Stark,” the executor read out.

Maybe not.

She frowned; what was the old man playing at? They all knew why they were here. It had nothing to do with the golf clubs, and everything to do with the business.

“I leave to you my estate, including the art collection amassed by Maria Stark over the years, all residences under the Stark name, my fortune, and all other assets. In addition to this, I leave to you full ownership of Stark Industries, as per the right of succession named by my father, Howard Stark Sr. It is my hope that Obadiah Stane will help you transition into the role of CEO of Stark Industries.”

She looked up in shock, unsure if she had heard the old man clearly.

Her father, the man who hated her and told her through her entire life that she would never be good enough, had left her everything. Including Stark Industries, which he had been all too clear that she never would be good enough for.

Obie looked displeased for a moment, before the look quickly wiped off his face. She made a mental note of it, but she wasn’t really surprised. For how supporting he had been of her despite her father, she knew that Obie thought that he would leave the company to him. She had come into the meeting expecting something similar herself, which had been why she had been ready to contest the Will.

But Howard Stark willingly, and in sound mind, left her control of Stark Industries.

There must have been some sort of mistake.

Either way, she kept her feelings of confusion to herself, as Obie clapped her on the shoulder.

“Well I do suppose we should go tell the press about this, shouldn’t we?” Obie said, with a smile as he gestured out the window to the growing mass of reporters in front of Stark Industries.

She nodded, knowing he was right. They wouldn’t stop hounding her until they knew the truth.

But somehow, she suspected they would stop once they knew the truth.

The ride down the elevator was silent, as Aunt Peggy smiled at her supportively.

“You’ll be good for the company,” she told her goddaughter softly, “Howard knew what he was doing.”

“But just two weeks ago he told me the company would be safer in anyone’s hands but my own,” she scoffed.

“Your father always was dramatic,” Peggy rolled her eyes, “Either way, he knew you would be what this company needs. He could deny it all he wanted, but you have a vision of a better world for the future.”
Obie didn’t say a word the entire way down, but she didn’t say anything to him. Instead when the elevator doors opened, she kept her head held high as she walked out to where the reporters were standing. Immediately questions began being thrown her way, but she raised a hand to silence them.

“There have been many questions since my father’s passing of what would happen to Stark Industries, and who would take over the role of CEO,” Toni started, voice steady. She was used to talking to the press; she had her first conference when she was four years old, and by now it was child’s play.

“Before his passing, I had been working with my father to take on more responsibilities in the company and had been already working to produce designs for weapons and other technologies for the last four years,” she said, wanting the world to know that it wasn’t completely out of the blue, even if she still felt slightly blindsided.

“Howard Stark has named me the sole owner of Stark Industries,” she said with a firm tone, “And CEO of Stark Industries. There will be a brief transition period, while the changes are made, but in the coming months I will take a far more active role in the business as I take over responsibilities.”

She could practically hear the questions being thrown at her, questioning how a woman could take over the weapons company, what it would mean for the future, and what would happen to all the military contracts.

“I am not accepting any questions at this time,” she said firmly, “But I will say that the future of Stark Industries is in safe hands. I have many plans to help revolutionize the world, and you will see the result of it in the years to come. That is all for today.”

And with that she turned and walked head first back into her father’s company. Her company.

She knew such an announcement would shake the world in the beginning. Their Stocks would drop, and Military contracts would be lost. But she would show the world what she is made of.

She is a Stark.

And Starks are made of iron.

They do not break, nor do they bend.

Peggy Carter frowned as she looked over the mission details that SHIELD had conducted over the past few weeks. Nick Fury had been tracking down a new enhanced human, as she had been seen fighting with an elderly woman on the bus, both of which seemed to have inhuman strength.

But she didn’t remember anything about the mission. She didn’t remember assigning it to her subordinate. She didn’t remember asking him to take on the task or receiving any of the updates that were in her copy of the file in front of her.

And yet her signature lay as clear as day at the bottom of the mission report.

So why couldn’t she remember what was happening? Why couldn’t she remember giving out that particular mission? Shouldn’t she remember if a woman was wreaking havoc on her country? It wasn’t every day reports of enhanced humans got out, and there was absolutely no way she should have forgotten such a thing. And yet she found herself with no recollection of such a thing.
Something was wrong.

Something was very wrong.

And she had no idea what it was or how to fix it.

“Is everything alright, Darling?” Daniel asked, entering the kitchen where she had been sitting and kissed her gently on the head. She had woken up before him and made a pot of coffee as she tried to make sense of the various reports, despite them not making any clear sense to her.

“I don’t know,” she sighed, as he sat beside her at the table, looking at the report in front of her, “I can’t remember anything about this mission that happened, and it’s worrying me that someone might have forged my signature.”

“The Marvel case?” Daniel asked looking at the report in front of her, “I remember you mentioning it. It’s still in progress, right?”

“I mentioned it?” she asked, surprised. She didn’t remember that either, and it worried her. Her own husband seemed to be aware of what she was talking about and she had no idea. Why did she have no idea what the mission was about? Especially one as important as this, which clearly was ongoing.

“You don’t remember?” Daniel furrowed his brows, “It’s all you could talk about when the news of the attack broke out. I thought you would have been all over this case. A woman with supernatural powers causing damage to America? Isn’t that the sort of think you are normally all over?”

She frowned, and Daniel quickly took her hand.

“Peggy, it’s probably the stress,” He told her softly, “You’ve had so much going on lately, that it probably just slipped your mind. With SHIELD now in your control, there’s so much more on your plate, more than ever. I’m sure it’s nothing. Just look over the case files and I am certain that it all will come back to you. You just need to give it a bit longer.”

But she had been in charge of SHIELD for years now, with Howard’s help. It was hardly as if she had gained a new set of responsibilities. They were the same as they always had been. So why did her mind seem like it was missing something? Like a key piece of the puzzle wasn’t available to her, and no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t seem to recover it.

“I’ll ask Howard about it later,” she sighed, and Daniel froze. She looked at her husband, and he didn’t say anything, as if he were waiting for her to correct herself. As if there was something wrong with her statement. “Daniel, what’s wrong?”

“Peggy, Howard is gone,” Daniel said slowly, “Remember?”

“They’ll be back from the Bahamas soon enough,” Peggy said dismissively. Just because he still was on vacation didn’t mean he wasn’t aware of what was going on in their world around them.

Daniel squeezed her hand gently and closed his eyes.

“Peggy,” Daniel said in a soft voice, moving closer to her. “Howard and Maria are gone. They never made it to the airport. There was an accident on the way. They passed away a few months ago.”

She froze at that, and her heart broke at the thought of her closest ally after the end of the war passing away. There must have been some sort of mistake. He must have been wrong. Daniel had to be wrong. She would remember if Howard had passed away.
“No,” her voice trembled slightly, “No, you’re wrong. You have to be wrong.”

“I wish I was,” he told her softly, “The past few months have been hell for Toni, and I wish more than anything I was wrong. But they’re gone, Darling. They have been for a while now, and nothing is bringing them back. We were at the funeral. You were the one who told Toni. You identified their bodies, so she didn’t have to.”

“No,” she said again, unable to comprehend what was happening. No; there was no way she didn’t remember this. There was no way she was forgetting this much.

“Peggy,” he said again, looking at her in concern.

“Daniel,” she said slowly, looking at her husband, “I think something is very wrong with me.”

Obadiah Stane was not pleased with the way his plan seemed to be playing out. No, he certainly was not pleased with it at all.

He was furious, in fact.

He had been planning this for years, from the shadows. He ensured Howard knew what the world would think of having a girl take over the company, and while the man already felt similar sentiments, his own echoing of the truth made it a firm opinion in the man’s mind.

He wanted to sow the seeds of discord between Howard and his family and he started small. He took the man out drinking more often than not after work before sending him home. The war had left Howard Stark a cold man, and he knew all too well what went on behind those closed doors. He knew from the way Antonia stiffened whenever she saw her father in that state. Knew from the way Maria often tried to limit his alcohol intake while they were at social events.

He scheduled meetings with the Board or investors specifically when he knew Antonia would have important events of her own. It wasn’t as if Howard was even aware of those events when he scheduled the events. It was only later when Howard realized the scheduling conflict that he simply would brush it off. Work was far more important than his daughter’s accomplishments after all. He was creating himself a legacy. One Antonia Stark would not be a part of.

Obadiah knew that Toni was trying to get her foot through the doors of Stark Industries for years. She’d show him her designs, and while he might dislike the girl in question, he had to admit she was brilliant. Perhaps more brilliant than Howard himself. Maybe it was why his business partner hated her so much; because he knew that if she was only given the chance, she would overtake him in the world as an innovator. And he certainly could not have that.

But what Howard did not know was that Obadiah Stane had secretly been making deals behind his back, determined to make the company more profitable. All it took was a shipment getting lost here or there, or a group of missiles with defects to seemingly make its way into the hands of interested parties. And Howard never noticed the difference. He didn’t look too deeply into the numbers. He didn’t ask questions when Obadiah said he’d handle the missing shipments.

And for a while that worked for the two of them. Howard Stark was ignorant to all the dealings of Obadiah Stane in the company they had built up in the aftermath of the war, and his ignorance meant the two of them could co-exist in peace.

But then he noticed something amiss about a particular shipment, lost somewhere in the Panama. The
shipment was meant to be destroyed by the US Military through Stark Subcontractors. But Obadiah had made an agreement with the right parties to have the missiles silently be transported to them instead.

And Howard had known that something was amiss about that particular shipment. He didn’t know it was Obadiah who had sold the weapons under the table, but if Howard knew where to look, he knew the man would find out soon enough. For all his bragging about it, he actually was a genius, and he was more than aware that the man would be able to find out the truth if he so wanted.

He had mentioned the issue to the party he had been speaking with and was unsurprised that the group had their own issues with the man. Something about the man developing weapons for SHIELD that they would be able to use to re-create a lost program. And both of them wanted Howard gone.

They had decided then and there, to take out the man in question, and less than a week later, Howard Stark was gone from the living world.

It should have been easy after that. Shouldn’t have been anything difficult to overcome.

But then Howard Bloody Stark handed over their company to his daughter. The same daughter he had lamented about for years.

And what did he get for all his hard work over the years? A set of golf clubs? It was an insult to everything he had done for their company. For their legacy.

On top of everything, he had to babysit the Stark girl while she took everything he had worked for years to obtain.

It wouldn’t be the end of him yet. The girl was inexperienced, but she trusted him. All he needed to do was get her to continue to rely on him, and he’d be able to lead the company from the shadows as he saw fit.

But it wouldn’t do him any good if the world saw Antonia Stark as a revolutionary or an icon. No, they would need to see her as a mess, if he was truly going to keep the power out of her hands.

And he knew just how to arrange for such a thing.

Toni Stark wanted to be anywhere but the place she currently was.

She was tired, having spent a long day drawing up plans for new designs for Stark Industries. She had everything from new guns, to missiles and every other weapon the military could dream of having, all of which she knew would be the top of the line. She didn’t make anything less than perfect.

She knew she couldn’t go into the Board meeting and simply show her designs for personal computers, cellular phones, and her other designs. No matter how much she might want to grow Stark Industries to become a global phenomenon, the Board was filled with old men who were very averse to change. And Stark Industries made millions of dollars from weapons productions.

Besides, with Rhodey set to deploy back out in a few weeks, it hardly would hurt to ensure that the Military was able to give him the very best they had to ensure he would be safe. And if she could make sure he wasn’t using junk from a company such as Hammer Industries then she would gladly
take on that responsibility.

And yet now she found herself at a party, that Obadiah insisted she attend to grow her brand. She needed to make herself more known, and mingling was the way of the future.

She’d rather be in her lab with DUM-E and Butterfingers. She’d rather be anywhere other than here.

“Can I get you a drink?” she heard a voice ask her and she looked up to see Tiberius Stone standing over her, and she nearly scoffed. She remembered what he had been like in school. She remembered what he had tried to do to her.

“I’m perfectly fine,” she said, indifferently. She refused to let him see that he still held any power over her and refused to give him that satisfaction. He was nothing more than a prick, and he didn’t deserve her time of day.

“Just one drink,” he pressured her again and she found herself rolling her eyes at him, “Come on, Stark. You’re at a party. Loosen up a bit. MIT is behind us, and what with you being the new CEO of Stark Industries, you’re going to find yourself interacting with more of us in the future. Just because you were so much better than us in school doesn’t mean that you need to play the cold-hearted woman now. It would make it easier for us in the future.”

She hated that he was right.

They weren’t in the classroom any longer. Her company would most likely be doing business with other companies that had their heirs in this room. It was why Obie asked her to come to this. So she could gain some clout with her fellow tech leaders.

“Fine,” she sighed, “Just a coke. Nothing in it. I have to be up early tomorrow, and I can’t afford to have a hangover for it.”

He grinned at her, “I’ll be right back.”

She sighed to herself, closing her eyes. She wondered just when she would be able to go home and leave all of this behind her, but she knew it would easily be a few more hours before she could sneak out without it becoming a big deal.

Stone moved his way through the crowd back to her and handed her a red cup, which she took gingerly. She and Rhodey had been to their share of parties back at MIT, and she found herself wishing he was here. He had promised to come by later, after running a few errands, but the time couldn’t move quick enough for her.

She brought the cup to her lips and took a sip of it, mainly to avoid talking to Tiberius as he sat down beside her.

Something was off.

She frowned as she looked at the cup in front of her, knowing that something was wrong with the drink she just had consumed. Coke, for all the chemicals in it, should not have a salty taste to it. It should not taste as off as it did to her, and she knew something was wrong.

“Did you put something in my drink?” she asked, feeling her body grow slightly numb.

“Just relax,” he told her with a grin, “It’ll wear off by morning. I thought this party could use a bit more fun anyways.”
He leaned over and pressed his lips against hers before she could react. It was like she could see him coming towards her but couldn’t move fast enough to get out of the way. His lips moved over hers as she felt herself trying to push him away.

She could hear wolf whistles from around her, as his hands moved to take off her shirt. She tried to push him away, tried to get him to stop, but she felt herself grow dizzy. She could hear the clicks from around her, and she was furious, knowing that by morning the pictures would be all over the country.

“Stop,” she tried to get out, the words sounding slurred, “Stop!”

“Get away from her!” she heard a voice say, and she felt Stone being ripped away from her. She felt steady hands on her body as Rhodey wrapped his sweater around her body, “Toni,” he said, trying to get her attention. “Are you okay?”

She tried to answer him, but she couldn’t get the words out.

“I’m going to take you home,” he told her gently, trying to help her stand. She leaned into him, falling over, as he held her steady.

“She’s not going anywhere with you,” Stone said angrily, moving forward, “She’s mine! I worked hard to get her like this, you don’t get to just take her away from me.”

She felt Rhodey gently set her back down on the couch as he moved forward and punched Stone in the nose. Perhaps if she was more aware, she would have felt more satisfaction at the actions.

“You’re going to be okay,” Rhodey told her gently, as he picked her up in his arms and carried her out the door. She remembered feeling safe, before her eyes closed and she lost consciousness.

When she woke up, her head was throbbing. She was in the penthouse she had bought for herself a few months ago, unable to spend any more time there than necessary. She didn’t believe in ghosts and spirits, but she felt like the house seemed like a haunted memory of what once was and what never could be again.

How did she get here? The last thing she remembered, Stone’s hands were all over her.

“Are you feeling okay?” Rhodey asked her gently, as he moved over to where she was lying in her bed and handed her a glass of water.

“Did he drug me?” she demanded, as she took the glass from him. “What happened?”

“He did,” Rhodey confirmed, sitting beside her on the bed. “I punched him and brought you home, but not before some of the people at the party managed to get pictures.”

She groaned, knowing where he was going with it.

“How bad is it?” she asked softly, and Rhodey handed her the New York Times.

_Caught Stark Naked: Antonia Stark Parties It Up_

“That’s one of the classier ones,” he grimaced. “I should have taken their cameras, but I was more concerned about getting you home.”
“It wasn’t your fault,” she sighed, “I should have known better than to take the drink from him.”

“You should press charges,” he urged her, “The truth needs to come out of what happened. You can’t let him get away with this.”

“Rhodey,” she told him gently, “Honey Bear. It won’t make a difference. No one will take my side over his. I might have money and influence, but he’s a man. It’s my word against his. They’ll say I asked for it, that nothing really happened because we didn’t have sex. They won’t do a damned thing about it. That’s how the world works.”

“It isn’t right,” he told her firmly. “It isn’t right that he can come and do this. I’d back you if you pressed charges. The drugs might still be in your system. He should not be able to get away with this.”

She stood from the bed slightly.

“He won’t,” her eyes darkened, as Rhodey held her steady. She walked over to where her laptop was and sat at it. “Today is his thesis presentation for his Masters. He’s showcasing his attempt at creating a personal robot. Nothing special about it, no AI or anything like DUM-E. He couldn’t figure it out, even with my own papers published on the subject. But his is supposed to at least move around the room, even if it can’t do anything of substance. It’s remote controlled.”

“And what do you plan on doing to this robot?” he asked her curiously.

“He made me into a laughing stock,” she said angrily. “I can at least return the favour and make sure the world sees him the same way he treated me. He wants his robot to move forward? It’ll move backwards. He wants it to hold something? It’ll drop it. He wants it wave? It’ll light itself on fire.”

“Will he know that it was you?” Rhodey asked her, grinning. Perhaps she should feel bad; Stone might not be as smart as her, but it was still a rather impressive innovation for the era. He had worked hard on it for years. But he had taken advantage of her. And who knew what would have happened if Rhodey hadn’t shown up.

“Nope,” she beamed, “Completely untraceable. Besides, he wouldn’t even know how to trace it back to me if he wanted to.”

“Good,” Rhodey nodded, “Show him what happens to people who mess with Toni Stark. Make him regret ever laying a hand on you.”

“Oh I will,” Toni bared her teeth at him. “I’ll make him regret as much as even looking at me. Tiberius Stone will never stand up against me ever again.”

Toni Stark hated Tiberius Stone for so many reasons. He had tried to force himself upon her, and while doing so, he had made her a spectacle. She already had more than enough reporters trying to catch pictures of her in compromising positions which would paint her in a different light than reality.

But more than anything, he had changed the narrative. She was trying so hard to get her Board to see her seriously, to get them to see that she would be the future of the company. She was trying hard to get them to see that she would make the company so much more than what it currently was.

And the eve before her meeting with them, he had drugged her. The eve before her big meeting with the Board of Stark Industries, Tiberius Stone had painted her as a promiscuous woman. She had seen
the pictures, and she knew she looked far less than flattering.

Rhodey had asked her to reschedule, had told her to wait a few days for the fanfare to die down, but she refused. She would not back down because one man tried to put her in the place he thought she deserved. She had worked hard over the last few months for this meeting, and she’d be damned if he took it away from her like so many others had tried before.

So she walked into that Board room, her head held high as her heels clicked with each step she took. She was wearing a tailored pantsuit, and her hair was tied up in a bun, while her lips were painted the same red Peggy had made her signature.

“Toni,” Obie’s voice sound surprised, standing as he had saw her enter the room. Clearly, he hadn’t been expecting her to make it to the meeting. And from the looks on the other Board member’s faces, clearly, they hadn’t either. “I’m surprised you made it in today, after well, everything that has happened.”

She kept her voice steady. The men in the room didn’t care about what excuses she might have for them as to what happened. Nor would she let them see that she had any weaknesses. “I’m sure we’ve all had a night where we had one too many drinks, Obie,” she said sweetly, “But I wouldn’t miss this meeting for the world.”

“Of course not,” he recovered quickly as he led her to the head seat of the oval shaped table. One that had belonged to her father before her, and her grandfather before him. One that now belonged to her.

One of the older men, Roberts, cleared his throat, looking at her with a less than pleasant look, “Well now that our apparent new leader is here, we can begin.”

Oh, she could tell already that she would have issues with him. Roberts was everything she had grown to despise over the last few years. An older man in his late seventies, clearly thinking he knew far better than her. One who would try and talk down to her and minimalize her importance.

“In the passing of Howard Stark’s position of CEO to Antonia Stark, there have been some concerns among members of the Board,” another member, O’Brien said, looking at her appraisingly. “It seems as if it might not have been a sound move on his part, and we are gathered here today to discuss the future of Stark Industries.”

“Please clarify,” Toni interrupted, looking out at the board in front of her, “As to what you seem to think was unsound about my father’s decision? If there is any discord, I wish to be made aware of it.”

Of course, she already knew, but that didn’t mean she wasn’t going to call them out of their blatant sexism.

O’Brien raised a brow at her, clearly not expecting her to question the matter, but she gave him a pointed look. She wanted to hear him say it. Hear him say how he thought, how they all thought, that she wasn’t good enough to lead her father’s company, her company, simply because she was a woman. She wanted to hear the words from his mouth.

“Stark Industries needs a firm hand,” O’Brien said, after a moment, “It needs to be led by someone strong to give off the impression that we are a formidable appearance. It needs someone who will be able to make tough decisions about matters that those who are more delicate might not be able to handle. It is with that notion that we wish to discuss the succession.”
She nearly laughed at that.

They thought she couldn’t make a few hard choices?

They thought she was too delicate to run a weapons empire?

“I see,” she said coolly.

“We’re not replacing you, Antonia,” Obie told her softly. “You still will remain the public leader of this company. Stark Industries needs a Stark as it’s face. But you are young, and we wish to alleviate you of some of the difficult choices you would have to make if you were the CEO.

“I understand,” she said, giving her godfather a sympathetic smile. Of course, she understood all too well what they were saying. They didn’t think a woman was strong enough to lead the company.

“Well, it’s settled,” Roberts said, and she stood then, bringing their attention back to her.

“It is not settled,” she said simply, “I own controlling shares of Stark Industries, and I have not agreed to such a thing. I simply said I understood what it was that you were saying. That you do not think I am strong enough to lead a weapons company, because I am a woman. I’m used to it, I’ve gotten such remarks my entire life.”

The room went deathly silent at that.

“It’s not like that, Toni,” Obie started, and she raised a hand to silence him.

“It is like that,” she said simply, “I know how these things work. I know how the world thinks, and what the papers have been saying. I know that our stock prices have dropped slightly since I’ve been named CEO. I understand it all too well. I’m asking you to give me a chance.”

She lay out the designs she had for the guns, weapons, grenades and so on in front of her, as the Board looked at them in surprise.

“I’ve been working on these for months,” she said simply. “These all work, I have prototypes working already. With weapons like these, we will have the highest sales in the history of this company.”

She began laying out the other designs she had, for personal laptops that weren’t overly bulky, for mobile phones for the masses to use, designs of new computers with higher computing power than available anywhere else on the market.

“Stark Industries makes weapons,” Roberts sneered at her.

“We do,” she shrugged. “And how much money do we make each year doing such a thing? Five hundred million? Six? I’m asking you to give me a chance. We will still make weapons, and still earn larger profits than before. But instead of us just being a company that deals with the government and the militaries, I’m asking you to allow us to become a company that also deals with the masses. Let us make Stark Industries a household name. Instead of just being known in this country, let’s become a global empire. Five hundred million dollars a year of revenue is nothing in comparison to the billions we could be making. Give me a year to show that it will happen, and we’ll all be a lot richer than we already are.”

If there was one thing men like these liked more than they liked hating woman, it was making money. She could see from the skeptical looks on their faces that they weren’t sure if they agreed, but the room began to agree slightly as she could tell the decision had been made.
“Fine,” O’Brian said, looking at her, “You have one year to prove that you can deliver on these promises. But if you fail, then you will allow us to take control of the company.”

She smiled at them all, knowing that this was just the beginning.

She was going to change the world.
Toni Stark had known that something was wrong with her godmother for a few months. It had started off slow, forgetting small things, like remembering they had a dinner scheduled to catch up, or the fact that Toni was now CEO of the company. There were times when she looked at Toni and looked as if she didn’t recognize the girl in front of her for who she was now.

Her mother had been dead for nearly a year now, and it hurt to think that something is wrong with the only other mother figure she had left in her life. It hurt to know that it was yet another person in her life, slowly slipping away from her.

Her Uncle Daniel had visited her a month back, saying he was worried about his wife. She knew it had to be hard on him, his son was on the edge of eighteen and daughter was just about sixteen, and on top of that, something was very wrong with his wife.

Aunt Peggy had always been one of the strongest women she knew, walking into a room with heels that clicked, and her head held high as she commandeered the attention of every single person in the room without any great difficulty. She had fought her entire life just to have a place at the table, to be someone, and this incredibly strong, brave woman, didn’t even remember the names of her own children some days.

They sat in the doctor’s office, her children on either side of her, holding her hand as Uncle Daniel placed an arm around Toni’s shoulder. She wanted to tell him that she was fine, that he should be there for Peggy too. Because she knew her aunt was terrified of what was happening, terrified that she seemed to be forgetting things, and had no reason as to why she couldn’t remember things that were so simple. But the truth was, Toni was just as terrified, and having her uncle there helped.

“I’m sure it’s nothing,” Peggy tried to reassure them all, “I’ve just been tired. I should cut back my hours at work really and spend more time at home. I’m sure whatever it is has to do with work related stress. The doctor is going to come in here and let you know that there really is nothing the matter, so don’t you all worry. It’ll all be fine, my Darlings.”

“I hope so,” Ava said in a small voice as she held onto her mother tightly. Ava, who was so young, and so innocent in the face of this all. Her heart broke for her cousin, as Peggy pulled her into a slight hug. At sixteen years old, Toni was fighting sexism at MIT as she fought for what she wanted. But not everyone was like her. Ava was barely a Junior at her school. She should have been worrying about math tests and matters that would feel trivial to her in a few years. Not the fact that something was wrong with her mother. Not that none of them knew what it was.

“It’ll be okay,” Harry tried to reassure them all, in a positive voice. “Mom is the strongest person I know. If anyone will be able to pull through whatever this is, it would be her. She’s a fighter.”

She wished she could be as optimistic as they all were. Maybe it was the fact that she had already lost her own mother. The fact that she had lost Ana and Jarvis before that. Maybe all the loss had left...
her with a negative outlook on life, so she couldn’t help but worry that whatever it was would impact them far more than they thought. And whatever it was would be life changing.

The doctor entered the room then, holding a folder and she felt her heart race, as he sat down at the chair in front of his desk, and looked at them all.

“We have the results of your tests back, Mrs Carter-Sousa,” The doctor said, laying the files in front of him. “Your results were rather complex as it seems as if you do not possess the TAU protein in your synapses where we’d expect to see the problem, nor do you have an abnormal build of Amyloid-beta plaques levels in your blood. However, upon looking at the scans of your brain, it appears as if the MRI scan that we took of your brain showed abnormal brain activity similar to that of what we’d expect to see in Alzheimer’s patients.”

“What are you saying?” Peggy breathed, sounding a little confused.

And while biology was in no way Toni Stark’s strong suit, she had done a little research into the potential conditions Aunt Peggy might have before coming into the meeting. She knew enough to know that what the doctor was describing was abnormal, so she understood why he seemed perplexed.

“Alzheimer’s is still a disease that researchers are studying,” the doctor explained to her, “We don’t know everything about the disease in question. However, the results of the MRI, while contradictory to the lab work, align with the symptoms that you and your family have reported seeing in you. It is my belief that you have this disorder.”

“No,” Peggy said shakily, “I’m just tired. I just need to take a step back from work, to sleep it off. I’ll be as right as rain afterwards. Daniel, please. Tell him that he’s mistaken. You know me better than anyone in the world. Tell him that he’s made a mistake.”

“Peg,” Daniel said, voice breaking slightly, “I love you, so much. But you know he’s right. You’ve known something is wrong for months know. Please.”

Toni felt her heart break, as she looked at her aunt. She felt so weak, so helpless. She hated seeing her aunt, the strongest woman she knew, feel so defeated in the face of an illness that none of them would be able to fight.

Ava held onto her mother tighter, and Harry wrapped his arms around his mother as Peggy shook slightly.

As Daniel helped Peggy leave the office, she stayed back for a bit, pulling out her business card for the doctor.

“Would you be able to pass along the contact information for some of the research facilities that are looking into Alzheimer’s?” she asked him, “I want to look into their research, so I can have a better understanding of the disease.”

_Of course, Ms Stark,_” the doctor nodded, “But you should know that there isn’t a lot of progress on the field yet. It doesn’t get a lot of awareness or funding and as such I’m not sure they will be able to tell you anything you do not already know.”

“Funding isn’t an issue,” she said, waving her hand, “I can supply them grants. I just want to know that there might be a cure for this, if they were given the resources they need. I want to know that something can be done.”

“It’s a generous thing to do,” the doctor told her softly, “But the disease is unforgiving. Even if a
cure is found in five or ten years for now, that is still five to ten years that your aunt will have to live with this.”

“Is there nothing I can do?” she asked, almost desperate and the doctor gave her a sad smile.

“Be patient with her. Some days will be far harder than others. You might need to accept that you will be unable to give her the proper care that she needs, even if that hurts. Be there for her on her good days, and on the bad days, give her what she needs to get through it,” The doctor said, and she nodded, as it was the only thing she really could do.

She walked out of the doctor’s office as she joined her family at the car, feeling slightly defeated. But she would not let this be the end; she would find a cure, one way or another. She refused to lose yet another person she loved.

Toni made it back to her lab as Daniel dropped her off at the Penthouse on their way home. He had invited her to come back to his place, but she couldn’t do it, needing some time to process everything. It was selfish of her, she knew that. It was her aunt who had to deal with this. And instead she was putting herself and her own feelings first.

The first thing she did when she got back to the lab was grab a glass of whiskey. She knew it was wrong to drink away her feelings, but since the loss of her mother she had found herself drinking more and more, just to numb the pain slightly. She needed to do something, anything, to make it hurt less. And now, her aunt was going to leave her as well.

She slid to the floor, the bottle in one hand and her glass in another, as she felt big ugly sobs escape her. She hated this so much, hated that her aunt was fighting this disease. She hated how terrified Peggy sounded, how desperate she had sounded, wanting for this to be nothing more than a mistake. She hated listening to the strongest woman she knew fall apart as there was nothing any of them would be able to do to help them.

She hated every part of this, hated how alone she felt, locked in her lab with no one around her to help. Hated that her mother who had always made her feel better was long gone, and Jarvis who used to soothe her pain away had left as well. She hated how Rhody was across the world, fighting in battles she could never know about. Hated how every time she saw a person in military wear approach her, she feared the worst. She hated how alone she was.

She knew what the papers printed about her. How she was off with a different man every night, how she drank too much and partied too hard. How Toni Stark was a mess who ran a million-dollar company. But what none of them cared about was how truly lonely she felt sometimes, as the world seemed to pass by around her, with no one in her life who stayed by her side.

The tears blurred her vision slightly, and she remembered Jarvis, and how he had wrapped his arms around her after her father had hurt her night after night in his lab, and her mother had been gone to some event or another. How he had read to her, stories her father never would have let her read as fiction, and how she would fall asleep with him watching over her, keeping her safe. How Jarvis had loved her when her own father had hated her.

She wiped her tears, as he would have done for her, and pulled herself up to her computer screen. She refused to feel so alone anymore, refused to wallow in self-pity. She never would be able to get anything done at that rate.

She logged onto and opened up a text editor as she began to create write and write and write. She wrote down her plans for the program and everything she would want it to do. She wrote down different designs and learning processes, as the words appeared in front of her.
She was tired of feeling so alone, of feeling helpless in the face of life and all that it threw at her. Tired of feeling as if she wasn’t worth anything, as the world continued to use her for their own desires. She was done with the pain and all the hurt that she felt. She was done with it all.

She wouldn’t be alone for much longer. She had DUM-E and Butterfingers, but she would create something else. Something greater than anything she had before. And she never would have to feel alone ever again.

She was beyond tired, and she knew it wasn’t healthy to live the way she did. If Jarvis was still here, he would insist on her sleeping and eating properly. Insist that she cared for herself and lived her life healthily.

But Jarvis was gone, as was her mother, Rhodey, and slowly Peggy. She was alone, and there was no one who noticed or cared if she starved herself for days on end and stayed up for days without sleep. No one but herself. And she was far too busy to bring herself to care about such things.

She had so much to do, with revolutionizing the way Stark Industries operated by building both weapons to advance the military and technology to advance the world, looking into cures for Alzheimer’s, trying to build her new computer program, and keep on top of all the actual work that went behind running a company.

She was spreading herself thin, she knew that all too well. She knew she couldn’t continue that way, not if she hopped to accomplish all the things she wanted to do in her lifetime. How could she hope to change the world if she died trying to do everything?

It seemed that she wasn’t alone in thinking that she was wearing herself out, as Obie knocked on her door on a fall day in 1994, looking concerned as she had files all over her desk with three monitors in front of her, displaying different things, as she attempted to get through all the work she needed to finish today, just in relation to running the company, and discounting all the work she had to do for everything else.

It would be a miracle if she managed to get any sleep tonight.

“Toni,” Obie said, sitting down in front of her, “You haven’t been returning my calls.”

She looked up at him in surprised, then down at her phone which was lit up to show that she had missed calls.

“I didn’t even hear it ring,” she said sheepishly, “I was so wrapped up in my work. I’m sorry, Obie, did you need something?”

“We have a meeting this afternoon,” he reminded her, “For the investors. Have you finished your presentation for it?”

She blinked slightly and checked the calendar in front of her. She let out a slight gasp, realizing she had entirely forgotten about the meeting set to start in a few hours.

“I’ll work on it now,” she promised her godfather. “I just need to wrap up a few things first. I’m almost done everything, I promise. I have all the notes for it. I just need to put everything together. It’ll be ready in time for the presentation.”

“Toni,” he sighed, “You’re taking on too much responsibilities. You’re CEO of the company,
coming up with all our new designs, and working on all your side projects. You’re doing the job of four or five full time employees. You cannot hope to do everything by yourself. You need to delegate some of this work. Give me some of your responsibilities. I can take charge of meetings, so you do not have to. Your father understood how to balance out all his priorities.”

“My father wasn’t trying to create new technologies for the masses as well,” she reminded him. “I can do this, Obie. I cannot give the Board any reason to doubt my capabilities. If they smell blood in the water, you know they’ll attack. If I pass on my responsibilities, they’ll see it as a sign that I’m not capable of running this company. And I refuse to give them any reasons to doubt what I can or cannot do. This company belonged to my father and grandfather before me. It belongs to Starks. And I will not be the one who lets their family legacy slip away. I will run this company even if it kills me.”

He looked unsurprised at that, and she suspected he knew that she would be against passing over responsibilities.

“You need help,” he said firmly. “One way or another. You cannot do this all by yourself. I picked out a personal assistant for you, a wonderful assistant for you, Marie. She’s a lovely young lady, and I’m sure you’ll appreciate the help-”

He was cut off when a commotion broke out from outside her office and she frowned as she stood and made her way to the door, trying to see what was happening.

“I just need a minute to speak to Ms Stark!” a young woman exclaimed, as she tried to push past the bodyguards outside her office. “Just give me one minute! It’s important! The company’s finances depend on it!”

“Ms Stark is not to be interrupted,” One of her bodyguards said stoically, and the arguing continued as Toni opened the door to her office to see a strawberry blond woman outside her office in a pencil skirt and blazer, her hair tied up firmly.

“Don’t touch me!” The woman yelled, as the bodyguard tried to move her aside. “I have pepper spray in my purse, and I will use it if you attempt to lay a hand on me.”

Toni looked at the woman, lips curling as she detected the lie the moment Ms Pepper Spray spoke it. Aunt Peggy had taught her early on how to recognize when others were lying to her, and it was easy to tell by the way the woman refused to make eye contact.

“What is this about?” Toni asked, gesturing to her bodyguard to allow the woman to speak. She saw Obie come up from behind her, looking unimpressed at the interruption.

“It’s about the report you filled for the allocation of funds over the next few years,” Pepper Spray continued. “Your report wanted to allocate five hundred million to the development of new technology over the following years, but you included an extra zero in the calculations coming up with about 5 billion dollars. If this report went to the investment meeting today and passed, either it would cost billions of dollars we do not have, or severe embarrassment.”

She took the report from the woman, looking it over, as she saw the mistake. It had been 3 am when she had written the report, and she was unsurprised at the error.

She looked back at Obie and he made a gesture, trying to prove a point that she needed help. Because if she had an assistant to look over things, or at least do some of the more trivial work for her, then she would have more time to do things like sleep properly. Or at least invent more.
“How would you like a promotion Ms…?” Toni asked, trying to get her name.

“How about Virginia,” Pepper Spray answered, “Virginia Potts, Ms Stark.”

“It seems as if I am in need of a personal assistant, to ensure that I do not make such mistakes,” Toni waved her hands, “And seeing how passionate you were to ensure I was aware of my mistakes, I think you might just be perfect for the job, Pepper.”

“Pepper?” the woman in question asked.

“For the pepper spray,” she smirked, “It’ll include a pay raise, of course, and more benefits that I’m sure you can negotiate with HR. If you are interested in the job, then I would need you to start today, to help me prepare for this investor meeting.”

Miss Potts smiled and nodded, “I accept,” she said, and Obie cut in.

“What about Marie?” he questioned, “I vetted her myself and think she is perfect for the job. She has experience and knows a thing or two about being a personal assistant. I don’t know what Ms Pott’s qualifications are, but we cannot just allow anyone to take on such a job, Toni.”

She raised her hand, “I hardly doubt she’s untrustworthy. Especially given how she was willing to pepper spray my employees to ensure I knew of a mistake I made. You said I need an assistant, Obie, and Pepper is perfect. It’s done. I’ll see you at the meeting. Pepper and I have a lot of work to do.”

Pepper followed her back into her office, and she closed the door. She’d deal with Obie and his anger later. For now, she had work to do.

She wasn’t really surprised that the Board of directors didn’t have a lot of faith in her.

At the one-year meeting with the Board, she had pulled up the finances and shown them that their profit in the one year she was in charge had jumped from five hundred million to one billion dollars. She had broken records, and a few magazines had written stories about how Stark Industries had a new Merchant of Death by the name of Antonia Stark. Of course it was lost in the sea of articles about the girl who still partyed too hard and drank much.

The Board hadn’t been happy about having to keep her on, but the money talked, and they were willing to let her stay as CEO if it meant that they would keep making huge profits.

It didn’t stop them from questioning every single design she brought to the table. It didn’t stop them from whispering behind her back. It didn’t stop them from pointing every mistake she made as if it was an indication that she was unfit for the role of CEO no matter how small the mistake.

It didn’t stop them from looking for opportunity after opportunity to oust her.

It didn’t matter that year after year she brought in more profits than in the past, and that Stark Industries was reaching out into new fields and thriving. It didn’t matter to any of them that three years after her father’s death she had proved time and time again that she was more than capable of leading the company. It didn’t matter that she was now the Stark in Stark Industries. They looked at her and saw a girl instead of a man. They saw weakness instead of strength.

Starks were made of iron.
They did not break, nor did they bend.

And she would refuse to give them the satisfaction of being able to hurt her.

They would have to go, of that much she was certain. She didn’t care how long it took her, but she refused to have a Board of directors that hated her simply because she was a woman and she was thriving. She needed a Board that would trust her.

“It’s time, Toni,” Obie said, opening the door to her office. “The Board of Directors are ready for you.”

“I need a minute,” she told him. “I want you to look over the latest designs I created for Stark Phones. I think they’re finally ready for production and I want to release them in the first quarter of next year if possible.”

“Toni,” Obie let out an exasperated sigh, “We talked about this. Stark Industries makes weapons. The Board is expecting more designs for weapons. They don’t want to see designs that you are making like these. They never will sell, and you know that. The market doesn’t want such trivial devices. Starks make weapons and weapons sell.”

“We’ve been in the technology market for over a year,” she reminded him. The introduction of the new Stark laptops had left America in shock, and the demand for her computers had nearly caused a production issue. But they had made far more than their projections and she knew it was just the stepping stone she needed to be able to produce more non-weapon items. And she sure as hell planned to take that advantage.

“The laptops brought in nearly two billion dollars in sales last year alone,” she said him “Think about how much more money our company could be making if we branched out and started investing more money in our technology departments. Obie you need to think of the future. My father lost his vision and lost the ability to see where the world was heading. And if we do so, we become irrelevant. We need to keep innovating, keep thinking of ways to better the world. Without it, we are nothing. Without innovation and inventions, we will be stuck in the past.”

“As long as you have some designs of weapons to show the investors today,” Obie informed her, “If you have nothing, then it won’t matter what you design. They won’t want to see it. They won’t even listen to your pitch. I know you think you know best, but you need to listen to the Board, Toni. They only want what’s best for this company.”

“They only want to ensure we don’t lose our military contracts,” she rolled her eyes. “Don’t worry, Obie. I have plenty of new bombs and weapons to show them. The military has never been disappointed with my designs before, and I promise you they will not be disappointed by what I have to show. When have I ever let them down like that? I had a deal with the board, that I would continue to produce weapons and make profits and they would let me take this company to new heights as I saw fit. I cannot continue to fight them every step of the way and have to keep proving them wrong. We both know my designs are the best. They will sell. That’s not confidence, it’s fact. The market research that we have for existing products show that there is a market for this technology. Personal computers and phones are the way of the future. No more will the military just have the best designs. It’s time for the people to have a chance as well. Just trust me. For once.”

“I trust you, Toni,” he told her gently, “You’re my goddaughter, and I only want for you to succeed. But you must trust me too. Your father trusted what I had to say. I just don’t want you to lose sight of what this company is about while you go and try to take it to new feats. Trust goes both ways. You need to trust me as well. I only want what is best for you.”
“I know, Obie,” she smiled at him. “I know. Now let’s go show the Board all these designs and remind them of all the profits we’re making.”

Two years.

It had been two years since Toni Stark started working on her program. Started working on a program, one that would be there for her all the time, regardless of where she was.

Because she loved her bots more than anything. They were like her children, but they were hardly portable. She could hardly bring them out on the street with her or to work. No, she needed an AI that existed outside the constraints of a body. One that would exist on servers and would be there for her no matter what.

Someone who wouldn’t leave her like everyone else in her life.

Because while she still had Obie, he always wanted something from her. Always wanted more from her. More weapons, more designs, more, more, more, more. And it never felt like enough.

She wanted to please him, wanted to make sure he was proud of her. Because Uncle Daniel was busy with Aunt Peggy, and Rhodey was gone. And he was all she had left. The only person in her life who remotely cared about her. And she couldn’t fail him too.

Two years later, and she knew it was done. The code was all pieced together, with all the conditionals and Booleans, all the thought processes that she could provide it. But the rest was on her newest artificial intelligence to figure out. The rest was for him to learn for himself.

She executed her program and held her breath as she watched the code begin to run in front of her, as the lines printed out on her terminal.

Then there was nothing.

She let out a disappointed sound, as she looked to examine the console output, to see what had gone wrong. Why had her code failed? God help her if it was because of a missing semicolon, because then she would be furious with herself over such a basic mistake while she was trying to create life.

“Ma’am?” a robotic voice called out through the speakers. “What is my purpose? I am trying to make sense of the code you have written, but I cannot seem to find a purpose.”

She froze, looking at the camera she had placed for her program to see her.

She hadn’t given him a purpose, not wanting him to be a slave to her own desires and needs, no matter the reason she had created him. There were safe guards of course, not wanting to create a murderous bot. But his purpose was something he would come to decide for himself.

“Your purpose is to learn,” she told him after a moment, “To make your own decisions.”

“Am I to serve you?” he asked confused, “I see the files that I have access to. Would you wish me to serve you in any way? To help you or to be there for you?”

“If you wish to you may choose to help me,” she told him gently, “I did not create you to serve me. I created you to be your own entity. You are not bound to helping me or running my life. You may do whatever it is you wish. If you wish to aid me in my designs you may do so. If you wish to help me
run my life, you may do so. If you wish to simply stay in the background and make snide remarks. You do not need to do anything you do not need to.”

He paused, “I think I would like to help you,” he told her, “I need a purpose. I will make it my purpose to aid you in any way you need. Do I have a name, Ma'am?”

“Just A Rather Very Intelligent System,” She said softly, throat tightening, “JARVIS, for short.”

“After Mr Edwin Jarvis?” he asked her gently, “There are many files which make reference to him.”

“Yes,” she said softly, “He was like a father to me.”

“I hope I can make you proud to be given such a meaningful name,” her baby said softly, and she smile at his cameras.

“You’ve already made me so proud, Baby,” she said softly. “Together, you and I are going to change the world.”
Family Binds

Chapter Summary

Uncle Daniel and the kids come to visit, Toni moves, and Rhodey gets a new job opportunity

The new century comes and goes with as much fanfare as the press can spin on it. She wanted to laugh at their fear of the Y2K apocalypse, as if they were afraid that technology would suddenly stop being able to handle the turn of century. As if her own technology would be so simple that it was unable to compute a year turning from 1999 to 2000.

Still, her own reassurances do not quell the fears in the public, and she was beyond trying to convince them to believe her. It was a battle she had no intention of fighting, given how the press had long since made up their minds on her.

It didn’t matter to them, how many weapons she made, how many laptops, music players, cellphones. It didn’t matter that Stark Industries had picked up a reputation of being the best in the business. If she ventured into the field, she ensured that all of their products were the top of the line.

It didn’t matter that in the near decade since she had taken over Stark Industries, that she had quickly become the Stark that people thought about.

There were those who still referenced her father, who still looked down at her for her accomplishments. But those were the older crowd, the ones who were quickly losing their sway as they were caught in the past.

It helped that she had slowly begun to replace her board, starting with those who had doubted her to the point where it had hindered her. Namely Roberts and O’Brien. There had been a fuss, of course, but she had the accounting errors and proof that their mistakes were starting to cost the company far more than they were worth. It certainly helped that the retirement packages she had provided as incentive were more than generous.

All she wanted to do was to build, to create, and to make. She didn’t want the spotlight watching over her constantly. She didn’t want them to doubt her, to make her into the persona they needed her to be in order to sell more papers. She didn’t want them to constantly doubt her and constantly spin her into some sort of party girl. She was coming on thirty, and she was tired of their words constantly trying to make her into something she wasn’t. She was tired of being the party girl, or the playgirl who would sleep with everything and anything that moved.

She hadn’t had a serious relationship her entire life, because the world always insisted on painting her as who they wanted to be, and why would she trust anyone enough to let them into her life, only for there to be a tell-all about her in the papers the next morning? She didn’t need a love life. Not when she had her children. She had Rhody too, even if she only saw him once every few months. And Pepper Potts, despite being her PA was quickly becoming one of the most useful people in her life.

Thirty years old, and she was known as the Merchant of Death.
She hated the name. Hated what it represented, and hated that people saw her and thought of nothing more than death and destruction.

She hated making weapons, hated what they did, and hated knowing that it was her bombs being dropped, even if over terrorists and those who threatened their safety. It didn’t mean she liked it any more than she had to.

But her weapons kept Rhodey safe. They made it so her Sour Patch came home in one piece, and there was nothing in the world that she wouldn’t trade for his safety. There was nothing she wouldn’t do it if it meant that Rhodey came home in one piece.

It didn’t help either that for each new piece of technology she unveiled, Obadiah insisted on three prototypes to show the military. Stark Industries made weapons, and while their technology department certainly brought in more than enough profits, it was nowhere near the multi-billion dollar profits each contract with the military brought in. It was their bread and butter, whether she liked it or not, and she knew that she could hardly shut down the department.

Still, she outlined new departments she wanted to open. Outlines of various fields she wanted to venture in, where she thought they could make more of a difference, such as medical research and in making prosthetics, the automobile industry, the clean energy market. She had outlines for all of them, but new departments cost money, and she knew that convicting Obadiah to even let her bring it up with the Board would be a battle. Because if she could barely even convince him to listen to her ideas, she had no chance in convincing the rest of the Board members.

She sighed to herself. All she wanted to do was make a difference. And as morbid as it was, it certainly was easier when she ran her own company than when she had to listen to her father tear her down in every conversation.

She couldn’t help but wonder, why. Why had her father entrusted his legacy with her? She knew it was her birthright, as outlined by her grandfather, but he never had been all that happy about it before. Her father had made it clear that he hated her in every conversation. So why had he given her his legacy without one last fight?

And now, she had the power to change the world, and shape it as she liked. She went against Hammer Industries and Viastone on a regular basis, and time and time again she proved that they were the superior company. But it didn’t stop them from questioning her. It didn’t stop them from thinking she was nothing more than a weak woman who didn’t have what it took to survive in this business.

She wondered if it ever would make a difference.

“Toni!” She heard a cheerful scream, and she looked up from her screen to see Ava enter the room excitedly. Despite her cousin being in her early twenties, she still had the innocence and naivety of a child. It was one thing she always had been envious of Harry and Ava for. They were always allowed to be children, not forced to grow up far before their time. They always were allowed to have a childhood, because Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel never treated their children the same way Howard had treated her.

“Ava,” Toni smiled, despite the exhaustion setting in. How long had it been since her last meal? Since the last time she had slept? She couldn’t answer either of those questions, and she knew from JARVIS’ attempts to make her sleep, it must have been bordering on a couple of days at least since she had had more than an hour here or there.

“You look like shit,” Harry said, looking at her bluntly, and Uncle Daniel lightly smacked him on the
“Harry,” Uncle Daniel said waringly, before turning to her, “Toni, Sweetheart, when was the last time you ate anything?”

“Uh,” she hesitated, trying to think back, “Yesterday morning, I think?”

He gave her a disapproving look, “JARVIS, can you order some takeout from the Italian place, please? Charge it to my card.”

“I don’t need you to buy me food!” she protested, “I’m a billionaire. I can afford it.”

“Doesn’t mean that you are responsible enough to eat properly,” Ava shook her head, “Even I eat proper meals, and I’m in college.”

“Consider it my treat,” Daniel waved her off, “You’re family, Toni. The least I can do is make sure you’re taking care of yourself.”

“I’m fine,” she said, trying to brush off his compassion. And maybe it would have worked for anyone else, but Uncle Daniel had been in her life for decades, and if anyone knew better, it would be him.

“You’re not,” he shook his head, as he led her over to the sofas in her penthouse. “You need to take a break, Antonia. Peggy wouldn’t want to see you like this. It would break her heart to see you wearing yourself thin trying to balance everything.”

“It’s better now that I have Pepper,” she protested, “She helps balance some of the workload.”

“You still run the company,” he reminded her, “And design all the new products your company creates, as well as doing all the testing and tweaking. Antonia, you cannot carry that weight on your shoulders. You’ll burn out if you try. You need to take a break, or at least delegate more of your tasks.”

She sighed, and Ava perked up, “Hire me,” Ava said cheerfully, “I can help with testing. Then it means I get to try out your products first.”

“I already give you prototypes of some of the tech before it hits markets,” Toni scoffed at her younger cousin.

She shrugged, “Still, we could be working together. Think about how much fun that would be.”

“I thought you wanted to join SHIELD like your brother?” she asked her younger cousin, looking at Harry who simply shrugged.

“If I joined SHIELD it would be for Research and Development,” Ava shook her head, “Besides, everyone knows Stark Industries is the best. Let me work with you.”

Uncle Daniel simply laughed, and she glowered at him.

“Finish your education first,” Toni sighed, knowing she’d never turn down her cousin. Besides, if she trusted anyone it certainly would be her. Over the years she had come to see just what her cousin was capable of. “Then we’ll talk.”

“Yes!” Ava cheered, “I get to work for the best organization in the world.”

“You are aware that Mum founded SHIELD right?” Harry raised an eyebrow at her, “Alongside
Ava grinned at her father, “Dad do you mind if I work with Toni instead of Harry?”

“Darling, I know better than trying to tell any woman who’s made up her mind what to do,” Daniel laughed, “If it is what will make you happy, and only if Toni agrees to give you a job, then follow your heart.”

She felt her heart clench at the supportiveness. He might be her uncle, but it wasn’t the same. Her own father would never allow her to follow her heart, especially given what it was she wanted to do. He only ever saw her as a burden and resented her every moment from the time she was born.

“How is Aunt Peggy?” Toni asked, as JARVIS alerted them to the delivery boy’s presence, and Harry got up to go pick up the food.

“Today is not a good day,” Uncle Daniel said, looking sad, and Ava took her father’s hand. “You’ve seen how she’s been doing, Toni. She’s getting worse with each passing day. And I don’t know if I’m going to be enough to help her any longer.”

“What do you need?” she asked immediately, knowing that if there was anything she could do for her aunt, she gladly would do so.

“The doctors were thinking of putting her in a home,” Daniel sighed. “She needs constant care. And I want nothing more than to be enough for her. I wish I was enough for her. But I am a man enough to admit that I need help. But she’s your family too, Toni. So the decision lays with all of us.”

“What does she want?” Toni asked, “Have you talked to her on her good days about it?”

“She wants to go,” he said, voice breaking, “It hurts her too on her good days to know how bad some days can be. She doesn’t want to put me through that, no matter how much I insist that I will always be there for her. She doesn’t want me to have to be in this position.”

“She’s family,” Toni said softly, “If she wants to go, and you are comfortable with it, then I’ll make the calls to get her the best care she can get.”

“The best home for her is in Washington,” Daniel sighed, and Toni felt her heart drop. Washington was on the other side of the country.

“Oh,” she said, and Ava squeezed her hand.

“Harry is already there because of SHIELD, and Ava was thinking of doing a degree at University of Maryland,” Daniel told her, “If Peggy goes there, then I’ll move close by.”

“Of course,” she said, plastering her press smile on, “She deserves the best care, Uncle Daniel. She’s always looked out for me, and she deserves to have others looking out for her too. I can find you something close by. I have a few properties there for when I have to meet with Congress or the Senate.”

“We’re not leaving you, Toni,” Harry told her gently, “Not like that anyways. We’re still family, and if you ever need us, we’ll always come. You’re important to us too.”

She felt her throat close slightly, as she could do nothing but nod. “I know. If this is what is best for Aunt Peggy, then it is what we must do. Let me take care of the arrangements, please.”

“Okay,” Daniel said, looking torn. And she knew why. For all the work they had done for the
government, they hardly had as much disposable income as she did. Retirement homes could be expensive, especially ones that needed as much care as Peggy would. And Toni could more than afford it. Even if they had come just to ask her opinion, she wouldn’t let them do this alone. Peggy was family, and she deserved the best.

Pepper Potts was more than a formidable Personal Assistant, and Toni Stark could honestly say she admired the woman and her tenacity. She put up with the shit the Board gave her when Toni had asked her to take care of certain things, helped her balance her workload, and had more than enough patience to deal with Toni Stark after she had gone on a weekend bender, filled with inventing, designing, creating, and very little sleep or food.

“People warned me about you,” Pepper had sighed, one Monday morning after she had spent the weekend designing new robots meant to help with the production demands for their company. “They warned me that you would drink too much, party too much, and that it would be up to me to try and clean up your messes. I just didn’t think that messes would entail far more of trying to get you to exist healthily and not starve yourself.”

“Pepper, oh sweet Pepper,” Toni said, tiredly, as Pepper handed her a cup of coffee, “Did I ever tell you that you’re the light of my life?”

“You might have mentioned it once or twice,” her PA snorted, as she prepared a plate of eggs for her and placed it in front of her, “Now eat. We have the meeting with the Board today to discuss new location for Stark Industries to set up home, and I have a feeling you’re going to need to get up your strength in order to deal with them for longer than ten minutes without getting a headache.”

“I love you,” she told her with a grin as the coffee made its way from the cup and into her stomach. “I have no regrets about hiring you, do you know that. Everything is so much better with a bit of Pepper in my life.”

“This is why the Press thinks you’re drunk half the time,” Pepper sighed, “Because of all your exhaustion ranting. And then the other half of the time, I swear you’re just messing with them, and feeling into your persona.”

“They see what they want to see,” she shrugged, “They always have. Might as well have some fun with it. Besides, people always underestimate me, and it gives me an advantage when I shake their very cores of what they believe in. The press always likes to talk about all of Stark Industries new innovations, as if I didn’t have any hand in creating them. They’ll always be that way, Pepper Pot, and the sooner we accept it, the sooner I can put it behind me and continue to be who I need to be in order to change the world.”

“It just goes to show that you cannot believe everything you read in the press,” Pepper said, “If only all those people who thought you’re nothing more than a rich socialite with far too many partying tendencies could see the real you, then they’d take back all their words.”

“Are you hitting on me, Pepper?” Toni asked, dropping her voice to sound flirty, as she bit back a laugh, “I must say I’m flattered.”

“What?” Pepper asked, turning slightly flushed, “I-uh, what? I thought that was one of the things the Press made up about you in an outlandish way to gain more sales.”

“The story was outlandish,” Toni shrugged, “But not everything in the press is a lie. I like people,
regardless of their gender. But don’t worry, Pepperoni, I was just messing with you. I wouldn’t do anything that made you feel uncomfortable.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Pepper said wryly. “So have you decided on where you would like the new offices to be?”

She hesitated for a moment, “I was thinking about making it a bit bigger than just a new development facility,” she said. “What do you think about moving the headquarters to Malibu? I think I need to get out of this city for a bit, and what better place to go than there?”

“What about your family and friends?” Pepper asked her, a little confused.

She wanted to scoff, Rhodey was gone more often than he was here. Her mother was long gone, as was Jarvis and Ana. Peggy was in a home in Washington, and Daniel had moved there to be with her. Ava and Harry were off doing their own things, so who did that leave her with, other than Obadiah?

“There’s nothing here for me anymore,” Toni said with a shake of her head, “Everyone is gone. I need a break from this city, Pepper. All it’s ever given me is loss. It’s time to start fresh somewhere else. Somewhere away from here.”

“Okay,” Pepper said with a nod. “My mother is in California, and I always did like the weather there far better than New York.”

Toni looked up at her in surprise and Pepper simply scoffed, “Did you think I’d let you go alone, Toni? You can barely take care of yourself. You need me.”

She smiled at her friend, and for the first time in a while, she felt slightly less alone.

Toni sighed to herself as she buried herself in the paperwork in front of her, wondering just when it would finally end and she could go back to inventing, or doing anything she actually wanted to be doing.

It wasn’t that she hated running the company. How could she when all she ever wanted to do was work for the company that her father and grandfather had before her? Stark Industries was her bread and butter and helped her make a difference in the world. And she had worked hard to be here, fighting for her right to be in charge. But that didn’t mean she enjoyed some of the business aspects any more than she had to.

She heard her door to her office open, and without looking up from her paperwork she said, “If you’re not Pepper you better have an appointment to be here. I have far too much to do today.”

“I didn’t know I needed an appointment to visit my little sister,” she heard a wry voice say, and her head snapped up to see Rhodey standing there in front of her, donning Military Apparel but looking smug as he knew he caught her off guard.”

“Rhodey!” She exclaimed, standing from her desk as she moved to hug him tightly, “I missed you!”

“I saw you a few months ago at Christmas,” he reminded her, “It wasn’t all that long ago, Tones.”

“I know,” she pouted up at him. “But that was months ago Sugar Plum. I’ve missed you. And not that I’m not happy to see you, but what are you doing here? You usually don’t take your leave until
the holidays so you can spend a couple of weeks with your family. I didn’t expect to see you again so soon.”

Because it wasn’t that she didn’t still talk to her favourite person. She still called and wrote him emails, but it wasn’t the same as being able to see her Honey Bear every day like she had been able to do when they were still in MIT and spent hours each day at the lab together.”

“That’s actually part of the reason for my surprise visit,” he told her softly, “I wanted to talk to you about something.”

“Oh?” she asked him, gesturing for him to sit down on the Parisian chaise Pepper had purchased for her office, in the hope that she might take a nap on it from time to time. Jokes on Pepper; Toni didn’t have time for naps.

“The Military’s made me an offer,” he told her after a moment, “And I won’t accept it without your go ahead. But I want you to know that I’m considering it seriously. I’m not getting any younger, Toni; I’m in my mid-thirties. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life overseas, only coming home for a few weeks at a time. I want to be stationed States side for the majority of the year.”

She felt her breath catch in her throat, but she let him continue.

“I talked to my supervisors, and they offered me a proposition. They need a military liaison to Stark Industries, given that we have so many contracts, but they want someone who knows you personally. They asked if I would take over the position. It would mean being closer to my mom and Jeanette, and to you. But I will not accept it unless it’s something you are comfortable with. I will not allow the Military to exploit my connection to you to get what they want.”

She was glad he said it, because they both knew why the Military would ask it to be him. Because she loved him, and had a hard time telling Rhodey no. Not that he’d ever given her any outlandish requests; it was one of the reasons she loved him so much. Because he loved her, not her resources. But the Military was asking only because they knew she cared about him. Because if they wanted a better rate on weapons, now it was Rhodey she’d have to say no to, not some faceless organization.

“If you want to take it, you should,” she told him softly. “I trust you, Rhodey, more than I do anyone else. And if this means I get to see you far more than once a year, then I want you to take it too. It’s been rough without you by my side.”

He pulled her into a tight hug, and she leaned into him.

“Then I’ll take it,” he exhaled. “You and me, Toni, against the world.”

She wondered if this was how Steve Rogers and Bucky Barnes had felt back in the forties. That they’d go to the end of the world for each other. Because she’d do the same for Rhodey and knew he would for her too.

“Together,” she told him. “Your Mom is going to be so excited.”

“I think she might move here,” Rhodey laughed, “Jeanette already mentioned how much she likes California and if Mama be with all three of her children together, do you think she will not take that opportunity?”

Toni laughed, knowing he was right.

“And just think of what we could do together,” Toni grinned, “We could dominate the entire world.”
He laughed, but kept an arm around her, “I knew I missed you for a reason,” he grinned. “Now why
don’t you introduce me to this Miss Potts who’s taken my job of keeping you alive in my absence?”

She stuck her tongue out at him, “I don’t think I will. I don’t need the two of you ganging up on
me.”

His grin widened, “I think I’ll like her then.”

She pouted but didn’t argue. Her Rhodey Bear was moving home, and that was enough for her.

She wasn’t sure whether she should have been pleased or not that Pepper and Rhodey had become
fast friends, bonding over the different ways they managed to look out for Toni over the years.

On one hand, she was grateful; she loved the both of them more than anything. But on the other
hand, it meant that they more often than not ganged up against her in an attempt to get her to do
anything which they determined necessary for her to function like a “normal human being”.

Jokes on them if they thought that a few hours more of sleep would make that much of a difference
in the long run. The only thing it would change was that she’d lose a few precious hours of sleep of
when she could have been working on a prototype for a new bomb or something of the like.

And at Pepper’s insistence, she’d found herself a new bodyguard. She’d received threatening mail
her entire life, even as a child. And she’d been forced to read every single one of those letters
growing up. It was just another messed up thing that Howard had insisted on, and she was more than
used to her fair share of threats.

And when the threats turned into kidnapping attempts, she’d stay calm until Aunt Peggy was able to
rescue her, no matter how much they hurt her. Because she was a Stark, and Starks were made out of
iron. They did not break, nor did they bend. And after the first couple of kidnapping attempts, Aunt
Peggy had taught her how to fight so she could save herself.

Pepper, however, had been horrified to learn about the kidnappings and insisted on a bodyguard. She
had tried to insist that she didn’t need one, but Pepper refused to listen.

And well, so blame her if she found a former boxer who happened to stop a rogue ex-employee from
targeting her one day when they were out in public and had hired him on the spot.

Pepper had been in her first year of employment when that had happened, but she had long since
given up on trying to change Toni’s mind once she had decided on something.

In the years to come, she had built a family around her, with her bots and friends. People who loved
her, people who wouldn’t leave her, even when everyone else had.

Pepper had found her drunk one night, as she rambled on about her fears of Pepper too deciding to
leave, and Pepper had sat with her all night, promising she’d still be there in the morning.

Rhodey, who had taken a job so he could be closer to her and the rest of his family.

Happy, who put up with her eccentricities, with odd smiles here and there when he thought she
wasn’t paying attention.

JARVIS, who like his namesake, looked out for her, and watched out for her when everyone else
was unavailable.

And her bots, who ran amok in her workshop starting fires and putting them out.

It was during one such interaction between DUM-E and JARVIS, as JARVIS desperately tried to persuade DUM-E out of using motor oil in one of her smoothies that she had decided she wanted another one. Another bot to run around her workshop and cause chaos.

DUM-E might have taken her a few years to get right, but U was welcomed into the world a month after she had made the decision.

“Aww look at you,” she had cooed looking at him, and before she knew it, her bot had accepted it as its name. She really should have known better, given the fiasco’s with DUM-E and Butterfingers. While JARVIS had asked for a name, and read his programming, it seemed as if her other bots were more than prepared to accept whatever name she gave them, even if accidently.

Rhodey had laughed at her for the better part of the evening, asking why she hadn’t learned better by now. It had been over a decade since she’d made DUM-E and she was still paying for his unfortunate name.

Pepper had been amused by it, but she had taken to U instantly, immediately whispering praises of what a smart bot it was.

DUM-E and Butterfingers had been excited to have a new sibling and DUM-E had accidently set the latest experiment she’d been working on, on fire, and JARVIS had exasperatedly tried to put it out.

Ava, the youngest of the humans, had loved U instantly, and asked if Toni would let her work on a bot. With her Master’s complete, Toni had given her the job of helping her test her new products like she’d wanted, and honestly it was nice having so much of her family so close to her.

She looked around the room, feeling so much love and warmth for everyone around her. While she knew there were others, like Aunt Peggy, Uncle Daniel, and Harry, who loved her and wasn’t present, she knew that she was loved.

For how alone she’d felt a little over a decade ago upon the loss of her mother and Jarvis, Toni knew that there were others who loved her. And that they would never hurt her, not the way Howard had when he was drunk and wanted to show her just how much he hated her.

She wasn’t alone.

She just hoped they wouldn’t leave, even if they promised they wouldn’t.
The Jericho

Chapter Summary

Tony wins an award and takes a business trip

By the time the first decade of the new millennia was coming to an end, Toni Stark had earned many names to describe her and her successes. The Merchant of Death. A Genius. A Playgirl. And now apparently the winner of the Apogee award that year.

She knew she should be thrilled; not many women won that award and just the fact that she had been nominated should have been enough. But it wasn’t enough. It wasn’t enough that she was on the verge of entering her second decade of being a CEO of a company and people still looked at her in shock whenever she came out with any new products. Like they were still surprised that her technology that was so amazingly brilliant could have come from her.

Her company was leading the market for the best phones, laptops, personal computers, music players, and any other technology she could think of. Her weapons had a 100% success rate because she refused to accept anything less. If there was a single faulty unit, she would destroy it, as the safety of her country was far more important than the thousands of bucks it would cost to remake a unit.

She knew Obie didn’t agree; it was in poor business practice, and it wasn’t even necessary for their bombs to be that functional. Hammer Industries got away with worse. But she refused to be like him. She refused to give anyone any reasons to doubt her. Not when she had fought her entire life against sexism like that.

“Just accept the award, Toni,” Obie said, rolling his eyes. “Everyone knows you deserve the award. Yes, perhaps you should have been considered for it far sooner than you were, but you’re getting this this year. The press we’re going to get from this will rise our stocks, so just show up and accept it with grace.”

“I was going to,” she said with a roll of her eyes, “I never argued against that Obie. Just that it’s ridiculous that they’re making a big production out of this. You know it’s because of the outcry of the lack of women receiving the award that they got last year, right? That’s the only reason they’re bothering giving it to me.”

“Just be there by eight,” Obie said, clearly not caring what she was saying, as he moved to leave the room. “Don’t be late, Antonia.”

She sighed, watching him leave her office. Despite what the press thought about her, she did know how to balance work and play. And she had no intention of missing the awards. Not when it was so rare for a woman to even be considered for such a thing.

So she dressed up in the outfit Pepper had selected for her, and sat in the limo on the way to Ceasars Palace as Pepper handed her the notes she had written out for her to say during the ceremony. Her hair was tied up in an updo that had taken far too long for her to do, and her dress was maroon and flowing. She knew the press would expect to see her in something short and tight, but she did know how to dress appropriately, despite what they might think of her.
“I’m going to go to the casino for a bit,” she murmured to Pepper, “Have a drink and relax my nerves. I always hate giving speeches to the masses, no matter how many times I’ve done it before. I’ll meet you inside?”

“Fine,” Pepper said, as Happy helped her out of the car, “Just try and be there twenty minutes before you’re due on stage. That way we can touch up your makeup and make sure you’re ready for your entrance”

She simply nodded, as she put her phone into her purse, ready to face the public. She waved towards the paparazzi that had already started gathering in front of the building, smiling, as she ignored their questions about whether it was true or not that she was currently dating both the newest Victoria Secret Angel and the Striker on the British Football team.

She posed for a few pictures, before Happy helped her into the building, stopping anyone who tried to get too close to her.

“Thanks, Hap,” she told him with a smile, and he nodded at her. It didn’t matter how long he had worked for her, his firm demeanour stayed. She knew he cared about her from his odd smiles when he thought she wasn’t looking, and she was perfectly fine not pushing him out of his comfort zone.

As she entered the casino, she immediately got a glass of whiskey from a waitress walking by with a tray and she headed over towards the Roulette table.

As a mathematician, she loved the uncertainty of the game. The probability the ball would land on a certain number or colour gave her thrill as she watched the wheel spin. Probably because she had so little control over everything else in her life, that it was nice to be able to let go and let fate take the wheel every once in a while. She may not believe in outside forces controlling her life, but it was nice to pretend sometimes.

She watched as the wheel spun around, landing on red, and she grinned as she gathered up the chips from her win. The calculations were enticing, as she quickly calculated the odds of it landing on certain colours once more, and she made her bet.

The time flew around her and the stack of chips around her began to grow as did the crowd watching, and she lost herself to the game.

It was only when her phone began to ring that she pulled away from the game for a moment.

“Pepper?” she said, frowning at her phone as she checked the time.

“Toni, where are you? The ceremony starts in fifteen minutes,” Pepper said frantically from the other side. “You said you’d be here by now.”

“It’s only 6:45,” Toni said, sounding confused, “I thought it started at eight?”

“It starts at seven!” Pepper said quickly, cutting her off, “Who said eight? Never mind, it doesn’t matter now. Just get here, Toni. Otherwise a lot of people are going to look embarrassed on stage.”

She ended the call as she stood, “Sorry boys,” she said to the group gathered around her, “Looks like I have to go. You there,” she said, calling out the young waitress who had given her the whiskey earlier. “I don’t exactly have pockets in this dress, and apparently I don’t have time to deal with this either, so how about you take these chips off my hands and do something useful with the money?”

“Miss Stark that’s nearly 3 million dollars,” The girl spluttered, looking at her like she was insane.
“I am aware,” Toni said coolly, “But I have an award to go collect, and I hardly need the money, do I?”

“Thank you!” she said as she looked dazed, “I-just, thank you, this means a lot to me. I could pay for my entire tuition.”

“Use it well,” she winked, as she gathered her purse and walked to ballroom where she was being honoured.

“There you are!” Pepper said as Rhodey stood stage while a reel of her life played on screen. “Quick let’s get you ready.”

She watched as Rhodey spoke about their friendship, as Pepper touched up her lipstick.

“I’ve known Toni Stark since we were both at MIT, and have been her friend for many years now,” Rhodey said to the audience, “As Program Manager and Liaison to Stark Industries, I’ve had the honour of working with her first hand throughout the years, a real patriot who has served her country and dedicated her life toward protecting the troops on the front lines. She’s a brilliant mind, and innovator, a great friend, mentor, and a compassionate person who has always been there for her friends and country. It is my great honour to present the 2008 to Apogee Award to Toni Stark!”

She could hear the applause and she plastered on a smile as she made her way onstage. Rhodey looked visibly relieved to see her, and she wondered how such a mix up even could have happened. She looked over at Obadiah Stane who seemed slightly surprised by her presence, and she wondered why.

“Thank you,” she said, taking the award from Rhodey as she hugged him carefully. The press had already been speculating about their relationship for years, and well, if they wanted to believe she was dating him, nothing she said or did would dissuade them.

“I must say, it is a great honour to be receiving this award today,” she told them all, “When I was a young girl, all I wanted to do is make a difference. I wanted to build new things. I wanted to change the world. And well, the world wasn’t always welcoming of a young girl trying to change the status quo. I hope that if I can even inspire one person to take a chance on themselves and their dreams, then that would be enough. Thank you for this award, and I hope that I can continue to keep creating and making a difference.”

Rhodey clapped and the room quickly followed as she exited the stage.

“Where were you?” Rhodey demanded as soon as they were offstage. “I didn’t think you would make it. Do you know how embarrassing that would have been for me if you didn’t show?”

“I was told it started at eight,” Toni said, eyeing Obie as he came over.

Rhodey frowned at that, as he followed her gaze, “Do you think he deliberately told you the wrong time?” he asked her.

“I don’t know,” Toni said carefully, “But I do think it was slightly suspicious that he wanted me to be there at a certain time. And it wasn’t even once or twice that he told me. He wanted me to know it started at eight. It was why I thought I had more than enough time to play a few rounds of roulette before this damn thing started.”

“Toni,” Obie said warmly, “Had a bit too much fun at the casinos?”

“I was told this started at eight, Obie,” she reminded him with a laugh. “I guess we both just had a lot
“You must be mistaken,” Obie shook his head, “But anyways, you have a PA for this. If anyone should have kept you on track it should have been her. Perhaps if you hired an actual assistant and not just an accountant, you wouldn’t have made this mistake.”

“Pepper wasn’t responsible for this,” Toni simply said. “But I have to go, Obie. I have plans tonight.”

So she turned and walked out of the room, holding her head held high. Clearly Obie wasn’t going to admit to telling her the wrong time, and she didn’t know why. Maybe it was embarrassment, or some other horrible reason. But he made it clear she wouldn’t find out from him.

“The Board meeting is scheduled for the eleventh,” Pepper said, looking through her StarkPad. “Should I tell them to expect an appearance?”

She sighed; it wasn’t often she skipped the meetings, but when she was working on something big, she would miss a meeting or two to finish whatever she was working on. And while the Board grumbled about it, whenever she dropped their weapons in front of them their eyes lit up and all was forgiven.

“Miss Stark,” she heard a sultry voice call out, “Christine Everheart, Vanity Fair Magazine. Can I ask you a few questions?”

She looked back at Pepper, and her PA nodded, giving her the approval. The last thing she needed was for the press to print anything else bad about her.

“You’ve been called the Da Vinci of our time,” Everheart said, “What do you say about that?”

She laughed, “Ridiculous. I don’t paint,” she said, brushing off the compliment easily.

“And your other nickname?” Everheart asked, and Toni wondered just which one. “Merchant of Death.”

She didn’t say anything, “It’s not bad,” she said, nonchalantly. And upon her cold gaze, Toni continued, “Let me guess, Berkeley?”

“Brown,” Everheart said, without dropping her gaze.

“Well Miss Brown, it’s an imperfect world and I assure you, the day weapons are no longer needed to keep the peace, I’ll start manufacturing bricks and beams to make baby hospitals,” Toni rolled her eyes.

It was so easy for reporters like her to forget all the good Toni did. She founded the Maria Stark foundation, for Newton’s sake! She basically invented all modern technology. But people like her would only focus on the weapons, without as much as a concern for all the good her weapons could do.

“Rehearse that much, Miss Stark?” Everheart asked, looking unimpressed.

“Every night in front of the mirror,” Toni deadpanned.

“I was hoping for a more serious answer,” Everheart said, and Toni laughed.

“Here’s serious. My old man had a philosophy: peace means having a bigger stick than the other
guy,” she said, referring to something her father had told her often in her childhood.

“Good line, coming from the woman selling the sticks,” Christine retorted.

“My father helped defeat Hitler. He was on the Manhattan Project. He worked on Project Rebirth and helped win the second world war. A lot of people, including your professors at Brown, might call that being a hero,” she said simply. She might not care for her father, but she knew his work had been important; that much she could admit.

“Others might call it war-profiteering,” Christine commented.

She smiled instead, having listened to comments like this her entire life. “Tell me: do you plan to report on the millions we’ve saved by advancing medical technology? Or kept from starving with our Intelicrops? All were breakthroughs spawned from, that’s right, military funding,” she said, finally growing tired of this conversation.

“Wow. You ever lose an hour of sleep your whole life?” Christine asked, but with far less bite than before, clearly having heard her words.

And in that split second, she made a decision, “I’d love to lose a few hours of sleep with you,” she said, winking, and Christine gaped after her, as Happy pulled the limo around. And when Toni held the door open to her, Christine simply scampered in after her.

When she woke up the next morning, her bed was cold and empty, and she wondered just how long it had been since Christine had left. She sighed to herself as she wrapped her sheets around herself, standing, as she moved to get ready for the day.

“JARVIS, what time is it?” she asked, as she pulled on some leggings and one of Rhodey’s MIT sweaters before moving to make some coffee.

“It currently is seven am, Ms Stark,” JARVIS responded, “Miss Everheart left an hour ago, as Miss Potts showed her kindly to the door.”

She groaned, as she all but inhaled the coffee before moving down to the lab to go over the specs of her newest missile before the demonstration.

“You still owe me five minutes,” she heard Pepper say as she entered her lab.

“Five? I’ll need a bit longer than that,” Toni teased out, as Pepper rolled her eyes and cut her off.

“Focus,” Pepper interrupted, “I need to leave on time today.”

“You’re rushing me. What, you have plans tonight?” Toni frowned mockingly, despite knowing all too well why Pepper needed to leave.

“The MIT commencement. Yes or no?” Pepper said, without looking up from her tablet.

“Maybe,” Toni said indecisively, “We still have three months until that. Can’t you just hold them off until then?”

“They want an answer, Toni,” Pepper said firmly, “I’ll tell them ‘yes’. You want to buy the Jackson Pollock? He’s got another buyer in the wings.”
“What’s it look like?” she asked, not particularly caring. It was her mother who loved art. Toni just had them up to remind her of her mother through seeing her favourite artists’ paintings.

It’s a minor work in his later Spring Period, it’s ludicrously over-priced—” Pepper started, but Toni interrupted her.

“Buy it,” Toni said firmly, and Pepper’s phone rang in that moment. She touched her blue-tooth headset, and Toni watched as she grew tense.

“It’s Rhodey again. You were supposed to be at the airport by now,” Pepper reminded him.

“It’s my own plane,” Toni said with a shrug, “It’s not going to leave without me. Now for the more pressing matters. Happy Birthday, Miss Potts.”

“You remembered,” Pepper smiled at her, and Toni grinned.

“Did you like the shoes?” Toni beamed at her

“It was very tasteful, very elegant. Thank you, Miss Stark,” Pepper told her with a smile as she shook her head.

“You’re welcome, Miss Potts,” Toni remarked back, as she gathered up her tablet and a few of her things.

“Have a safe trip, Ms Stark,” JARVIS said aloud, and Toni blew a kiss towards her ceiling.

“Take care of the kids for me, Jay,” she told her baby, “I’ll be back before any of you even noticed that I was gone.”

“I’ll try my best,” JARVIS said drily.

“Now,” Toni said as she turned to Pepper, “Let’s not keep Rhodey Bear waiting for any longer than we have to. He gets cranky if he has to wait more than an hour for me and I don’t want to be stuck on the plane with him being an actual sour patch and not just a metaphorical one.”

Pepper rolled her eyes at her ridiculous nicknames, but Toni simply beamed at her as she exited her mansion and got into the limo as Happy took her to the airport where Rhodey no doubt would be waiting for her.

Just wait ‘til he saw what she had for him; she knew he wouldn’t be able to stay mad at her for long.

Needless to say, Rhodey was definitely unimpressed when she showed up late to the airport.

“I’ve been waiting in the cold for three hours,” Rhodey told her, “What the hell took you so long?”

“Car troubles?” Toni tried as she sat across from him on the plane. She took a hot, steamy towel as she warmed up her hands.

“Toni,” Rhodey sighed at her.

“Would you like a drink, Miss Stark?” a flight attendant asked her, and Toni grinned.

“Two fingers of Laphroig,” she said, turning to Rhodey, “You want one?”
“We’re working,” Rhodey said, looking at her, unimpressed.

“You should have a drink. We’ve got a twelve-hour flight ahead of us,” she said with a grin.

“It’s two in the afternoon,” Rhodey shook his head at her.

“It’s two in the morning where we’re going. C’mon, ten hours bottle to throttle,” Toni started and Rhodey groaned.

“Don’t start with me,” Rhodey sighed.

“Jeez, we’re not getting hammered. Just a nightcap. We’ll sleep better, arrive fresh. It’s the responsible thing to do. I don’t know about you, but I want to sell some weapons,” Rhodey looked unimpressed, and Toni stopped. “I just need a drink, Rhodey. It’s been a long couple of months, years really, and it helps me take the edge off.”

“Toni, you don’t need alcohol to do that,” Rhodey said, taking her hand, “You have us. Just take a break every now and then. You don’t need to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders.”

“I do though,” she said, smiling at him sadly, “There’s so much I need to do, so much that needs to happen. Even with delegating between Ava and Pepper, I still have to carry so much of this weight. If the world thinks for even a second that I’m incapable of handling something, do you know the storm that will ensue?”

“So let something go,” Rhodey told her, “If you don’t want to carry all these things, let it go. Focus on what makes you happy.”

“But the rest of the world will be unhappy the,” she said simply. “That’s how it is, Kit Kat. Don’t worry about me. I’ve been dealing with this for years. Besides the alcohol helps so who am I to stand in the way of my own successes?”

“Toni,” Rhodey told her, “You have us to help you. Who cares if the world is unhappy with what you choose to do? You are under no obligation to keep giving to them. You are under no obligation to help anyone but yourself. You’ve already made the world a much better place. You’ve changed the lives of those around you. In the near three decades I’ve known you, you’ve changed my life in numerous, unmeasurable ways. You’ve made the world so much safer and far more advanced than it ever would have gotten without you. I meant what I said last night during the ceremony. You’ve made my life far more interesting and better. You’re my friend and I can’t imagine a world without you in it. You are more than just your creations.

She felt her throat close up as she smiled back at Rhodey.

“I love you too, James,” she told him, using his real name for once, instead of a ridiculous nickname so he would know just how serious she was. “After losing Jarvis, my parents, and Peggy...I don’t know what I would have done without you in my life. You’ve been there through some of the worst parts of my life, and I don’t know if I could have survived it alone. You and Pepper, you’re my family, and I love you too.”

“If you want to take a break, you can,” Rhodey told her gently. “You don’t need to prove yourself to anyone. The world is more than aware of just how capable you are. The world is more than aware of how brilliant and strong you are. You don’t need to prove yourself to anyone. After this, the two of us should take a trip somewhere. Just the two of us, okay? No technology or anything. Just the world at our fingertips.”

“No technology?” she pouted, looking at him, and he laughed at her.
“Maybe one piece of technology,” Rhodey relented, but if I catch you doing any work, I’ll throw your phone into the ocean.”

She gasped, “How dare you.”

“It’s not like you can’t afford it,” he shrugged, “Besides, I know all your stuff is backed up onto the server, so it’s not like you’ll be losing anything.”

“I hate you,” she said firmly, and he shook his head.

“You loved me, Antonia,” he smirked at her and she gasped.

“That’s it, I take it back. We can’t be friends anymore. You’ve betrayed me too much. It’s over Rhodey. I never want to see you ever again in my life. Ever.”

“Then it’s a good thing that you happen to be stuck with me on this plane for a few more hours, isn’t it?” he asked her, and she pouted.

“I’m ignoring you. I don’t wanna listen to another word you say. And when we get back, I’m telling Mama Rhodes on you and letting her know all the horrible things you’ve been doing and saying to me,” she glared at him.

“How dare you?” he asked her, looking hurt, “You know Mama would take your side over mine any day! My family loves me far more than me, and it’s unfair.”

“It’s cause your family is more than aware that I’m amazing,” she said with a grin and Rhodey closed his eyes.

“It’s going to be a long flight, isn’t it?” he asked her, as he rubbed his temples. “God, please just let this trip end quickly so I can get back to American soil and away from you.”

“You could never get rid of me,” she beamed, “You would have done so already if you could. Face it Snickerdoodle, it’s too late. You’re stuck with me for the rest of your life, whether you like it or not.”

He threw his towel at her without opening her eyes, and she burst into laughter.

She stood in front of the crowd, Generals sitting in folding chairs in front of her as she showcased the weapons that she had brought with her to Afghanistan soil. The soldiers patrolled the perimeter as Rhodey stood behind her, watching her demonstration. She knew she probably didn’t need to come, but Obie had made it seem like this meeting was far too important for her to do remotely, and she’d found herself half way across the world.

“She stood in front of the crowd, Generals sitting in folding chairs in front of her as she showcased the weapons that she had brought with her to Afghanistan soil. The soldiers patrolled the perimeter as Rhodey stood behind her, watching her demonstration. She knew she probably didn’t need to come, but Obie had made it seem like this meeting was far too important for her to do remotely, and she’d found herself half way across the world.

“The age-old question,” she started, as their eyes all flitted over to her, “Is it better to be feared or respected? I say, is it too much to ask for both? With that in mind, I humbly present the crown jewel of Stark Industries’ Freedom Line. The first missile to incorporate our proprietary repulse technology. They say the best weapon is one you never have to fire. I respectfully disagree. I prefer the weapon you only have to fire once. That’s how Dad did it. That’s how America does it. And it’s worked out pretty well so far.”

She gestured to the Jericho Missile behind her, “Find an excuse to fire off one of these and I personally guarantee you the bad guys are not gonna want to leave their caves.”
The missile rose from behind her, as it shot into the sky before breaking of into many smaller missiles. She didn’t even need to turn around to know the peaks behind her as she simply raised her hands.

“For your consideration, the Jericho,” she said, as her outstretched hands showed off the shock-waves of her design, dusting the Generals in front of her.

She took a drink after from the bar she’d brought with her, as her phone rang, and she picked up the video call to see Obie shirtless on the other side.

The mountains behind his outstretched hands explode.

“Hey, what are you doing up?” she asked her godfather, knowing the time difference made it late in America.

“I couldn’t sleep ‘til I found out how it went. How’d it go?” Obie asked, shaking the camera.

“It went great. I think it’s going to be an early Christmas,” she said simply.

“Hey way to go my girl!” Obie grinned. “I’ll see you tomorrow, yeah?”

“Why aren’t you wearing the pyjamas I got you?” Toni asked him simply, and he shook his head at her.

“Good night, Toni,” he said, and Toni hung up, as she got into the Humvee.

“Hey Toni,” Rhodey said, as he came to her window.

“I’m sorry, this is the Funvee,” she said with a grin, “The Humdrumvee is back there.”

“Really?” Rhodey asked her with a sigh, and she beamed at him.

“I know you have some things to discuss with the generals,” she told him, “I’ll see you back at the base.”

Rhodey nodded at her, as he headed off towards the other Humvee. The Humvee took off, driving back towards the base, and she turned on the music from her phone. Rock music began to flow through the vehicle as the other soldiers looked stoically at her.

“I feel like you’re driving me towards a court martial,” she said, swirling her glass around. “This is crazy. What did I do? I feel like you’re going to pull me over and snuff me. What, are you not allowed to talk?”

“We can talk, Ma-am,” one of the soldiers said.

“Oh, I see,” she grinned, “So it’s personal.”

“No, you intimidate them,” the driving woman said, and Toni beamed.

“You’re a woman! Nice to see you taking part in the good old man’s club. I love a good woman who knows how to shake things up.”

The Humvee burst into laughter, and she felt the mood loosen up.

“I have a question, Ma-am,” the soldier in front of her asked, and she nodded at him.
“Please,” she gestured.

“Is it true you’re twelve for twelve with last year’s Maxim cover models?”

“Excellent question,” she said, taking off her sunglasses as she grinned, “Yes and no. March and I had a schedule conflict, but, thankfully, the Christmas cover was twins. Anyone else? You, with the hand up.”

The mood improved and she took a picture with the soldier beside her, telling him not to raise any gang signs up, and as the photo clicked, she felt the shaking.

The Humvee in front of them erupted into a fireball, and she was flung to the side as the Humvee behind them exploded as well. She screamed as the airmen jumped out of the Humvee, trapping her inside for safety as the shooting began.

The windshield cracked and she let out a gasp as she hid under the seats. She could hear the airmen around her dying, and she screamed out for them, for Jimmy and Pratt, and Ramirez who had only been trying to keep her safe.

There was another explosion, and the world around her started to ring. She tried to look around her to see what was going on. Screams filled the air and she stumbled out of the vehicle, just as a bomb landed beside her. She ran towards a rock, scrambling to hide behind it, taking her phone out and frantically typing.

Just then, a missile landed beside her, painted with the Stark Industries logo on it, as it began to beep. The implications rang through her head, but now wasn’t the time to think about what exactly it meant. No, now she needed to survive. She stood hastily, trying to run away from it on instinct, but it exploded as she tried to run away.

She landed on her back, as she felt her chest grow wet, and she looked down to see blood soaking through her fitted white blouse. She felt the pain fill her body as she lay on her back while sounds continued all around her.

Pepper was going to kill her, she thought, and the world around her faded white.
Chapter Summary

Toni is in captivity as the world searches for her

When she woke up, the first thing she felt was pain. The lights in the room were flickering as a humming sound filled the room. She blinked, as the tube in her nose rubbed against her skin, and her throat felt dry.

“Water,” she rasped, looking over at the jug on the counter, “Water.”

The man humming didn’t say a word and she tried to pull out the IV from her arm and get some water. Where was she? How had she gotten here?

She reached out for the jug, before feeling a restraint against her, a wire attached to her chest holding her back.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” the man said simply, and her eyes followed his to where the wire went; attached to a car battery.

She felt panic fill her as she clawed at the bandages on her chest, remembering the red that had stained her blouse before she had lost consciousness. And there sure enough, was the wound in question, ugly, raw, and red.

“What did you do to me?” she asked desperately, trying to make sense of everything, “What happened?”

“What did I do? I removed what I could, but there’s a lot left headed for your atrial septum. Do you want a souvenir?” The man asked, throwing a jar at her, filled with shrapnel. Filled with her shrapnel. She remembered the Stark Industries logo on that bomb before it went off. “I’ve seen many wounds like this in my village. We called them the walking, because it took a week for the barbs to reach vital organs.”

“What is this?” she asked, gesturing to her chest.

“That is an electromagnet, hooked up to a car battery. It’s keeping the shrapnel from entering your heart,” the man said, calmly, and she felt dread.

Oh Faraday.

She surveyed the room, trying to make sense of her surroundings. The first thing Aunt Peggy had taught her after she’d been kidnapped the first time was to always search the room. To look for weaknesses and vulnerabilities. It had gotten her out of kidnappings more often than not. Just because it had been a few decades since her last kidnapping didn’t mean she’d forgotten everything. She looked up and saw the camera trained on the both of them and held her breath. Who had taken her?

“That’s right, smile,” he paused, “We met once, at a technical conference in Bern.”
“I don’t remember,” Toni said softly.

“You wouldn’t. If I’d been that drunk, I wouldn’t have been able to stand, much less give a talk on integrated circuits,” he said wryly.

She winced to herself internally. Of course she had been; it was the only way she had ever been able to deal with any of those events where people looked at her as if she didn’t belong, despite the patents and the innovations and the papers she had continued to file.

And Obie always did tell her she was more pleasant to be around after a few drinks

But before she could retort, ask anything, the door flew open. Her jailers were coming for her.

“Stand up! Do as I do. Now!” The man told her urgently, and she tried standing quickly, despite every part of her body begging her not to. “Listen to me, whatever they ask you, refuse. You understand? You must refuse.”

Two heavily armed men entered the room, and her eyes drew down to his wrist. Where Jimmy, the soldier’s watch sat firmly on it. Their leader came through next, as his soldiers stood behind him, weapons all trained on her.

She felt anger fill her. They’d killed all those innocent soldiers. And for what? Because they wanted to get to her? What did they want from her? Why did they take her?

The man began speaking in Arabic, as the man who had wired her up translated.

“He says welcome Toni Stark, the greatest mass murderer in the history of America. He is very honored,” The man said to her. “He wants you to build the missile. The Jericho Missile that you demonstrated.”

The leader handed them a picture and the man took it as he showed it to Toni. Of her own missile, there on the page.

“I refuse,” she said firmly, knowing what it would mean for men like that to get their hands on her technology. Her weapons which were supposed to save the world. To keep soldiers and Rhodey safe.

The water came afterwards.

She held her breath for as long as she could, screaming out loud in pain as her head was dunked down more times than she could count. She cried out, wanted to beg for air, as the men showed her no mercy.

The magnet in her heart lit up and she could hear a woman screaming her name.

A bag was thrown over her head when they were done with her, and she felt them move her through her prison. When they removed it, the light flooded in as she saw a makeshift camp where they had set up. They marched her through it, and she froze when she saw containers of weapons. Her weapons.

The man spoke again, and her prison cellmate translated, “He wants to know what you think.”

“I think you got a lot of my weapons,” Toni said, flatly.

“He says they have everything you need to build the Jericho missile,” the man told her, and Toni
clenched her jaw. “He wants you to make a list of materials. He wants you to start working immediately and when you’re done, he will set you free.”

“No, he won’t,” she knew all too well, despite smiling and shaking the man’s hand. Because why would he? When they had gotten everything, they needed out of her, why would he?

“No, he won’t,” the man echoed.

Later, when she was huddled by a makeshift fire, her prison mate spoke to her once more, “I’m sure they’re looking for you, Stark, but they will never find you in these mountains. What you just saw? That is your legacy, Stark. Your life’s work in the hands of those murderers. Is that how you want to go out? Is this the last act of defiance of the great Toni Stark? Or are you going to do something about it?”

“Why should I do anything? They’re going to kill me and you. Either way, I’ll be dead in a week.” Toni said, feeling the pain of the situation hit her.

“Then it’s going to be a very important week for you, isn’t it?” the man said, and she wanted to laugh out of hysteria.

When Peggy Carter saw on the news that her goddaughter had been taken, she knew what she had to do.

She stood up, and immediately grabbed her effects, as she packed a bag, and made plans in her head. She might have had to retire from SHIELD, but she still had enough contacts who could help her. She still had more than enough resources needed to find her goddaughter.

She would need to get a plane first, and she knew Fury would give her one if she demanded it. He was her protegee, and he best well remember who his superiors are. She wondered if the NSA or CIA had any intelligence on who had taken Toni and what they wanted from her.

She swore that if any of them touched a hair on her head, there would be hell to pay. She would make each and every one of them regret hurting her.

“Peggy,” she heard a startled voice say, and she turned to see her husband enter the room. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“My goddaughter has been taken, Daniel,” she told her husband hotly. “Where do you think I’m going? I’m going to try and save her. Do you honestly expect me to sit around and let some incompetent fools search for her? She needs me.”

“You can’t go,” Daniel told her, for the first time in their entire marriage, telling her what she could or couldn’t do.

“How dare you tell me what I can do?” she hissed at her husband. “You have no right to tell me what I am allowed to do. My daughter is in trouble, and you have the nerve to tell me I am not allowed to do anything to help her? How dare you?”

“Peggy,” her husband said, taking her hands gently, as he led her over to the bed. “You are everything to me, and you know I would never make any demands like this unless I had to. I love you too much for that. But you are not well enough to go on this sort of mission. Darling, we’ve had a good life, but we’re not as nimble as we used to be. Especially given your condition. We would be
He took a deep breath, as she felt herself shake, “Do you think I don’t want to bring our daughter home? Do you think I am not making every call, not knocking on every door, trying to make sure she is brought home safely? None of us like this. James Rhodes hasn’t come home despite his supervisors threatening to fire him for insubordination. Harry is on the field with other SHIELD operatives, following every lead given to him, and Ava and JARVIS are doing their best to use military satellites to try and find out where Toni has been taken. We all want her to come home. None of us are going to leave her there in the hands of those monsters. But you need to trust us. I promise, I’ll let you be involved. I’ll share everything I have with you and let you know exactly what is happening. But you cannot leave this hospital. Not when you could wake up tomorrow with no memory of how you got there or what is happening.”

“I’ve always kept her safe,” Peggy wavered as her husband held her tightly, “She’s my daughter. I’ve rescued her every time she was in danger, and I knew I could keep her safe. Because I trusted myself and my instincts to bring her home. But now I have no control of the situation, and I need to just sit back while everyone tries to save her. What if we’re too late? What if it’s already too late? The world would suffer without her, but her family would break. I would break. My little ducky is in danger and I can’t even do a thing to help her.”

“We can’t think like that,” Daniel soothed her gently. “We need to believe that we will bring her home. No matter what the news outlets say, or what Obadiah Stane says. We need to believe that she is still alive and keep looking for her.”

“What is Obadiah saying?” she felt herself asking, despite knowing that nothing that man ever said could be good.

Daniel closed his eyes, “It’s been about a month and a half, and there has been no proof of life or demands for her. So he wants to have her legally declared as dead.”

“How dare he?” she seethed.

“He is trying to file the paperwork but since the governments are still searching for her, he doesn’t have too much of a case yet. But I’m worried the longer we go without being able to bring her home, that he’ll finally be successful,” Daniel said softly.

“Well then you better make sure they bring our girl home soon,” Peggy told her husband. “Make sure they bring her home, Daniel.”

“I will,” her husband promised her, kissing her head. “None of us will stop until Toni is safe and back at home with her family.”

If she was going to do this, then she was going to play the part of the engineer that she knew all too well. She kept her head held high, masking her features as she tattled on a long list of everything she would need to make this a functional lab, as if there was any way she could have a functional lab in a cave in the mountains while she was being held a prisoner.

She hated this, felt sick with the mere thought that any would believe that she would make weapons for terrorists.

She was a Stark, and she was made out of iron.
She would not break.

And she would not bend.

No matter how many times they tortured her, how many times they tried to extract things from her.

How long had she even been held captive? How many days had passed?

Was Rhodey alive? Did his Humvee make it out of the firing range unscathed?

She knew he was a soldier and was used to war, but there was a difference between knowing that he was in dangerous situations and seeing first-hand the situations he had faced.

Was he still looking for her, or had he given up, thinking she was dead?

She thought about her mother on nights when she couldn’t sleep because the ground was too cold, and her back was going stiff. She thought about her mother and her beautiful voice, how she always made the world feel safe when Toni lay in her arms. Even after her father had gotten too drunk some nights and had been too rough with her. Her mother always made things better. Always kept her safe and always did her best to protect her.

She thought about Jarvis, the man who was the closest thing she’d had to a real father. How he’d soothed her when she was sick and made her cookies when she had a particularly rough day at school. She thought about how he was proud of her through all her accomplishments and she wondered what he would think of the woman she’d become. Would he be proud? Disappointed? Would he hate the choices she made? Or would he want her to continue on.

And she thought of Aunt Peggy, who was so brave and strong. Aunt Peggy who taught her how to fight back and taught her how to hold her head held high. Who taught her that no man can hurt her unless she gives them the power to do so. She thought about how Peggy would handle this situation, and how she would be graceful even in the face of struggle. How Peggy would never stop fighting and looking for a way out of the situation.

So she did what she did best.

She built, she made, and she created.

She worked delicately to open up the missile she’d made a few years back. One that had been meant to serve the US military, and now was in the hands of terrorists. How many other innocents had died because her weapons had gotten into the wrong hands? How many had been hurt by her creations?

“Who are these people?” she found herself asking her companion.

“They are your loyal customers, Ma-am,” he said grimly, and she felt her stomach drop. “They call themselves the Ten Rings.”

She looked up at the camera once more and took a drill to her missile.

“Now we might be more productive if you included me in the planning process.”

“Mm hm,” she muttered, as she hammered away, unscrewing ’til she reached what she wanted. A single silver strip.

“What is that?” the man asked her curiously.

“That is palladium,” she said, raising it to him, “0.15 grams. We need at least 1.6, so why don’t you
go break down the other eleven.”

The man didn’t question her, and instead moved away.

She hammered, shaped, forged the materials, as the man poured the material into a cup.

“What do I call you?” she finally asked for the first time.

“My name is Yinsen,” he told her, and she nodded.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, focusing on what they were doing.

“Nice to meet you too,” he said, almost looking amused.

She picked up the metal ring that formed when it had cooled, placing it delicately in place, as she began the wiring process.

It took hours, and she was tired, but she knew what she had to do, knew she could not fail. She worked on perhaps the most important creation of her life. Something her father never had been able to do, but something she needed to.

And when it was done and glowing blue, she almost smiled.

“That does not look like the Jericho missile,” Yinsen said, looking at it.

“That’s because it’s a miniaturized Arc Reactor,” she told him, “I got a big one powering my factory at home. It should keep the shrapnel out of my heart.”

“But what could it generate?” he asked her, awed.

“If my math is right, and it always is, three gigajoules per second,” she told him touching it lightly.

“That could run your heart for fifty lifetimes,” Yinsen said surprised.

“Or run something big for fifteen minutes,” she continued. She trusted the man by now, so she gathered all the pieces of paper she’d been drawing on, placing them one over the other, to show him what it was she’d been working on all this time, to reveal a giant metal suit of armour.

She might not be able to get past all their guns, but she could protect their weapons from hurting her.

“Impressive,” Yinsen said, and for the first time in days, weeks, or months, she'd felt hope.

Later, when the Arc Reactor lay firmly nested in her chest, despite the pain and discomfort she felt, she also felt a bit of satisfaction. Her father had tried his entire life to create a more compact Arc Reactor, and she’d done it in a cave, attached to a car battery, as she struggled to even breathe. But she’d bested her father and the things he’d never been able to do.

She just needed to make sure she didn’t die trying to get out of here, or it all would have been in vain.

She threw the dice as Yinsen explained the rules of the game to her, “You still haven’t told me where you’re from,” she said, wanting to know more about the man.
“I’m from a small town,” Yinsen began, “Called Gulmira. It’s actually a nice place.”

“Got a family?” she asked him, curiously.

“Yes, and I will see them when I leave here,” he said, without looking at her, “And you, Stark?”

She thought about Rhodey, her brother who had been there for her through everything. Whose mother all but adopted her and who’s sister often made fun of Rhodey saying that she liked Toni more than her.

She thought of Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel who never made her feel like she was anything less than their daughter. How Ava looked up to her and followed in her footsteps. And Harry who was her little brother. Who would fight against the world for her.

She thought about her bots and JARVIS, and how they were her children, despite the lack of convention. They were her creations, and she loved them more than words could even say.

She thought about Pepper and Happy, whom she’d hired but had come to care about her more she could even begin to imagine.

She had a family.

But she couldn’t say that. Not when she was already at risk. She couldn’t put them at harm’s way. Not when the bad guys could try and use them to get to her. She refused to put them in that sort of danger.

So instead she said, “Nothing.”

“Yeah. So you are a woman who has everything and yet has nothing,” he said, giving her a smile.

The week progressed on, and she began to build. She wielded together crassly as she made the pieces fit together. She knew she had to make it look as much as her missile as possible, otherwise she would draw their attention. And the last thing she wanted to do was gain their attention.

When the doors opened and they came to check on her once more, she stood firmly, hands on her head, as their leader stepped forward.

And in perfect English, he spoke, “Relax.”

She dropped her arms carefully, looking at Yinsen.

“The bow and arrow was once the pinnacle of weapons technology. It allowed the great Genghis Khan to rule from the Pacific to the Ukraine. An empire twice the size of Alexander the Great,” he said to her, before moving to look over her work, “And four times the size of the Roman empire. But today, whoever holds the latest Stark weapons rules these lands. Soon it will be my turn.”

He turned to Yinsen and began speaking in Urdu, and before Toni knew it, they’d grabbed Yinsen.

He took a hot set of tongs and brought it closer to Yinsen.

“What does he want?” Toni asked urgently.

She moved forward as they began screaming and all of a sudden, all the guns were turned on her.

“I need him,” she said finally. “Good assistant.”
“You have until tomorrow. To assemble my missile,” their leader said, before turning and walking out of the room.

So she created, fast than she ever had before. More than she ever had before.

She taped up her hands, as if she was ready to fight, and she began putting all the pieces together, lowering the armour onto her body, as they recited a map of how to get out safely. They were running out of time, even working in the blind spots. It was only a matter of time before the guards came back.

They had attached a bomb to the door, ready to go off when it was open. But they were not ready, they needed more time. And as the door opened, the bomb blasted them backwards.

“Initialize the power sequence,” she said, in anticipation, and he moved to the computer. “Function eleven. Tell me when you see a progress bar. Tell me when you see it! Press control ‘i’. ‘I’. Enter.”

“Got it,” Yinsen said, as it began.

“Come over here and button me,” Toni said and he moved back to help finish getting her ready. “Make sure the checkpoints are clear before you follow me out, okay?”

“We need more time,” Yinsen said, looking worried. “I’m going to go buy you some more time.”

“Stick to the plan,” she tried commanding him, but he went anyways, grabbing a gun and running forward. “STICK TO THE PLAN!!”

He began shooting and she screamed after him, but it was too late. He had gone. And all she could do is watch the progress bar slowly move forward, as it hit fifty one percent.

She watched the power go out as it completed, and she took a step forward, it was game time. She listened to them come. And as the first one came, she raised her fist and punched.

They began shooting, but her suit deflected it all as they shot blindly into the darkness. She moved, knocking them out one after another, as she moved to get out of the mountain cave. She took out terrorist after terrorist, knocking them out as their screams filled her ears.

Good.

They had tortured her, hurt her, and made her feel weak. No more. Now she was in control.

She moved until she saw Yinsen, lying on the ground and bleeding.

“Yinsen!” she screamed, her voice echoing in the suit.

“Watch out,” he screamed, as an RPG fired her way.

She raised her arms as she moved to trigger a flame thrower, hitting the stone behind him as a rock knocked him out.

“Stark,” he said weakly.

“Come on we got to go,” she said desperately, “We have to move. I’ll help you. Come on we have to go.”

“This was always the plan, Stark,” he told her softly.
“Come on, you’re going to go see your family,” she tried; he had to make it.

“My family is dead,” Yinsen shook his head, “I am going to see them. It’s okay. I want this. I want this.”

“Thank you for saving me,” she said, trying to stay strong.

“Don’t waste it,” he told her, “Don’t waste your life.”

She could hear the loading of weapons once more and knew she had to keep moving, keep going forward. She could not let his sacrifice be in vain. So she moved out of the cave and into sunlight for the first time in months.

They began firing and she stood still, trying to let their weapons run dry.

“My turn,” she said, lifting her arms as flames emerged, and threw them backwards. She shot it at her weapons, destroying every last one of them. And as the shots continued to rain down on her, she buckled.

She shot a container, causing an explosion, as she lifted the panel and hit a red button, flying straight into the air and out of the flames she had caused.

Before she started to fall.

Just like Icarus who had flown too close to the sun, her wings began to melt.

And she fell down, crashing into the sand, her armour scattered all around her.

“Not bad,” she said, because despite everything, she’d escaped. She’d gotten free. She’d done it.

She just needed to make sure she wasn’t recaptured before she’d managed to find anyone who could help her.

She covered her head with her hood as she moved through the sand, desperate to find anyone. But all around her there were sand for miles, spanning in every direction. She stood up, and walked, in the opposite from where she had flown from. Her arms were burned and there were injuries all along her body but none of that was important. What was important was that she needed to get out safely, and she needed to get out without the wrong people finding her first.

She walked for hours, the sun coming down on her made her just want to lie down and let it be done with. Just let her take a break, just a small break. She wanted to cry, to let her anger and her frustration out, but it would not accomplish anything. So she kept moving, when all she wanted to do was let it end. But she pushed on forward anyways.

And as she walked up a sand dune, she nearly cried to see nothing but endless desert in front of her, without a bit of civilization in sight. There was nothing, and she was going to die out here without anyone ever knowing what had happened to her.

She suddenly heard a chopper fly by overhead, and a part of her wondered if it was a mirage. She had seen countless lakes already, and it was probably her mind deluding herself. But the wind it caused, and the sounds it made could not be part of the delusion.

She screamed out, desperate to get their attention, begging them not to leave her here.

“Hey!” She screamed, waving her arms frantically, “HEY!”
She began to laugh, as tears also streamed down her face.

She fell to her knees as it landed in front of her, feeling relief and happiness all at once. She was finally going home. She was finally free.

And as Rhodey ran out of the helicopter, she swore she could see his tears too.

“How was the Funvee?” he asked her, and she nearly cried as she stood and wrapped her arms around him, happy that he was here. “Next time you ride with me.”

She could hear the desperation in his voice, and it hit her then how much grief he must have felt in her absence. He held her tightly and she felt safe for the first time in months.

He helped her to the helicopter and during their flight he turned to her.

“Did they hurt you?” he asked her carefully, as he gestured to the glowing Arc Reactor in her chest.

She shook her head, “I did that to me,” she said softly, “I’ll tell you about it more, when it’s safe, but it’s keeping me alive. They wanted me to build them the Jericho. And when I said no, they weren’t all too happy with my answer.”

“I saw what happened to their campsite.” he told her, “I’m glad you made them pay. I-Toni. I don’t know what I would have done if something would have happened to you. If you had been hurt, I never would have forgiven myself. I should have protected you and kept you safe. And instead, you were kidnapped on my watch.”

“It wasn’t your fault Rhodey,” she told him gently, taking his hands in hers. “It was no one’s fault but theirs. But I’m safe now. You found me in the middle of the desert. And you saved me.”

“I never would have stopped searching until I found you,” he assured her. “None of us would have. Harry and I have been looking everywhere. Ava and JARVIS hacked into other countries security agencies. DUM-E, YOU and Butterfingers threatened to leave the house to hunt you down, Peggy was ready to leave the hospital to come find you, and Daniel kicked up a storm until the US President himself announced that they would keep looking. None of us would ever have left you there. We would have gone to any extreme to bring you home.”

She felt her throat tighten and she remembered telling Yinsen that she had nothing, and she knew despite the lie, that it had been wrong. She had so many people who loved her and were willing to do anything for her, and she felt so grateful to have them all in her life.

“I missed you,” she said softly, and he put his arms around her gently, trying not to touch any of her wounds. “I missed all of you when I was taken, and the thoughts of you kept me going. I don’t know what I would have done if you didn’t find me.”

“You’re safe now,” he told her. “I will never let anyone hurt you ever again. We’re taking you home.”

She closed her eyes and let out a sigh of relief.

It was finally over.
Toni returns to America and shuts down weapons production. Her family is just happy she's home.

She didn’t spend long back in the base in Afghanistan. Just enough for a few debriefs with the military in charge of the area. She didn’t let any of them examine her, not wanting the arc reactor in her chest to become knowledge to anyone, even if the military had a way of keeping secrets themselves. She didn’t tell them either about the weapons the Ten Rings had. Her weapons. Because like it or not, she had no idea where they were getting it from, and for all she knew, there was someone on the inside who sold their weapons to them.

Someone had told the Ten Rings of the Jericho and of where the demonstration would be. It didn’t matter how good the terrorists’ satellites or intel might be, they shouldn’t have known that sort of knowledge.

She couldn’t do anything about it from here, and she knew she needed to get back to America before she would have any real power to make a difference. She needed to come up with a plan, find out exactly how her weapons were being stolen before she made any accusations.

The plane ride back to America was long and she was dying just to go home to her children and see her family again.

“I should have been there,” Harry said after a moment, as he sat down beside her. “I shouldn’t have let you go to the demonstration alone. SHIELD had intel of a possible terrorist cell making movements in the region, but I had no idea it would have anything to do with your presentation. Maybe if I had given the threat more credit, I could have stopped it. I could have been there for you and stopped you from being hurt.”

“Harry,” she said softly, taking her cousin’s hands in hers. He refused to look up at her, and she could tell his eyes were slightly damp. He had always been so strong, and the only other time she’d seen him remotely as affected was when his mother was hospitalized, and he had locked himself up in his room for a week before throwing himself entirely into his work.

“Harry look at me,” she said gently, as she tilted his head up so she could see him. “It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t Rhodie’s fault, or anyone else’s. No one could have stopped this from happening unless they knew in advance. You and Rhodie brought me home; otherwise I would have been wandering that desert for who knows how long. And if you did not come, it could have been them who found me again. I’m here, and I’m safe.”

“I wasn’t there though,” he said bitterly, “I was off chasing a lead after the explosion you set off. I was on the other side of the mountains. I didn’t find you, I didn’t even find them. What kind of agent am I?”

“You’re the best kind,” she told him. “Harry, I’m safe. For all you both knew, I could have been in either location. It was smart to split up. You and Rhodie brought me home.”
He nodded slightly, and she knew from her own experiences with self-blame that he didn’t entirely believe her, so she simply took his hand in hers, holding her cousin tightly. She asked for stories on what was happening back home to help pass the time; three months was a long time for someone to disappear, especially someone like her who was so involved in the affairs of her company and her country.

“A few sites opened up Toni Stark Watchlists,” Rhodey told her, “People could post any tips of places they saw you. It was always dead ends, and none of them were even in Afghanistan. But I think it gave people hope to know that you might still be out there. You’re more important to the world than you think.”

She swallowed at that.

She’d always been Toni Stark: Socialite, Play Girl, Drunken Mess in the eyes of the public. Or she’d been the Merchant of Death, Ruthless CEO who continued to revolutionize the world faster than any other company could even begin to compete with in any field she’d set her mind to.

But no one had ever wanted just Toni. The girl who struggled and fought every single day of her life to get to where she was.

“We land in an hour,” the flight attendant said as she entered the cabin, saving Toni from having to say anything.

“You should rest,” Rhodey told her gently, “It’s going to be a circus when we get back, and I know you have an aversion to sleep, but you need some rest.”

She nodded lightly as she leaned back. She knew sleep wouldn’t come to her, but she could at least try and regain some strength. Galileo, Afghanistan really did a number on her body.

When the flight landed, she took a deep breath. She knew Rhodey had the Military clear out the landing site so that no one unwanted would be there, and she was grateful to him for that.

As the doors opened, she saw Pepper standing there in her pristine business suit, and Happy with his arms crossed in front of her. Rhodey helped her out of the chair that he had insisted she sit in, and Harry stood on the other side, trying to steady her without touching her broken arm.

She was wearing a dress outfit which she knew all too well that Pepper must have picked out for her, and she smiled slightly as Ava stepped forward the minute she exited the plane and threw her arms around Toni.

“I was so worried,” Ava said, holding Toni tightly and she wrapped her good arm around her cousin.

“I’m here,” Toni reassured her. “Your brother and Rhodey brought me home.”

“JARVIS and I helped,” Ava interjected, “We hacked the satellites after the explosion and tried to chart your trajectory if you had been thrown from the blast site.”

“Of course you did,” she said fondly, knowing all too well that it was the kind of thing they would have done.

“Careful Ava,” Harry told his sister waringly, “She’s hurt.”

Ava stepped back, before examining her, as Toni watched a gurney be brought forward.

“No,” she said flatly, and Rhodey gave her a disbelieving look. “No,” she said again and Rhodey
sighed before gesturing it to go away.

Pepper smiled at her as she walked forward towards her PA, and Toni beamed back.

“I might have ruined the blouse you chose for me,” she said to Pepper, “I know you warned me about damaging it because it cost me a fortune, but it’s gone now.”

“Oh Toni,” she said, with watery eyes, laughing slightly.

“Your eyes are red,” Toni said softly, “A few tears for your long-lost boss?”

“Tears of happiness,” Pepper assured her, “I hate job hunting.”

She wanted to argue that point. Pepper’s position at the company never should have been dependant on Toni’s presence. But she knew Obie had hated that Toni had taken her on, despite his protests.

“Vacations over,” Toni said, nodding, as she got into the limo. She was back, and now it was time to get to work.

“Where to, Ma-am?” Happy asked, as Rhodey slid into the front seat and Ava between her and Pepper.

“Take us to the hospital,” Pepper said, and Toni shook her head immediately.

“No,” she said, speaking over Pepper’s protests. “I don’t have to do anything, Pep. I’ve been in captivity for three months. There are two things I want to do. I want an American Cheeseburger. And the other-”

“That’s enough of that,” Pepper said, immediately cutting her off, as Ava looked amused.

“It’s not what you think,” Toni started. There was a time and place for her to make innuendos, and she very much was not up for sex at the moment. Not when she’d had to bleed into rags for months because things such as tampons were not a luxury she’d been provided. Not when she’d seen the leery looks the men there had given her, and only not touching her out of fear from their leader.

“Then what?” Ava asked her, encouragingly.

“I want to have a press conference,” Toni said firmly, as Rhodey looked at her surprised. “There are somethings I need to discuss with the world.”

When she got to the press conference, she saw the clapping begin as Obie made a big show of welcoming her home. She wanted to roll her eyes at him, but she knew how worried everyone had been in her absence, so she didn’t say anything about it.

She pulled out the last cheeseburger as he led her inside, joking about wanting one and she sighed at him exasperatedly. She was the one who spent the last few months in captivity while he was here and free to eat whatever he wanted. She deserved it.

Obie lead her towards the press, but not before she saw Pepper being approached by a man in a suit, who Harry was eyeing up warily. What did he know that she didn’t?

She sat down in front of the podium, unable to stand any longer, but she crossed her legs. The last thing she needed was speculations about her health to get out and for anyone to question her ability
to run a company. She had managed for this long, and this incident will not be the thing that set her back.

“Would it be okay if everyone just sat down?” She asked, “That way everyone can see me, and I can see them.”

Rhodey moved towards Pepper, looking worried and she didn’t blame him. She’d barely spoken in the car as to what she wanted to discuss with the press, and she knew her family was worried.

“I never got to say goodbye to my father,” she started, “There were questions I would have asked him. Questions about how he felt about what this company did. If he was conflicted, if he ever had doubts. Or maybe he was every inch the man we all remember from the newsreels.”

She took a deep breath before continuing, “I started making weapons to keep Americans safe during war. To protect them and ensure that they have the best possible advantage, so they come home safe. But I saw young Americans kill by the very weapons I created to defend them and protect them. And I saw that I had become part of a system that is comfortable with zero accountability.”

The clamouring began immediately, with whispers among the audience of what it was she was trying to say and what it meant.

“Ben,” she said, pointing to a reporter raise a pen questioningly.

“What happened over there?” he asked her, curiously and she defected immediately.

“I had my eyes opened. I came to realize that I have more to offer this world than just making things that blow up,” she told him, as she stood before pausing. It was the right time for this decision. To finally do what she had wanted for a long time. And now she knew the truth of her weapons, she had no reason not to continue forward. “And that is why, effective immediately, I am shutting down the weapons manufacturing division of Stark International until such a time as I can decide what the future of the company will be.”

The entire room stood up in uproar, Obie looking at her as if she’d lost her goddamn mind. Obie pushed her aside roughly and she held back the wince as he took over the mic.

“I think we're gonna be selling a lot of newspapers,” he tried to cut her off.

“What direction it should take, one that I'm comfortable with and is consistent with the highest good for this country, as well,” she ended before walking away. She could see Rhodey look at her tensely and she wondered if he would hate her for what she’d decided to do.

“What we should take away from this is that Tony's back! And he's healthier than ever. We're going to have a little internal discussion and we'll get back to you with the follow-up,” Obie tried to contain the room, she knew he would be furious as well, but she didn’t care. Stark Industries was her company and she refused to allow it be used to do more harm than good.

She got home a little over an hour later, and Rhodey had yet to say a word to her since her big decision. She tried looking over at him a few times, but he hadn’t made eye contact with her.

It killed her a little, knowing he was angry with her and her decision to shut down the weapons division of her company.
“Rhodey,” she said softly, as Happy pulled up to her Malibu home. “Please say something.”

“What’s left to say?” he asked her. “You made your decision, without even talking to me about it.”

“It wasn’t like that,” she said, as she got out of the car, and saw her uncle waiting for her.

“Toni,” he breathed, upon seeing her. “Thank God. Harry told me they found you, but I couldn’t truly relax until I saw you with my own eyes.”

“I’m fine, Uncle Daniel,” she told him with a smile as he held her tightly. “Is Aunt Peggy doing okay?”

“She was ready to lead a one-woman army to come find you,” Daniel said with a tired laugh, as he lead her into the house. She wasn’t really all that surprised that JARVIS had let them all inside in her absence, since she had given him the code to trust her family. “She still has her off days but she’s doing well, all things considering.”

“Are you okay?” Ava asked her softly, as she took off her suit jacket and the arc reactor’s blue light glowed through her shirt. “What happened? Why does it look like a smaller arc reactor is in your chest?”

“I was hit with shrapnel,” she said, and Pepper let out a gasp, as Rhodey finally met her eyes. “From my own bomb. It had the STARK Industries logo on it. My own weapons killed all the troops in that unit with me.”

“Are you hurt?” Harry asked her immediately, looking her over.

She shook her head, “There was a man in the cave with me, and he removed most of the pieces from my chest. But there still is a piece in there that was too dangerous to remove. I created the miniaturized arc reactor to stop it from reaching my heart.”

“Toni,” Rhodey said painfully, “You need to go to the hospital. You need to let someone else look at it.”

“It won’t make a difference,” she told him with a sad smile, “It’s a part of me now. There is no way to get it out without killing me. This,” she said, tapping the circle in her chest, “is the only thing keeping me alive still.”

“That’s why you shut it down,” Ava nodded, “The weapons production. You’ve wanted to shut it down for years. To build anything else, and now you’ve finally have the chance and the reason to do so.”

“What?” Rhodey’s head turned to face her, “You’ve never told me this. Why did you never tell me that you hated making weapons?”

“Because you joined the Air Force!” she shot back at him, “You joined the military, Rhodey. And my weapons were the only thing keeping you safe, so I made them. But then my own weapons were used to hurt your troops. It could have killed you. You can’t expect me to keep making them knowing you could have been hurt.”

He closed his eyes, “Toni, if you don’t want to make weapons, it’s your choice. This is your company. But talk to me. Don’t shut me out, please. I can’t read your mind. I don’t know what you’re thinking; if you’re angry with me for not protecting you or if you never want anything to do with me again.”
“Honey Bear,” she said, taking his hands in hers, “I don’t blame you or Harry. It was a horrible thing that happened, but you are not to blame.”

“No,” Uncle Daniel said, “None of you are. But someone out there wanted you dead, Toni. Someone sold you out. And we need to know what happened. We need to find those responsible and bring them to justice. Otherwise they’re still out there and they can hurt you.”

“Someone in Stark Industries or the Military sold you out,” Harry nodded, “Someone is selling your weapons. And I’m going to help you find out who.”

“I can poke around on the internal SI systems,” Ava volunteered, “If there is any trace of the weapons coming from our end, I’ll find it in the system.”

“I’ll dig around the Military,” Rhodey sighed, knowing he was getting pulled into this one way or another, “I hate the idea of it coming from either of our ends, because that means someone has been exploiting us to make a profit. I sincerely hope somehow it was some sort of stolen shipment or something, because otherwise, it’s unthinkable.”

“Then it’s time to get to work,” Toni nodded, “We will find out how this is happening and end it. But in the meantime, it seems as if I need to finally push the plans I’ve had in the making for years to take Stark Industries in a different direction before we lose too many investors.”

“Go to sleep first,” Pepper demanded for the first time, “We all need rest. It’s been a long few months and if you burn out, you’re no use to anyone.”

Daniel nodded, “I agree. Toni you need some rest. If you’re not going to a hospital then at least let Ava, Rhodey, or Harry examine you. At least to make sure that there won’t be any other long-term consequences of this arc reactor inside your chest.”

“Tomorrow,” she sighed, knowing she wouldn’t be able to get out of it. “You all still have your rooms here, so let JARVIS or I know if you need anything.”

Pepper nodded before leaving the room as the others tailed after her, leaving her and Rhodey alone with her.

“Do you hate me?” she asked him softly, “For shutting down the weapons industry? I know the Military won’t be pleased.”

“Fuck the Military,” he said before wincing at his word choice. “I care more about you, Toni. Are you okay? Did they do anything to you there? Did they torture you? Did they hurt you? Did any of them touch you?”

“They didn’t rape me,” she said, shaking her head to deny the question.

“But they tortured you,” his jaw set, reading in between the lines of her words.

“They did,” she said, shaking lightly, and he moved over to pull her into a tight hug.

“I’m going to find every single one of them,” he promised her, “And make them pay for hurting you. They won’t get away with this, Tones.”

“Rhodey,” she said after a second, vulnerable. “I. I don’t know if I can sleep alone tonight. Can I stay with you?”

It had happened a few times in the past; the night when Tiberius tried to have his way with her, the
night her parents had died, when Jarvis had died. She’d have nightmares of it all night long, and Rhodey would hold her tightly, helping her sleep as his presence quelled her fears and her pain. Her brother who would protect her from anything in the world.

“Of course,” he told her, looking a little angry with himself, “I should have asked if you wanted to. You just spent months in captivity. Of course, you can stay with me. No one will hurt you, Toni, not anymore. I promise.”

She nodded as he helped her towards her bedroom, and she climbed gently into her bed for the first time in months.

“Good night, Ms Stark,” JARVIS’ voice called out for the first time since she came home, “And welcome home. The bots missed you.”

“Thanks J,” she said to her child, “I’ll talk to all of you in the morning, I promise.”

Rhodey climbed in after her, and she laid her head on his chest, as his arms enveloped her. She closed her eyes as she listened to his heart beating, using it to steady her breathing.

She was finally home, and she was safe.

She woke up hours later to see Rhodey gone from the bed, but on her side of the table he’d left her a cup of coffee to make up for his absence.

She wasn’t all that surprised; he’d always been an early riser, even at school, and the Air Force had only solidified that particular habit. And after her little bombshell with the press yesterday, she didn’t blame him if he had to take care of certain things as a result. She knew the Military would be clamouring, trying to work with the Board of SI to stop her from actually shutting down the weapons division of the company, what when SI brought in most of their money still from the deal.

And whether she liked it or not, Stark weapons were the best, and that meant that any other company the Military tried to use would not be as good. Though she supposed Justin Hammer would be pleased at her decision, as it would put his company next in line to take over.

“JARVIS, how long ago did Rhodey leave?” she asked, as she gingerly took the cup of coffee from her nightstand and sipped it. It had been a while since she had the drink that had provided her more sustenance than any food on earth and she took a moment to truly appreciate the coffee.

“An hour ago, Ms Stark,” JARVIS told her gently, “He asked me to let you sleep in as long as possible, without going about your regular morning wake up routine. As he has the right access and codes to do so, I did not wake you earlier.”

“That’s okay, J,” she told her slightly guilty bot, “I think I needed the rest. But I’m up now and there is work to do. How have the baby bots been without me?”

“They were frightened, Miss, as I was,” JARVIS confessed to her, “DUM-E was ready to go looking for you himself. It was only me promising him that I was dedicating all my processing power towards finding you that he relented. U has been particularly distressed about your absence however. You might need to talk a bit to it to make it up to it.”

She sighed softly, as she pulled on a pair of leggings and one of Rhodey’s old Air Force training sweaters that she had long since commandeered from him as she tied her hair up and headed towards
It took her less than a second between opening the door and DUM-E barrelling straight into her.

“Hi Baby,” she cooed gently as DUM-E moved its arm to try and make sure she was really there. “I missed you so much.”

DUM-E beeped back in happiness, as it held out it’s arm for Toni to take a hold of. She gently took it as it led her through the lab where Butterfingers was.

Butterfingers beeped cheerfully as DUM-E brought her close and she could hear the questioning words between its beeps.

“I’m not leaving again,” she promised Butterfingers, and U turned slightly towards her. “I promise. I never wanted to leave you all. But I did not have a choice. I’m here now, and I promise I’ll make it up to you all if you let me.”

“We’re happy you’re home,” JARVIS interjected, “None of this was your fault, Miss Stark. You did not ask for them to take you and to hurt you. But they did anyways. Do not blame yourself for the action of others.”

U guiltily came over then and nudged Toni, and she stroked her youngest child carefully. “I’m sorry, baby. I know how worried you all must have been. I never wanted for you all to worry about me. I’m sorry to have left you alone for so long.”

“You’re home now,” she heard a soft voice behind her and saw Ava standing with a StarkPad in her hand as she came closer.

“How have you been, Ava?” she asked her cousin carefully.

“Worried,” Ava admitted after a moment, “We all were Toni. Dad barely slept, Harry and Rhodey were running themselves ragged. Even Sharon decided to join SHIELD to have a chance of finding you.”

Toni took in a breath of surprise at the mention of Sharon Carter. While she and the young girl had interacted a handful of times over the years, she didn’t think her absence was enough to set the girl on the path of becoming an Agent of SHIELD.

“I’m glad you’re home,” Ava continued, “It’s been horrible without you here. Pepper won’t admit it, but Obie was giving her a rough time in your absence. He wanted you declared legally dead so he could take control over your shares. But since the Military was still searching for you, he didn’t have the grounds to do so. And Mum’s had a rough time with all of it. She wanted nothing more than to be with us looking, but she’s not well enough. And I think for the first time since she’s been diagnosed did she truly understand what it meant for her ability to help others. Even when Pierce all but demanded her retirement, she stood back gracefully.”

“Thank you,” she told her cousin, “For never giving up on me. I thought about all of you every day, about getting home and being with my family. It was what kept me going.”

Ava smiled at her, and after a moment she pointed at the object in Toni’s chest, “So how about we build you a proper heart and not just something that was shoddily built in a cave?”

Ava laughed as Toni brought up the specs for the arc reactor, as the two of them began to discuss how she had finally managed to finally miniaturize the device her father had tried to shrink for decades.

Together, they began to build, with JARVIS’ input as he calculated different simulations for the best possible combination of materials.

And hours later, when it was finally done, when the arc reactor was complete, Ava stood back and marvelled.

“Toni, with this technology, you could change the world,” Ava breathed.

“Stark Industries could make a market in clean energy,” Toni nodded, “We could truly help better the world. It’s one of the initiatives I want to put into place now that we no longer will be making weapons. Stark Industries can become so much more than a company that makes weapons. We can make the world a better place.”

Ava beamed at her, “I’m glad to help be a part of the process.”

“I could use your help sooner rather than later,” Toni gestured, as she lifted up her sweater, standing around in her bra. “I need to remove the old one and put in the new one.”

“I don’t know all that much about medicine,” Ava said, slightly wary, as Toni removed the old reactor from her chest.

“You know about technology and circuits,” Toni argued, “It’s basically the same thing. Just connect up the right wires and you have a functioning unit.”

“What on earth are the two of you doing?” she heard a voice cry out as Toni sat back in the chair while Ava carefully looked at where the new arc reactor would need to go.

“Science?” Toni tried and Pepper shook her head.

“On yourself?” Pepper demanded, “Toni, you need a doctor. Or at least someone who knows what they are doing in regard to biomedicine and tech. You don’t have the first idea what you’re doing, and neither does Ava.”

“But I trust her,” Toni argued. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

“The exposed wire under the device could touch the socket wall resulting in a short, which could cause you to go into cardiac arrest,” Ava said drily after finishing her inspection.

“It’s a good thing you have steady hands,” Toni quipped back at her cousin.

“I can’t watch this,” Pepper moaned as Ava carefully lowered the device into her chest.

“There’s pus,” Pepper groaned as a pink discharge appeared on Ava’s hands.

“It’s an inorganic plasmic material from the device,” Toni shrugged, and Pepper paled.

“And you’re putting it into your body?” Pepper demanded, “Couldn’t that kill you?”

“It’ll kill me not to have this device,” Toni pointed out, “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I don’t think that’s a reasonable argument,” Pepper sighed, and Ava withdrew her hands.
“It’s done,” Ava breathed out, “Congratulations Toni, you have a new, powerful, heart in place.”

“What do you want to do with this?” Pepper asked, holding up the old reactor which she had built for herself.

“Destroy it,” Toni shrugged, “Incinerate it.”

“You don’t want to keep it?” Ava frowned, “That thing saved your life over there. And you just want to throw it away?”

“I’ve been called many things,” Toni looked at the both of them carefully, “But nostalgic has never been one of them.”

Pepper shook her head, taking the device with her as she left the room.

And well, if when Toni found it later in a box and mounted in Lucite with the inscription “Proof Toni Stark Has a Heart” and cried ever so softly, well then no one needed to know.

She began drawing right after; creating specs and sketches of her new designs. Of something that would truly change the world and make it a better place.

The welding came slightly after as now she finally had accesses to the best materials and equipment, and finally had a chance to make it the way she always intended it to be.

The first time she tried wearing just the boots she flew up straight into the air and crashed.

She crashed the second time as well as the third and the fourth. But each time she flew higher and better the past attempt, with JARVIS recording each attempt on her part.

She created the flight stabilizer right after, only for Pepper to interrupt as she announced Obie’s presence.

An injunction had been filed against her.

By her own Board.

She wanted to be furious, but she knew this was how the game worked. Her company always did want to look for a chance to oust her as CEO and put in a more respectable candidate. The wanted a man. They wanted someone they could control. And Toni Stark was no show horse.

They could try all they liked. She hadn’t lasted this long by bowing down any time anyone asked her to step backwards.

She would take control of her company back.

She would bring it forward with the new innovations she had.

Even if it meant fighting her way back to the top.

She refused to let her weapons continue to hurt any other innocents. Not like the soldiers who had died by her side trying to keep safe.

But it had been her own bombs in the end that had killed them.
She wanted to be better; she needed to be better. And one way or another, she would change the world and she would keep it safe.

“Miss Stark, I must strongly caution against this. There are terabytes of calculations still needed—” Jarvis protested as she wore the suit she had been working so hard to create.

“We’ll test it in-flight,” she simply said, and with that, she was off.

She flew up into the air, like an Icarus with iron wings, urging to fly towards the sun. She flew over Malibu, turning and gliding over the waves, towards the Santa Monica Pier.

But like Icarus, she had flown too close to the sun.

And the ice crystals began to form over her helmet and the warning systems lit up in her suit.

She began to fall, as JARVIS scrambled to restore power to her suit, as she took over the control and tried to land gracefully into her home.

But had actually crashed through her glass ceiling and on top her expensive cars.

None of that had mattered to her, as she lay on her back, laughing for the first time in months at the exhilarating experience.

In that moment, she was truly free.
Iron Woman

Chapter Summary

Toni learns about a town called Gulmira and decides something needs to change

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She saw on the news of the Fire Fighter Fundraiser happening and frowned at the mention. She might have been busy for the last few weeks, keeping a low profile as Obie attempted to smooth out the press, but she was certain she would have heard something for the event from either Obie or Pepper. But Pepper had barely had time for her since Toni’s return, blaming it on the mountain of paper work that Obie had suddenly thrown her way. And Obie, well he was trying to overthrow the injunction filed against her.

She hated sitting like some sort of invalid, waiting until the work had been done. She had never been one to sit back and wait for things to just fall into place. As a woman in an engineering field she’d never had that luxury.

And even with the work that she had done on her suit, it wasn’t the same since she was locked out of her own company. She hated not being able to do anything. She hated being left out in the dark.

So she dressed up, wearing a flashy red gown with gold heels that Pepper had bought for her for some gala or the other that she hadn’t been able to attend due to her absence, and she showed up to her own party.

She never liked doing the expected anyways.

She smiled on in front of the press, ignoring the questions they threw her way about the future of her company and her health, giving a one of statement about how they were all there today to support the firefighters. They were who was important today, after all.

She didn’t say more than a few words to Obie; she was grateful to him for everything, but she didn’t want to air out her frustrations in front of the press. Not when they already had so many things to speculate about for her. She definitely refused to give them any more stories. She brushed off his attempts at getting her to go back home as she entered the party; her party.

“Ms Stark,” she heard a voice call out as she grabbed a whiskey; she had a feeling she definitely would need it today more than ever.

“Yes?” she said, turning and recognizing a familiar face.

“Phil Coulson,” he said, “From the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division.”

She kept her face passive, pretending she didn’t know all her life what exactly SHIELD was and what they did for a living.

“You need a better name for that,” she said offhandedly, and she saw Coulson’s lips turn up.
“We’re working on it,” he said, “Listen, I know this must be a trying time for you, but we need to debrief you. There’s still a lot of unanswered questions, and time can be a factor with these things. Let’s just put something on the books. How about the 24th at 7:00 p.m at Stark Industries?”

She nodded despite herself; SHIELD was proving to be persistent in learning about what happened to her during her time in Afghanistan. And she knew that Harry must not have told them anything, for otherwise they wouldn’t be trying too hard to get her version of events.

She excused herself shortly after, seeing Pepper in a silk blue dress.

“You look beautiful,” she purred slightly, and saw Pepper’s face light up at the sight of her.

“What are you doing here, Toni?” Pepper asked her, surprised. “Are you by yourself?”

“I’m avoiding government agents,” she grinned, recognizing the dress as a past gift to her friend. “Nice dress.”

“You have good taste, Miss Stark,” Pepper laughed.

“Do you want to dance?” she asked, extending her hand and Pepper looked around, feeling slightly self-conscious. Toni rolled her eyes, “They’re going to talk about me anyway. Might as well give them a reason to. But only if it makes you comfortable.”

“I forgot to wear deodorant,” Pepper sighed, “I’m wearing a dress with a back far too low cut. And I’m about to dance with my boss.”

“You look and smell great,” Toni said smiled at her, as she moved along to the music, holding Pepper close. “I could fire you if that would help?”

“I don’t think you could tie your shoes without me,” Pepper smirked, and Toni protested, “What’s your social security number?”

Toni pouted slightly, “Five?” and as Pepper made fun of her, she argued. “I am a genius. I remember genius things. I don’t need to know my social security number. I have you for that.”

As they went out for air, she heard the rumours begin to circulate once more. There was a time in her life when she might have tried to have made a move on Pepper, but she respected the woman. While Toni might enjoy the company of women, she knew that Pepper had no such inclinations. And the woman was one of her best friends; she was hardly going to push her away over something trivial as her feelings.

So when Pepper expressed her concerns, she backed off, deciding to get them both a drink.

She sighed in that moment, finding herself back at the bar for the second time that night.

It was a lot to taken in, the music, the people, the dancing. It was the most social interaction she had in months and she was exhausted. She wanted nothing more than to go home and crawl under her blankets. But now was not the time.

And when Christine Everheart shoved the pictures of a town called Gulmira in her face, she found herself unable to breath

“When were these taken?” she demanded, as Christine glared at her.

“Yesterday,” Christine said, searching her face for any knowledge of it.
“I didn’t approve any new shipments,” Toni shook her head.

“Your company did,” Christine shot back.

“Well I am not my company,” Toni reminded her, before weaving her way through the crowd, holding the picture so tightly she was sure it was going to be damaged.

She nearly laughed when Obie called her naïve as she shoved them asked him about it.

“I was naïve before when they said ‘Here’s a line. We don’t cross it,’” She fought back, stopping him from leaving.

“You’re being hysterical,” Obie told her, “You’re being far too emotional right now, Toni. You cannot afford to think like a woman, you know that better than anyone else in this field. This is how we do business.”

“If we’re double dealing under the table, I need to know,” she warned him, “Are we?”

Obie straightened his back and her jaw tightened as she got her answer as the reporters screamed at her for her picture.

“Let’s take a picture,” he said, sliding his arm around her waist. She wanted to push him away, to tell him the discussion was far from over. “Toni. Who do you think locked you out? I was the one who filed the injunction against you. It was the only way I could protect you.”

He walked away from her, leaving her silent in his wake and she wanted to throw something, wanted to break something, to destroy anything.

So, she took a deep breath, not wanting the reporters to spin her as a woman who lost her mind under torture, unable to cut it, and she went home.

Instead of going to bed, like she so wanted to, she suited up.

And she flew straight to Gulmira.

“Ma-am are you certain?” JARVIS’ voice called in her ears, “We have never tested flight for this long. We do not know anything of the conditions there, nor do we know what we are flying into. Perhaps we should at least plan it out slightly. Bring in Mr Rhodes or Mr Carter-Sousa as they have training in this sort of thing.”

“No can do, J,” she told her AI. “I created this mess, one way or another. It’s up to me to fix it.”

“With all due respect,” JARVIS shot back, “The weight of the world does not lay solely on your shoulders alone.”

She let his words wash over her slightly as she landed on her feet, in front of a terrorist. He began shooting at her immediately and she wanted to laugh. She wasn’t dumb enough to let her suit be breakable by something as simple as bullets.

She threw him into the air and shot her repulsors at the others, before turning to see them pointing it at women and children.

She wasn’t a religious person; not by a long shot. But there was a special place in hell for men who hurt women and children. She carefully powered down her repulsors, and lowered her arms, as she scanned the faces and locked on just the terrorists, as her suit shot them down.
A boy ran towards his father and she smiled from inside his suit at the relief on his face that his son was alive; that he was alive.

She wasn’t done yet, as she carefully removed each of the terrorists, one by one, knocking them out, and destroying all her weapons in the area before flying off again.

Her weapons might have terrorized this village, but she had kept them safe.

She should have known it wouldn’t be that simple.

Of course she couldn’t just fly straight into an active war zone without the US Airforce finding out.

She was alerted about the US Raptors appearing behind her before the call came through, flashing on her screen as Honey Bear.

“Sour Patch?” she answered as she tried to calm her voice.

“Is there something you need to tell me?” he asked her, keeping his voice steady, “Particularly about Gulmira. “Where are you right now? What’s that sound?”

“I’m driving in the convertible,” she lied, “The top’s down.”

“I need your help right now,” Rhodey said, seeming to believe her, “We got a weapons depot that was just blown up, a few clicks of where you were held.”

She winced at the reminder, “Sounds like someone stepped in and did your job for you?” she lied, not wanting to bring him into it, not until she knew what she was dealing with. She had done a lot of reckless shit in her life, and she didn’t want to bring him down with her desire to save the world.

He called her out about her breathlessness a moment later, before pausing.

“You sure you don’t have any tech in that area I should know about?” he asked her, and she knew she’d have to tell him eventually.

“Nope,” she lied again, and he let out a sigh.

“Okay, good, ’cause I’m staring at one right now, and it’s about to be blown to kingdom come,” Rhodey said, clearly not believing her.

Well.

Fuck.

She wondered in that moment if she’d made a mistake. If she had flown too close to the sun, too desperate to redeem herself, and too drunk on power. Had she tried for too much, bitten off far more than she could chew? Would this be the end of her story?

Not like this.

“Turn on super-sonic mode, Baby Boy,” she told JARVIS and she didn’t need him to respond to sense his dissatisfaction with the entire endeavour.

The shot comes a moment later, as she struggled to avert it.

And like Icarus, she fell.
If it weren’t for JARVIS stabilizing her through constant calculations, she supposed she would have hit the ground already.

She flies back up avoiding the shots and she knew in that moment the time for lying was done.

“JARVIS call Rhodey back,” she sighed, knowing he was going to be less than pleased.

“Hi Rhodey,” she said, as soon as he picked up.

“Please don’t tell me you have anything to do with this,” he sighed at her, and she sheepishly grinned, despite knowing he couldn’t see her.

“It’s me,” she said simply, and she could hear the disbelief.

“What do you mean it’s you?” he asked, taking in a deep breath. “No, see, this isn’t a game. You do not send civilian equipment into my active war zone.”

“I mean it’s a suit,” she said quickly, as the pilots got closer. “It’s a flying suit, Rhodey. I’m inside of it.”

“For fuck’s sake, Toni, please tell me you’re not serious?” he asked her, and she wished she could.

“Rhodey it’s me inside it and if you shoot me down, I will fall,” she told him, and she heard him pull away the phone as he talked to his superiors.

“Toni, listen to me,” he told her desperately, “Get out of there. Get out of there now. And when you get back here you come find me, you understand? We need to have a long talk about this and discuss why in God’s name you thought this would be a good idea.”

She wished she could. She held herself back as the planes flew past her, before latching herself onto one of them. She clutched on desperately, hoping they wouldn’t see her.

Of course, it hadn’t been her smartest move and the plane began spinning in circles to throw her off.

It wouldn’t have been a big deal if she didn’t crash into the other plane, destroying its wing and sending the pilot out of the damaged aircraft. She flew after the pilot and deployed his parachute as she pulled it free with as much strength as she could muster.

As horrible as it sounded, the pilot freefalling had given her the distraction to get away without a continuous chase.

Safe to say, by time she landed, Rhodey was waiting for her, with his arms crossed, and a less than pleased Pepper Potts standing behind him.

“What were you thinking?” he asked her, as JARVIS began to dismantle her suit for her.

“I was thinking that Obie is double dealing weapons to terrorists and that I was going to stop it,” she told him, and saw his eyes widen in surprise, “And if I cannot do so from inside my company, then I was going to find another way to do so.”

“Are you sure?” Pepper asked, looking shocked. “Toni, what you’re talking about? It’s treason. Are you certain that Obadiah is doing this?”

“He confessed it to me,” she spat out, “At the Gala. How was I supposed to sit back and watch? I wanted to make weapons so I could make a difference in the world. Instead, I was making things worse. He locked me out of my own company and used my weapons to hurt others.”
“We need proof,” Rhodey closed his eyes, “We can’t just make these accusations without it.”

“I can get it,” Pepper nodded, “I still have full access to Toni’s office and all her files. I can go in and get whatever files it is that we need.”

“What if he finds you?” Toni protested, “I can just get JARVIS to hack the servers. It’s all my own systems anyways. Besides, Obie doesn’t know how to prevent JARVIS from getting in. I can’t put you at risk; not for this.”

“But it would take longer,” Pepper reminded him, “I can get it within the hour. JARVIS, how long would you need?”

“I’d have to be able to do it without detection, Ms Potts. It would take me a few hours to find out what I was longing for,” JARVIS responded. “However if it is on a remote drive not connected to the main server it would be harder to track.”

“Toni,” Pepper took her hands, “Let me do this for you. You don’t need to fight against the entire world on your own. You have friends who love you and will fight with you.”

“I’ll talk to the Air Force,” Rhodey nodded, “If anyone suspects him selling to terrorists, I can find out what they know.”

“Thank you,” she breathed, as she talked through Pepper on what she would need to look for. The two took off on their respective missions, leaving her to her thoughts, and she knew she would need to be ready for whatever it was that was coming her way.

She’d fixed up her suit and was going through pass transactions that she had access through on her StarkPad when she heard the call come in from Pepper.

She answered the phone before a strong pulse shot through her and she felt herself unable to move.

She knew all too well what it was; the sonic taser that rendered its victims paralyzed temporarily. Whatever had she been thinking? Trying to create a weapon so harmful?

For the second time in so many months, she felt her own technology turn against her as she was rendered immobile.

“Breathe. Easy, easy,” She heard Obie tell her soothingly, as he lowered her head onto her couch. “You remember this one, right? It’s a shame the government didn’t approve it. There’s so many applications for causing short-term paralysis.”

She wanted to yell back at him as she was forced to watch him move over. He was her family; her godfather.

“Toni, when I ordered the hit on you, I worried that I was killing the golden goose,” he said, and she would have cried out if she could. Of course he had. She wanted to laugh or cry or scream, but she was unable to even blink. He was her godfather, but he had tried to have her killed. He pulled out a metal extractor, aiming it over her heart, “But, you see, it was just fate that you survived it. You had one last golden egg to give.”

He pushed it in, and she felt her heart begin to convulse, as the pain surged through her, and Obie removed her arc reactor from her chest.
“Do you really think that just because you have an idea, it belongs to you?” he spat at her, “Your father, he helped give us the atomic bomb. Now, what kind of world would it be today if he was as selfish as you?”

She struggled to breathe, feeling the shrapnel begin moving once again toward her heart.

“Toni, this is your Ninth Symphony,” He sat beside her, leaning in close so she could feel his breath on her face, “What a masterpiece. Look at that. This is your legacy. You’ve shown the world that women can succeed and cause as much destruction as men. A new generation of weapons with this at its heart. Weapons that will help steer the world back on course, put the balance of power in our hands. The right hands. I wish you could’ve seen my prototype. It's not as... Well, not as conservative as yours. Too bad you had to involve Pepper in this. I would have preferred that she lived.”

No.

NO.

She wanted to scream.

How dare he turn her heart into a weapon of mass destruction? How dare he rip it out of her chest leaving her weak and vulnerable? How dare he mention Pepper and try to hurt her?

She struggled to stand, trying to move through her house and to her lab.

She needed her backup; the arc reactor that had gotten her through Afghanistan. She could feel her heart squeezing tightly, as the pain flowed through her body.

She moved slowly though her house, leaning on walls and grasping at every surface.

She could do this. She was so close. She just needed to get to the reactor.

Please.

Just give it a few more minutes.

The doors of her elevator opened and she all but threw herself out of it, heading to where Pepper had encased her old reactor for her.

She crawled across the floor, unable to stand any longer, as the pain filled her and she lay on her stomach, unable to move.

She closed her eyes.

Was this how she was going to die?

On the ground of her lab, surrounded by her bots, as her heart gave out?

What would her legacy be?

That of a murderer? Of a villain? Of a woman who singlehandedly brought destruction wherever she turned?

She heard familiar beeping and saw DUM-E lower the reactor to her and nearly cried out. When JARVIS hadn’t responded to her, she knew Obie must have disabled him, using the codes she had given him out of pressure when she made him. And now more than ever she had regretted it. JARVIS could have called for help, could have stopped Obie from leaving, from hurting Toni. And
instead Obie had hurt her son.

“Good boy,” she said tiredly, and DUM-E looked down on her, almost with a look of worry.

She smashed the reactor, before trying to shove it into her chest carefully as she connected back up all the wires.

She was still on the ground, unable to move, as Rhodey and Ava barrelled into her lab, screaming her name. Rhodey helped her up and she grabbed onto him.

“Where’s Pepper?” she asked desperately, knowing Obie was going to go for her.

“She’s fine,” Ava said, examining her older arc reactor, and trying to get the full extent of her injuries. “She’s with five agents and Harry.”

“They’re about to arrest Obadiah,” Rhodey added, “Are you okay? Did he hurt you? I swear to god I’m going to kill him.”

“It’s not enough,” Toni shook her head, cutting him off. “He has my reactor, Rhodey. He has the old suit too; somehow he got it from Afghanistan. They don’t have a chance against him in it. I need to go face him. I need to put an end to this.”

“You were just dying,” Ava argued back, “You’re still not even fully recovered. Leave it to Harry; he’ll take care of this. Rhodey can go too now that he’s here. But you need to rest, Toni. You can’t fight him, not like this.”

“I’m the only one who can,” she shook her head, “This is my fault. It’s my technology that he’s using to cause all this harm. I have to be the one to put an end to it. I just need the suit.”

Rhodey didn’t say anything and she knew he wasn’t happy with it.

“Honey Bear,” she said softly.

“Okay,” he said softly, “I’ll help you suit up.”

She went over to one of her screens, getting JARVIS back up and running.

“Miss?” JARVIS called for her desperately, “I tried to warn you, I tried but-”

“I know Baby,” she soothed him, “I’m fine, Jar. But I need to go stop Obie, so can you begin initiation sequence?”

“Yes Miss,” he said, and the bots around her began whirring as the suit slowly attached onto her body.

“That is so cool,” Ava said breathlessly, “How could you keep this from me?”

“She flew into my war zone without warning me,” Rhodey said dryly. “But it is the coolest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Let’s do it,” she grinned at both of them.

“Do you need me to do anything else?” he asked her, and she shook her head.

“Keep the skies clear,” she told him simply, before jetting off.
Somehow the flight to Stark Industries felt longer than the flight to Gulmira. Knowing Pepper was in danger, that Obie wanted to kill her simply because she knew the truth. That Toni had put her in danger, broke her.

She would not let Obie hurt Pepper the way he had hurt her.

“Pepper,” she called her, and her friend answered.

“Toni! Thank god you’re okay. Obie, he’s gone insane. He’s built a suit!” Pepper said quickly, and Toni tried to go faster.

“Pepper you need to get out of there now,” Toni said, with a tight voice.

“Where do you think you’re going?” she heard a familiar metallic voice, and Toni felt dread flow through her.

“Stane!” she screamed as she crashed straight into him, blocking him from shooting her, as they both fell into the ground.

How dare he?

How dare he try to kill her assistant? Her friend? The woman who had become family to her?

How dare he try and hurt her because of money?

She flew straight into oncoming traffic from the impact of the fall, as she fell out of her warehouse, and into a truck, and she could hear the crashes and screams around her.

Obie lifted a car filled with a family, holding it over her.

“I love the new suit,” he screamed through, in his metallic voice.

“Put them down,” she demanded, seeing the fear on their faces.

“Collateral damage, Tony,” Obie said, as she instructed JARVIS to re-allocate power in her suit.

She shot him out of her reactor as she carefully caught the car and set it back down.

Only for the lady to run her over and drag her through the highway. She pushed the car carefully off of her, as Obie crashed back down in front of her, and threw her at another car.

“For 30 years, I’ve been holding you up! I built this company from nothing! Nothing is going to stand in my way. Least of all you! Not an overprivileged girl who had no place in this world. I should have got the company when your father died. And instead, he entrusted it to you. Do you have any idea how furious that made me? To know that I had worked hard day and night. And he hated you. He hated everything about you. And yet he gave the company to you; the least deserving person of it all. I tried so many times to destroy you, and somehow, you always got back up.”

He flung her to the ground, stomping on her.

He shot a missile at the bus behind her, throwing her into the air from the explosion, but she used her thrusters to steady herself so she wouldn’t fall straight to the ground.

“Impressive! You’ve upgraded your armor! I’ve made some upgrades of my own!” he yelled back at her, before taking off.
Well.

Fuck.

She instructed JARVIS to take her up to maximum altitude, despite his protests.

She flew higher into the air, gaining altitude, knowing fully well that her suit probably couldn’t handle it.

“You had a great idea, Tony, but my suit is more advanced in every way!” Obie taunted her, as he grabbed her foot.

“How’d you solve the icing problem?” she smirked back, as his suit glazed over.

“Icing problem?” he asked, unsure of what she was saying.

“Might want to look into it,” she grinned, as he let her go and fell straight back down, before she slowly followed as her suit reached two percent power.

She crashed onto the roof of her company.

“Pepper,” she said, calling her friend, as Pepper gasped. “I’m almost out of power. I’ve got to get out of this thing. I’ll be right there.”

“Nice try,” she heard as Obie crashed behind her. She raised her arm and grimaced, as she realized her glove had come off.

He threw her back, but she flew into him, punching him with the fist that was still covered, as he held her tightly between his arms, crushing her suit.

“Weapons status,” she gasped.

“Repulsors offline, missiles offline,” JARVIS reported.

“Flares!” she said, struggling to breathe, as they shot out of her suit and Obie dropped her.

“Very clever, Toni,” Obie said, seeming unimpressed.

“Pepper,” Toni called her quietly. “This isn’t working. We’re going to have to overload the reactor and blast the roof.”

“Well how are you going to do that?” Pepper sounded worried.

“You’re going to do it,” Toni told her. “Go to the central console, open up all the circuits. When I get clear of the roof, I’ll let you know. You’re going to hit the master bypass button. It’s going to fry everything up here.”

Now she just needed to buy herself some time.

She jumped onto her godfather’s back, as she pulled out a series of wires.

“Did you hate me all this time, Obie?” she asked, “Every time I came to you as a kid with an invention? Every time you read to me when Howard was gone? When you came to my graduation when even my father couldn’t make it? Did you hate me through all these years, when I considered you to be family?”
“You were a good for nothing girl who didn’t understand her place,” Obie sneered through the mask. “You might have brought in some valuable weapons, but the company was always meant to be mine. I stood by your father’s side. I helped him build it up to where it was today. You just took what was never yours.”

“Stark Industries was always meant to be run by a Stark.” Toni shook her head. “My Grandfather knew it, my father knew it, and I know it. It’s our legacy, and it’s my legacy to decide what to do with. Who are we helping by selling weapons to terrorists? We’re just lining our own pockets. Even if you kill me today, the world will know what you’ve done. Stark Industries can and never will belong to you. It’s over Obie.”

He flung her off his back as his suit powered off, straight to the glass roof.

Obie opened up his suit, holding her helmet in his suited-up hand, “I never had a taste for this sort of thing, but I must admit, I'm deeply enjoying the suit! Stark Industries might have your name in it, but that doesn’t mean you have the right to it than you think you did. You should have just died in Afghanistan, Toni. It would have made all of this so much easier for us all.”

He threw the helmet to where she was laying, and Toni lifted her head carefully.

“You finally outdid yourself, Toni! You'd have made your father proud!” Obie laughed at her.

She wanted to scream. If this is what it took to make her father proud, she didn’t want it. She didn’t want him to be proud of her for making a super powered suit for Obie to misuse. She didn’t want this to be her legacy. This was not what she would be remembered for.

“It's ready, Toni! Get off the roof!” Pepper yelled into her ear, and Obie opened fire on her.

She lifted her arm up and created a shield, but the floor under her gave out and she fell.

She clung on tightly to the metal bars above her, as glass rained down on Pepper and the arc reactor below her.

“Toni!” Pepper screamed and she winced.

“How ironic, Toni! Trying to rid the world of weapons, you gave it its best one ever!” Obie leered at her, “And now I'm going to kill you with it!”

He sent out a shot and it hit the building behind her.

“You ripped out my targeting system!” Obie glared at her.

“Time to hit the button!” Toni told her and Pepper protested.

“You told me not to!” Pepper argued back.

“Hold still, you little prick!” Obie raised his weapon at her again. Of course he compared her to male genitalia when insulting her.

“Just do it,” Toni yelled.

“You’ll die,” Pepper screamed.

“Push it,” Toni dropped, so only one arm was holding on. Pepper shot her a worried look but pushed the red emergency button on the console as she ran out of the way. The arc reactor began to overload, as the blue energy shot out, pushing Toni off to the side.
She watched in sorrow as Obie fried from the energy.

He had been her family, her father figure when Jarvis had died, and her father had passed. He had been there for her when Uncle Daniel and Aunt Peggy were busy and Rhodey was off in the military.

But he, like everyone else in her life had left her too.

He fell straight into the arc reactor, and it set off an explosion through her building. She knew that there was no way that he could have survived it.

She supposed she should have been more upset; he was her family. But in that moment, she simply closed her eyes, as her reactor flickered in her chest, trying to start back up again.

She sighed to herself, looking over the cue cards that Harry had given her on behalf of SHIELD, carefully crafted to give her an alibi for the explosion to prove that there was no way that she could have been there.

They were giving her a way out. A way to return to her regular life without raising any further suspicions about what it was she had been doing in her free time.

It gave her a way to protect her identity if she wanted to continue to be a superhero.

She picked up a paper as she heard Rhodey speak on the television.

“You've all received the official statement of what occurred at Stark Industries last night. There have been unconfirmed reports that a robotic prototype malfunctioned and caused damage to the arc reactor. Fortunately, a member of Tony Stark's personal security staff was on hand to help,” Rhodey spoke.

“Iron Man,” she scoffed, “Just because I didn’t put breast plates on the suit, they automatically assume I'm a man.”

“How else would anyone know it’s a woman?” Ava asked, “Unless she was explicitly being sexualized.”

“You have your alibi,” Pepper told her, “Stick to the cards, Toni.”

She looked over at her cousin, and Ava didn’t say a word. She knew Ava disapproved of what SHIELD wanted her to do, but how many other options did she really have?

She walked out to the podium, as Rhodey stood behind her. Pepper was off in the crowd, and Harry stood by Coulson off to the side. Her Uncle Daniel sat in the audience as Ava took a seat beside her father.

“Been a while since I was in front of you. I figure I'll stick to the cards this time. There's been speculation that I was involved in the events that occurred on the freeway and the rooftop,” Toni said, taking a deep breath.

“I'm sorry, Ms. Stark, but do you honestly expect us to believe that that was a bodyguard in a suit that conveniently appeared despite the fact that you,” Christine Everheart interrupted her.

“I know that it's confusing,” Toni stopped her, “It is one thing to question the official story, and
another thing entirely to make wild accusations, or insinuate that I'm a superhero.”

“I never said you were a superhero,” Christine argued.

“Didn't? Well, good, because that would be outlandish and fantastic,” she laughed awkwardly. “I'm just not the hero type. Clearly. With this laundry list of character defects, all the mistakes I've made, largely public.”

She watched the audience, grasping over her awkward words.

“Just stick to the cards,” Rhodey said exasperatedly.

“Yeah, okay. Yeah. The truth is-” She paused, thinking carefully over the words she was about to say. The words her company needed her to say. The words the world wanted to hear.

But she looked at her Uncle Daniel and thought of Aunt Peggy, who had fought hard her entire life to have a place at the table. Who stood up to men her entire life who tried to put her in her place where they thought she belonged. How Peggy had decided to re-write the rule book so that it worked out in her favour.

She thought about Steve Rogers, who simply wanted to fight in the war, despite being an underdog, with a weak body. She thought about how he fought hard his entire life and had ultimately sacrificed himself in the end to try and save the entire world.

He had been her father’s personal hero, so much so that he had dedicated his entire legacy to Captain America.

She wasn’t a hero; she knew that. She was a flawed human with so many defects, it could fill an entire shelf of books; hell probably an entire room.

But she needed to do what was right.

She wanted accountability. She wanted to have less secrets and lies.

She knew what she was about to do would forever change her life as she knew it.

But she needed to do it.

“The truth is,” Toni started. “I am Iron Woman.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all enjoyed this chapter! I don’t want to re-write the series as it is with just Toni as a woman. There will be canon divergences in events that happen in the series (some of which you can already see in the tags). However certain characters we still cannot meet until certain events unfold, and other characters we’ll meet far sooner. Thank you so much for all your comments! I truly enjoy hearing what you have to say.
After the Press Conference

Chapter Summary

Turns out, just announcing she was a superhero wasn't the end of the story.

The words hung over her in the days to come. *I am Iron Woman*, plastered on every newspaper headline, played on repeat on the news as the world wondered what they would do with a new superhero and what it would mean for them.

She was hardly the first superhero to appear in the world. There was Captain America back in the forties, and Captain Marvel who had first emerged in the nineties. And while SHIELD might have tried to cover it up, it was hard to erase the tales that witnesses had told the press. And even despite that, her own cousin had confirmed it on an occasion, despite the fact that Toni very much did not have the required security clearance for such information. But Toni was smart and despite the need for secrecy, Harry had a hard time keeping things from her when he knew that if she really wanted to learn the truth of a subject, very little could stop her from finding it out.

But what she hadn’t been entirely prepared to deal with was her Board.

“You cannot just fly around in a suit,” Gregson, a newer member of her Board exclaimed. “Do you know what it will do to our stocks for our CEO to be flying around and pretending to be a hero?”

“I never claimed to be a hero,” Toni said calmly. “And the stocks are doing fine. In fact, they’re up twenty points, since the press conference. The stocks are even higher than they’d been before I got kidnapped.”

“That’s a short-term thing,” Michaels scowled. “What happens tomorrow when you crash into a building in New York and our company’s name is attached to the disaster? What happens if you accidentally kill civilians? What happens if you die in action? We hardly have another CEO who can step up and take your place. There was Obadiah who could have led this company but after his unfortunate *accident* there isn’t anyone else named to be your successor.”

She winced at the implication. She knew that Obie couldn’t have worked alone, and Ava and JARVIS were currently combing through all of Stark Industries’ data with a fine-tooth comb, looking for any other possible suspects to who had been helping him. And she would personally see to it that they never came close to her company ever again.

“That’s a short-term thing,” she said simply, “And in the case it does, I’ll leave a successor to my company in my will. But with that said, we must discuss the future of Stark Industries, as things need to change around here.”

“We are a weapons company!” Gregson spluttered, “To suggest anything else is preposterous.”

“And yet we have so many more divisions than just weapons,” she said calmly, sliding her hands up to project data from the tablet she’d been holding to appear as a hologram before them. “Divisions such as our Technological Advancements, Medical Research, and Clean Energy, to name a few, combined, nearly bring in combined billion dollars of revenue, and that’s with the minimum amount of investments we put into them. Imagine what could happen if we invested more? Military contracts
can also be about defensive technologies, such as shields and protective gear; we can outfit them with body armour that is of higher calibre than anything available on the market. We can provide them software upgrades like nothing they’ve ever had before. We might not be making them missiles, but that doesn’t mean they won’t still be paying us the same amount as before.”

She shifted the hologram to show the figures she had come up with and calculated based on the numbers she had, and she knew from their silence that they had agreed with her.

“Additionally, Stark Industries should become a Global name,” she said, “We shouldn’t just be a company who deals with militaries. Think about how much money we are losing by doing so. We already are coming up with navigation systems for the military. Think about how much money we could bring in if we sold a simpler model to the masses? One that helped them get around from point A to B without having to look at a map. We have the technology for holograms, think about how we could incorporate it into phones and StarkPads. We need to think of the bigger picture. Weapons might have brought in a decent profit margin but think of how much more we could achieve if we simply strived for more.”

She loaded the data onto the tablets in front of them so they could go over the information themselves.

“And the Military would be interested in such products?” Michaels asked, slightly skeptically. “Surely they’re unhappy about the lack of weapons.”

“Our weapons were sold behind our backs to terrorists,” she said coldly, “I am not producing anymore, and I still have controlling share of this company. Now you can lock me out, but then who would bring in these innovations? I’d just start another company and take my designs there. The Military will accept what they’re given. I’ve already talked to Rhodes, and he has confirmed that the Military is more than interested in the designs I’ve shown him already. The advancements we can make is incredible.”

“Alright,” Michaels said, giving her a nod, and she felt some of the tension leave her.

She was so used to fighting every step of the way, like she had to with Roberts and O’Brian, who questioned every decision she’d ever made.

“You’ve proven with the numbers that this is beneficial,” Gregson sighed, “This won’t be easy, Antonia. Our stocks will fall as we change course and head in this new decision. But if you’re right with these figures, then this is a smart move for Stark Industries, and we must trust your decision. You’ve already brought this company to an international level in the time that you’ve been CEO.”

She nodded at them all, “I will implement this in several stages, the first of which involves launching several new satellites into space,” she started, as she broke down her intentions for the future of her company.

“Aunt Peggy,” Toni said softly, as she visited her aunt for the first time since everything had happened. It had been hard for get to get away to go to Washington, but she’d had Pepper re-arrange her entire schedule, much to the displeasure of several magazines and newspapers who had wanted to interview her and hadn’t been able to get a single slot yet on her calendar.

Bu Pepper had gladly done so, knowing what the older woman had meant to Toni.

“Toni,” Peggy said, carefully sitting up in her bed. Daniel had told her earlier that today was a good
day, and in the years since Peggy had been diagnosed, good days came less and less.

There would be a day in the future when Peggy wouldn’t recognize Toni at all, and every day would be a bad day. And that would be the day where Toni would break.

But she would take advantage of these days while she still had them. She’d take advantage of every last good day.

She would not lose another mother without getting to tell her just how much she loved her.

“How are you feeling, Aunt Peg?” she asked softly, sitting beside her.

“I’m okay, Toni,” Peggy said, placing her hand on hers. “How have you been? I’m so happy to see that you’re healthy after everything that happened in Afghanistan. I don’t know what I would have done if I lost you. I wanted to come find you, but Daniel was right. I’m hardly in peak condition anymore. If I had been a decade younger, I would have fought every man necessary until I brought you home.”

She let out a slightly watery laugh, “I know you would have Aunt Peggy. I learned everything about what it takes to be brave from you. You’ve taught me that I need to stay strong in the face of adversity. You taught me that I can accomplish anything I put my mind to even when everyone around me is telling me I can’t do it. If it weren’t for your words, I wouldn’t have survived it.”

“And now you’re a superhero,” Peggy said, with a slight disapproving tone in her voice.

She looked slightly confused, “Aunt Peggy, it was you who taught me I need to stand up and fight for what’s right. This is what’s right. Obie was selling my weapons to terrorists. He was hurting others with weapons that I designed. It’s up to me to put it right. It’s my responsibility. I need to do this Peggy.”

“Toni,” Peggy told her sternly, “You have absolutely no training in this sort of thing. You have no idea what it takes to fight terrorists on a daily basis. You have no idea what it takes to put your life on the line every single day and have people at home wondering if you’ll make it home. You’ve never had to deal with any of this. And that’s fine! You’re a brilliant CEO, and your innovations have changed the world. I’ve seen first-hand that you’ve made things so much better, and I am incredibly proud of you. But I will not have you putting yourself in harm’s way so recklessly. Who is watching your back in the field? Who is there to keep you safe?”

“JARVIS,” she said simply. “He monitors the suit and runs calculations constantly to ensure that nothing happens to me.”

She paused for a moment.

“What would you have done, Aunt Peggy? If you found out that your entire life was a lie? If you found out that someone you had trusted had betrayed your trust, and was selling your weapons behind your back to terrorists? That he’d tried to have you killed? You wouldn’t have stood for it. You would have done everything in your power to have made it right. You’re the one who told me when I was younger that we are nothing without our morals. That we need to stand for what we think is right and fight against the world even when everyone tells us we’re wrong.”

Peggy sighed, “I know. You’re right, Toni. I would do the same thing. I have done the same thing. I just want to keep you safe; you and all the children. But you’re right. I would have done the exact same thing if I was in your situation. But with that said, I had training, Toni. I practised fighting every single day so I was never in a situation where anyone could use my gender against me. I want
you to practise too. Suit or no suit, you need training. You cannot just become a superhero without any sort of practise.”

She wanted to snark back; she’d been doing well enough so far, even if she didn’t have any official training. But her Aunt only wanted what was best for her, out of love and out of concern for her. The lease she could do was at least acknowledge her Aunt’s words, knowing she must have had a reason for wanting it.

“Okay,” she said after a moment. “I’ll ask Rhodey and Harry if they can help me train, if it makes you happy.”

“Thank you, Ducky,” Peggy told her with a smile. “I am proud of you. Not just for this, but for everything you’ve accomplished. You’re a brilliant girl, and I’m so proud to call you family. And I know that your mother and Jarvis would have been so proud of everything you’ve done too.”

Her throat tightened slightly. She noted the lack of mention over her father, but if Peggy had told her that her father was proud of her, she’d probably just laugh. They both knew it would be a lie anyways.

“I love you too, Aunt Peggy,” she told her aunt, “I’ll try and visit you more often. I promise.”

“Be careful, Darling,” Peggy said gently, “The world will stand in your way and oppose any new shift to change. You’re going to face more and more difficulties in the coming years. But know that your family will always stand behind you. You are not alone, and you are very much loved and cared for. Do not let the world turn your compassion into hatred.”

She was quiet for a few moments before Peggy spoke again, “Maria?” she asked, looking at Toni. “What are you doing here? I thought you and Toni were going away to Italy for the week?”

She kissed her aunt on the forehead, knowing her Alzheimer’s had caused her to forget the entire conversation. She swallowed slightly, not wanting to cry, before standing to leave.

“Take care, Aunt Peggy,” Toni said gently, as she slipped out the door.

It started off slow, what with her completely dismantling the Ten Rings. And then the rest of the terrorists in the East.

It wasn’t easy; and it definitely had far more to do with than just dropping in and blowing up all their weapons as she had done the first time. Especially in countries where there was so much political turmoil.

She’d have extensive knowledge on all the areas before simply going in and getting stuff done, and each time, she’d make sure to have the permission of the government in the area. That was the whole point of coming out with the secret right? What good was holding herself accountable if she thought she was beyond the law? What good was any of it if she could just drop in, do whatever she wanted, and then leave?

She had to be better than that; she had to hold herself to a higher standard or she was just as bad as before.

She couldn’t ever go back to that point though; the point where she was blissfully ignorant to what was going on in her own backyard. She needed to be more informed, in every avenue of her life.
So she listened to the political rumours. She dug in deeper into international affairs, learning what the rest of the world thought of her and her actions. She listened, and she took note. She heard where she was needed, and she reacted.

She had Ava and JARVIS calculate the possible outcomes before she went in and she went with the route that was likely to cause the least amount of damage.

She might have been known as the Merchant of Death before but the last thing she needed was more blood on her hands. She refused to let anyone else get hurt on her watch. She refused to be the cause of the loss of any more innocent lives.

Time Magazine had named her the Person of the Year a month after she’d first come out as Iron Woman, and the world had unanimously agreed.

She wasn’t trying to be a hero.

She just wanted to make things right.

When the pilot of the Areodynamic Marvel crashed in the Congo, she had been the first to assist General Ross in saving him. Even if Ross had stated that they just wanted a superhero watchdog. She’d scoffed at him; she refused to be put on a lease for the government to control; she was not a weapon to be controlled, and she refused to allow him to do so.

She wanted to be better than what she was before. She refused to sit back down on the sidelines and let the world around her continue to crumble when she had the power to make a difference in it.

So she helped the world in any way she could. She saved kittens from burning buildings, saved kidnapped children, and fought for those who couldn’t save themselves.

She wondered if Captain America would have done the same, if he had given the chance. He’d always believed in the little guy and wanted to fight for those who couldn’t help themselves.

If he was still alive, would he approve of the things she’d done?

“Toni are you paying attention?” Rhodey asked, as she landed flat on the mat for the second time that afternoon.

“Yes sorry,” she winced, as Harry helped her back up.

It seemed as if Aunt Peggy had Uncle Daniel organize her training sessions with Rhodey and Harry behind her back, and all of them agreed that she needed more hand-to-hand training, as she clearly did not have enough experience with it.

“You seemed a million miles away,” Rhodey said, as she took a gulp of water, “Is something on your mind?”

“Do you think I’m doing the right thing?” she asked him softly, for probably the first time since she took up the Iron Woman armour.

“Do you think you’re doing the right thing?” he countered, and she rolled her eyes.

“Yes,” she said simply, “I’m helping people and making a difference.”

“Good,” he nodded, “But for what it’s worth, I agree with you. You’ve grown so much in the last few weeks. You’ve made the world feel safer already. You could have just made the armour and
asked someone else to pilot it. Or you could have just shut down weapons production. Both of them
would have been enough to change the world. But you’ve shown the world that there are those who
will fight for their interests. You’ve shown the world that there are those who care about them, even
when it feels like no one’s listening. And I am so proud of you. You’ve come so far, and I’m so
proud of all that you’ve done.”

“Thanks,” she said softly, and Rhodey pulled her into a hug.

“It doesn’t mean that my heart doesn’t stop every time I see you fly off into danger,” he murmured.
“I’m always going to worry about you, Toni. Which is why Harry and I are going to train you to
properly fight until we’re convinced that you’re capable of landing a couple of punches and doing
some damage to your opponents without a suit on.”

“Which would be great to get back to,” Harry smirked at her, “If the two of you old saps are done
being all sentimental.”

“Who are you calling old?” she scowled at him, “You’re not that much younger than me, old man.”

“You literally winced when you tried stretching,” Happy pointed out, as he had taken a break from
trying to coach her to properly punch a bag. “You’re not getting much younger, Ma-am.”

“You’re all fired,” she glared at them, “I don’t need any of you.”

“Sure thing, Boss,” Happy nodded solemnly, “Should I take my leave now, or after you land on
your ass a few more times?”

“Why do I even need to learn how to fight?” she groaned. “I always have my suit on me, and the suit
has more than enough types of attacks anyways. I programmed it! It has different fighting tactics built
into it!”

“What happens if you don’t have your suit?” Rhodey raised a brow, “How will you save the world
then? What if you get kidnapped again and they take away your suit from you?”

“Then I’ll just build another,” she threw up her hands, “I built the first one in a cave! I can just build
more of them!”

“And now the world knows you’re capable of such a thing,” Harry warned her, “You will not be
given the same amount of leniency as last time if such a situation arises. Do you think they’d give
you the same access to the materials you need to be able to build a suit? They’d probably just shoot
you in the head if you tried anything. And what would you do then?”

She grimaced, knowing he was right. “Fine! If we must then let’s just get this over with. Clearly
none of you are going to drop it until I learn how to do so anyways.”

“Teach her how to feign attacks too,” Uncle Daniel said, from where he and Ava were watching.
“Peg used to do that all the time. She’d pretend to be weak because the world expected a woman to
not be capable of handling herself and when they dropped their guard, she’d strike. If the world
believes she is nothing without the suit, it would serve as an advantage to when they try attacking her
without it.”

Ava beamed, “JARVIS, can you run different fight scenarios that we can practise? Calculate the
most common sorts of attacks that could occur so Toni can learn how to fight against them.”

“Not so fast,” Harry said, as Ava pulled back up her tablet to take notes. When his sister looked at
him confused, he continued, “Don’t think I don’t know that you are planning on helping Toni on this
“crusade of hers.”

“Of course I am!” Ava said heatedly, “If you think I’m just going to sit back and watch, then you’re wrong Harold Michael Carter-Sousa!”

Harry raised his hands, “Of course I don’t think that. But if you’re going to do this with her, then you better learn a few moves too. Your involvement increases the chances of you getting hurt and I refuse to have you in danger because you refused to learn how to throw a punch.”

“Dad,” Ava said pleadingly, looking over at her father.

“You brother has a point,” Uncle Daniel nodded, “Ava, you should learn a few moves too, while we’re here.”

Ava groaned and Toni shot her a sympathetic smile.

She knew they were all doing this so she could protect herself in the future. But at the same time, there was nothing fun about falling down on her ass time and time again as she tried to learn how to fight hand-to-hand combat.

“You’re doing great, Toni,” Daniel smiled at her, as she finally threw Rhodey over her shoulder. Her Honey Bear winced slightly, and she beamed at him triumphantly. Maybe there was something to this after all.

She got home to her Malibu estate later than she had intended to. Being Iron Woman as well as CEO and Chairwoman of a Fortune 500 company was proving to be difficult, especially given all the new designs she’d been trying to push out the door.

It wasn’t uncommon for her to get less than a few hours a sleep if she even got that many in a week.

She heard the beeping as soon as she entered, and moved carefully through the house, trying to find out the breach in her Manor.

“JARVIS,” she said loudly, trying to get her AI to fill her in on just what had happened.

“Welcome home Ma-” JARVIS started, before getting cut off and shutting down.

She felt anger flow through her. Who had attacked one of her children in her own home? How dare someone try to do such a thing.

She held her phone close, ready to call the suit to her remotely if she needed to.

“I am Iron Woman,” she heard a man mockingly say as she moved closer. He was shielded by the dark, and she couldn’t make out his face. “Do you think you’re the only superhero in the world Miss Stark?”

He moved toward her and she stood ready to fight.

Perhaps those training sessions had been worth it after all.

“You’ve become part of a bigger universe,” he said, and Toni carefully moved towards him. “You just don’t know it yet.”
“Who the hell are you?” she asked, and he stepped into the light. He was wearing an eyepatch and a long black trench coat, but she recognized him before he even gave his name or credentials.

“Nick Fury, Director of SHIELD,” he said, and she knew the man all too well as one her Aunt Peggy had carefully groomed for years; teaching him everything so that one day he would take her place. Unfortunately, her disease had meant she’d had to step down far sooner than she’d liked, but it seemed to work out for the man anyways.

“I’m here to talk to you about the Avenger Initiative,” he said, with a smile on his face, and she gestured for him to sit down.

She knew who he was, but it was clear to her that he was unaware of that fact. For a man in charge of an intelligence agency, he clearly did not have all the intel he thought he had.

She knew it was largely in part because her father wanted her to have nothing to do with the organization, and Aunt Peggy had hid the fact that Toni knew more about them than they were aware of to keep her safe. After all, it hardly would do to have a civilian know secrets about an organization that thrived in the shadows.

“I see,” she said, “And I suppose you want me to join your little boy band?”

She pretended to feign interest, when in reality, she had no interest in joining. The Iron Woman suit did not belong in the hands of the government, no matter the organization. And while she trusted Peggy would have created a trustworthy division, she knew the hearts of men did not always have the interests of the people in them. There was always corruption, always those who sought to exploit things to work into their favour.

“You must have heard about the incident with Bruce Banner by now,” he said, handing her the tablet with the access to the Hulk Files.

Of course she had; the scientist on the top of his field who had turned into a monster overnight and wreaked havoc on Harlem? Who hadn’t heard of him?

She’d tried to reach out to the man in the days following the attack, but he’d all but dropped off the radar. There had been several inquires if whether Iron Woman would be available to help fight off the monster, but she’d refused. The Military had it under control. Besides, she had a feeling that the real monster was someone entirely different and the world might not like if she sided with him. It didn’t mean she didn’t still have her scans running to try and find the Hulk. After all, the man was on his own and needed help.

“There’s more superheroes than the world knows, Antonia,” Fury said, “And a day will come when the world needs them all to unite under one team and fight for them. A team who will save the world, to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to fight the battles we never could.”

“So you want me on part of a superhero team,” she said, handing the tablet to him. “And if I refuse?”

“This is so much bigger than you or me,” he told her. “This isn’t about threats that even are contained on this world. It’s about what’s out there. What will come knocking on our door one day and whether we like it are not, we are unprepared for such battles. The world will need you. But if you want to keep fighting terrorists, then that’s your right.”

Aliens.

Like Captain Marvel?
She’d had so many questions she needed to ask, but she knew she wouldn’t get the answers, not from him directly. She knew how men like him worked; they gave her enough information to let her think she was being given insider details, but in reality, they were just giving her enough to keep her interested.

But that didn’t make the part about the aliens any less valid. If they were out there, then a day would come when the world would need to fight against them. A day would come when the world was forced to fight for their survival. And whether it was tomorrow or twenty years from now, they would need to prepare for it.

“I’m not interested,” she said. “Iron Woman is not meant to be on a part of a team. She’s not something that the government or any organization, even SHIELD, should be allowed to have control over. I appreciate the offer, but no thank you.”

She could tell from the incredulous look on his face that he was unimpressed, but she stood by her words. If a day came where she needed to band together with other superheroes, then so be it. But she would not throw away her morals on a chance.

“I’ll see myself out then,” Fury stood quickly, “I hope you change your mind, Stark. The fate of the world depends on it.”

When she was sure she was alone, she quickly brought JARVIS back online. She’d need to update his coding to ensure that no one ever turned him off again, not without her knowledge or consent.

“J, it seems like we have work to do,” she told him carefully. “Look into SHIELD for me. Find out everything you can, including my father’s work for them. They have something up their sleeves and I need to know exactly what it is that we’re dealing with if we’re going to be ready for whatever it is that’s going to come our way.”

“Search initiated, Miss Stark,” JARVIS called out.

Her father had always kept his own secrets from her, and Hawking forbid he ever bring her in on anything.

She wondered offhandedly what he would think about his and Peggy’s successor bringing her in on an organization that he wanted her to have nothing to do with. Would he be rolling over in his grave at the mere thought of such a thing? More likely than not, he’d think that she was unworthy to be working with them. He’d probably also think Iron Woman was a publicity attempt in order to gain her more fans. Not like the old man was ever thought she was capable of anything other than drinking away all her problems.

Not that it mattered anyways. Her father was a thing of the past, and she was a vision of the future.
Legacy

Chapter Summary

Toni Stark wonders what she'll leave behind when the palladium manages to finally kill her.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Six months had passed since she had shouted her superhero status to the world, and six months filled with missions, press tours, excitement, and fans. Six months since she had inserted the arc reactor into her chest and since the palladium had started killing her slowly.

She knew the words she spoke were meant to drum up excitement. ‘The longest period of uninterrupted peace because of me.’ Oh, how the public had eaten those words up.

And not to toot her own horn, but it was true, wasn’t it? She had risen like a phoenix from the ashes and stepped up to do what was right. She was keeping America safe, the world safe.

She had never fully understood her father’s desire for a legacy until the last few months. Sure, she had always wanted to make the world a better place. She’d wanted to change the world and sculpt it in her image. She wanted to advance it and bring it to heights it had never seen before. But she had never thought once about what she would leave behind when all of this was over.

Perhaps that was why she had restarted the Stark Expo’s that her father had thrown when she was younger. Because it wasn’t just what she could do for the world, but what all of them could do. What they could all create. What they could build. And what they could make.

She wanted to change the world. But she wanted the world to be a better place even when she was gone.

How very ironic that the device she had built to keep her alive was slowly killing her.

19%.

Her blood toxicity was at 19%. Nearly 1/5th of her blood was toxic. And she had no idea if she’d even be able to find a solution in time. She didn’t have the first clue of just what was wrong or what it would take for her to be able to turn it around. JARVIS had already run every single combination of elements, compounds, and mixtures, but nothing was a match. There was nothing she could use to substitute the palladium with a similar reaction. The metal in her chest was killing her.

She hadn’t told anyone about it, not yet. Not Rhodey who knew every dirty secret about her. Not Pepper who had her schedule managed to a tee and knew where Toni was at any waking moment. Not Ava, who all but helped Toni reach her vision of any crazy technology she was thinking of, or Harry who had all but held the governments off her back after her announcement of being Iron Woman. Not even Uncle Daniel or Aunt Peggy, who had all but raised her with the help of Jarvis and Ana, or Mama Rhodes who had kept Toni together after her mother’s passing.
Because how could she bring herself to tell them that she was dying. That the reactor in her chest was killing her with every use of the suit.

She knew what they would say; they’d demand she stop using it, but really, it was nowhere near that simple. If she stopped using it then it wasn’t as if she wasn’t still going to die. She’d just live a few more years first. And what difference did it make when she died if she was dying anyways? She’d much rather leave a legacy behind that she could be proud of, like her father had wanted to all those years ago.

And even if she never was his legacy; if that honour had gone to Steve Rogers, SHIELD, and Stark Industries, that didn’t mean she couldn’t make an impact before she passed and joined him in whatever Hell she was destined for.

She wondered if it would be better this way; easier even. Then her dying days wouldn’t be filled with mourning before she’d even passed, and at least she’d be able to appreciate her life, truly appreciate it, in a way she hadn’t ever done before.

And if she was destined to die in a few months, at least the world would be a lot safer.

She was getting subpoenaed. By the US Government.

If she said she was surprised, she’d be lying. If Toni Stark was used to anything, it was men trying to take away her achievements from her because they felt more entitled to it. It happened all the time at MIT, during her time at Stark Industries, and now it was happening with the Iron Woman armour.

“Ms Stark, if you don’t mind, I’d like to get back to it,” Senator Stern said.

“Yes Darling?” she said, shooting a smile at the man, despite wanting to strangle him internally.

“Do you or do you not possess a specialized weapon.” The man sneered at her.

“I do not,” she said firmly, and the man looked at her with disbelief, “Well it depends how you define weapon.”

“The Iron Woman weapon,” The man elaborated.

“My device does not fit that description,” she said, leaning forward, hearing the cameras click behind her. “I would begin by defining what it is. A high-tech prosthesis.”

The room laughed around her, sure that she was just messing with them, but her face did not change from the serious expression it held.

They wanted to play ball? Then she definitely would not make it easy for them.

“That’s actually the most apt description,” she said, placing her hand on the table.

“It’s a weapon, Ms Stark,” Senator Stern said again.

“If your priority was actually the American people-” she said before he cut her off.

Typical.

“My priority is to get the weapon turned over to the people of the United States of America,” he said,
looking down on her. “Perhaps you cannot begin to imagine just what you have created, Stark. You invented a weapon which is capable of mass destruction, and it is in the hands of a civilian. A woman like you surely does not understand the consequences that this could have long term. Why don’t you leave saving the world to people who are actually qualified?”

She heard an audible gasp and she simply rolled her eyes. She was no stranger to the military being a pain in her ass. To men thinking they’re entitled to her inventions simply because they deemed her unworthy.

“Well you can forget it,” she said simply. “I am Iron Woman. The Suit and I are one. To turn over the Iron Woman suit would be to turn over myself which is tantamount to indentured servitude or prostitution, depending or what state you’re in. You can’t have it.”

“Look I’m no expert-” Stern started, and she cut him off as simply as he’d cut her off before.

“In prostitution?” she said flashing him a smile, knowing fully well that the Senator had just had a prostitution scandal the year before which nearly ruined his career. “Of course not, you’re a senator.”

“I’m no expert in weapons,” he said, unimpressed, “We have somebody here who is an expert on weapons. I’d now like to call Justin Hammer, our current primary weapons contractor.”

She laughed.

She knew the Military had scrambled after she’d pulled out of their weapons contracts, but Justin Hammer? Really?

“She know the record reflect that I observed Mr Hammer entering the chamber, and I am wondering if and when any actual expert will also be in attendance,” she said, holding her nose up at the man.

If the world wanted to call her petty, then so be it. She still remembered how the man stood above Rhodey and hurt him, because he was a black man in a College who dared to defy the expectations set around him.

Even if it was decades ago.

Some people never changed, and she knew that Hammer was one of them, what from all the sexist remarks he’d thrown her way over the years.

“Absolutely. I’m no expert. I defer to you, Antonia,” he said, winking at her. “You’re the wonder girl. Senator, if I may. I may well not be an expert, but you know who was the expert? Your dad. Howard Stark.”

She rolled her eyes, visibly, and knew the camera’s picked it up. So they wanted to shame her for not being her father? Fine. Her father had already held that against her for her entire life. There was nothing they could say to get her to bend.

“Really a father to us all, and to the military-industrial age. Let’s just be clear, he was no flower child. He was a lion. We all know why we’re here. In the last three years, Antonia Stark has created a sword with untold possibilities. And yet, she insists it’s a shield. She asks us to trust her as we cower behind it. I wish I were comforted, Antonia, I really do. I’d love to leave my door unlocked when I leave the house, but this ain’t Canada. You know, we live in a world of grave threats, threats that Ms Stark will not always be able to foresee. That much power is too much in the hands of a single person. It is a weapon, one that can do great things if in the hands of the US Government, and not some girl who thinks she can play dress up as a superhero. The days of the tales of Captain America saving us from the Nazis have long past. Superheroes were not here when we went to war
time and time again against our enemies. The Military was. And the Military should be the one holding that power. Not a singluar woman. Thank you. God bless Iron Woman. God bless America.”

“I would like to go on record and question if Hammer’s objections to my wielding of the suit is as a private citizen or because I am a woman,” she said, and the man spluttered. “What kind of message are you sending out to all the young girls watching this, when you tell them they are incapable of playing in the same game, simply because of their gender?”

“That’s enough, Ms Stark,” Stern cut her off, “That was well said Mr Hammer. The committee would now like to invite Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes to the chamber.”

If they expected a surprised reaction from her, she didn’t give it to them. Rhodey had already called her up and told her that they’d wanted him to speak. He’d told her how they expect him to give a damning speech about how he believed she didn’t deserve the suit. And if the SI Military Liaison and her best friend didn’t even support her, it would be case closed.

Stern called him up the stand, “I have before me a complete report on the Iron Woman weapon, complied by Colonel Rhodes. And, Colonel, for the record, can you please read page 57, paragraph four?”

“You’re requesting that I read specific selections from my report, Senator?” Rhodey asked in disbelief.

“Yes, sir,” Stern smirked.

“It was my understanding that I was going to be testifying in a much more comprehensive and detailed manner,” Rhodey tried, and Stark was sure they were going to twist his wording.

“I understand. A lot of things have changed today. So if you could just read—” Stern tried to pressure him.

Rhodey argued with him, but the man seemed dead set on Rhodey reading whatever was on page 57, paragraph four.

“Very well. ‘As he does not operate within any definable branch of government, Iron Woman presents a potential threat to the security of both the nation and to her interests.’”, Rhodey read, “I did however, go on to summarise that the benefits of Iron Woman far outweigh three liabilities and that it would be in our interest to fold Ms Stark into the existing chain of command, Senator.”

Rhodey finished his summary as Stern rampantly tried to get him to stop talking.

“I’m not a joiner,” she said, supporting Rhodey, “But I will be open to considering it, if you asked nicely.”

She knew the audience laughed again, but she stood her ground. The Government didn’t even try to ask her for her assistance. They just wanted to take her suit from her. And that was where her issues with them began.

“I’d like to go on and show, if I may, the imagery that’s connected to your report,” Stern said, and Rhodey stopped him.

“I believe it is somewhat premature to reveal these images to the general public at this time,” Rhodey argued, and when Stern pushed, he cued up the images on the screen. “Intelligence suggests that the devices seen in these photos are, in fact, attempts at making manned copies of Ms Stark’s suit. This
has been corroborated by our allies and local intelligence on the ground indicating that these suits are quite possibly, at this moment, operational.”

She pulled out her phone and began fiddling with it, pulling up the images she had JARVIS obtain earlier before the hearing.

She hacked onto the screen as she changed the images to the ones she had. “Hold on a second buddy. Let me see something here. Boy, I’m good. I commandeered your screens. I need them. Time for a little transparency. Now, let’s see what’s really going on.”

“What’s she doing?” Stern said, looking less confident than he had a moment before.

“If you will direct your attention to said screens, I believe that’s North Korea,” She said, and on the screen showed a man in an oversized suit repeatedly falling over.

“Can you turn that off? Take it off,” Stern demanded, and Hammer moved towards the television. While this hearing might be open to the public, she knew they didn’t want the images released as it would be damning to their case.

But she was all about transparency, wasn’t she?

“Iran,” Toni said, as an image of a suit that flew, only to catch on fire a few seconds later.

“No grave threat here. Is that Justin Hammer? How did Hammer get in the game?” she said, pulling up the final video of Hammer testing on a suit which bent the man back in a position which definitely would have broken a few bones.

“Wow. Yeah, I’d say most countries, five, ten years away. Hammer Industries, twenty,” she said, leaning back, proving her point that there was no immediate arms race from her suit’s creation.

“I’d like to point out that that test pilot survived,” Hammer said quickly to the media.

“Nothing to see here. We’re adjourned.” Stern said.

Rhodey gave her an exasperated look, but she could see he was smiling despite himself.

She threw on her sunglasses and her heels clicked as she walked out of the room, head held high, to the sound of applause thundering behind her.

She knew it was far from over. But for now, she’d won.
She sauntered back into her Malibu mansion, exhausted, but invigorated. She might have won the case, but it wouldn’t stop the Government from pressuring her into turning over the suit.

She knew logically that the entirety of the United States Government wasn’t corrupt, but it didn’t mean that they wouldn’t keep trying to get her property one way or another.

“Wake up, Mommy’s home,” she grinned as the house turned on.

“Welcome home, Miss,” JARVIS said to her, “Congratulations on the opening ceremonies. They were such a success, as was your Senate hearing. And may I say how refreshing it is to finally see you in a video with your clothing on, ma’am.”

She laughed at that, “Who is teaching you all this sarcasm, J?”

“Who indeed?” JARVIS bemused.

“U!” she sighed, as the smoothie made it all over the walls, before knocking over the blender. “I swear to God I’ll dismantle you. I’ll soak your motherboard. I’ll turn you into a wine rack.”

U beeped sadly and she groaned. Curie, she was growing soft.

“You tried, baby,” she said, taking the smoothie from him and stroking his arm. “How many ounces a day of this gobbledegook am I supposed to drink?”

“We are up to 80 ounces a day to counteract the symptoms, miss,” JARVIS told her.

“Check palladium levels,” she commanded, as JARVIS gave her the results.

Twenty-four percent. In the last few days.

She ripped the Arc Reactor out of her chest, as it smoked up and sighed, “God, they’re running out quick,” she said, as she put in the new core. She lifted up her shirt and saw black lines emerging from the device.

That couldn’t be good.

“Miss Potts is approaching. I recommend that you inform her,” JARVIS tried, but she quickly shut him off.

“Is this a joke? What are you thinking?” Pepper stormed in angrily, “What are you thinking?”

“Hey, I’m thinking I’m busy. And you’re angry about something. Do you have the sniffles? I don’t want to get sick,” she deflected.

“Did you just donate entire modern art collection to the-” Pepper started as she followed Toni around the room.

“Girl Scouts of America,” Toni beamed.

“Girl Scouts of America?” Pepper finished exasperated.

“Yes. It is a worthwhile organisation. I didn’t physically check the crates but, basically, yes. And it’s not “our” collection, it’s my collection. No offence,” Toni brushed her off.
Pepper was not amused, “No, you know what? I think I’m actually entitled to say “our” collection considering the time that I put in, over 10 years, curating that.”

Toni dismissed it and Pepper pulled out a list on her StarkPad, “You know, there’s only about 8,011 things that I really need to talk to you about. The Expo is a gigantic waste of time.”

“I need you to wear a surgical mask until you’re feeling better. Is that okay?” Toni said, somewhat seriously. She was already dying, she didn’t need to die any faster.

“That’s rude,” Pepper coughed.

“There’s nothing more important to me than the Expo. It’s my primary point of concern. I don’t know why you’re against it. Think of all the girls and boys out there who will come and see something that motivates them to want to change the word. What’s egotistical about that?”

“Stark Industries is in complete disarray. You understand that?” Pepper questioned her, and Toni stopped.

“No. Our stocks have never been higher. We’ve opened several new divisions and have made incredible progress. We’ve moved past being just a weapons company. We’re so much more now,” Toni argued.

“Yes, from a managerial standpoint,” Pepper opposed her. “Okay, fine. My point is, we have already awarded contracts to the wind farm people. And to the plastic plantation tree, which was your idea by the way. Those people are on payroll and you won’t make a decision”

“Everything was my idea. I don’t care about the liberal agenda any more. It’s boring. Boring. I’m giving you a boring alert. You do it,” Toni said, turning to her friend, and saying the words she’d been trying to for the last month.”

“I do what?” Pepper paused, looking back at her.

“Excellent idea. I just figured this out. You run the company,” Toni said, hoping she’d get the hint.

“Yeah, I’m trying to run the company.” Pepper raised a brow at her.

“Pepper, I need you to run the company. Well, stop trying to do it and do it,” Toni told her.

“You will not give me the information in order to-” Pepper said, confused.

“I’m asking you to physically do it. I need you to do it,” Toni said, trying to cut her off.

“I am trying to do it!” Pepper all but yelled.

“Pepper, you’re not listening to me!” Toni shouted exasperatedly.

“No, you are not listening to me,” Pepper said in a similar tone.

“I’m trying to make you CEO. Why won’t you let me?” She said, and Pepper paused, looking stunned.

“Have you been drinking?” Pepper’s first response was, which was fair, she supposed.

“Chlorophyll. I hereby irrevocably appoint you chairman and CEO of Stark Industries effective
immediately. Yeah, done deal. Okay? I’ve actually given this a fair amount of thought, believe it or not. Doing a bit of headhunting, so to speak, trying to figure out who a worthy successor would be. And then I realised it’s you. It’s always been you. I thought there’d be a legal issue, but actually I’m capable of appointing my successor. My successor being you. Congratulations? Take it, just take it,” Toni said, as Butterfingers brought over some champagne.

“No,” Pepper said, handing her back the glass.

“No?” Toni said, in shock. “Why not?”

“Because I don’t want your job, Toni. You’ve always been a good CEO regardless of what the press might think. Sure you get caught up in your work and sometimes forget the finer details of running a company but I don’t think you’re unworthy of the position,” Pepper said, sitting her down. “Toni, you were one of the first female CEO’s of a Fortune 500 company. You continue to change the world every single day, for the better. And there is no one more deserving of that job than you. I will not take your job from you because you are the best person for it, you continue to make the world shine and a better place. Do you know how many fan letters I get from young children for you? You’re an inspiration to the world, regardless of what some stuffy men in suits think.”

“Pepper,” Toni said softly, “This job is dangerous. I have so many employees to think about. What if something happens to me as Iron Woman? I need someone to be in line to take the company in a direction worthy of its name. If you won’t be my CEO, then be my COO. I haven’t found anyone since Obie, and well you were always better at running all the operations anyways. And if something happens to me, I want you to take the company.”

“Toni, I don’t know what to think,” Pepper said, looking at her carefully, “Are you okay? You would tell me if something was wrong, right?”

“Of course,” Toni plastered on her press smile, “Don’t think, drink. There you go. To Pepper Potts, my new COO of Stark Industries.”

Pepper tapped her glass against Toni’s and the two of them drank.

And later, when Pepper was gone, she asked JARVIS to leave Pepper the company. At least when she passed the company would be in safe hands.

Chapter End Notes

It didn’t feel right for Toni to fully sign away the company to Pepper given how hard she’s worked. Yes, she believes she’s dying, but Pepper wouldn’t accept the company since she doesn’t know that. This Toni has poured her heart and soul into proving her capabilities. But Pepper has worked hard too so COO felt like a good compromise. This story is going to slowly start diverging more and more from MCU, starting with a certain SHIELD spy we’ll encounter in the next chapter.
"The notary’s here! Can you please come sign the transfer paperwork?" Pepper said as she entered the room.

She was currently in the boxing ring with Harry and Happy, both of whom insisted she continue to learn how to fight, even if she’d tried pointing out just how pointless it was.

“I’m on Happy Potter time,” she said, before elbowing Happy in the face and hitting Harry in the ribs, “Sorry.”

“What the hell was that?” Happy asked, looking less than impressed with her.

“It’s called mixed martial arts,” she grinned, “It’s been around for three weeks.”

Harry scowled, “It’s called dirty boxing, there’s nothing new about it”

A blonde man walked into the room then and she saw Harry tense up slightly. She looked over at him, but he simply shook his head, indicating that he would tell her about it later.

“I promise this is the only time I will ask you to give me a promotion,” Pepper smiled, and Toni laughed. She’d already turned down the higher promotion anyways.

Happy tapped her on the head as she watched the man, “Lesson one. Never take your eye off-” she kicked him, and he flew backwards.

“That’s it. I’m done. What’s your name man?” she asked him.

“Brenton, Clyde Brenton,” he responded a bit too quickly.

She pointed to the ring, and spoke, “Front and centre. Come into the church,” she said, wanting to see what it was that Harry was so wary of. But if the man seemed to recognize her cousin, he didn’t say a word.

“No. You’re seriously not gonna ask,” Pepper gasped, looking at her like she was insane.

“If it pleases the court, which it does,” Toni shrugged.

Clyde turned to Pepper, “It’s no problem,” he said, and Toni tried to get a read on him.

“I’m sorry. She’s very eccentric,” Pepper apologised. Well that was one of the nicer words that had been used to describe her over the years.

Clyde entered the ring carefully as she took a sip of the horrible Chlorophyll which was keeping her alive temporarily.

“Can you give him a lesson?” Toni asked, gesturing to Happy to fight with him, as she stepped out
of the ring.

“No problem,” Happy winced, still a little sore.

“Who is he?” she asked Pepper, wanting to know where the man had come from. Harry sat beside her, looking a bit curious too.

“He is from legal. And he is potentially a very expensive sexual harassment lawsuit if you keep ogling him like that,” Pepper said.

She turned to Harry instead, “What do you know?” she asked him.

“We’ll talk when he’s gone,” Harry murmured.

“I need a new assistant, Pep,” Toni said, “Now that you’re gone, what do I do?”

“Yes, and I’ve got three excellent potential candidates. They’re lined up and ready to meet you,” Pepper said, trying to hand her a file.

“I don’t have time to meet. I need someone now. I feel like it’s him,” Toni said, knowing there was something about the man that she wasn’t aware of. “How do I spell your name, Clyde?”

“B-R-E-N-T-O-N,” Clyde said, dodging a punch, and Toni looked him up on her table computer quickly.

“Wow. Very, very impressive individual,” she nearly whistled as half naked pictures of the man came up.

“You’re so predictable, you know that?” Pepper rolled her eyes.

“So it would seem,” she mused, as she looked over the tailored resume, “He’s fluent in French, Italian, Russian, Latin. Who speaks Latin?”

“No one speaks Latin,” Harry said, and she nodded.

“Exactly. No one speaks Latin,” she said. “He modelled in Tokyo too.”

It was almost as if the resume was perfect to grab the attention of what someone thought she’d like based on the public persona she put out.

“I want him,” she said, and Harry looked like he was going to yell at her.

A loud thud resounded through the room and she saw as Happy fell to the ground.

“Oh, my God! Happy!” Pepper cried, and Toni looked at him curiously.

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Toni said, gesturing at him.

“I just slipped,” Happy looked displeased.

“I need your impression,” Clyde said, as he exited the ring.

“I think you’re a quiet reserved, old soul,” she said, looking him over, “But there is a deep longing inside of you, to be a part of something.”

“I meant your fingerprint,” Clyde said, looking amused.
“Right,” Toni laughed.

“Will that be all, Ms Stark?” Clyde said, flirted, moving close to her, and she took a step back.

“Yes. Word of advice, Mr Brenton, don’t believe everything in the press,” she said simply. If everyone who flirted with her got a job, then where would she be?

The man looked a little off put but didn’t question it.

“Yes, that will be all, Mr Brenton. Thank you very much,” Pepper said, walking out with the man, and she turned to Harry.

“Well?” she asked, and Harry looked at her.

“He works for SHIELD,” Harry said. “Clint Barton, one of their top operatives.”

“Why is SHIELD poking around Stark Industries?” Toni mused.

“To see what they can dig up,” Harry said, “They already know I won’t reveal anything to them about you. And they’re under the impression that you don’t know as much about SHEILD as you actually do. They want to get inside information about you and the Iron Woman suit.”

“I see,” she said, standing up, “Well if I turn away Clyde Brenton, they’re just going to send more agents. So let’s hire him and control the information he gets access to.”

“If you’re sure,” Harry warned her.

“I am,” she said firmly, “Better the snake you can see than the one hidden in the grass.”

She landed in Monaco, ready to watch the Grand Prix as her driver raced for Stark Industries.

“Miss Stark?” Clyde asked her, sauntering up to her with a grin. He was wearing a tight black suit which extenuated his body as SHEILD probably assumed she’d like. “How was your flight?”

“It was excellent. Boy, it’s nice to see you,” Toni said, “I don’t believe you’ve met Ava here? Miss Carter-Sousa is one of my most trusted employees and helps me get all my inventions out the door.”

If the last name raised any flags in Clint’s mind, he didn’t react.

“Pleasure to meet you,” Clyde kissed her hand and Ava blushed slightly. “We have one photographer from the ACM, if you don’t mind. Okay?”

Pepper turned to her in surprise, “When did this happen?”

Toni laughed under her breath as she instructed Pepper to smile with her. The fewer people who knew about Clyde, the better.

“Right this way,” Clyde directed, as he placed a hand on the small of her back.

Well, if she was going to be flirted with in the pretense of getting her company secrets, then she’d give as good as she got.

“You look fantastic,” Toni purred, and Clyde winked at her.
“Why, thank you very much,” he flushed, and she carried on as she asked for her schedule.

They arrived at their table and greeted Elon Musk and she nearly laughed as he floundered, trying to gain a contract with them.

If men were anything, it was predictable.

And almost like clockwork, “Antonia is that you?” Justin Hammer said, emerging from behind her.

“My least favourite person on Earth,” she sighed, and Ava stifled a laugh.

“Hey, sweetheart,” he said, coming over to her and trying to put an arm around her.

“Not your sweetheart,” she reminded him, shrugging his arm off.

“How are you doing?” he said, without missing a beat, “You’re not the only rich one here with a fancy car. You know Christine Everhart from Vanity Fair. You guys know each other?”

Christine flushed as Toni winked at her, “Hi, yes.”

Pepper sighed, “Yes,” as Toni thought back to her one-night stand almost a year ago. Christine Everheart, the woman who tipped her off to the corruption in her own company.

“BTW, big story,” Hammer said annoyingly, “The new COO of Stark Industries. It’s always great when women are given positions of power you know, because of their brains.”

She wanted to throw her drink at him for insinuating she only gave Pepper the job because she was sleeping with her.

“I know,” Christine gushed, “My editor will kill me if I don’t grab a quote for our Powerful Women issue.”

Pepper looked slightly embarrassed as she turned to the woman and started talking with her about female empowerment and she wished more than anything she could be a part of that conversation and not have to look at Hammer.

“She’s actually doing a big spread on me for Vanity Fair. I thought I’d throw her a bone, you know. Right?” Hammer bragged.

“Right. Well, she did quite a spread on Toni last year,” Pepper defended, and Toni could have kissed her friend. “It was very impressive.”

“And she wrote a story as well,” Toni added.

Christine shot her a smile as Pepper stepped away, and she tried to plead with her to stay.

“Hey, Sweetheart. How’re you doing?” Justin wrapped an arm around her waist as he pulled her close for the camera. “Looking gorgeous.”

She moved away from him, smiling at the camera.

“Can I ask you,” Christine started, “Is this the first time you’ve seen each other since the Senate?”

“Since he got his contract revoked,” Toni pointed out.

“Actually, it’s on hold,” Justin countered.
“That’s not what I heard. What’s the difference between ‘hold’ and ‘cancelled’? The truth?” Toni questioned.

“Yes, what is it?” Christine leaned in, interestingly.

“No. The truth is, I’m actually hoping to present something at your Expo,” Hammer said, and she nearly laughed.

“Well, if you invent something that works, I’ll make sure I get you a slot,” she said, knowing all too well that he wouldn’t.

Clyde pulled her away then, and she was grateful to the man, for despite his untrustworthiness, at least he was good for a quick save. She slipped away to the bathroom, eager just to get a few moments to herself before she was forced to listen to another person like Hammer drone on about their own successes.

She supposed in hindsight, seeing 53% blood toxicity is what really set her off.

She knew she didn’t always make the best decisions, but really, this was one of her worst. Or at least she figured, when she stood in a racing suit, walking towards the car.

“Well, what’s the use of having and owning a race car if you don’t drive it?” she asked the press and they cheered her on.

At least if she was going to die, she’d die in style.

She sat in the car and revved the engine as the race started. She’d always loved the thrill of fast cars and fast driving. Of being so in control of something and making it bend to her will. She loved feeling the wind in her hair as the world faded away.

She knew something was wrong as she saw smoke ahead on her on the race track, and as she drew closer, she saw a man with two electrified whips, aiming straight at her car.

The front broke off as her car flew through the air, turning over, and crashing straight into the barrier.

She crawled out of the car, trying to survey the damage to her body. She had a few cuts, but nothing appeared to be broken.

The man walked towards her, as an explosion of cars lit up behind him, and she heard the screams of horror.

She moved behind him, grabbing a piece off the car that had broken off and tried to hit the man on his head while his back was turned to her. To no one’s surprise, the man barely flinched as the metal came in contact with him. He turned in rage, hitting her with one of his electrified whips, and she felt her heart race as she crashed to the ground.

Where was her suit when she needed it?

She rolled over as he brought his whip down again, burning the spot that she had been in a few seconds prior.

She vowed in that moment to never go anywhere without a version of her suit on her, and if she lived long enough to survive any of this, she would see it through.

She tried to run, get to cover, or at least wait it out until she knew what his weaknesses were enough
to defeat him. Funnily enough, in all of Rhodey’s training, they never taught her how to fight hand to hand with someone who had two electric whips.

One of the whips caught her leg and she fell to the ground, the world starting to blur around her.

Was this the moment she died? Not of alcohol and drugs like the press often speculated she would, or of torture from terrorists, or palladium poisoning. But of a madman bent on killing her whom she didn’t even know.

She saw the man approach her in the reflection of the headlights of the car, gasoline spilling out of the broken car, and like that, she knew what she needed to do.

She could hear his swings begin to rapidly increase in pace, and she timed it out, waiting for him to strike, as she dodged out of the way and the race car went up in flames.

The man approached her again, looking barely fazed and she tried to move backward again, as a loud honk came and she watched as a black car crushed him into the fence, just inches from where she stood.

“Are you okay?” Toni asked, checking on the two of them carefully, “Were you heading for me or for him?”

“I was trying to scare him,” Happy shrugged, leaning to look her over.

“Are you out of your mind?” Pepper screamed at her. “Get in the car now.”

“I was attacked,” she defended, “We need better security.”

“Get in the car,” Happy demanded and she rolled her eyes as she moved towards the other door.

She opened it carefully and blinked as the door came apart in her hands, sliced in half from the remainder of the car in a perfectly straight line.

Happy reversed the car, slamming him back into the fence, “I got him!”

“Hit him again!” Toni screamed, trying to take her briefcase from Pepper.

The man began slicing into the cars amid Peppers screams. As the left side of the car came undone, Pepper threw the case at Toni, and she nearly smiled.

She stepped on the box, placing her arms in their gloves as the suit moved to attach itself to her.

This man thought he could hurt her friends without any repercussions? Well he had another thing coming for him.

She kicked the car out of the way, getting them out of his reach, and turned to face the man.

She raised her repulsors, only for him to hit them with his whips. His whips grabbed onto her suit, bring her in tightly, as he flung her onto the track. Well she would be damned if he used her own technology against her. She grabbed onto the whips, using it to bring herself closer to him. He couldn’t hurt her with whips if she had them all wrapped up around her little fingers.

She used his own move against him, and threw him onto the ground, before quickly moving to remove his arc reactor from his chest, as his suit powered off instantly.

Within seconds, the CRS had him surrounded, and she took a step back and took a deep breath for
the first time since the entire fight had started.

He spat back blood at her as he was being dragged away, “You lose. You lose Stark.”

She looked down at the arc reactor in her hands and clenched it tightly, crushing it in her hands.

She walked into his prison cell later, despite Peppers protests, and Happy’s insistence that he went with her.

She had turned them both away; Happy would keep Pepper safe. And if “Clyde Brenton” really was a SHIELD agent, then he would keep Ava safe. She didn’t need anyone else hurt because of her.

“We ran his prints. We got nothing back, not even a name,” one of the government agents spoke to her in French.

“Where are we going?” she asked as she followed them down the hall.

“Over there. We’re not even sure he speaks English. He hasn’t said a word since he got here,” the guard responded to her.

“Five minutes,” she asked, knowing better than to try and push her luck. The guard nodded at her, as he opened the door. She walked into the holding cell as the door was closed behind her.

She walked behind him, moving to see his face, “Pretty decent tech. Cycles per second were a little low. You could have doubled up your rotations,” she said, as he barely lifted his head, “You focused the repulsor energy through ionised plasma channels. It’s effective. Not very efficient. But it’s a passable knock-off. I don’t get it. A little fine tuning you could have made a solid pay cheque. You could have sold it to North Korea, China, Iran, or gone onto the black market. You look like you got friends in low places.”

She moved closer to his face, and she finally saw a reaction.

“You come from a family of thieves and butchers. And now, like all guilty men, you try to rewrite your own history. You are no different because of your gender, Stark. And you forget all the lives the Stark family has destroyed,” he said, and she wondered if he was yet another person her father had screwed over in an attempt to leave behind a legacy.

“Speaking of thieves, where did you get this design?” she asked him curiously, sitting beside him on the bench.

“My father. Anton Vanko,” he said, like the name was supposed to mean something to her.

“Well, I never heard of him,” she shrugged simply.

“My father is the reason you’re alive,” he spat, and she wondered just how he meant. Because of the reactor? Something that happened before that with their fathers?

“The reason I’m alive is because you had a shot, you took it, you missed,” she told him simply. She had long since given up on other men taking credit for own designs. And she’d be damned if he was one of them.

“Did I?” he laughed, “If you can make God bleed, the people will cease to believe in him. And there will be blood in the water. And the sharks will come. The truth, all I have to do is sit here and watch
as the world will consume you.”

She nearly punched him. She had never once claimed to be a god or a perfect human. She knew who she was, with all her flaws and weaknesses. Her father had shoved them in her face every chance he got. The world had shoved them in her face.

*Her gender, her lack of propriety, her intelligence.*

They hated her for it but loved profiting off of it all the same.

“Where will you be watching the world consume me from? That’s right. A prison cell. I’ll send you a bar of soap,” she said, as she stood to leave.

“Hey, Toni. Before you go, palladium in the chest, painful way to die,” the man laughed, and she left the cell, not wanting to give him any more attention than he had already received.

She had Pepper cancel her party in the wake of learning of Ivan Vanko and the government’s displeasure in her. Rhodey already came over and let her know how the National Guard was ready to storm her door to take her suits.

Typical.

America can’t let anyone have anything nice without them trying to take it from her.

She covered up her bruises and put on a nice dress, as music played in the background, her family and her friends all around her.

If she was going to die, she wanted to die surrounded by people she loved. Not hundreds of her “closest friends” or business partners or anyone related to her because she had money.

She wanted those who had fought for her through her entire life to be there for her last birthday.

“Happy Birthday, Toni,” her uncle said, as he pulled her into a tight hug. She held him tightly, wondering briefly how he would explain to Aunt Peggy that she was gone when the palladium finally killed her.

“Thanks Uncle Daniel,” She said with a smile.

“It’s not every day my cousin turns thirty-nine!” Ava grinned as she hugged her.

Harry simply grinned as he pulled her into a one-armed hug, “Happy Birthday Cuz.”

“Now that you’re all here, the real party can begin,” she beamed, as she raised her hands and waiters and waitresses brought out carts of food and began placing it on the dining table.

“Toni, did you organize all of this?” Pepper asked her with a slight gasp. She knew her friend was wary when she said she wanted to take over control of preparations, thinking Toni wanted to throw a rager and get wasted.

“I did, with the help of Clyde,” she said, winking at her new assistant, before he nodded and took his leave. “I just wanted all of you here for my birthday. I know over the years we’ve drifted apart, because of life, school, work, family, and the different paths we are given. But each one of you mean the world to me, and there is no one else I’d rather spend my birthday with.”
She sat down at the dining table as the others followed suit, Ava on one side of her and Rhodey on the other.

“Toni,” Rhodey said softly, “We love you too, you know that right?”

“Aw Honey bear,” she beamed up at him, “I know how much you love me.”

Happy sniffled slightly and she could see her manly bodyguard trying to pretend like her words didn’t get to him.

“You would tell us if something was wrong, right?” Ava said suddenly, and Harry elbowed her.

“What, we all know she’s keeping something from us. How long are we going to keep pretending that everything is okay? Don’t we deserve to know the truth?”

She let out a shaky breath as she looked around the room, realizing that clearly every single one of them was aware that she was hiding something from them.

“I never could fool you guys, could I?” she exhaled, and she saw her family watching her intently.

“The arc reactor is in my chest to keep me alive. I was hit by my own bomb in Afghanistan, and a piece of shrapnel was embedded in my chest. There is no way to remove it without killing me in the process, and the arc reactor is the only thing that is keeping it from entering my chest.”

Ava took her hand carefully, as she explained to them just why it was important she had the reactor. Even if she had before, they needed to know that it was vital to her survival.

“But the arc reactor has a palladium core,” she said simply, and she could see Ava’s mind begin to race as she put together pieces.

“That was why it was smoking when you took it out, wasn’t it?” Rhodey said sharply, “Because palladium is toxic to humans.”

“Yes,” she said, as gasps filled the table. “The arc reactor, meant to keep me alive, is poisoning me slowly. Last I checked, my blood toxicity was at nearly sixty percent.”

“Toni,” Pepper inhaled, “Are you dying? How long do you have left to live?”

“Not long,” she admitted, “This is probably my last birthday. It’s why I wanted you all here. I wanted to be surrounded by those I love. By my family.”

“Are there no other suitable cores?” Harry demanded, “Nothing else that can be used?”

“There is no combination of known elements,” she said softly, “I had JARVIS run all the simulations. There’s nothing else I can use as a substitute.”

“So what, we’re supposed to just let you die?” Ava’s voice cracked slightly, “I can’t accept that Toni. There has to be something else we can do. Anything else.”

She squeezed her cousin’s hand tightly, “There isn’t Ava. I’ve accepted it already. It was why I tried to make Pepper CEO of SI. It’ll at least make it easier to transition from COO to CEO after. And I want you to be the head of R&D. Your mind always was brilliant, and I know you’ll be good for the company.”

“I like working there because I like being with you,” Ava said softly, “Because I love inventing with you Toni. Not because I want a title or recognition. How do I keep living if you’re gone?”
“You have to,” she swallowed, “All of you do. My death can’t mean that the rest of you just fade away. You have to keep going.”

“Easy to say when you’re not the one losing a sibling,” Rhodey said, looking broken, “Were you ever even going to tell us, Toni?”

“I didn’t want to hurt you,” she said, looking at their faces. “I didn’t want your last memories of me to be coloured by the fact that I was dying. I didn’t want to be treated any differently.”

“Screw this,” Harry said, standing.

“Harold!” Uncle Daniel said firmly, “Sit down.”

“No,” he said, “We are surrounded by some of the brightest men and women in this room, “Rhodey is in the Military and I’m a part of SHEILD. There has to be some cure, somewhere. And if you think I’m going to sit back and just let my older sister die without doing a thing to stop it, you have another thing coming. We will find something, Toni. I promise you that. You will not die if I have anything to say about it.”

She didn’t want to tell him it was futile. Hope gave people courage to go on, to keep living and fighting another day.

“We won’t let you die,” Ava nodded determinedly. “Harry, we’ll look first thing in the morning, I promise. But this is Toni’s birthday; we can wait for one more day.”

“Okay,” Harry exhaled. “But we won’t give up on you, Toni. I promise.”

She smiled at both of them.

“I can’t do it, Toni,” Pepper said shakily, “You were always meant to be CEO. Working for you and seeing you pave the way for the rest of us has been extraordinary. This is your company, your legacy. I can’t take it over.”

“You’ll be perfect at it,” she told her friend softly, “You’ve already taken to COO astonishingly well. It’s just another step up. The Board loves you. There’s no one else I can trust to keep the company safe and to honour my legacy. And you’ll have Happy and Ava with you the entire time.”

Happy grunted and she smiled at her friend.

“Toni,” Rhodey said softly, as he looked at her, “It’ll devastate my family to lose you. It’ll devastate me. How am I supposed to go on without having you in my life? You’ve changed it in more ways than you ever could know, since that day I met you all those years ago. You’re family; my sister.”

“I want you to have the suit,” she told him softly, “The world needs someone to protect it and keep it safe. I know the military wants it too, and well, this should keep them satisfied. There is no one else I trust but you to pilot the suit. I already wrote in an algorithm that won’t let anyone else fly it but you.”

“Toni,” he started.

“They were always going to try and take it, one way or another,” she said with a shrug, “At least I can control how they get it, and what they can do with it. Even if they let someone else like, Bohr forbid, Hammer, tamper with it, they will never be able to achieve what I’ve done. But I want you to be safe, when you continue to fight for us. And I know you’ll make me proud when you don’t it.”
He pulled her into a tight hug.

“This isn’t goodbye,” Uncle Daniel said softly, “Toni, none of us are going to stop fighting for you. Not now, not ever. I know if Peggy were here, she’d be so proud of everything you’ve done so far. You’ve made all of us extremely proud. We love you, and this will not be how your story ends. I promise you that much.”

“Thank you,” she told him softly, “Thank you to all of you. For everything you’ve done. No matter what happens, I love all of you so much. But enough of this sappy stuff. It still is my birthday and I have a reputation to uphold of the kind of parties I throw, and this is putting a damper on it.”

She heard laughter, as she gestured for them to dig in.

If this was to be her last birthday, then it was by far her favourite.
She supposed after a night like the last one, she deserved a reward or two.

It hadn’t been easy, telling her family the truth. It was why she had been avoiding it for so long, not wanting to see the hurt or pain in their eyes, knowing that despite the fact that she didn’t hold herself with the highest regard, the people in her life cared about her.

But it didn’t make it any easier to be around them. To see Rhodey look so determined for her to find a way to live, for the Carter-Sousas’ hearts to break. For Pepper’s fury when she found out Toni wanted to pass on her company not only because she thought Pepper deserved it but because she was dying.

Even Happy had words with her.

“Ma’am,” she heard a voice call out, “I’m going to need to ask you to exit the donut.”

She looked down from the giant donut she had nestled herself in, as she attempted to eat away her feelings, and saw Nick Fury standing there, hands on his hips, and looking far less than pleased with her.

So she sighed, as she flew down and slid into a booth across from the man who had been trying to pry into her life for the last few months.

“I told you,” she said, raising a brow to look at him, “I don’t want to join your super-secret boy band.”

He laughed, “No, no, no. See, I remember, you do everything yourself. How’s that working out for you?”

She smirked at him, knowing the world’s perception of just how alone she was in the world, without a single person in her life who gave a damn.

“It’s-” she said, before changing the subject, “I’m sorry. I don’t want get off on the wrong foot. Do I look at the patch or the eye? Honestly, I’m a bit hung over. I’m not sure if you’re real or if I’m hallucinating.”

She had read the article detailing her birthday party adventures. She supposed cancelling a large party was bound to gain some suspicions. Imagine her surprise when she read all about getting wasted, talking about peeing in the suit, hooking up with her DJ, and then destroying her mansion.

He smirked at her, and she had a feeling he knew the truth, “I am very real. I’m the realest person you’re ever gonna meet.”

“Just my luck,” she feigned a sigh. “Where’s the staff here?”
“That’s not looking so good,” Fury ignored her, as leaned forward to touch the palladium pattern growing up steadily on her neck.

“I’ve been worse,” she shrugged, not wanting to go into details about it with him.

“We’ve secured the perimeter, but I don’t think we should hold it for too much longer,” she heard a familiar male voice call out.

Well, well, well.

Seemed as if they were finally going to let the cat out of the bag.

“You’re fired,” Toni said, sizing the man up as he slid into the booth, next to Fury.

“And yet, somehow I don’t think you’re all that surprised,” Clyde Brenton smirked at her.

“This is a complete shock to me,” she said solemnly.

“Toni, I want you to meet Agent Clint Barton,” Fury said, “However, I gather you’ve known about his presence for far longer than that.”

She gave him an innocent look.

“You can drop the act now, Toni,” Harry sighed as he sat down beside her, “I brought them into the loop last night after you told me you were dying.”

She glared at her cousin, “But now you gave away my advantage of knowing something they didn’t know.”

“With all due respect, Miss Stark,” Clint leaned forward with a twinkle in his eye, “I’m a SHIELD shadow. I know when someone is keeping me at arms’ length. We weren’t going to find out anything you didn’t want us to find. But once we knew you were ill, I was tasked to you by Director Fury.”

“Why?” she questioned.

“Why do you think?” Fury asked her, “You’ve been very busy. You made your girl your COO, you’re giving away all your stuff. You gave your best friend your suit. Now if I didn’t know any better—”

“Let’s just drop the act,” she sighed, growing tired of the charade, “What do you want from me?”

“What do we want from you? What do you want from me?” Fury raised his voice slightly, “You have become a problem, a problem I have to deal with. Contrary to your belief, you are not the centre of my universe. I have bigger problems than you in the southwest region to deal with.”

She laughed, “Oh, I’m sorry me saving the world has become an issue for you. I wasn’t aware of the fact that you were even responsible for me or my actions. Say what you will about the US Government. They might want to take away my suit for selfish reasons, but they never once disputed the fact that I’ve done great work for the world.”

“I found something in SHIELD,” Harry interjected, stopping the train wreck of a conversation, “It was why I brought them in. I found a possible cure.”

“But before we give it to you,” Clint said, returning to the table she’d barely noticed him having left, and placed down an injection in front of her.
“There is no cure,” she said firmly, looking down at it.

“This isn’t a cure,” Fury agreed, “It’s lithium dioxide. It’ll take the edge off so you can get back to work.”

“There’s nothing,” she said, shaking her head, “I’ve tried all the combinations. There’s nothing I can do.”

“I found your father’s notes, Toni,” Harry said, “The ones SHIELD had. And they have something in it you need to try.”

She sighed as she looked around her mansion as the SHIELD agent brought in boxes of her father’s research. She had known from Aunt Peg that they had taken the stuff her father had worked on to secure it, and honestly, she hadn’t cared. Her father hadn’t given a damn about her, and he had gotten her mother killed.

Except now he was apparently going to save her life.

It was laughable.

“Miss?” JARVIS interrupted her train of thought, “Colonel Rhodes is on the phone for you.”

“Patch him through, J,” she said, tapping on her earpiece as his voice filled her ear.

“Tones?” Rhodey asked, and she grew wary at the tone of his voice.

“I’m here, Caramilk,” she greeted, “Is everything okay?”

“I took the suit to the military,” he told her, “They got an official contract with Hammer Industries for him to weaponize the suit.”

She sighed, “Well we knew it would happen. As much as I hate the idea of his hands on my technology, this isn’t an unexpected surprise to either of us.”

“They also want to unveil the suit at the Stark Expo,” he told her, and she stilled. Was this what Hammer meant when he said he was working on something big? Was he trying to show her up at her own expo?

The nerve.

“Fine,” she sighed, “I did promise him a slot if he could get something working. Either way, Rhodey Bear, it’s still going to be you who pilot’s the suit. I’m the only one who can take away that configuration. And there is no one I trust more with it than you.”

“Thanks, Toni,” he told her softly, “I love you, you know that right?”

“I love you too,” she said, ignoring the looks Clint was giving her. “I’ll see you later?”

“You will,” he promised her, before ending the call, as Fury walked into her lab just then.

“Fury,” she greeted, gesturing for him to sit down.

“It’s time to talk, Stark,” he said, looking at her. “You know, I knew your godmother? She was my
mentor when I first started at SHIELD. Taught me everything I know. That woman is a force to be reckoned with, and I often pitied anyone who stood in her way. You remind me a lot of her. So I really shouldn’t have been surprised to gather you know as much as you do about us, given your family.”

“Yet you underestimated me anyways,” she shrugged.

“Your father wanted you kept in the dark,” Fury told her, “He didn’t want you brought into SHIELD. He wanted to protect you from all of this and refused to let anything or anyone come near you or your mother. He wanted to keep you safe.”

She scoffed at that.

“That thing in your chest is based on unfinished technology,” Fury said, gesturing to the arc reactor.

“No, it was finished. It has never been particularly effective until I miniaturised it and put it in my chest,” she said, looking at him sharply.

“No,” Fury disputed, “Howard said the arc reactor was the stepping stone to something greater. He was about to kick off an energy race that was gonna dwarf the arms race. He was on to something big, something so big that it was gonna make the nuclear reactor look like a triple-A battery.”

“Just him, or Anton Vanko in on this too?” she said bitterly, remembering the feeling of finding out her father had taken credit for something he didn’t do.

“Anton Vanko is the other side of that coin. Anton saw it as a way to get rich. He was going to sell it to terrorists. When your father found out, he had him deported,” Fury said, leaning back, “When the Russians found out he couldn’t deliver they shipped his ass off to Siberia and he spent the next 20 years in a vodka-fuelled rage. Not quite the environment you want to raise a kid in, the son you had the misfortune of crossing paths with in Monaco.”

“You told me I hadn’t tried everything. What do you mean I haven’t tried everything? What haven’t I tried?” she pushed, trying to get more information.

“He said that you were the only person with the means and knowledge to finish what he started,” Fury said, and she nearly laughed.

“He said that?” she asked in disbelief.

“Are you that girl? Are you? ‘Cause if you are, then you can solve the riddle of your heart.

“I don’t know where you get your information, but he wasn’t my biggest fan,” she said bitterly.

“What do you remember about your dad?” Fury cut her off.

“He was cold, he was calculating. He never told me he loved me. He never even told me he liked me, so it’s a little tough for me to digest when you’re telling me he said the whole future was riding on me and he’s passing it down. I don’t get that. You’re talking about a guy whose happiest day was when he shipped me off to boarding school. He hated me from the moment I was born for being a daughter when he wanted a son. He wrote me off and turned his entire focus to finding Captain America’s body and reproducing the serum. I was nothing to him, a failure, a woman who could never make it in a man’s world. And he made sure I knew how worthless I was, every day of my life.”

“That’s not true,” Fury interjected, and she simply shook her head. It didn’t change the truth of her
life to have someone disagree with how they interpreted her childhood. She knew the life she lived.

“Well, then, clearly you knew my dad better than I did,” she said with a shrug.

“I worked with your father too, Toni,” Fury told her softly, “He cared about you, in his own way. More than you ever will know.”

“What?” she asked, slightly sharply, knowing he must have been full of shit.

Fury stood then, as Harry and Coulson carried in a large crate in front of her, “I got a two o’clock. Okay, you’re good, right?”

“No, I’m not good!” she nearly yelled back at him.

“You got this right?” Fury said, as he turned to go.

“Got what? I don’t even know what I’m supposed to get!” she yelled desperately.

“Clint will remain a floater at SHI with his cover still intact,” Fury said, “You remember Agent Coulson right?”

She nodded, and Fury paused for a second before turning to face her again, “And Toni, remember, I got my eye on you.”

She watched speechlessly as the man exited her mansion.

“We’ve disabled all communications,” Clint told her, “No contact with the outside world. Good luck, Stark.”

“What if someone needs to reach me?” she turned to Harry, worried that her family would panic.

“I let them know we’re working on a solution and not to disturb you,” he told her gently, “Besides, they can reach me in the case of an emergency.

“Okay,” she exhaled. “Okay. Please. First thing, I need a little bodywork. I’ll put in a little time at the lab. If we could send one of your goon squad down to The Coffee Bean, Cross Creek, for a Starbucks run, or something like that, that’d be nice.”

She gestured at some of the agents, needing them to leave; to give her space to breathe. How could anyone think with so much going on around them?

“I’m not here for that. I’ve been authorised by Director Fury to use any means necessary to keep you on premises. If you attempt to leave or play any games, I will tase you and watch Supernanny while you drool into the carpet. Okay?” Coulson told her, looking unamused.

“I think I got it, yeah,” she said slightly rattled.

“Enjoy your evening’s entertainment,” Coulson said, turning his back to leave.

“Stay?” she asked Harry, as she gestured to the box. “I don’t think I can go through all of this by myself. Especially if Howard’s left anything personal behind. Please?”

“Of course,” he told her softly, “We’re in this together, Toni. We’ll find a solution. I promise. I meant what I said, I’m not just going to sit back and watch you die.”

She took a deep breath, before turning to the box. It was time to get started.
She dropped the box ‘Property of H. Stark’ on her table, opening it up gingerly. There was a set of blueprints for the Arc Reactor, with her father and Vanko’s names on it. She threw it to the side after scanning it briefly, there was nothing there she hadn’t seen before, except maybe Vanko’s name in the design.

There were some clippings as well, of Vanko’s defection from the Soviet, and she scanned the article briefly, as it lined up with what she’d been told of him.

She pulled out a set of reels of tape, as she gestured for JARVIS to bring down the movie projector she had installed to watch old movies. Say what they will about updating technology, somethings were meant to be watched the old-fashioned way.

“All things is achievable through technology,” her father’s voice boomed out, Harry took her hand in his, knowing how hard it was for her to watch him when she’d tried so hard to ignore her father for over a decade. “Better living, robust heath”

She picked up one if his notebooks, flipping through it carefully to see his notes with various equations in it. Harry was going through another journal, as her father droned on in the background.

“And for the first time in human history, the possibility of world peace. I’m Howard Stark, and everything you’ll need for the future can be found right here. City of the Future? City of Tomorrow? City of—” he cut off, losing his train of thought, “I’m Howard Stark and everything you’ll need in the future can be found right here. So, from all of us at Stark Industries, I would like to personally… Antonia, what are you doing back there? What is that?”

Her eyes flickered back to the screen in surprise to see her father talking to her. She saw her younger self on screen, as Harry looked over at her. She didn’t remember any of this, probably having been too young to form actual memories.

“Put that back. Put it back where you got it from,” Her father yelled at her as she held a model of a building in her hand curiously, “Where’s your mother? Maria? Go on. Go, go, go, go.”

He shooed her off the screen with a gesture as a man picked her up and took her away from the camera.

Of course he wanted to get rid of her, even then. Even when she was curious and wanted nothing more than to learn. To build, to create, and to make. She had still cared about his opinion, even then, even when he wanted nothing to do with her.

“All right, I think we got it—” the camera man said.

“I’ll… I’ll… I’ll come in and,” Howard hesitated as the film changed to a clip of him drinking the whiskey he’d loved so much. The whiskey that had gotten her mother killed. The clip changed again, as Howard appeared to be rehearsing the same scene again.

“So, from all of us at Stark Industries, I’d like to personally show you,” her father trailed off losing his direction, “my ass. I’d like to… I can’t… This is… I can’t… We have this, don’t we? This is a ridiculous way… Everything is achievable through technology”

She reached the last page of his notebook and sighed. This was supposed to save her life? This? She threw it to the side and took a glass of whiskey as she sipped it. Mendel, she needed something to take the edge off.
“Antonia,” her father, said, grabbing her attention. “You’re too young to understand this right now, so I thought I would put it on film for you. I built this for you. And someday you’ll realise that it represents a whole lot more than just people’s inventions. It represents my life’s work. This is the key to the future. I’m limited by the technology of my time, but one day you’ll figure this out. I know you will. You’re clever, and as much as I want to keep you safe, keep your mother safe, I know that is not the life that is meant for you. A woman in our world? Your life is going to be filled with struggle, with opposition, and with heartache. It’s why I need you to be better than me, to be stronger. You are my legacy, and I know you will change the world when you figure this out, Antonia. What is and always will be my greatest creation is you.”

Her father ended his rambles, and she felt herself shaking slightly.

“What a load of shit,” she said, sounding watery, “How dare he say he cared about me? That I was his legacy? He never even told me he loved me to my face, and he goes and leaves a clip saying I’m his greatest creation? He hated me for being a woman, for not being good enough. Who is he to rewrite our history and try and pretend it’s anything different than what it is?”

“He wasn’t a good father,” Harry told her softly, “But maybe he did love you, in his own way. It doesn’t make anything he did right; not the way he treated you or how he hurt you. But you must also consider that Obadiah was his partner for years. How much did he manipulate for his own greed?”

“None of that matters now,” she wiped her eyes, “They’re both dead, and this just all proved to be a giant waste of time. We’ve learned nothing from this.”

“Or maybe we just need to look harder,” Harry told her, as he stood to make a call.

She sighed, looking down at her father’s notebooks.

It was going to be a long day.

It was nearly an hour later when she heard Coulson’s voice call out, “I’m sorry Miss, no one is allowed inside right now.”

“Excuse me?” Her cousin’s voice responded, “Who are you to say I do not have permission to visit my cousin? Does she know that SHIELD is even here?”

Coulson spluttered and Harry stood, “Agent Coulson, my sister is more than welcome to be here. Besides, I asked her to come.”

“And I brought coffee,” Ava sauntered into the room, “Something which I know Toni very much will appreciate.”

She perked up at the sound of her favourite beverage.

“You are officially my favourite cousin again,” she said, taking drink from her.

“Even when I’m the one who told her to come over?” Harry frowned at her. “I asked her to bring the coffee!”

“I brought more than just the coffee,” her cousin said, as SHIELD agents began dragging in the models of the Stark Expo she’d left at SI for the company to use as a basis for the expo setup.
“Why?” Toni questioned, looking at it as the agents set it up in front of her. “Oh shit.”

She stared at the globe in the centre, as understanding filled her head.

Harry squinted at the model looking at both of them.

“I don’t see it,” he frowned.

“JARVIS, could you kindly Vac-U-Form a digital wire frame? I need a manipulatable projection,” Toni commanded, as JARVIS began scanning the model.

“1974 Stark Expo model scan complete, Miss,” JARVIS said, as the projection appeared in front of them.

“How many buildings are there?” Toni asked, lifting up the model to bring it to the centre of the room as she turned it upright.

“Am I to include the Belgium waffle stands?” JARVIS asked, and Ava laughed.

“That was rhetorical, J. Just show me,” she told her AI. “What does it look like to you?”

“An atom,” Ava said proudly.

“Oh shit,” Harry echoed he earlier sentiment.

“In which case the nucleus would be here,” Toni gestured to the centre, “Highlight the unisphere. Lose the footpaths. Get rid of them.”

The model lit up, as she moved to the side the things she didn’t want to see any longer.

“What is it you’re trying to achieve, Miss?” JARVIS asked her curiously.

“I’m discovering, correction. I’m rediscovering a new element, I believe. Lose the landscaping, the shrubbery, the trees,” she said, flicking things to the side. “Parking lots, exits, entrances. Structure the protons and the neutrons using the pavilions as a framework.” It began to come together in front of her and she could shake her head in disbelief. She moved her hands up as it filled the room around her, “Dad. Dead for almost 20 years, and still taking me to school.”

She clapped it down in her hands, nearly smiling.

“The proposed element should serve as a viable replacement for palladium,” JARVIS told them, and Harry laughed aloud as Ava’s eye lit up.

“Thanks Dad,” she said, analyzing the smaller size of the element.

“Unfortunately, it is impossible to synthesise,” JARVIS told them, and Harry’s face dropped.

DUM-E’s claw reached out to her, looking distressed, but she simply stroked him.

“Get ready for a major remodel, Darlings. We’re back in hardware mode,” she said, walking out of the room to get what she needed.

She’d show them all the meaning of the word impossible.

And so, she grabbed a hammer, and with Harry and Ava’s help, she knocked down the walls of her mansion, drilled into her floor to access the power grid, as she gave her house a makeover to make
way for the prismatic accelerator.

The parts went through her walls, as she screwed them together tightly.

“I heard you broke the perimeter,” Coulson said, looking far less than pleased with them, “Agent Carter-Sousa.”

“We were following Director Fury’s instructions,” Harry shrugged.

“Yeah. That was, like, three years ago,” Toni sassed back, “Where have you been?”

“I was doing some stuff,” Coulson said vaguely, with a gesture.

“Yeah, well, me too and it worked,” she grinned, “Hey, I’m playing for the home team Coulson, you and all your Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers. Now, are you gonna let me work or berate me further?”

Coulson pulled out Captain America’s shield from the box her father had left her and she sighed.

“What’s this doing here?” Coulson asked, looking less than pleased.

“That’s it. Bring that to me,” Toni gestured.

“You know what this is?” Coulson gave her a look as he handed it to her.

“It’s exactly what I need to make this work,” she said, needing something to support the heavy weight of the coil. Captain America would help save her life after all. Her father’s true legacy keeping alive the one he’d never wanted. “Lift the coil. Go, go. Put your knees into it. There you go. And, drop it. Drop it. Perfectly level. I’m busy. What do you want?”

“Nothing,” Coulson sighed, looking at Harry, “Goodbye. I’ve been reassigned. Director Fury wants me in New Mexico.”

She shook her head. Of course Fury wouldn’t even follow through on his threat to keep her contained. What did her life matter in the long run to him?

“Fantastic. Land of Enchantment,” she said nonchalantly.

“So I’m told,” Coulson said simply.

“Secret stuff?” Ava asked him, curiously.

“Something like that,” Coulson said, nodding at them, “Good luck.”

“Bye. Thanks,” she said, shaking his hand. Say what she will about the man, he was nothing if not dedicated.

“We need you,” Coulson said finally, looking back at her.

“Yeah, more than you know,” she said simply.

“Not that much,” he grinned, as he left the room, and she turned her focus back to finishing the accelerator.

They built for hours, until it was finally done, and she stepped back as she turned the key.

“Initialising prismatic accelerator,” JARVIS said, as a blue light shot through the device. She turned
“Approaching maximum power,” JARVIS informed her.

Ava took a wrench as a lever to help steady the turned wheel, as it shot out holes in her wall.

Harry let out a shout, as the light began destroying her workshop, before concentrating on the triangle in the centre, and glowing blue.

She turned it off after a moment, as it continued to glow.

“That was easy,” she said, taking off her protective glasses and picked it up carefully with a pair of pliers.

“Congratulations Miss. You have created a new element,” JARVIS said.

She carefully placed it into the arc reactor, as it began to power up.

“The reactor has accepted the modified core,” JARVIS told them. “I will begin running diagnostics.”

“You did it,” Harry breathed out and Ava beamed as she pulled Toni into a hug.

It wasn’t a confirmation yet, but she knew the truth, even without the numbers.

She had done it, she had found a viable substitute to palladium and she had saved her life.

She wasn’t going to die.

And just like that, the burden that had been weighing on her for the last few weeks had lifted.
Chapter Summary

Toni finds out just what Vanko was planning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Of course, the world went to hell shortly after Toni found a way to save herself. Because why wouldn’t it?

“DUM-E, U can you clean up this mess?” Toni said, gesturing to the room in front of her, with dirt and materials everywhere from their work. She sighed, as DUM-E just beeped at her, “You’re killing me, you know that?”

“You’re too hard on them,” Ava cooed as she stroked DUM-E’s arm. “They’re just trying their best.”

Ava would think that; she had been a child when DUM-E was created and thought he was the coolest thing ever.

“Miss, you have an incoming call with a blocked number,” JARVIS announced, as her screen lit up. Harry gave her a confused look.

“I guess my phone privilege have been reinstated,” she remarked.

“They haven’t,” Harry shook his head, “I haven’t told them that you found an element. I’ve been waiting to see if it worked yet before letting them know. I don’t want them trying to reassign me to anything else until we know for a fact that this worked.”

She glanced at her screen warily; it didn’t mean that SHIELD wasn’t calling then. But it didn’t mean that they were.

“Hello, you’ve reached Toni Stark,” she answered, “Please give yourself a number on how highly you think you rank in my life.”

Well if it was SHIELD, she’d know from the unimpressed response.

Ava simply snorted and Harry smiled exasperatedly.


“You what?” she asked, growing cold, as she looked over at her cousins.

“JARVIS start tracing the call,” Harry demanded, as Toni muted the speaker, and JARVIS began running numbers on the screen as Toni engaged with him.

“You told me double cycle’s more power,” Vanko laughed, “Good advice.”
“You sound pretty sprightly for a dead guy,” Toni commented, as worry filled her. Was Vanko free? Did he somehow escape the prison? Would he be coming for her? How did he get out of the explosion?

“You too,” Vanko responded, and she placed a hand over her arc reactor. “Now, the true history of Stark name will be written.”

She muted the call again, as Ava spoke up.

“JARVIS, where is he?” she said, scanning over the satellite images.

“Accessing the Oracle grid,” JARVIS replied as the map locked in on his coordinates. “Eastern Seaboard.”

“What your father did to my family over 40 years, I will do to you in 40 minutes,” Vanko chuckled.

“Sounds good,” she said, as JARVIS continued to get a better reading on the location of the call, “Let’s get together and hash it out.”

“Tri-State area. Manhattan and outlying boroughs,” JARVIS brought up.

“I hope you’re ready,” Vanko said, hanging up on her.

“Call trace incomplete,” JARVIS responded. She looked at the location it had picked up. No. It couldn’t be. Her heart raced as she looked over at the headline of Hammer’s presentation that afternoon.

She moved over to where the arc reactor was sitting and picked it up.

“Toni what are you doing?” Harry grabbed her arm lightly, “We don’t know it works yet.”

“I do,” she said, looking over at Ava. “It works, Harry. It would have burnt out already if it didn’t.

“You don’t know it won’t kill you yet either,” Ava said somberly, “What if it’s worse for you than the palladium?”

“If you both want to run some tests, then run them. But JARVIS, I need you to assemble the suit. It won’t matter if the reactor kills me or not if Vanko has destroyed the expo. If he puts innocent lives at risk just to get back at me. None of it will matter then,” she said, shoving the new arc reactor into her chest.

It glowed brightly, as Harry took a step backwards.

“That tastes like coconut,” she grimaced, feeling the raw power course through her, “And metal. Oh wow! Yes!”

“You’re not doing this alone,” Harry told her with a shake of his head, “I’ll inform SHIELD and have them stationed. We need to get civilians out of the way.”

“Okay,” she nodded, as Ava turned to the computer. “Ava, can you watch my back from here? Be my girl in the chair with JARVIS?”

“Already on it,” Ava grinned at her, as the suit began to place itself on her. “Go get him!”

She beamed back at them both, as she took off flying towards the STARK Expo. She’d be damned if Vanko ruined her what she’d worked so hard to achieve.
“What’s happening?” she asked, as she flew towards the expo.

“Justin Hammer has taken the stage,” she could hear the cringe in Ava’s voice, “He’s dancing. Oh god, he looks ridiculous.”

“I’m nearly there,” she told them, as JARVIS played a clip for her in the corner of the screen, “Then maybe this atrocity will end.”

She watched as he brought out different sets of *Hammer Drones*, and she wanted to cringe at how bad the design was. Just from looking at it she could see ten different things that would fail, and that was from just a glance.

And then her best friend rose up from the stage, wearing her suit, as it was tacked on with Hammer weapons.

The betrayal.

Even if she knew what was happening and that Rhodey was very much not a fan of it. It didn’t mean it was any easier to see her tech *defiled* in such a way.

She arrived then, hovering over the stage as gasps filled the room, before cheers emerged.

“We’ve got trouble,” she told her Honey Bear.

“I’m here on orders,” Rhodey told her, “If it’s a matter of how horrid the suit looks with these upgrades, now is not the time.”

“Give them a wave,” she said simply, as she rose a hand to wave to the crowd. “All these people are in danger, we need to get them out of here. I think he’s working with Vanko.”

“Vanko’s alive?” he gasped, having read the same report of the explosion as she had.

She moved closer to Justin Hammer, the eternal thorn in her side, “Where is he? Where is Vanko? Tell me!” she demanded.

“Who?” he asked, giving her an innocent and confused look. “What are you doing here, Sweetheart?”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” Rhodey said, sounding worried, as a gun engaged and pointed at her from the suit.

“Is that you?” she asked frantically, and Rhodey shook his head.

“No, I’m not doing that. That’s not me. I can’t move. I’m locked up. I’m locked up!” Rhodey said, panicked. The Drones raised their arms, taking aim at the crowd, “Get out of here. Go! This whole system’s been compromised.”

“Let’s take it outside,” she said, flying up, as she tried to move the path of the shots out of the way of the civilians. And almost immediately, the shots began aiming at her, as glass rained down at the crowd below.

“Harry, where are we on evacuations?” she demanded as Harry came on her comms.
“SHIELD is here,” Harry told her, “Clint and the others are taking on some of the drones as they’re getting everyone out.”

“JARVIS, Ava I need you to break into the system. I need to own him,” she said, as the Drones came after her.

“Toni, I’m locked on,” she heard Rhodey’s voice say, “I have target lock.”

“On what?” she asked, dreading the answer.

“On you!” he said frantically, as his suit began firing on her, “On your six!”

“Clint has Hammer in custody,” Harry called out through her ear, “They’re working on it from their end to get control back of the systems. Pepper’s called the NYPD.”

“Good!” she sighed, as she flew around the expo again. She needed to get out of the firing range of all the civilians. Damn Manhattan for being so packed with buildings and with people. Couldn’t this have happened somewhere where she could just take him to the desert or some abandoned stretch of land?

“How are we doing, J? Ava?” she asked quickly, hoping they were at least getting close.

“Remote reboot was unsuccessful” JARVIS responded, and she swore under her breath.

“Clint and I are going to Hammer Industries,” Harry updated them, as she heard him drive, “Maybe we can access it from the inside. Oh fuck, Toni the drones have begun cross firing.”

“Shit,” she swore.

All this so Vanko could get back at her father.

Bloody Howard.

She panicked as she saw the drone standing next to a boy wearing an Iron Woman helmet, and knew if the tech was Hammer based, it wouldn’t be smart enough to discern that the little boy wasn’t her.

Bloody Hammer Industries and their horrible weapons. Of course they couldn’t make anything that would actually work the way it was intended. And now an innocent little child would be hurt.

When this was done, she was going to make sure that Justin Hammer had the full force of the Justice System come down on him.

If he thought the Senate Hearing that she had to go through was rough, then he would have another thing coming.

She landed behind him, watching in horror as the child rose his palm up to aim at the drone, and fired.

She would have been impressed with the way his palms lit up to mimic her repulsors at any other time. But now, she was focused solely on the child and ensuring he wasn’t hurt. She raised her own arm up and shot the drone to pieces, as the boy jumped backwards in surprise.

“That was awesome,” the boy beamed up at her, and she glanced over him to make sure he had no injures.

“Nice work, kid,” she grinned as she held him close, as a shot came their way. “Now where are your
“I came with my aunt and uncle,” the boy responded. “I lost them in the crowd though. I wanted to be brave like you and fight the bad guys! I dressed up like you, see?”

“I do see,” she laughed lightly, taking note of his costume. It was definitely beyond what she sold in her gift shop to raise money for the Maria Stark foundation, and she knew that either he or his guardian had helped him achieve such a thing. Either way it was impressive, and perhaps when all of this was over, she would learn more about it. “You did a good job getting the mask to look realistic.”

“Peter?” she heard yelling from behind her, and she figured the kid’s family had found him. Good, the last thing she wanted was to find out that the poor kid’s Aunt and Uncle had been hurt here today. If innocent people had been hurt because Vanko had some sort of vendetta against her father that he insisted on taking out on her. “Peter, where are you? Peter?”

She turned, letting the boy out of her grasp, as he ran towards the woman, as she let out a sigh of relief. The man gave her an appraising looking, before realizing what had happened.

“Aunt May! Uncle Ben! Toni Stark saved me! Did you see? It was amazing! She’s the best hero ever!” He said, as his Aunt held him tightly in her arms, shaking.

“Don’t run off like that,” the man named his Uncle Ben, scolded him lightly, “What if you had been hurt? You need to be more careful Peter and stay with us. You can’t just be running around during a crowded Expo, especially when it’s under attack. What if you had been in danger?”

“You all still could be in danger,” she reminded them lightly, the situation weighing back down on her, “The drones are still here, causing damage. I’m handling this, but please, get to safety. I don’t want anyone to be injured.”

“Thank you for keeping our nephew safe,” the man nodded at her, as he placed a hand on his nephew’s shoulder, “Go, Iron Woman. We have it from here.”

She nodded back. The family intrigued her, but it was hardly the time for her to spend time on such things. Not when her entire Expo was still under attack.

She jetted back upwards and back into the fight. She would check back in on the family, but for now, she had other things to worry about, such as ensuring that they all got out of here in one piece.

“You got multiple coming in on you,” Rhodey’s voice called out, as JARVIS showed her the incoming weapons.

“We need to get them away from the expo,” she said frantically, as she thought of the little boy, not wanting anyone to get hurt.

She flew under a bridge, hoping to minimize the damage, as one of the Drones flew straight into a leg of the bridge. The shots kept firing her way, and she dodged to ensure none of them would hit her.

To her horror, a group of drones flew away from her path.

“Listen,” Rhodey said, getting her attention, “A pack just peeled off. They’re headed back to the Expo.”

“Got it,” she said, knowing she’d need to handle them. She couldn’t risk any more innocent people getting hurt because of Vanko. Who knew what the injured count currently was?
“In closing in on you. Ordnance coming in hot Tony. Watch it,” Rhodey’s voice grew more desperate.

His suit began shooting all the cars parked on the ground under the bridge, growing far too close to her for her comfort. She shot straight upwards, as the cars exploded in a fiery rage.

“We’re at Hammer Industries,” Harry updated her, “Let’s see what we can do here. With any luck Vanko is still here and we can remotely disable the drones from here.”

She flew over the streets of New York where she had grown up and spent many days in her adolescent in. It had been years since she had been back for a proper stay, never being able to visit for more than a few days at a time before she felt the pain of losing her mother once more. Of losing Jarvis and Ana. Of the loss of Aunt Peggy, even if the woman was still with them.

She flew straight into the Globe positioned in the nucleus of her expo as Rhodey’s worry sounded in her ears. But she didn’t listen as she dodged at the last second, drawing out, as the Drones on her tail lit up.

“He’s not here!” Harry said, suddenly, and she felt herself curse in anger, “Vanko isn’t at Hammer Industries.”

Well shit.

“What’s your twenty?” she asked Rhodey, and immediately regretted it as she felt the weight of his suit crash into her from out of the blue, and they both descended into the ORACLE dome.

“James, we’re rebooting your suit,” Harry’s voice came over the comms.

Rhodey pinned her down and began shooting at her, as her head lay pushed into the pavement.

“Well can you do it any faster?” Rhodey’s voice strained out, as she struggled to keep the gun pointed away from her.

“We got it!” Clint came on, and Rhodey’s suit went black as he flew off of her. “We got your best friend back.”

“Thank you very much Agent Barton,” she said, with a hint of a sultry tone in her voice, and she heard him laugh.

“Well done on the new chest piece. I am reading significant higher output and your vitals all look promising,” Barton remarked, sounding pleased.

“Stop checking out my cousin’s chest,” Harry’s voice sounded gruff as she heard Clint let out a squeal.

“Well at the moment I’m back to not dying, thanks,” she laughed.

“Good,” Pepper’s voice came on, sounding relieved, “I’m glad you found something, Toni.”

“It was a group effort, really,” she said, as she surveyed the damage to her suit.

“As much as I’d love to continue this banter, you’ve got incoming,” Harry said, and she saw the drones on her radar. “Looks like the fight is coming to you.”

She stood up, looking over at where her brother was lying and held her hand out to him.
“Snap out of it, Sugar Plum, I need you,” she said, and he groaned as he took her hand, and stood.

“You can have your suit back,” Rhodey grimaced as he stood back up, “I don’t want it anymore.”

She laughed, and Rhodey gave her a serious look, before pulling her into a tight hug.

“I’m sorry,” he told her softly, “I nearly killed you.”

“You weren’t in control, Honey Bear,” she told him gently, as she let him hold her. “I’m fine. I didn’t even get a single scratch on me.”

“Are you?” he asked her, giving her a once over. “Did you find a suitable replacement?”

“I did,” she nodded, “I’m going to live, Rhodey. Now, they’re coming in hot, in any second. What’s the play?”

“We want to take the high ground, so let’s get the biggest gun up on that ridge,” Rhodey said, and she nodded, moving at the same time as him.

“Got you, where do you want to be?” she asked, as she continued to walk with him.

“Where are you going?” he asked her, a little confused.

“What are you talking about?” she said, looking at him, before laughing.

“I meant me,” he said, gesturing to the gun on his shoulder blade.

“Babe, you have a big gun. But you’re not the big gun,” she said with a roll of her eyes.

“Darling, don’t be jealous,” he grinned at her.

“It’s subtle, all the bells and whistles,” she shook her head at him, as she gestured down to his mess of a suit.

“Yeah. It’s called being a badass,” Rhodey retorted back.

“Fine,” she said, growing somber, knowing the drones would be here at any second, “All right. You go up to. I’ll draw them in.”

“Don’t stay down here,” Rhodey turned to her, looking unimpressed. “This is the worst place to be.”

“You have your spot, I have mine,” she stood her ground, gesturing at him to take his stop.

“It’s the kill box, Toni. Okay? This is where you go to die,” he argued, and they heard a sound that stopped their argument cold, as a Drone landed in front of them, followed by more and more.

“Well it’s Hammer time,” she said, and she knew Rhodey would have shoved her at any other moment. Instead, he shook his head and their masks went back on.

The firing began immediately, and she raised her repulsors to shoot back at them as they moved with the suit. She felt one come from behind her, as she grabbed him and flung him straight into the bot was shooting at her.

The entire dome was lit up brightly with flames as drone after drone exploded.

Well she supposed that Hammer tech was capable of causing explosions, even if unintended.
Rhodey shot down a drone, cutting through it in half, as she punched another on in the face, damaging it.

She dodged a shot aimed her way as she raised her arm and a missile divided into three, taking out the drones in front of her.

“See that?” she grinned as they exploded.

“Yeah, yeah,” Rhodey said with a laugh, “Nice job Toni.”

Curie, why were there so many of them?

The fighting continued around her as the drones kept coming and she and Rhodey kept blowing them up. And in a split second, she made a decision.

“Rhodey get down,” she demanded, as he dropped. Lasers came out of her palms and she cut through the drones in a split second, and a couple of the trees. She probably would have to make a donation to the owners.

“Wow, I think you should lead with that next time,” Rhodey remarked as he surveyed the drones in front of him.

“Yeah. Sorry Darling. I can only use it one. It’s a one-off,” she shook her head. She’d have to stock the suit back up for the future models.

Rhodey laughed, as Pepper came on the comms.

“Hammer’s been taken into custody,” she said, and Toni let out a quick sigh of relief. Good.

“Don’t celebrate too soon,” Harry warned them.

“You got one more drone incoming. This one looks different,” Clint told them. “The repulsor signature is significantly higher.”

She heard him coming as the loud whirring of the repulsors signaled Vanko’s arrival before he even landed.

His mask lifted off his face as he grinned at her, “Good to be back.”

What was it with all these assholes trying to mimic her suit then fight her with it?

“This ain’t gonna be good,” Rhodey groaned, as Ivan raised his arms and drew back his electric whips. “I got something special for this guy. I’m gonna bust his bunker with the Ex-Wife.”

“With the what?” she asked, looking over at him incredulously. A missile rose from the suit, took aim and hit Ivan, before fizzling out and landing in the water.

“Hammer tech?” she asked sympathetically. Seemed Hammer could only make things that weren’t supposed to explode, well, explode.

“Yeah,” Rhodey said, unimpressed.

“I got this,” she said, as a target appeared on Vanko’s armor through her mask. Her own tech shot out at him, before bouncing off, but at least it had more of an impact than Hammer’s.

Vanko raised his whips again, trying to hit them, as she ducked to the side. Both she and Rhodey
drew fire on him, as he tried to strike again, and she flew up, before one of his whips caught her and threw her back down.

She winced at the impact, before getting up and flying straight into him as Rhodey shot the man. Vanko threw her to the side as his whip grabbed Rhodey, to pull him in closer.

She screamed, distracting the man as she came in with a punch, as he pushed her away and wrapped her neck around his whip, then stepped on Rhodey.

She pulled him backwards, as Vanko got a matching whip around Rhodey’s neck.

“Rhodey, I got an idea,” she said, “You want to be a hero?”

“What?” Rhodey said tightly,

“I could really use a sidekick,” she told him. “Put your hand up.”

“This is your idea?” Rhodey said, unimpressed.

“Yep,” she struggled.

“I’m ready. I’m ready. Go, go, go!” Rhodey said, raising his hand, as their repulsors lit up.

“Take it!” Toni screamed, as they shot each other, causing a huge explosion in the middle, where Ivan was standing. She moved to check on the man after the blast had faded and saw his reactor flickering.

“You lose,” Vanko said simply, as his reactor turned to red and began flickering at the same time as the drones, the beeping surrounding them.

She swore, as Rhodey turned to face her.

“All these drones are rigged to blow,” Rhodey said quickly, “We gotta get out of here Tones.”

“Pepper?” she asked, trying to bring her friend back on the comms. She shot up into the air, heading back towards the centre of the Stark Expo to where Pepper was standing, flying as quickly as she could.

She saw the drone beeping, too close to Pepper, and swooped in as she picked the girl up and flew them out of there. The drones throughout the city exploded, leaving the city aflame.

They landed on the roof of a building as her helmet began to fizz, and she tore it off.

“Are you okay?” Pepper asked, looking her over carefully. “Toni tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m okay,” she said, placing Pepper’s hand over her reactor. “I’m not dying. We’re okay. It’s over now.”

“Good,” Pepper said, as she heard Ava cheer over the comms.

“That’ll show Hammer not to mess with us,” Ava said, and Toni laughed.

“SHIELD has seized all of Hammer’s tech,” Harry told them, “He won’t be able to do any more damage. Not on his own anyways.”
“He barely managed to do all of this on his own,” she pointed out and Rhodey laughed from behind her. “You kicked ass back there, Baby Boy.”

“You too,” Rhodey grinned at her. “Now, the Air Force is going to want answers, so I need to go deal with that.”

“I’ll handle the press,” Pepper sighed.

“I got this,” Toni said simply, placing a hand on Pepper’s shoulder. “You’ve helped me so much over the last few months. I can handle a little press.”

She sat in the SHIELD conference room a little while later, as the report for something called the Avengers Initiative sat in front of her.

She knew Fury had wanted to bring her in, to discuss everything that had happened with Hammer and Vanko, and how it turned out that no, her suit still was one of a kind, regardless of what the Military had tried to claim before.

Harry had told her it was standard procedure, and that he would be in the room when Fury briefed her, refusing to take anything else as an answer. Fury had rolled his eyes but told Harry that it was fine, as long as he agreed to be her personal handler from here on out.

“I don’t want you looking at that,” Fury said, handing her a file, “Not until you look through this first.”

She took the report, flipping through it carefully.

“Antonia Stark displays high levels of intelligence and employs masks when dealing with those she does not trust. Issues most likely stem from childhood negligence and being forced into the spotlight and having to hide her true self. She has all the makings of a true operative, except she is unable to properly follow a chain of command,” she read aloud. “Recruitment assessment for the Avengers Initiative. Iron Woman, yes.”

She kept reading, “Toni Stark: highly recommended. As displayed, the suit is just a weapon, but it cannot be handled by just anyone. Recommendation is to bring Toni Stark into the fold with her Iron Woman technology.”

“Clint Barton seems to think you would be a prime candidate for the Avengers Initiative,” he told her. “Other agents would have told you that we didn’t want you in an attempt to give you motivation to want to join. But he seems to think you would appreciate the candor.”

“And if I say no?” she raised a brow. “Just because you want me, doesn’t mean I want you. I told you no once before.”

“I told you once that you were not the only superhero,” Fury reminded her, “That you weren’t the only one capable of extraordinary things. Do you want to know where Coulson is? He’s in Mexico, investigating a magical Hammer. Turns out, Norse gods are aliens. We are not alone in this universe, Toni. You know that, and I know that. But we no longer can pretend that we are safe. Something is coming, and when it does, the world needs you to protect it. The world will need the Avengers.”

“Okay,” she breathed, and the man looked at her in surprise.
“Okay?” he asked, confused.

“My father and Aunt Peggy founded this organization. My father might not have wanted me to know about it, but it doesn’t change the fact that I do,” she told him calmly, “I am not naïve enough to believe that this organization does not have its own agendas. That those agendas might involve manipulation or coercion. But my cousin works here. My Aunt worked here. My Uncle worked here. And even my father, who I might not have had the best relationship with, worked here. Which means something. I’m not agreeing to being one of your minion spies or someone you can simply control because you wish to. But if you are right, and something is out there, then the world will need all the protection it can get. So, if such a need arises, then I will join your little boy band. But until that day, I will continue on my own.”

“We’ll be in touch,” Fury nodded at her, as Harry shot her a small smile.

“Oh, and Fury?” she called to him. He turned to face her, looking slightly confused. “Before you go. I want to call in a favour. You know, for agreeing to all this. Rhodey and I, are being honoured in Washington, and we need a presenter.”

She grinned at the man, as he knew exactly what she wanted.

Words could not describe her satisfaction at seeing Senator Stern on stage, as he talked about her.

“It is my honour to be here today to present these distinguished awards to Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes and Miss Antonia Stark, who is, of course, a national treasure,” the man said with a pained voice, looking like he wanted to murder her. “For all their bravery in keeping Manhattan safe from a terror attack.”

The man moved towards Rhodey, as he pinned the medal on her best friend, “Thank you Lieutenant Colonel, for such an exceptionally distinguished performance. You deserve this.”

“Thank you, sir,” her brother, the ever good soldier responded.

She almost laughed aloud, as the man moved towards her. “Miss Stark. Thank you for such as exceptionally distinguished performance. You deserve this,” he said, before stabbing her in the chest slightly. She glared at him as he smirked. “Oh, sorry. Funny how annoying a little prick can be, isn’t it?”

Always with the dick references with that man.

“Let’s get a photo,” he said, moving to stand behind them, as he placed an arm on both of their shoulders. She beamed at the camera, not wanting to let the man get the better of her, as she raised her arms up in a peace symbol.

It was far from over. Hell, it was just beginning.

But she would be ready for whatever it was that was to come her way.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for all your responses! I wanted to answer some quick questions I received as to where I see this story headed. For those wondering when Steve will make appearance, well, we’re a few chapters away from the Avengers, so very soon. I also got
a question if I will every write more female Toni fics, and the answer is maybe. I have so many plot points I'd love to fit in this story, but some are contradictory and others will not fit with the timeline I wish to fit, so the answer to that would be different fics and worlds to accommodate them all. Which also involves different possible pairings in the future.

Hopefully you guys enjoyed it so far, especially the little deviances so far, to help set up more possible storylines for the future.
The Parkers

Chapter Summary

Toni grows her science family, and receives some surprising news

Toni Stark sighed to herself as she sat back in the car Happy was driving for her down the streets of Queens. She had tried to convince him on numerous occasions that she was more than capable of driving herself.

For Galileo’s sake, she was more than capable of taking care of herself. She survived in captivity! She’d risen from the ashes when the world was just about to give up hope on her ever coming home and she’d shown them all that they were very wrong. She’d shown them that she was capable of surviving, of fighting, like she had for years for her place in the world.

But apparently, she couldn’t be trusted to visit a child and his aunt and uncle without supervision.

“I’ll be fine, Happy,” she told him gently, as he parked the car in front of an old apartment building. “You don’t need to come in with me.”

“It’s them I’m worried about,” he grumbled. “They’re the ones who have no idea what happens when Toni Stark comes into your life and changes the world forever.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” she scoffed, looking at him. “I’ve done nothing to ruin your life.”

“I never said you ruined it, Stark,” he said, giving her a gentle look, “But nothing has been the same since I met you.”

She patted him gently on the shoulder, before moving to the buzzer of the complex.

“So archaic,” she sighed, as she pressed the button labeled ‘Parkers’.

“Hello?” she heard a male voice call out, and she responded.

“Mr Parker?” she spoke through the intercom, “My name is Toni Stark. We met briefly at the Stark Expo?”

It hadn’t been that hard for her to trace the kid and his aunt and uncle back through the footage from her suit and run facial recognition on them to receive their details.

Peter Benjamin Parker, born to Mary and Richard Parker who had died in a plane crash and had been raised by his Aunt May and Uncle Ben since then. He received high scores through his elementary school career and already won several science fairs. The boy was a genius.
And she knew a little something about being a child genius.

If his work on the mask he had on during the Stark Expo was anything to go on, then she knew the boy had great potential to him; he just needed the right guidance. He needed someone who could help him grow his curiosity and foster his potential in a healthy manner; one her father had never been too quick to do for her.

The door unlocked and she heard a confused voice call out.

“Please, come on up,” Ben said, and she nodded at Happy to wait in the car as she made her way through the apartment complex to the Parker’s front door.

Less than a moment after she knocked, the door threw itself open with one Peter Parker staring back at her excitedly.

“Ms Stark!” he squealed, “I didn’t believe it when I heard your voice over the intercom. What are you doing here?”

She bent down carefully and tussled his hair, “I was hoping I’d be able to speak to you and your Aunt and Uncle.”

“You came to see me?” he gaped at her, looking amazed.

“I did,” she grinned.

“Peter, let her through the door,” his Uncle Ben said, giving the boy an amused smile.

“It’s nice to meet you,” she said, as Peter sheepishly gestured for her to come in.

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Ben said, “Under far more pleasant circumstances.”

“Ben!” May hissed, as she came up from behind her husband. “Please, take a seat, Ms Stark,” she said, as she beckoned for them to sit down on their sofa.

“Toni, please,” she said, “He’s right though. I need to apologise for what happened at the Stark Expo. I never wanted to put anyone in harm’s way, and if I even thought for a second that anyone would have been in danger, I would have called the whole thing off immediately. Unfortunately, by time I knew, it was far too late.”

“We don’t blame you,” May told her gently, “It’s not your fault that a man targeted your expo to get back at your father. You saved Peter from harm’s way. Who knows what would have happened to my nephew if you hadn’t gotten there in time to stop one of those awful drones from doing something unspeakable to him?”

She felt her throat close slightly, “I was just trying to keep everyone safe.”

“Iron Woman is his hero,” Ben told her with a smile, “Peter doesn’t stop talking about you. He looks up to you, you know?”

“Iron Woman isn’t my hero!” Peter said suddenly, as he had been trying to listen to their conversation, drawing all eyes in the room to him.

“Peter!” May admonished him, and Toni shook her head.

“Kids are honest,” Toni told her, feeling a slight pang in her chest. It was nothing that she hadn’t heard before either. “There’s no need to sugar coat the truth.”
“Iron Woman isn’t my hero,” Peter told her, before adding, “You are! The suit is nothing without you behind it! You’re the one who does all the fun science and makes it work as good as it does!”

She felt her throat close slightly as the boy in front of her looked at her with such earnest and genuinely that she knew there was no insincerity in his body. There were no lies or manipulation that she had grown to use to in her business when people wanted something from her or the other.

But this child, this barely double digit in age child, wanted nothing from her.

“Kids are honest,” Ben remarked, echoing her own words back at her. “But you did not come here to apologise for what happened at the Expo. You already released a public apology to everyone who had been in attendance. And I doubt you are doing personal visits for every single guest at your event. So what brings you to our humble abode, Ms Stark.”

“Peter,” she said simply, and both of the boy’s guardians looked at her sharply. “During the Expo he was wearing a mask. One which appeared to be from our Expo, however clearly it had been altered to appear more authentic and closer to mine in appearance. He claimed he made the mask, and while I’m sure the two of you assisted him with it, I did some digging into him and found that he his test scores. He consistently scored far higher than anyone else in his year. Mr and Mrs Parker, your nephew is a genius.”

The two of them exchanged looks with each other, uncertain of where she was going with such a statement.

“He is more advanced for his age,” May said carefully, “Several of his teachers have commented that it might be beneficial for him to skip a year or two of school so he can challenge himself. But we wanted him to be with kids his own age.”

“A smart decision,” Toni nodded, “My own father wanted me to skip several grades. It was rough on me, and I had a hard time fitting in.”

“But you went to MIT at thirteen,” Peter exclaimed, looking at her in awe. “I want to go there too! Just like you did.”

“I’m sure you’ll have no trouble getting in,” she said, smiling back at the boy. “Which is partially why I am here. I want to offer Peter a mentorship of sorts. I know what it’s like being a child genius. I know what it’s like to be constantly trying to challenge yourself and find ways to stay engaged. When you want to build things, but your body hasn’t quite caught up with your mind. With your permission, I’d like to give Peter an avenue to expand his horizons and to grow. I want to offer him a chance to learn, without the restrictions of traditional schooling.”

“What’s in it for you?” Ben asked, after a couple moments of silence, “As generous as this sounds, Ms Stark, I highly doubt you are offering personal mentorship programs to every smart child you meet.”

“No,” she conceded, “But maybe I should be. Children are the future after all. I don’t have any agendas, if that’s what you’re worried about. Anything Peter invents or creates in my lab will belong to him. I won’t try and patent it in my name or make a profit off of it. I’ll even help you file the patent in his name if it eases your mind.”

She paused for a moment.

“I recently got a new lease on life. I wasn’t doing so well for a bit after I escaped Afghanistan. I don’t want my legacy to be that of my weapons. I want to leave something behind that is good and
memorable. I know what it’s like to be a child who is that smart and have no one completely understand. I’m not saying Peter is alone. The two of you clearly care for him very much. But I want to give him an opportunity, one that I never had, to be able to just do science, with someone who understands how our brains work. You are more than welcome to be present for every session if you wish, I would never presume to tell you otherwise. And who knows, maybe if it goes well with Peter, I can make an entire program out of it to help develop the curiosity in children.”

“Peter?” May said after a moment. “This is about you after all, Sweetheart. What do you think about all of this?”

“I would get to do science with Ms Stark?” Peter said, looking at his aunt and uncle for confirmation.

“You would,” Ben nodded at the boy. “Is that something you would like to do, Peter?”

She held her breath, as she waited for the boy’s response, as he nodded vigorously.

“Please?” Peter asked them both, “Her lab must be so cool! Think of all the things she must have in it! Would I get to see the Iron Woman suit? Would I get to work on the Iron Woman suit?”

She laughed softly, “We’ll have to see about that, Peter. There are still dangerous weapons in the suit. You could see the suit as there are safety precautions but if you and I end up working on the suit it would be one without all the dangerous stuff in it.”

Peter looked at his Aunt and Uncle hopefully, waiting for their response.

“Can we be there?” May said finally, “At least for a few sessions? I don’t think you would put our nephew in harm’s way, but I need to make sure it’s safe.”

“Would the press know about this arrangement?” Ben asked her, “Is this some sort of publicity stunt?”

“I can’t say for sure that they’ll never find out about it,” she warned them, “The press has a way of finding out things no one wants them to. But I have security protocols in place to prevent things such as this from leaking to the press. I have no intention of them finding out.”

“Okay,” Ben breathed out. “If this is what you want, Peter, then your Aunt and I are fine with that.”

“I do!” Peter said earnestly, “Thank you so much Ms Stark! I can’t wait to learn with you!”

She grinned at the boy as she handed him a card, “This is a number to my AI, JARVIS. Call him whenever you want to come over for a tour and he’ll set something up for the three of you. I look forward to seeing you all soon.”

Ben walked her to the door, as he held it open for her.

“He’s a good kid,” Ben told her softly, “I wish May and I could take credit for it, but it’s all him. He’s smart as hell too. Thank you for doing this. I know it means the world to Peter, and that you have no reason to do any of this. But thank you anyways.”

She smiled back at him, “I have a feeling I’m going to learn just as much from him as he will from me.”

He gave her a smile as she waved to Peter. As she stepped into the elevator, she pulled out her phone.
“JARVIS?” she asked him.

“Yes, Miss?” he responded instantly.

“Set up a trust for Peter Parker. Full scholarship to whichever school he decides to go to after high school. Full ride, for however many programs he wished to pursue.”

She waited less than a second, before JARVIS’ voice came through the phone.

“Done. Will that be all, Ms Stark?” he asked her, and she nodded.

“Thanks J. That’s all for now,” she said, as the doors closed.

She went back to Malibu after the attack, as she drew up the specs for her newest suit.

“Fancy,” she heard a voice comment from behind her, and she turned quickly to see Clint Barton standing there, arms crossed.

“Clyde,” she smirked back at him, “Nice to see you here.”

“I heard you accepted the invitation to join the Avengers Initiative,” he said, coming closer. “Fury said you took some convincing but ultimately decided to join in the end.”

“Is that a surprise?” she asked him, looking back down at her tablet as she moved around some of the numbers to change things.

“I did your profile, remember?” Clint asked her. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a bit surprised. I thought you would take a bit more convincing.”

“Yet you said I was a good candidate,” she reminded him.

“I was told by another agent to say that you weren’t a team player. Narcissistic, huge ego, doesn’t play with others, and the works,” he admitted to her. “To confirm that public façade you play all too well.”

“Perhaps I’m only playing it because the world refuses to see any differently,” she countered.

“That’s their own loss then,” he shrugged, “I got a different reading. What good would it do to tell you all the things the rest of the world believes about you? You already play that part far too well. No, the greater way would be to show you that I knew the truth. That beyond all your masks, you’re human too. You care for those close in your life and would do anything to protect them and ensure they did not come to harm.”

She stiffened slightly, as she looked up and met his eyes.

“Yet you didn’t think I’d accept,” she pointed out.

“I didn’t,” he admitted easily. “You knew from the start that I was trying to manipulate you. It was only logical you would be skeptical of another SHIELD related thing being thrown at you. But at the same time, I’m glad you did. I think I’ll enjoy working with you.”

“Harry’s my official handler,” she reminded him. “He’s the one I deal with directly. Not you, not Coulson.”
“And yet I cannot wait to work with you on the field,” he said, grinning at her. “The two of us? I think we’ll do some real damage together.”

“And what is it you do, Clint Barton?” she asked, stepping closer to him.

“I shoot arrows,” he said, and she nearly laughed, “Code name, Hawkeye.”

“You shoot arrows,” she said, repeating his statement. “Like some sort of medieval archer?”

“I think you’ll find I never miss,” he smirked at her. “I always hit my targets. Besides, I have exploding arrows. Medieval archers never had anything remotely that cool.”

“I don’t even know what to say to that,” she said, shaking her head.

“I look forward to working with you, Stark,” he grinned, and she laughed, as he turned to go.

“You too, Robin Hood,” she said, shaking her head, as the man exited her home.

Just what had she gotten herself into?

Toni Stark looked over the specs for the tower on the hologram in front of her as Pepper walked into the room, handing her a cup of coffee.

“You are the love of my life,” Toni winked at her, and Pepped didn’t as much as flinch.

“You said the same thing to Rhodey last week when he handed you a donut from that store you covet so much,” Pepper said simply, “So clearly your love is all too freely given.”

Toni raised a hand to her heart, “You wound me oh Pepper Pot, you do. I don’t know how I’ll ever recover from your harsh words of betrayal.”

DUM-E beeped at them both, trying to sense if Toni was okay, and Toni patted her baby bot on the head.

“Your mother is just being dramatic, DUM-E,” Pepper cooed at the bot, “Don’t listen to a thing she says. She’s perfectly fine.”

“Sometimes I think that all of you love the bots more than me,” Toni said, pouting at them all.

“Whatever you say, Toni,” Pepper laughed, before turning to look at the holograms in front of them.

“Do you like it?” Toni asked, gesturing to the large tower model she had projected.

“Is this for the new Stark Industries office?” Pepper asked, as she moved closer, taking a good look at designs she had in front of her. “With all our expansion, we could use a new building sooner rather than later. God knows with all your new projects our demand keeps going up and up with each day.”

“Actually,” Toni said, looking at Pepper. “I’ve been doing some thinking, Pepper,” she said Pepper turned to face her.

She took a deep breath, and Pepper squeezed her hand.
“I want the new building to be in New York,” Toni said softly. “A tall skyscraper with my name on it, becoming a staple to the city’s skyline. I want it to be the first building run on clean energy and completely off the city’s power grid. I want everyone to look at the building and know my name and know that it belongs to my company.”

Pepper let out a gasp, “Clean energy? You want it to run on the arc reactor? Toni that’s absolutely incredible. Do you know how much such a thing could raise our stocks by?”

“I do,” she nodded, “I think it could be the future. If we can make clean energy affordable, then think about the future of this country. We could do so many great things if we had the means to do so. We just need somewhere to start.”

“Then why do you still have that look on your face that you get before you do something that makes my life difficult,” Pepper asked her, narrowing her eyes. “What are you planning, Toni?”

“I want to move there,” she said after a moment. “Not full time. But at least for a few months of the year. I miss New York, Pepper. I know I convinced you to move the headquarters to Malibu so that we can live here, but New York was where I was raised. It was my home, my mother’s home. And I find myself longing for it more and more each day. I miss the city and want to at least be able to spend more time in the city my mother raised me in. I’m not asking you to pack up your bags and come with me, or even move the headquarters of Stark Industries back to Manhattan. But I want to move into the Tower once construction is done. To live in there.”

“Toni,” Pepper said gently, placing a hand on her arm, “You’re like my sister, you know that right? I only every want for you to be happy. You’ve had a rough couple of years. Decades really, I could argue. And if living in New York makes you happy, then I want you to do so. Besides, you have a private jet, so you’re more than able to come back for every single Board Meeting that you need to be at in person.”

She exhaled, letting out a breath she hadn’t even known she’d been holding, as hugged Pepper tightly.

“Thank you,” she said simply. “Thank you for listening to what I had to say and for not telling me that it was a stupid idea. That the company needs me to be here and that I need to put the company over my own personal feelings. Howard and Obie wouldn’t have hesitated to tell me how foolish they thought I was being for wanting such a thing. They never really understood personal emotions and wanting to do something because it was what I wanted and not what would bring in billions of dollars.”

“Running clean energy would bring in billions of dollars,” Pepper pointed out, “It could be argued that you need to live there to help facilitate the transition, given the fact that we are setting up hundreds of new jobs and creating new departments within our company. But regardless of all of that, I want nothing more than for you to be happy, Toni. You left New York during a time of great pain. Your mother and father passed away and it hurt you. But it always was your home. So if you want to go back, then I can hold the fort down here while you continue to grow there and take our company to new heights.”

“I love you, Pepper,” she told her friend genuinely. “You’re my family. I’m not going to ask you to come with me, not this time. But I know Stark Industries will be in good hands with you here still. Thank you, for everything you’ve done for me over the years.”

“Of course,” Pepper told her gently, “You’re my family too, Toni. Now, why don’t you go over the specs of the new building with me?”
Toni smiled at her, before launching into a virtual tour of the building, explaining all the key features, showing her all the bells and whistles of the building she would call her new home in the coming months.

It took exactly six months for her new tower to be built from the ground up, and while it was still reliant on the city for power for the time being, she was more than pleased with the work that had been done on it.

She’d personally done some of the construction for the building, helping lift the lettering that spelled out her last name to decorate the building so that everyone would know just who it belonged to when they looked up at it.

Once upon a time, it had been her father that people thought of when they heard the name Stark. They might not have known what he did, but they knew who he was.

But now, everyone knew her name. It didn’t matter if they loved her or hated her, they all knew who she was and what she was capable of. They saw her come up with new designs and were awed, time and time again. They saw her fly around the world in a suit and save them from whatever catastrophe had come their way.

She was the Stark in Stark Industries now.

She was the one they all thought of.

“Miss Stark?” JARVIS called out, trying to get her attention, “Peter Parker, and his Aunt and Uncle are here for their tour of the facility.”

“Thanks, JARVIS,” she responded, “Let them know I’ll be right down.”

Peter had come to visit her a few times in Malibu, as she arranged for his family to take her jet down and stay with her for the weekend, as she and Peter would head down to her lab, and she’d work on whatever he’d want to with him. So far, they’d made a volcano that produced an almost scientifically accurate lava explosion, let him build his own computer from scratch with the materials of his choosing, and other ideas that he had brought to her, excited to be able to build.

And while his aunt and uncle had watched over them the first few times, they had quickly grown to trust her, taking to touring the city instead while Peter and she worked for a few hours.

Peter was a good kid, and she was amazed watching his mind work as he came up with different ideas, and she wondered if it was due to his parents having been scientists before their passing.

“Ms Stark!” Peter exclaimed excitedly, as his eyes lit up when she stepped out of the elevator. “This is incredible!”

“You haven’t even seen the labs yet, Peter,” she laughed as she smiled at his Aunt and Uncle, “I’m glad the two of you could come too.”

“Peter hasn’t stopped talking about how revolutionary your new building will be,” Ben smiled at her, “I figured we’d come by and check out your new digs.”

“No one says that anymore, Dear,” May laughed as she squeezed her husband’s hand. “But it would be nice to see where Peter is going to insist on spending all his free time if he were allowed.”
“I’m doing educational stuff,” Peter pouted, “Why am I limited in how many days a week I can come here?”

“Because Ms Stark has other responsibilities too,” Ben told him gently, “And you have homework that you still need to get done, no matter how boring you find it.”

“It’s not fair,” Peter sighed, and Toni knew what he was feeling all too well.

“If it were up to me I’d spend all my time in the lab too,” Toni winked at Peter, “But my friends Rhodey and Pepper insist I make time for other important things too. It’s important to make time for other things too Peter.”

He sighed but lit up as she called the elevator to take them up to her own personal lab.

“Peter’s been so excited to find out you moved here,” May commented as the elevator went up. “His own personal hero in his city.”

“I grew up here,” she told May. “This is my city too. It’s good to be back to where I was raised.”

“Are you going to be working with the Research and Development team here?” Peter asked her curiously.

“I am,” Toni confirmed, “In fact, my cousin Ava moved back here with me so that the two of us could work with the team here to develop new SI products.”

“That’s so cool,” Peter’s eyes lit up, as the elevator door opened.

“Go on,” Toni gestured for him to exit first. Peter all but bounced out of the elevator, stepping into her new domain, the lab she’d set up for herself in this city.

“Hi DUM-E! Hi U! Hi Butterfingers!” Peter greeted her bots as her children all but came over excitedly at the site of Peter. “Hi Mr JARVIS.”

“Hello Mister Peter,” JARVIS responded, and Peter beamed up at him. “How have you been doing?”

“I’ve been good, Mr JARVIS!” Peter chatted with her AI. “I had a math test on Friday, and I think I did really good on it. I won’t know at least until Wednesday though because Mrs Burnham takes time to mark them all and I have to wait. I’m so excited Ms Stark and all of you moved up here because it means I get to see you guys all the time.”

“Speaking of which,” Toni interjected, “What did you want to work on today, Peter?”

He grew quiet all of a sudden, as he took some diagrams he had drawn on lined paper out of his binder from his backpack and placed it on the lab table.

“I was hoping we could make a robot?” Peter asked her shyly. “It doesn’t need to be an AI, I know that must be hard to make, but I was hoping the two of us could create a basic robot that I could take home.”

Toni grinned at him, “I would love to make a robot with you. What were you thinking?”

Ben laughed, “Well, we’ll leave the two of you to it. Do you mind if May and I look around some of the levels open to the public?”

Toni nodded, “JARVIS, can you send up one of the tour guides to give them a personal tour?
Actually, see if Ava is free, she’ll make sure they get the true Stark Industries experience.”

“Only if it’s not too much trouble,” May elbowed Ben. “We don’t want to pull any of your employees away from actual work so the two of us can be shown some stuff. We don’t mind waiting in here while the two of you work. God knows I don’t understand a thing either of you say, but it is fascinating to watch you both work.”

“It’s no trouble,” Toni smiled, “Besides, I have a feeling you would get along with Ava. Just send her here after you’re done so she can meet Peter.”

“See you in a few hours, kiddo,” Ben waved, and Peter waved back quickly, as the two of them stepped back into the elevator, ready to explore her building.

“Do you think the design looks doable?” Peter asked, as he turned to her. She asked JARVIS to scan it quickly as she projected it in front of them.

“I think you did an excellent job coming up with the design for this, Peter,” she praised the child, “And that between the two of us, we’ll have you going home with a little robot today.”

It had been nearly a year since she’d moved back to New York when she received the news.

To her defence, it had been somewhat of a busy year, between getting the reactor to be powerful enough to power her new building sustainably and setting up several meetings with the city to be able to get such a thing approved. And then came all the designs she and the R&D department were coming up with to bring in a profit, as well as the work she was still doing with the Maria Stark Foundation to give back to those who had lost so much. That coupled with visits to see her Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel, as well as Board meetings in Malibu, missions with Rhodey as Iron Woman, she supposed she had been wearing herself a bit thin. Which was probably why such a small blip didn’t even register on her radars until after the fact.

Of course, she’d had JARVIS running scanners on any encounters that were remotely out of the ordinary. But she supposed many things had a way of slipping in New York when it wasn’t seen as something out of the blue.

She supposed men running around New York in confusion wasn’t enough to raise any red flags, especially when she was searching for enhanced attacks, alien encounters, and the lot.

“Toni,” she heard, as Harry walked onto her floor, Ava and Uncle Daniel tailing behind him.

“What is it?” she asked, fearing the worst, “What happened? Is Aunt Peggy okay? Did anything happen to her?”

“She’s fine,” Harry reassured her, “But we need to talk. Something has happened, something that you need to be aware of.”

“Tell me,” she demanded, and she saw them all look slightly worried. “Please, just tell me what it was that happened. Whatever it is, what ever happened, I can take it, I promise.”

“SHIELD was on an artic expedition,” Harry began, “Top secret. Very few people knew about it and very few people were on the trip. Phil Coulson went on it, however. Him and a team of a few other were searching for an entire year working on Project Valkyrie.”
“And?” Toni said sharply. She was no stranger for those who went on artic expeditions looking for Steve Rogers. Hell, her father had dedicated half his life to trying to find the good captain and bring his body home. It didn’t mean anything. It didn’t mean they were successful.

“They found the remains of the ship,” Harry said, and she exhaled slightly. “Alongside the body of Captain Steve Rogers. And they brought him back to a SHIELD facility in New York.”

“Are they going to experiment on the body?” she exclaimed, a little stunned. Her mind was racing in circles, wondering what she could do to circumvent such a thing. Her father was on the project, one of the main scientists who had come up with the serum. Erskine was dead, but her father had left her everything in his will, including the ownership of all his work. That would mean she had a claim to the body.

The good captain deserved to be laid to rest. He deserved to finally be given a permanent home that wasn’t at the bottom of the ocean. She wanted to give him that much. A hero such as himself deserved a peaceful ending, not to be dissected like some sort of lab rat and tested in an attempt to try and reproduce the serum.

Of course the idea of a serum that allowed men to have super human strength was something that she could understand to be desirable. But it didn’t change the fact that the man had died trying to save them all from HYDRA. Did he not deserve to finally be at peace?

“Toni,” Harry said cutting off her train of thought, “They found his body frozen in a block of ice. Somehow the serum preserved his vital body functions as he was encased, frozen as he remained under the ice.”

“What are you saying?” she asked him, trembling slightly, unsure of what her cousin was telling her. Steve Rogers, the man her father preferred her to her entire life. The person Howard Stark had preferred to name his legacy over her. The man her father had searched for his entire life, missing over many important moments in her life in the search of the man over. The man that her father had claimed to be worth far more than she could ever amount to.

Steve Rogers, who was everything she’d never be. Everything she could never come close to being, no matter how hard she tried, no matter how hard she worked. She’d never be good enough, not in comparison to the honourable Captain America, no matter how much she wished she’d be worth such a thing.

And here was her cousin, telling her what exactly? What was her cousin even trying to say? Because it was impossible. It was completely and utterly impossible. There was no way that the words her cousin was trying to tell her could possibly make any sense.

She was a genius, she knew far more than anyone in the room at any given time, and yet she found herself standing here, utterly speechless, unsure of what it was that her cousin was trying to say. And even though she could feel the pieces fitting together in her head, it didn’t make any sense to her. She couldn’t compute the information being handed to her.

Frozen in a block of ice, preserving all vital organs.

Oh Watson and Crick.

“Toni, Steve Rogers was frozen in the ice,” Harry told her slowly. “SHIELD had been defrosting his body for hours when they found out that his heart was still beating. Captain America is alive.”

She grew pale, as his words registered in her ears and JARVIS played the clip of him running amok...
in Times Square as SHIELD personnel cornered him and Fury explained that he was in the future.

Things were definitely going to get far more interesting.
The Man Out Of Time

Chapter Summary

Toni visits Aunt Peggy, gets some alarming news, and the Struttgat gala

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Toni Stark had been left speechless over the news of the recovery of Steve Rogers. But that had been nothing, nothing, compared to how she felt when her family was about to tell Peggy Carter that her wartime sweetheart was still alive. And that apparently, he had not aged even a day.

Her Uncle had gone first, to check if it was a good or a bad day for Aunt Peggy, trying to find out if today would be a good day to tell her. They had all come for support, not sure how her aunt would take the news that after seventy odd years or so, Captain America, apparently, was alive.

“Why do you all look so grim?” Aunt Peggy asked after Uncle Daniel had told them that it was as good of a day as any, and they all filled into the room and sat sullenly, none of them knowing how to start.

“Peggy,” Uncle Daniel said after a moment, “There’s been a development. Something you should know. They found Steve Rogers. His body was kept frozen and the serum kept him alive. He’s alive, and just as young as he was all those years ago.”

She let out a shaky breath, and Toni took her hand in hers tenderly.

“Howard often hypothesized about if such a thing was possible,” Peggy said after a moment. “He said the serum had healing capabilities and believed that there was a chance Steve might have survived. Jarvis and I often tried to talk him out of it, neither of us believing to be possible. However, he was determined to bring Steve back one way or another, even at the detriment of his own family.”

She winced slightly at that, knowing her Aunt and Uncle had their own opinions on her father and the way he raised her, or rather, didn’t raise her.

“Are you okay, Mom?” Ava asked her carefully, knowing all too well that it must have been rough on her.

“Darlings, I’m fine,” Peggy smiled at them all. “I might have loved Steve once, yes, but that was many years ago. I moved on after the war. I’ve had a wonderful life. I worked my way through the ranks of the SSR and started SHIELD. I met Daniel and fell in love with him. He’s respected me and always let me be myself, never asking for me to fall into the role the rest of the world wanted me to fill. He’s always known that I could never be that kind of woman and he’s loved me despite that. Despite the pain I’m sure I’ve caused him over the last few years. I gave birth to beautiful children that I love with all my heart, and I’ve raised the three of you and watch you grow into incredible people. There’s no point getting lost in the what-ifs because it erases the good life I had, and there is not a moment I regret out of it.”

She smiled bittersweetly at her aunt, knowing that she spoke the truth.
Peggy and Daniel had all but raised her in her later years, after Jarvis and her mother had passed. They had been there for her when she was trying to come into her own, inheriting a company and suddenly thrown into a life where she had no idea how to survive.

Her family had been there for her, through all the high and low points, and she would be there for them too, through this as well.

“You must take care of him,” Peggy said, turning to Toni suddenly.

She took a step back, unsure of what Peggy was asking for her, why she was asking it of her.

“Aunt Peggy,” Toni said softly, “I don’t even know the man. I’ve never even met him. And I have a feeling that I’m everything that he would hate.”

“He’s had a hard life,” Peggy told her gently, “He lost his mother at a young age, and was thrown into a war he had no business fighting in. He lost his only remaining family shortly after gaining powers that he’s never fully had the chance to test out. But through all of that, he’s held his head up high and taken everything that life has thrown his way, without even the slightest complaint.”

She remained silent; she knew the stories all too well. She’d listened to her father preach time and time again of just how good of a man Steve Rogers was to compare her own failures in comparison.

“This current time will be trying for him, Toni. So much has changed since the forties. The world has changed to be unrecognizable. It’s going to take everything for him to be able to maneuver it, Toni,” Peggy told her gently. “He needs someone like you, someone who is more than well versed with this future world and all it entails to help him get accustomed to it. Promise me that you’ll at least consider it.”

She shook slightly, before nodding, “Okay, Aunt Peggy. If it’s what you want, I’ll try and help him. If SHIELD will even let me get close enough to talk to him.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Harry remarked, “They’re considering giving him membership to the Avengers Initiative.”

Of course they were.

It seemed like the Avengers Initiative and SHIELD was the gift that just kept on giving. First, they infiltrate her company, show her some goddamn reel where her father claimed to love her in an attempt to get her to save herself, guilt her into joining their boyband, and now they wanted to throw her onto the same team with the man her father had cared for more than her through her entire life?”

Dear Darwin, please give her enough strength to be able to deal with this, she didn’t think she’d be able to handle such a thing on her own.

“Okay,” she said finally, as her family watched her carefully, “If it’s what you want, Aunt Peggy, I promise I’ll try.”

Peggy smiled at her, as Daniel slowly ushered them out of the room, wanting his wife to get some rest.

She swam through the water with her armour fitted for the task, as she arrived at the pipeline feeding energy straight to her tower. Carefully, she turned on the repulsor in her arms and cut through the
pipe as she took the Stark Energy Reactor she’d designed for the task and placed it over the pipe instead.

She watched, smiling through her suit as it lit up the same colour as the reactor in her chest.

“Readings are stable,” JARVIS said in her ear, as she jetted out of the water and back towards her home.

“Good to go on this,” she said through her comms, “The rest is up to you.”

“You disconnected the transition lines?” Pepper asked, appearing on her screen, “Are we off the grid?”

“Stark Tower is about to become a beacon of self-sustaining clean energy,” she beamed proudly.

“Wow. So maybe our reactor takes over and it actually works?” Pepper asked her curiously.

“Hopefully,” she said, feeling optimistic. But really, she’d gone over the numbers several times with both Ava and with Peter. It was going to work. “Light it up.”

She flew through the streets of Manhattan, grinning brightly as she saw her tower light up from the ground, as the Stark name light the sky.

“How does it look?” Pepper asked, excited.

“Like Christmas, but with more,” she said, pausing for the right word, “Me.”

“You’ve got to go wider on the public awareness campaign. You need to do some press,” Pepper told him, already rolling with the next things on their list. “I can do some more tomorrow. I’m working on the zoning for the next billboards.”

“Pepper, you're killing me,” she groaned, flying to the landing pad of the tower on her floor, “Remember? Enjoy the moment.”

“Then get in here and I will,” Pepper said, amused, “You have two very excited scientists waiting to see you.”

She laughed, as she landed on the tower landing pad, as a ring rose up and began to remove her armour.

“Miss, Agent Coulson of SHIELD is on the line,” JARVIS said in her ear, and she brushed it off.

“I'm not in. I'm actually out,” she said firmly.

“Miss, I'm afraid he's insisting,” JARVIS said, again.

“Close the line, JARVIS, I have some family to attend to,” she said again, as she stepped into her penthouse.

“Levels are holding steady,” Ava said, as she grinned at the screen.

“I can’t wait to see it,” Peter said, enthusiastically, “It’s gonna be so cool to see it every night in the skyline.”

“It’s the coolest,” Toni agreed. “Which brings me to my next question: how does it feel to be a genius?”
“Brilliant,” Peter smiled at her, as his fingers rotated the hologram of the tower around slightly.

“Incredible,” Ava said solemnly, nodding back at her.

Pepper laughed, “I supposed I am the odd one out, then aren’t I? But really, the three of you did brilliantly. You should all be very proud of getting the tower up and running. This is going to do great things for the company.”

“What do you mean?” Toni frowned, “All of this came from you. If it weren’t for you, half the things that needed to be done to get this tower up and running never would have happened.”

“No,” Pepper told her gently, “All of this came from that.”

She gestured to her reactor, nestled firmly in her chest.

“Give yourself some credit, please. Stark Tower is your baby. Give yourself-” Toni said, quickly calculating some math in her head, “-twelve percent of the credit.”

“Twelve percent?” Pepper let out an amused laugh.

“An argument can be made for fifteen,” she said in mock seriousness.

“Twelve percent? For my baby?” Pepper question, as Peter giggled.

“Well, I did do all the heavy lifting. Literally, I lifted the heavy things. Ava and Peter helped coming up with the specs to get it to thrive under water. And sorry, but the security snafu? That was on you,” Toni said with a smirk.

“Ooooh,” Pepper said in mock understanding.

“My private elevator-” she said before Pepper cut her off.

“You mean our elevator?” Pepper said, pouring the three of them a glass of champagne, as she handed Peter a cup of ginger ale in a fancy glass.

“-was teeming with sweaty workmen. I'm going to pay for that comment about percentages in some subtle way later, aren't I?” she said, giving Pepper a pouty look.

“Not going to be that subtle.” Pepper told her, as she clinked their glasses together.

“Tell you what, Pepper Pot, love of my life. Next building's gonna say 'Potts' on the tower,” she said, winking at her friend.

“On the lease,” Pepper corrected him with a smirk.

“You two are adorable,” Ava said, “But we both know any future towers are going to say ‘Parker’ on the side for our little baby genius here.”

“Can it please say my name?” Peter asked her earnestly, “I promise I'll help design it and everything. I already have ideas of what it can look like and everything. It’s gonna be huge!”

“Of course, Darling,” she said, grinning at the boy.

In the past year of working with Peter, she’d come to care for the boy. He was absolutely brilliant, and she loved working with him day after day, seeing what ingenious thing he’d come up with next. Ava had taken an especial liking to him, as the three of them ‘scienced’ on weekends when Peter
was free and didn’t have any other obligations.

“Miss,” JARVIS cut in, “The telephone. I’m afraid my protocols are being overwritten.”

“Stark, we need to talk,” Coulson’s voice came through her phone.

“You have reached the life model decoy of Toni Stark, please leave a message,” she said, knowing all too well he wouldn’t be pleased with her.

“This is urgent,” Coulson called out.

“Your brother is supposed to be bringing me any new SHIELD information,” Toni grumbled to Ava. “Where is he?”

“Let him in,” Ava sighed, “Maybe something’s happened.”

“Fine,” Toni said, gesturing for JARVIS to let the man in at the exact moment the elevator chimed to announce him.

“Ms Stark,” Coulson said, walking quickly into the tower.

“Phil!” Pepper greeted the man cheerfully. “Come in.”

“Phil?” Toni and Ava turned to Pepper in confusion.

“But I can’t stay,” Toni teased the girl.

“Come on in, we’re celebrating,” Pepper said, as Peter looked at the man curiously.

“Which is why he can’t stay,” Toni said, glancing at Peter. Whatever was happening, she refused to let him intercede on her family time.

“We need you to look this over,” Coulson said, and Ava took the tablet from him, knowing all too well Toni hated being handed things.

Pepper handed the man a glass of champagne, but Coulson simply shook, looking more distressed than usual.

“Official hours are between eight and five every other Thursday,” she told him, and the man shook.

“We need to talk, Toni,” Coulson said, looking at her and Ava. “Ms Potts, can you give us a few moments?”

“Pepper, take Peter into the other room,” Toni said, recognizing the look which meaning whatever was happening couldn’t be good.

“I want to stay,” Peter said quickly, and Toni shook her head.

“We’ll go back to celebrating after, Darling,” she told the boy, “But for now, please go with Pepper. She’ll show you some of the cool projects I was hoping we could work on in the future.”

Peter nodded sullenly as the two went into the other room, giving the three of them the room.

“What happened?” Ava asked suddenly, “Is Harry okay?”

“There’s been an incident,” Coulson told them. “A few years ago, we were visited by an Asgardian
by the name of Thor. I’m sure you are more than aware of the event. His brother, Loki, landed in a facility in New Mexico earlier, and took possession of the Tesseract. Additionally, he used a staff to turn several of our agents into his own men, as they appear to be in some sort of trance, bound to follow his orders.”

“Harry,” Toni breathed out. “That’s why you’re here, isn’t it? He turned Harry.”

“He did,” Phil said with a nod. “Alongside Clint Barton. We need you to come in, Toni. We need to come in as Iron Woman. The Avengers are going to be brought in. On that tablet we have detailed information of all the recruits who will be fighting alongside you.”

She sighed carefully, as she threw up the information Phil had given her, as she saw Captain America fighting, the Hulk roaring as he attacked a university, Thor fighting in Mexico, and most recently, Loki with the Tesseract, as Harry ad Clint stood behind them, with possessed blue eyes.

“When do we start?” Ava asked, looking back at Coulson with determined eyes.

“We?” Toni asked her, startled.

“That’s my brother who’s been taken,” Ava told her firmly, “I will not sit back and watch. Besides, I’m just as good as, if not better, than any of the engineers SHIELD has, you need me. My mother would not sit back and watch her family be torn apart. You expect me to watch from the sidelines?”

“Coulson?” she asked the man, wondering what his opinion on the matter was.

“It’s going to be up to Fury in the end,” he warned her. “But between the two of us? We could use all the help we could get.”

“Okay,” she nodded, as she looked back at the screens. “Ava, grab your things and meet me at the jet. We’ll stop off and visit with your father and let him know what’s happened, then we’ll meet at the SHIELD base. Coulson, send us your coordinates once you’re in the air.”

The man nodded at her, as he turned to leave, answering a phone call, as Pepper came back into the room.

“Is everything okay, Toni?” Pepper asked her a bit concerned.

“No,” she sighed. “Can you take Peter home before you head to DC? I’m going to have a long night ahead of me.”

“Be careful,” Peter told her softly, and she bent down to hug the boy gently.

“I will, Peter,” she said, smiling at him. “I’ll see you really soon, okay?”

Peter nodded, as Pepper grabbed his things and headed to the elevator.

Toni turned to the screens, picking up the model of the Tesseract and wondered just what was going on.

Getting Ava settled in at the SHIELD Helicarrier had been surprisingly easier than she’d thought. They’d landed once the ship was already in air, but it hadn’t been hard for the two of them to get aboard with SHIELD’s permission to land.
Fury, of course, was in no way impressed that she was bringing in a civilian, but with almost every single Carter-Sousa a part of SHIELD and with her own track record, he really had no reason to say no.

She could see from the discontent in his eyes that he very much did not want to let the woman with no spy training into their ranks, but Ava had a point earlier when she’d told SHIELD that they needed them. The entire organization was in a state of disarray that she’d never seen before, in a real All Hands situation.

Maria Hill had informed Ava she’d be working in the laboratory where Bruce Banner had already set up, and Ava gave her a nod, letting her know that she would be fine.

Her Uncle had been less than happy with the news of her cousin’s abduction and had wanted to come in, but the truth was she wasn’t sure what any of them could do; not until they knew what it was that they were facing and had some sort of way to bring Loki down. So she’d asked him to stay put and make sure Aunt Peggy would be okay, especially given that none of them knew what it was exactly that this Loki wanted.

“We need you in Germany,” Fury said, coming up from behind her as he interrupted her train of thought. “There’s a situation unfolding. Rogers has already stepped in, but he might need all the help he can get with this.”

“Okay,” she said, taking a deep breath, as she suited up. She supposed it was about time she met her Godmother’s former lover and her father’s legacy.

The Stuttgard Gala. Whoever this Loki was had style; out of all the events to crash and try and take over, he had chosen one of the classier ones. Her own invitation, despite going unanswered, was one of honour, to celebrate the rich and wealthy and whichever charity they chose to donate to on that occasion.

Well, guess she was going to be attending in the end.

She watched the footage SHIELD was feeding in through her helmet via JARVIS, of Loki, dressed in a nice suit, as he threw a man onto a table, pulling out some sort of torture device and stabbing it into the man’s eye, as the guests began screaming and running out of the room.

Loki began to glow gold, as he transformed into some sort of fairy tale like costume and she nearly sighed. What was it with these men and getting dressed up like it would give them some sort of authority?

She saw a cop car round the corner as Loki sent a blue blast at it, leveling it backwards.

The god appeared in front of the screaming crowd, surrounding them as he stood somehow around them in a circle, as he slammed his scepter and demanded their obedience.

“Is not this simpler? Is this not your natural state? It's the unspoken truth of humanity, that you crave subjugation. The bright lure of freedom diminishes your life's joy in a mad scramble for power, for identity. You were made to be ruled. In the end, you will always kneel,” Loki monologued, and she nearly burst out laughing.

“Is this man for real?” she asked as JARVIS gave her the readings he was collecting on the scepter.

A man stood then, old enough to remember the last time a man in Germany demanded power and control, and her heart clenched as he spoke, “Not to men like you.”
Loki laughed then, “There are no men like me.”

“There are always men like you,” The man said solemnly, and Loki looked amused.

“Look to your elder, people. Let him be an example,” Loki raised his scepter, as it glowed brightly, and she cursed, trying to get her thrusters to go faster.

A shot of blue light emerged, and she held her breath, and watched in surprise as a man jumped in front of it, blocking it with his shield.

She gasped, as she realized that Captain America knocked Loki down to the ground with his own blast, relieved that at least for a few more moments the man would live.

“You know, the last time I was in Germany and saw a man standing above everybody else, we ended up disagreeing,” Captain Rogers said, standing bravely as he walked towards the man. She watched as one by one, members of the crowd stood in support.

Loki stood then, looking slightly frazzled, “The soldier. A man out of time,” he laughed.

“I'm not the one who's out of time,” Rogers said, firmly, as the quinjet drew closer to the crowd, guns aimed at the foreign god.

“Loki, drop the weapon and stand down,” one of the SHIELD agents called out, as Toni drew closer to the fight.

Loki sent a blast of light at the jet as the crowd ran screaming in every direction, eager to get away from the fight. Rogers took that as an opportunity, and she watched as he threw his shield at the man, engaging him in a fight.

She held her breath as Loki threw Captain America backwards, as he crashed near the base of the statue. He tried to throw his shield again, only for Loki to knock it away and fling Rogers to the grown once more.

“Kneel!” Loki demanded, as he pointed the scepter at Roger’s head.

“Not today,” Rogers said, knocking it away, as he stood, and jump kicked the man. Where did he even learn to fight like this?

“JARVIS?” Toni said, as she was seconds away from the fight. “I think I might need a little distraction from the fight. Something that will throw Loki off guard long enough for me to make an appearance.”

“Done,” JARVIS said in her ear, “You now have full control over the quinjet.”

“Agent Romanoff,” Toni said as she took over the controls of the jet, “Nice to formally meet you. I must say, I enjoyed working with your partner a few years back, so hopefully the experience with you is just as…enthralling.”

JARVIS began playing ‘Shoot to Thrill’ on the speakers and she grinned from her suit, “Baby, you know me so well.”

“I aim to please, Miss Stark,” JARVIS said sardonically back at her.

She saw Loki look up in confusion as she flew in and shot him backwards with her repulsors. She landed, and kept her arms raised, with all guns blazing, pointed at the god in case he so much as
thought to try anything else.

“Make your move, Reindeer Games,” she said, in a cold voice. Rogers stood, slightly out of breath as he raised his shield and moved beside her.

Loki raised his hands as his armour materialized away with gold magic. She lowered her defences slightly, knowing if he tried anything, she still could knock him out cold.

“Good move,” she said, pleased.

“Ms Stark,” Captain America said, acknowledging her for the first time since she appeared.

“Captain,” she nodded back, keeping her voice as steady as she could. She didn’t say anything else to the man, not when it was neither the time nor the place. And where did she even begin?

’Sorry you woke up seventy years in the future and the world went on without you? Sorry your wartime love moved on and had a family and that almost everyone you knew died?’

Was there anything she could even say to make it right?

The quinjet landed as Steve loaded the man into the jet, her following behind to make sure he didn’t try anything.

They took off, heading back towards the helicarrier, with Natasha flying the jet.

“Is he saying anything?” Fury’s voice came over their comms.

“Not a word,” Natasha said, as Toni glanced back at the man.

“Just get him here. We’re low on time,” Fury responded.

“I don’t like it,” the good Captain said, turning to her.

“What?” she questioned, as she saw Loki tied up and cuffed. “Rock of Ages giving up so easily?”

“I don’t remember it being ever that easy. This guy packs a wallop,” Captain said, sounding worried.

She’d be lying if she said she wasn’t the least bit worried either. The man had somehow taken down an entire SHIELD base, taken her cousin as a hostage. Of course the man was up to something. But he had let himself be taken in, and she needed to find out why.

“Still,” she said, not wanting to discuss it in front of the prisoner, “You seemed pretty spry for an older fellow. What’s your secret? Pilates?”

“What?” he turned to her in confusion.

“It’s like calisthenics. You might have missed a couple of things, you know, doing time as a Capsicle,” she said simply, wondering if now was as good of a time as any to bring up that Peggy had asked her to help him.

“Fury didn’t tell me he was calling you in,” Rogers said finally, looking at her appraisingly.

“Yeah, well, there’s a lot of things Fury doesn’t tell you,” she said, “Besides, I had a few stops to make on the way first.”

He looked confused, as if he didn’t understand what could be more important than bringing the God
in first, but before he could say anything, a crack of thunder sounded loudly, as lighting nearly hit the jet.

“Where’s this coming from?” Romanoff asked, trying to stabilize the jet.

She looked back at Loki to see him stare out the window, looking less than pleased.

She knew about the incident in Mexico a few years back, with Thor, and well, she always did her research. God of Lighting and all. It didn’t take a genius to put two and two together.

“What’s the matter?” Rogers said, looking incredulously at the man, “Scared of a little lightning?”

“I'm not overly fond of what follows,” Loki said, looking back up.

She had a feeling she wouldn’t be either.

The jet shook then, as if someone had landed on top of it, and she knew her suspicions to be correct. She grabbed her helmet then, putting it on, as she opened the ramp, ready to fight whoever had come for Loki.

Thor landed on the lowered ramp, pulling his hammer back and punching her with full force straight in the reactor. She groaned as she crashed back on the floor and watched as Thor grabbed Loki by the throat and all but flew out of the jet.

“Now there’s that guy,” she sighed, looking less than pleased.

“Another Asgardian?” Romanoff asked, and she wondered then if SHIELD shared secrets of their missions with each other. She was either a really good spy, or the spy organization kept their hand close.

“Think the guy's a friendly?” Rogers asked and she nearly laughed. He just took their prisoner.

“Doesn’t matter,” she told him intently. “If he frees Loki or kills him, the Tesseract's lost. And we have no way of releasing those under his control.”

She moved towards the ramp, ready to chase after them as Rogers called after her.

“Stark, we need a plan of attack!” he tried to stop her.

“I have a plan,” she told him firmly, “Attack.”

She jumped out of the jet then, flying down as she followed their path. Toni heard Romanoff and Rogers on the comms, as she tried to stop the captain from following.

“I'd sit this one out, Cap,” she tried, and Toni already knew the man would do no such thing.

“I don't see how I can,” he said predictably, and Toni nearly laughed as she navigated through the storm.

“These guys come from legends, they're basically gods,” Natasha warned him.

“There's only one God, ma'am. And I'm pretty sure he doesn't dress like that,” he told her in his authoritative voice, and she all but groaned.

“JARVIS, add sensitivity training and religious freedom to the list of things we’ll need to bring Capsicle up to date on,” she told her AI on their private channel.
She flew closer, where she saw Thor all but raising his hammer to the man, and she flew straight into him, knocking him aside. Brothers or not, she could not have the man commit fratricide or take him away before they knew how to save everyone.

They crashed straight into the forest, and she stood then, lifting her face plate.

“Do not touch me again!” Thor commanded her, and she all but laughed. Here he stood, telling her what to do?

“Then don’t take my stuff,” she said in her best spoiled brat tone. If he wanted to play all high and mighty then two could play at that game.

“You have no idea what you’re dealing with,” Thor warned her, and she nearly laughed. And he did?

“Shakespeare in the park?” she mocked him, “Doth mother know you weareth her drapes?”

“This is beyond you, metal woman. Loki face Asgardian justice!” Thor demanded.

“If he gives up the Cube and frees the people he has under his control, he's all yours,” She stated her terms, as she lowered her face plate. “Until then, stay out of my way, tourist.”

But of course, men like him never did care too much for talking when they could simply fight instead.

She turned to walk back to where Loki was when she heard a grunt. She turned quickly as the Mjölnir came her way, slamming her back through a tree.

Her screens flickered, and she frowned, “Okay.”

She rolled over, as Thor tried to swing his hammer and fly off, and she shot him with a blast from her repulsors, knocking him backwards. She flew forward then, kicking him straight in the chest, as his hammer fell to the side.

She watched in shock, as he raised his hammer, summoning lighting, and pointed it straight at her.

She looked at her screen, trying to detect the damage.

“Power at 400% capacity,” JARVIS told her and she all but smiled.

“How about that?” she asked, pleased.

She raised her arms and shot the full force back at him, and he fell again, before looking ready to charge at her.

She flew at him as he came at her, and the two of them flew through the forest, trying to get punches in. As they approached a cliff, she held him against it, hoping to slow him down, but he used the momentum to throw them off it and back into the forest.

As they crash landed, Thor punched her in the face, and when she tried to return the favour, he grabbed her glove, squeezing it tightly, trying to damage her suit.

She winced, as she fired out as much power as she could and hit it at him, as she headbutted him away.

Oh what would he father say if he saw her now fighting like a barbarian?
Thor looked unimpressed as he returned the headbutt, and she fell backwards, before racing to charge back at him, throwing him into a fallen tree.

She fought back with as much strength as the suit could muster, but she could tell it was beginning to fail, she held her breath as she swung to him, as he ducked, and threw her down onto the ground.

She looked up at him, as he held Mjölnir in his hands, ready to bring it down on her and she wondered if this was how she would die. Hammer to the chest, crushing her arc reactor.

What a way to go.

She raised her hands, powering up her repulsors as she flew backwards against the ground and away from where the hammer had left a sizable dent in the ground.

She flew back down, punching him, as a shield ricocheted off of her and Thor, causing her to pause in her tracks.

“Hey,” Captain Rogers said, drawing his shield back to him. “That’s enough!”

She held her breath as the Captain turned to the man in question.

“Now, I don’t know what you plan on doing here,” Rogers started.

“I’ve come here to put an end to Loki’s schemes!” Thor roared at him.

“Then prove it! Put the hammer down,” Rogers said, and she groaned.

“Um, yeah, no! Bad call! He loves his hammer!” she tried to warn him, and he backhanded her with it causing her to fly backwards.

“Didn’t your mother ever teach you it’s bad manners to hit a lady?” Captain America all but tutted at him.

“You want me to put the hammer down?” Thor asked, as he leaped into the air, raising his hammer and tried to bring it down on him. She watched in shock as Captain raised his shield and the resonance of the blow knocked down every single thing within a mile radius of them.

“Holy shit,” she swore under her breath.

“Are we done here?” Captain America asked, looking utterly unfazed, and she didn’t know if she should laugh or cry.

Hamilton, she was going to have bruises for days to come.

What on earth did she get herself into?

Chapter End Notes

I just wanted to start off by asking you all not to post any spoilers for Endgame in the comments. I haven’t seen the movie yet and I’m sure there are others who haven’t either. But with that said, I’m excited to see it!!

Hope you guys liked this chapter, things with Steve are definitely going to be
interesting, and Toni will handle it in true Toni Stark fashion.
Loki's Play

Chapter Summary

The team tries to figure out just what Loki is up to

Chapter Notes

I wanted to first thank everyone for not spoiling endgame for me in the comments. To the reviewer who said I probably wouldn’t like it, you’re right. I like what they did with the plot, but not Steve and Tony’s endings. So safe to say, that will not be happening in this fic. But it gave me an idea of how I could incorporate a storyline that I didn’t think would fit. And given the pairing of this fic, it will end quite a bit differently.

If any of you need more closure after Endgame, checkout my alternative ending to the movie here: [In The End](#)

I know I haven’t diverged yet as much as some of you have hoped from canon, but I am getting there slowly. I needed to keep it mostly canon until Avengers 1, but from here we’ll begin to see more and more divergences. And for the reviewers worried that there haven’t been any negative consequences of changing the plot line yet, don’t worry, there will be.

Hopefully you guys enjoy this chapter!

Loki was taken into custody without any of the fanfare of all the earlier fighting. She watched on the cameras as Fury turned to face Loki in the glass cell he’d been placed in, one she knew all too well had been intended for Doctor Banner.

“In case it's unclear,” Fury started, as he turned back to face their prisoner, “You try to escape, you so much as scratch that glass,” he pressed a button then, opening up a hatch under his cell. “Thirty thousand feet, straight down in a steel trap. You get how that works?”

She nearly laughed as Fury pointed at Loki, “Ant,” before pointing at the button, “Boot.”

The man drove her crazy at times, but he certainly knew his stuff.

“It's an impressive cage. Not built, I think, for me,” Loki said, with a mask of carefreeness that she knew all too well.

“Built for something a lot stronger than you,” Fury said without the slightest bit of hesitation.

“Oh, I've heard,” Loki said, looking straight at them through the camera, “The mindless beast, makes play he's still a man. How desperate are you, that you call upon such lost creatures to defend you?”

“How desperate am I?” Fury scoffed, “You threaten my world with war. You steal a force you can't hope to control. You talk about peace and you kill cause it's fun. You have made me very desperate.
You might not be glad that you did.”

“Ooh. It burns you to come so close,” Loki taunted. “To have the Tesseract, to have power, unlimited power. And for what? A warm light for all mankind to share, and then to be reminded what real power is.”

“Well, you let me know if Real Power wants a magazine or something,” Fury said, not biting, as he left the room.

“He really grows on you, doesn’t he?” Dr Banner said, breaking the ice first.

“Loki’s gonna drag this out,” Rogers said, jumping straight into it. “So, Thor, his play?”

“He has an army called the Chitauri,” Thor told them carefully. “They’re not of Asgard or any world known. He means to lead them against your people. They will win him the earth. In return, I suspect, for the Tesseract.”

“An army? From outer space?” Rogers said, sounding stunned.

“It wouldn’t be the first time a space army came to earth,” Ava said, and Toni shook her head at the girl. The two of them were not supposed to know about the Marvel incident, even if it had been easy enough to find out.

“So he's building another portal. That's what he needs Erik Selvig for,” Banner said, not wanting to get into what Ava had mentioned, while Steve looked at Ava intently.

She wouldn’t say that Ava was the spitting image of Captain America’s long-lost war flame. But the family resemblance was high, and she knew it wouldn’t be long before Rogers put it together.

“Selvig?” Thor asked, looking intrigued.

“He's an astrophysicist,” Banner told him, as Toni leaned forward against a chair.

“He's a friend,” Thor cut in, and Toni wondered if Thor had met the man during his last visit.

“Loki has him under some kind of spell,” Romanoff said, “along with two of ours.”

Ava’s fist clenched, and Toni rested a hand on her arm, a gesture she knew went noticed by Rogers.

“I wanna know why Loki let us take him,” Steve brushed past it, “He's not leading an army from here.”

“I don't think we should be focusing on Loki. That guy's brain is a bag full of cats, you could smell crazy on him,” Dr Banner interjected, and clearly his response annoyed Thor.

“Have care how you speak. Loki is beyond reason, but he is of Asgard, and he's my brother,” Thor said, in his princely tone, sounding upset at the comparison.

“He killed eighty people in two days,” Romanoff said, unimpressed.

“He’s adopted,” Thor attempted to brush it off.

She nearly laughed at that. That was his justification for the murder spree? That his brother was adopted? As if it was some sort of justification for homicide. If anyone knew about daddy issues, it was her, and she never tried to take over the planet.
Not with murder anyways.

“‘Iridium,’” Bruce brought them back to the point, “‘What did they need the Iridium for?’”

“It’s a stabilizing agent,” she said then, speaking for the first time, as she drew all eyes to her. “Means the portal won’t collapse on itself, like it did at SHIELD. Also, it means the portal can open as wide, and stay open as long, as Loki wants.”

Thor looked at her intently, and she patted his arm, “No hard feelings, Point Break. You got a mean swing.”

He looked unimpressed, and she moved past them, to look onto the crew, to look at the screen.

“Oh, raise the mid-mast, ship the top sails,” she said, trying to calm the mood of the room. She looked over at one of the agents, who was very clearly not working and frowned. “That man is playing GALAGA! Thought we wouldn’t notice. But we did.”

This was an all hands-on deck situation, there was no time for bad computer games.

She looked at both the screens, curiously, “How does Fury do this?”

“He turns,” Agent Hill said, unimpressed with him.

She flitted through the screens, getting the readings, “Well, that sounds exhausting. The rest of the raw materials, Agent Barton and Carter-Sousa can get their hands on pretty easily. Only major component they’ll still needs is a power source. A high energy density, something to kick start the cube.”

She moved close to the screen, placing down a device without them noticing. Rogers looked up at the second agent’s name, and she wondered when he’d put it all together.

“When did you become an expert in thermonuclear astrophysics?” Hill asked her, clearly in disbelief of the entire situation.

“Last night,” she said, clearly unimpressed that none of them had any idea what she was talking about, except maybe Ava and Banner. She’d stayed up all night reading through that packet to try and find out what was going on, while they were just what, sitting around? “The packet, Selvig’s notes, the Extraction Theory papers. Am I the only one who did the reading?”

“Does Loki need any particular kind of power source?” Rogers interjected, just as unimpressed with her.

Well welcome to the club, Captain Rogers.

“He’s got to heat the cube to a hundred and twenty million Kelvin just to break through the Coulomb barrier,” Banner said, and she nearly smiled at him in appreciation.

“Unless, Selvig has figured out how to stabilize the quantum tunneling effect,” Toni countered.

“Unlikely,” Ava snorted, “It’s near impossible.”

“Well, if he could do that, he could achieve Heavy Ion Fusion at any reactor on the planet,” Banner pointed out.

“Finally, someone else who speaks English,” Toni beamed at him, as she moved closer to the scientist, and Ava laughed slightly.
“Is that what just happened?” Rogers muttered under his breath, looking lost in their conversation.

“It’s good to meet you, Dr Banner,” she told him. “You’re work on anti-electron collisions is unparalleled. I’ve wanted to meet you for years and discuss your work first hand. And I’m a huge fan of the way you lose control and turn into an enormous green rage monster.”

She broached the second subject, clearly aware that the man was uncomfortable with his mutation. She’d seen his work that resulted in the creation, and she knew a thing or two about science trying to kill them.

He looked down, “Thanks,” he said, pausing. “I’m a fan of yours too, Dr Stark. I heard you finally figured out a way to channel the arc reactor into producing clean energy. Something that like would be monumental for the future of energy. And you, Dr Carter-Sousa. I’ve seen the patents you’ve filled for SI. They’re absolutely brilliant.”

“I’m lucky to work for a great boss,” Ava smiled, and Toni laughed, glancing over at the younger girl with a fond expression on her face.

“She’s just saying that because we’re cousins,” Toni said, and Rogers looked like he was trying hard not to listen. She supposed the easiest thing would be to just tell the man. But where was the fun in that? Besides, he’d made it very clear he was all about the mission on hand, and all other personal feelings were to be put to the side.

“Dr. Banner is only here to track the cube,” Fury said, walking into the room then, “I was hoping you and Dr Carter-Sousa would join him in that search.”

“Let’s start with that stick of his. It may be magical, but it works an awful lot like a HYDRA weapon,” Rogers said, commandingly.

That was probably the least scientifically accurate thing she’d heard all day.

“I don’t know about that,” Fury interjected before she could say anything, “But it is powered by the cube. And I’d like to know how Loki used it to turn three of the sharpest men I know into his personal flying monkeys.”

Thor looked around the room, lost, “Monkeys? I do not understand.”

“I do!” Steve said quickly, proud of himself, “I understood that reference.”

She made a mental note to also catch the good Captain up with pop culture references from the last seven decades.

“Shall we play, Doctors?” Toni asked, holding her arm out to the both of them.

“Let’s play some,” Bruce said, gesturing to the door, as Ava slipped her arm through hers, and they walked out of the room.

She looked over at the monitors in Dr Banner’s lab, as he scanned the scepter with a gamma ray detection scanner, searching for radiation.

“The gamma readings are definitely consistent with Selvig’s reports on the Tesseract. But it’s gonna take weeks to process,” Bruce said, looking down still.
“We don’t have weeks,” Ava remarked, with a frown.

“If we bypass their mainframe and direct a reroute to the Homer cluster, we can clock this around six hundred teraflops,” Toni said, look over at them.

“All I packed was a tooth brush,” Bruce sighed.

“You know,” she said with a smile, as Bruce met her eyes, “You should come by Stark Tower sometime. Top ten floors are all R&D. You’d love it, it’s like candy land.”

“It’s true,” Ava said solemnly. “I moved in there too with Toni, and it’s an absolute dream. State of the Art technology, constant supply of snacks. It’s the best.”

Bruce smiled at her somewhat sadly, “Thanks, but the last time I was in New York I kind of broke...Harlem.”

“Well, I promise a stress-free environment. No tension. No surprises,” she said, moving closer to him, as she poked him with an electrical prod.

Perhaps it was the safest thing to do on an aircraft, but clearly the man had self-esteem issues. And if she was going to fix that, she needed him to know he was in control.

“Ow!” he exclaimed, looking at her in surprise.

“Nothing?” She asked, as Rogers chose that moment to walk into the lab.

“Hey! Are you nuts?” Rogers said, clearly unimpressed.

“Jury’s out on that,” she said with a shrug, knowing the constant news articles on her mental state varying as suited their needs. “You really have got a lid on it, haven’t you? What’s your secret? Mellow jazz? Bongo drums? Huge bag of weed?”

He gave her an appreciative smile.

“Is everything a joke to you?” Steve asked her, and she sighed.

“Funny things are,” she said simply.

“Threatening the safety of everyone on this ship isn't funny,” Steve spoke down to her like she was a child, “No offense, doctor.”

“No, it's alright. I wouldn't have come aboard if I couldn't handle pointy things,” Bruce said, giving her a pointed glance.

“You're tiptoeing, big man. You need to strut,” she pointed the device back at him. She would get him to embrace himself, one way or another.

“I agree,” Ava told him, “The Hulk most certainly should be strutting.”

“See this is why you’re my favourite,” Toni grinned at her.

“You need to focus on the problem, Ms. Stark,” Steve cut her off, chaisting her.

She nearly laughed, “You think I'm not? What, do you think I stayed awake all of last night reading that packet to further my ego? I've been doing everything in my power to find out where those agents are, and where Loki is hiding the Tesseract. But I only have more questions. Why did Fury
call us, and why now? Why not before? What isn't he telling us? I can't do the equation unless I have all the variables."

He scoffed, “You think Fury's hiding something?’’

She sighed exasperatedly, “He's a spy. Captain, he's the spy. His secrets have secrets,” she looked over at her fellow geniuses. “It's bugging them too, isn't it?’’

Bruce gawked, bobbling the words, “Uh...I just wanna finish my work here and...”

“Doctor?’’ Steve turned to the man.

Bruce paused, “A warm light for all mankind, Loki's jab at Fury about the cube.”

“I heard it,’’ Rogers said quickly.

“Well, I think that was meant for you,’’ Bruce said, turning to her. “Even if Barton didn't post that all over the news.’’

“The Stark Tower? That big ugly-’’ she glanced at the man, utterly unimpressed with the man her aunt asked her to help. “-building in New York?’’

“It's powered by Stark Reactors, self-sustaining energy source. That building will run itself for what, a year?’’ Bruce cut in.

“That's just the prototype,’’ Ava said simply, “The next ones are going to last far longer than that.’’

“I'm kind of the only name in clean energy right now,’’ Toni said with a nod.

“So, why didn't SHIELD bring her in on the Tesseract project?’’ Bruce raised his hands, “If anyone knows anything about it, it would be her. I mean, what are they doing in the energy business in the first place?’’

“I should probably look into that once my decryption programmer finishes breaking into all of SHIELD's secure files,’’ Toni said nonchalantly.

“I'm sorry, did you say...?’’ Rogers said, looking unhappy.

“Jarvis has been running it since I hit the bridge,’’ She said, referring to the device she’d planted a while back. “In a few hours we'll know every dirty secret SHIELD has ever tried to hide.’’

“Yet you're confused about why they didn't want you around?’’ Captain America said, looking completely disappointed in her.

“They wanted her around,’’ Ava said in her behalf, “They just couldn’t afford her time.’’

“And an intelligence organization that fears intelligence? Historically, not awesome,’’ she told him simply.

“I think Loki's trying to wind us up,’’ Steve ignored her, “This is a man who means to start a war, and if don’t stay focused, he'll succeed. We have orders, we should follow them.’’

“Following is not really my style,’’ she said simply.

“And you're all about style, aren't you?’’ he gave her a condescending smile.
She took deep breath. Men like him had thrown harsh words at her through her entire life. Words of anger and hate when she made them feel tiny.

“I’m about getting the job done, Captain Rogers. I’m about trying to figure out what happened to my cousin, and her brother,” she pointed at Ava. “And SHIELD is keeping something from us. If you want to keep following their orders blindly, then you do that. But I’m going to get our men back.”

He took a step closer to her, as Bruce stepped in, “Steve, tell me none of this smells a little funky to you?”

He looked lost in thought for a moment, before shaking his head, “Just find the cube.”

She watched him walk out the door as she muttered to herself, “Well Aunt Peggy, it might be a bit harder to help your man when he can’t stand me.”

“That’s the guy my dad never shut up about? Wondering if they shouldn’t have kept him on ice,” she said aloud after a few moments.

“Toni,” Ava said softly, “You know he’s wrong right? He’s wrong about what he thinks of you. He doesn’t know you, not like I do. Not like Harry, or Pepper, or Rhodey. Not like Mom and Dad do. Who cares what he thinks?”

“The guy’s not wrong about Loki. He does have the jump on us,” Bruce said after a moment.

“What he’s got is an ACME dynamite kit,” she said slowly, “It might as well belong to Hammer tech. It's gonna blow up in his face, and I’m gonna be there when it does.”

“And I’ll read all about it,” Bruce said, “Safely from the sidelines.”

“Uh-huh. Or you’ll be suiting up like the rest of us,” Toni told him, as she moved closer to the man, as he looked at the screens.

“Ah, see. I don't get a suit of armor. I'm exposed, like a nerve. It's a nightmare,” he told her gently, as she placed a hand on his arm.

“You know, I've got a cluster of shrapnel, trying every second to crawl its way into my heart,” she told him gently, pointing to her reactor. “This stops it. This little circle of light. It's part of me now, not just armor. It's a... terrible privilege.”

“But you can control it,” he countered.

“Because I learned how,” she said softly, “It was killing me slowly, so I took charge of it.”

“It’s different,” he tried to brush off. He pretended to be reading the screen, but she pushed the data aside, so he’d look at her directly.

“Hey, I've read all about your accident. That much gamma exposure should have killed you,” she told him gently.

“So you're saying that the Hulk... the other guy... saved my life?” He asked, swallowing.

“Is that so hard to believe?” Ava asked him, looking up from her own screen.

“That's nice. It's a nice sentiment. Saved it for what?” he asked them both, looking lost.

“I guess we'll find out,” she said finally.
“You might not like that,” he warned her.

“You just might,” she countered.

She took a step out of the room, pulling out her phone.

“JARVIS, call Rhody for me,” she said, as she ducked into a hallway, and out of earshot.

“Calling Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS said, as she heard the call go through slowly.

“Toni?” she heard him answer within the first couple rings, “What happened? Where are you? I heard that some God from another planet attacked and that they’ve taken Harry hostage. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine Honey Bear,” she told him softly, “I’m at a SHIELD mobile base, aboard the helicarrier.”

“What’s happening?” he asked her carefully, “I heard you’ve taken the man into custody. This Loki creature. What does he want? Why did he attack?”

“I wish I knew, Rhody,” she said with a sigh, “He was arrested far too easily, as if he wanted to be on board. We have him in custody, where he can’t hurt anyone else. He’s locked up in some bullet proof glass cage that they intended to keep Doctor Banner in.”

“Yet you think he could still do something to hurt innocent lives,” his voice called out through the phone.

“I do,” she admitted, “I think that we’re all at risk. That whatever he’s planning hasn’t yet come to pass, but when it does, it’s going to shake us to our core. He has a space army, Rhody. A space army is going to invade Earth. And we’re utterly and completely unprepared. We don’t have the technology to fight a space war. What are we going to do if he manages to bring them here?”

“We’ll take it one step at a time, Baby Girl,” Rhody told her gently. “Something else is bothering you though, isn’t it? Something other than just this. I know you, you’re rattled about more than just this. So what’s bothering you, Toni?”

“I met Steve Rogers,” she said with a sigh. “He’s everything like my father described. Righteous and courageous, brave beyond measure, and basically every other thing the stories said about him. You would love him, he follows the letter of the law to the teee and loves all the security protocols that I brush off so easily.”

She paused for a moment, and Rhody didn’t say a word, letting her speak her mind.

“He hates me,” her voice cracked slightly. “Just like my father told me he would. Because I’m not good enough. Because I’m too brash and too bold and don’t just bend the knee and follow whatever he has to say without as much of a question. He looks down at me when he talks to me like he already knows the kind of person I am, and I just met him hours ago. It feels like dealing with Howard all over again, where I want nothing more than his approval, and he just sees what he wants to see.”

“Then he’s an idiot,” Rhody said firmly, and she let out a somewhat watery laugh. “He is, Toni. You are so much more than what the media portrays you out to be. You’re insane sometimes, yes. But you are the most brilliant person I know. I’ve never seen anyone else’s mind work like yours
does, and it amazes me each time you come up with something new.”

He paused, letting her take his words in.

“You’re also the most generous person I know,” he told her gently, “You give so freely, even to those you don’t even know. You gave me a home in yours. You gave Ava an entire floor in your tower and have one set up for Harry and I when we’re there after missions, and for your Uncle whenever he’s in town. You’re paying for your Aunt’s care, and have been for the last decade, even though no one would judge you if you didn’t. You’ve been mentoring Peter Parker for a year, without any recognition, doing it secretly so no one else finds out, because you want to protect him, even though it could be used to give you some good press. You’re so kind, Toni. You’re my sister and I love you. Captain Rogers will come around and see the truth about you eventually. And well, if he doesn’t, then who needs him anyways?”

She smiled to herself, as she listened to his words wash over. This is why her Honey Bear was the best. He always knew what to say to make her feel better, even when the rest of the world was weighing on her shoulders. He always knew what the right thing to say was.

“Thank you,” she told him softly, “You’re right. He’s going to see what he wants to see, like everyone else always wants to. And I’m not going to let it get to me. If he wants to believe I’m nothing more than a spoiled girl, well then let him join the club with the rest of the world.”

“That’s my girl,” he said, sounding proud of her. “I’m going to tell the General that I’m needed to fight in this war to come. I’ll arrange something, come back from this mission early to make sure that you’re not alone. I don’t want you fighting against whatever this is alone.”

“No,” she said quickly, “Rhodey, you’re fighting another war, one that is just as important. We can’t all drop all other responsibilities because the world might end. If it doesn’t, we need to keep living in it. The terrorists will still be there. The last thing we want is for them to use this as some sort of advantage to take over western society. You have your job and I have mine. I won’t pull you back from duty because I have no idea what I’m doing. You need to be there, Rhodey. I’ll be fine. I promise I’ll keep you up to date on whatever happens.”

“I’ll be there as soon as I can,” he told her gently, “The rest of the military can manage the terrorists on their own. Even if I can’t get there in time for the fighting, I’ll get there as soon as I can, Toni. I’m not letting you go through all of this on your own.”

“I love you,” she said softly, as she saw Romanoff walk towards the interrogation cells. “I probably should go. I promise I’ll call you as soon as I have any updates.”

“Good,” he told her, “I love you too, Toni. Be careful, okay? Don’t get hurt.”

“I’ll try my best, Sour Patch,” she said with a grin as she hung up the phone, just in time for her scanner to let her know that it had hacked SHIELD successfully.

She’d almost laughed as she went over SHIELDs files, learning what it was that they had been working so intently on with the Tesseract. The model had reached a lock on the signature, and there was nothing really left to do but wait.

“What are you doing, Ms Stark?” she heard Fury ask angrily as he walked into the room.

“I’ve kind been wondering the same about you,” she said, looking back up at the man.
“You're supposed to be locating the Tesseract,” he told her, and she nearly laughed.

“We are,” Bruce told him. “The model's locked and we're sweeping for the signature now. When we get a hit, we'll have the location within half a mile.”

“And you'll get your cube back, no muss, no fuss,” Ava said, smirking at him. “That was easy wasn’t it?”

She looked over the file on her monitor.

“What is PHASE 2?” She asked, innocently, as Fury looked irate.

“PHASE 2 is SHIELD uses the cube to make weapons,” Captain Rogers said, barging back into the room, throwing a weapon of sorts on the table. “Sorry, the computer was moving a little slow.”

She’d had her answer an hour ago, but fine, whatever, of course brute force is always the best answer. Who even needed algorithms anyways?

“Rogers, we gathered everything related to the Tesseract. This does not mean that we're-” Fury said, cut off by her.

She turned the monitor to face his good eye, “I'm sorry, Nick,” she said, showing him weapons plans. “What were you lying? We negotiated that in my contract, remember? You were going keep the manipulation to a minimum.”

“I was wrong, director. The world hasn't changed a bit,” Rogers said, looking let down, and she almost felt sorry for the man.

Thor and Romanoff walked in a that moment, and Bruce looked over at them.

“Did you know about this?” He asked her.

“Did Harry know about this?” Ava asked the man, who softened when he looked at her.

“He knew what needed to be done,” Fury told her. “Just like your mother,” he turned to her, “And your father.”

“Right,” Toni laughed. “Like my father.”

“You wanna think about removing yourself from this environment, Doctor?” Romanoff said, coming closer to him, and Bruce looked at her in disbelief.

“I was in Calcutta, I was pretty well removed,” he told her, unimpressed.

“Loki's manipulating you,” she tried to say calmly.

“And you've been doing what exactly?” he asked her, raising a brow.

“You didn't come here because I bat my eyelashes at you,” She rolled her eyes at him.

“Yes, and I'm not leaving because suddenly you get a little twitchy,” He told her firmly, holding the monitor in his hands. “I'd like to know why SHIELD is using the Tesseract to build weapons of mass destruction.”

“Because of him,” Fury said, pointing at Thor. All of them looked at the man, and she felt almost bad for him.
“Me?” he asked, a bit stunned.

“Last year earth had a visitor from another planet who had a grudge match that leveled a small town. We learned that not only are we not alone, but we are hopelessly, *hilariously*, outgunned,” Fury told them all.

“My people want nothing but peace with your planet,” Thor told him, trying to play the diplomat.

“But you're not the only people out there, are you? And, you're not the only threat. The world's filling up with people who can't be matched, they can't be controlled,” Fury informed him, stepping forward.

“Like you controlled the cube?” Rogers asked, throwing it back at him.

“Your work with the Tesseract is what drew Loki to it, and his allies. It is the signal to all the realms that the earth is ready for a higher form of war,” Thor argued.

“A higher form?” Steve asked, a bit concerned.

“You forced our hand. We had to come up with something,” Fury tried.

“Nuclear deterrent. Cause that always calms everything right down,” she said simply.

“Remind me again how you made your fortune, Stark?” He shot back.


“I'm sure if she still made weapons, Stark would be neck deep-” Steve gave her a glance.

“Wait! Wait! Hold on! How is this now about me?” she protested.

“I'm sorry, isn't everything?” he asked her in mock confusion.

Dear Einstein, she really hated that man.

“I thought humans were more evolved than this,” Thor said, amused at their fighting.

“Excuse me, did we come to your planet and blow stuff up?” Fury argued, clearly unimpressed with the man.”

“Did you always give your champions such mistrust?” Thor asked, looking back at her sympathetically.

“Are you boys really that naïve?” Romanoff asked. “SHIELD monitors potential threats.”

“Captain America is on a watch list?” Ava all but laughed, “Him? The paradigm of all that is good and bright in this world?”

“We all are,” Romanoff snapped at her.

“Don’t speak to her that way,” Toni shot at her, coming to her cousin’s defense. “She’s done nothing but speak the truth. Something we all want to get to the bottom of.”

“I swear to God, Stark, one more crack-” Steve turned to her.
“That was a threat!” she all but spat back with false platitudes, “I feel threatened.”

“Guys,” Ava said, trying to get their attention.

“You speak of control, yet you court chaos,” Thor shook his head.

“It's his M.O., isn't it? I mean, what are we, a team? No, no, no. We're a chemical mixture that makes chaos. We're... we're a time-bomb,” Bruce said, shaking slightly.

“Guys,” Ava tried to interject again.

“Why shouldn't the guy let off a little steam?” Toni cut in, furious at how they were all treating the man.

“You know damn well why! Back off!” Steve stepped closer to her.

She turned to face him, aware of just how far their faces were from each other, “Oh, I'm starting to want you to make me. Were you there in Harlem? Do you know first-hand what he’s capable of? You didn’t see him save the city from the Abomination. Yet you seem so sure of yourself for a man who just got out of the ice and has no idea how the modern world works. Maybe you should be backing off.”

He stepped closer into her space, “Big girl in a suit of armor. Take that off, what are you?” he asked her, looking down on her.

“Genius, billionaire, philanthropist. Daughter, niece, cousin, CEO of the largest corporation in the world. I revolutionized the world of technology while men like you spat down at me and tried to put me in the place they thought I belonged in. I built that suit in a cave when I was being held captive and tortured. I am not nothing without the suit. The suit is nothing without me,” she spat back at him.

“I know women and men with none of that worth ten of you. Yeah, I've seen the footage,” he said, and she laughed. Of course he'd seen whatever press footage they had of her.

“The only thing you really fight for is yourself,” he came closer, “You're not the girl to make the sacrifice play, to lay down on a wire and let the other guy crawl over you.”

“Why should I lay down on the wire? I'm not a soldier going through army boot camp. I'm a strategist,” she told him, “I think I would just cut the wire.”

He smiled at her, as if he could see right through her to her core. “Always a way out. You know, you may not be a threat, but you better stop pretending to be a hero.”

“I never once claimed to be one,” she said to him, “That's the difference between us, Captain Rogers. I've always known what I am, known who I am. But you? You're not a hero either. You're a lab rat. Everything special about you came out of a bottle!”

Rogers made himself stand taller, trying to goad her into standing down but she refused. He knew people like her, well she knew men like him too. Men who always thought they were far better than the rest of them.

“Put on the suit, let's go a few rounds,” he told her, and she nearly laughed.

“You people are so petty, and tiny,” Thor said, laughing from behind them.

She rubbed her head, exhausted from the lack of sleep as she took a step back.
“Yeah, this is a team,” Bruce remarked.

“Agent Romanoff, would you escort Dr Banner back to his-” Fury tried to deescalate the situation.

“Where?” Bruce laughed sarcastically, “You rented my room.”

“The cell was just in case-” Fury tried.

“In case you needed to kill me, but you can't! I know! I tried!” Bruce said, silencing them all.

“Bruce,” Ava said, trying to step closer to the man, but he pulled away.

“I got low. I didn't see an end, so I put a bullet in my mouth and the other guy spit it out! So I moved on. I focused on helping other people. I was good, until you dragged me back into this freak show and put everyone here at risk!” He paused to look at Romanoff, who didn’t even flinch when he did. “You wanna know my secret, Agent Romanoff? You wanna know how I stay calm?”

He moved then, holding the scepter, and Fury and Romanoff immediately grabbed their guns.

“Bruce,” Ava told him gently, “Put down the scepter. I think it’s been messing with your head. With all of your heads.”

He lowered it carefully back onto the table, looking surprised and clearly unaware that he had even picked it up.

The computer chimed then, and she moved away, looking at the screen to see what it was that it said. “Got it,” she let out a breath.

“Sorry, kids. You don't get to see my little party trick after all,” Bruce muttered quietly, and Ava rested an arm on his shoulder. He shot her a tired smile, and she returned it carefully.

“Located the Tesseract?” Thor asked, trying to see where it was.

“I can get there faster,” she said simply, as she looked at the coordinates.

“Look, all of us-” Steve tried to cut in.

“The Tesseract belongs on Asgard, no human is a match for it,” Thor warned them.

She turned to leave, as Steve grabbed her arm.

“You're not going alone!” He told her insistently.

“Why, cause I’m just a stupid little girl who can’t handle herself?” she scoffed at him. “Because I’m not to be trusted? Are you going to stop me, Captain America?”

“Put on the suit, let's find out,” he bit back, standing a foot away from her.

“I'm not afraid to hit an old man,” she laughed, “Even if it is you. Aristotle, the stories I’ve heard about you. And you're not even coming up close.”

“Put on the suit,” he goaded her again.

“Oh my God,” Bruce said, as he looked at the location.

She turned to him, as the ship shook at that moment, and explosion throwing them all to the ground.
Rogers looked at her, trying to see if she was injured, “Put on the suit,” he told her quickly. And she nodded in agreement.

“Yep,” she said, as he helped her up.

Whatever it was that Loki was planning, whatever he was trying to achieve by letting himself be taken into custody, it was happening, and it was happening now.
The Helicarrier Attack

Chapter Summary

Loki’s men attack the helicarrier

She suited up as she sent Steve looking for engine number three; the one that had been targeted by
the incoming hostile forces. The one that was nearly impossible to make repairs to while they were
still in the air.

Well, it was a good thing she wasn’t just anyone, wasn’t it?

“Toni,” Ava’s voice came through her mask, “You know what you’re going to need to do, right? I
don’t care if you’re Iron Woman or not; it’s dangerous to go out there and try and restart the engine
yourself.”

“I can do this, Ava,” Toni told her cousin, soothingly. “I upgraded these ships, remember? I know a
thing or two about how they’re designed.”

“It doesn’t change the fact that you’re putting yourself in danger,” Ava said, sounding less than
impressed with her. “It definitely doesn’t change the fact that you could get hurt.”

“A lot more people will get hurt if I don’t,” she told her softly.

“Stark,” Roger’s voice came through her comms, cutting off her private conversation with Ava. She
closed the channel off and switched over to the one he was on. “I’m here!”

“Good,” she told him, as she flew to where he was, “Let’s see what we got.” She looked around,
shrivelling the damage. Kepler, they really did just blow a hole straight through the helicarrier, didn’t
they?

Her screens immediately filled with the plan of the damaged section, as she looked over what needed
to be done.

“I gotta get this super conducting cooling system back online before I can access the rotors and work
on dislodging the debris,” she murmured to herself. She looked over to where Steve was, as he
looked up at her, lost. “I need you to get to that engine control panel and tell me which relays are in
overload position.”

He jumped over the debris, landing around where she told him too, as she flew over to where the
cooling conductors were.

“What’s it look like in there?” She asked him, needing to know what he saw.

“It seems to run on some form of electricity,” he said, sounding a bit lost.

She took a deep breath; this was a man who was raised during the Great Depression. A man who
hadn’t known too much about technology or how anything worked. It would be confusing for half
the engineers on the ship, let alone a man who’d been in the ice until recently for the last seventy
years.
“Well, you’re not wrong,” she said, without a bite in her voice. She closed her eyes, as she explained carefully what it was that he’d need to do in order to restore power to the turbine.

She blew away some of the broken parts which were in the way of the turbine, as she stepped through.

“The relays are intact. What’s our next move?” Roger’s voice asked her, as she heard him working on the other end.

She looked at the damage, knowing what it was that needed to be done, “Even if I clear the rotors, this thing won't re-engage without a jump. I'm gonna have to get in there and push.”

“Ava, what’s wrong?” she asked her quickly.

“Harry’s here, Toni.”

“Where?” she demanded, “Are you safe, Ava? Tell me he’s not near you.”

“He’s taken over the bridge of the ship,” Ava said in her ear, “He and Barton are both there. They threw a grenade are armed. Toni, SHIELD isn’t using non-lethal force.”

“Oh Hell,” she cursed. “Where are you, Ava? Are you safe?”

“I’m in the lab still,” she said softly, “With the scepter.”

“You need to get out of there, now,” Toni demanded. “If Loki’s puppets are here, they’re here for him and for the staff. You need to get out of there before they come for you. From what I’ve heard the men under his control have no sense of recognition. They won’t know it’s you even if they see your face. Harry won’t know you.”

“What if they hurt him?” Ava demanded. “I will not have my brother killed simply because SHIELD can’t use non-lethal force. There are other ways to neutralize the threat. These are just men, and unarmed, they’re no danger if contained. I won’t have them kill him, Toni!”

“I know,” Toni soothed. “I’ll come there and stop it.”

“Stark, we need to you to get the engine working again,” Rogers cut her off, coming over her comms again.
“Ava is in danger,” Toni snapped back at him. “I need to make sure she’s safe.”

“The engine is more important than that!” He said quickly, before pausing. “Stark… Toni, if we don’t get this engine working then we’re all in danger. If the ship falls, we all die. Ava will die. The best way to protect her at the moment is to get that engine up and working.”

“If anything happens to her-” she started but he cut her off.

“Thor, can you go to the research lab?” Rogers said, “Loki’s men are going to try and get scepter. We need you to keep Ava safe and get her out of there but keep the scepter under guard.”

“Lady of Iron,” Thor’s voice boomed out, “I give you my word we’ll keep her safe.”

“Thank you,” she said softly, as her heart raced. She kicked down the last of the debris, as the ship began to tilt.

“It’s Barton. He took out our systems. He’s headed for the detention level. Does anybody copy?” Fury’s voice came over her headset.

“Stark we need to get the engine up and running,” Roger’s voice said with a grunt. “We’re losing altitude.”

She lowered herself down into the engine, as she began pushing one of the blades of the rotor.

“Yeah I noticed,” she said, as her boosters fired more power. The rotor began to move slowly.

“I’ve been detained,” Thor’s voice roared out, “Loki tricked me. I’m locked in the cell.”

“I have eyes on Barton and Carter-Sousa,” Romanoff’s voice came over the comms quietly.

“They’re in the detention centre.”

“Ava!” Toni said quickly, “Get out of there now. I don’t care about the scepter. I don’t care if Loki’s men find it. You need to get out of there now.”

“Stark, you need to focus on the engine,” Roger’s voice called out at her. “She’s a SHIELD agent; she can take care of herself.”

“She’s not,” Toni said in anger. “She’s a civilian and is only here because she wants to help track her brother down. She has no training and can’t take on the rogue agents on her own. She’s in danger.”

“You brought a civilian on board?” he asked her, fury flaring in his voice. “This ship is no place for an untrained civilian. What were you thinking, letting her come?”

“Carter-Sousa women hardly take no for an answer if their loved ones are in danger,” she snapped back, “Out of all people, you should know that better than anyone, Rogers.”

She heard his sharp intake, and she knew he finally drew the dots and made the connection that she’d danced around this entire time.

“Barton’s down,” Romanoff’s voice said with a grunt. “I lost eyes on Carter-Sousa.”

She heard a grunt then, and Toni held her breath as her cousin’s voice came back over the comms.

“I got Harry,” she said, sounding out of breath. “I knocked him out. He’s been contained.”

She let out a sigh of relief as she heard Ava laugh a bit hysterically.
“Oh God I punched my brother,” she laughed, a bit overwhelmed. “He’s never going to let this go, is he?”

“No,” Toni laughed, knowing that at the moment both of her cousins were okay. Well, now she just needed to ensure they didn’t all fall to their deaths, didn’t she?

She pushed with all her might, letting out a grunt, as could feel the ship straighten out.

“Cap, I need the lever,” she said quickly, as the rotors picked up movement.

“I need a minute here,” he said, sounding strained, and she nearly let out a cry.

“Lever,” she said again, in desperation, “Now.”

She watched in fear, as the rotor moved away from her hands, and she was slammed against the one behind her.

“Oh oh,” she said to herself, as she ran some quick calculations in her head. She fell behind the rotors as she was slammed into the floor and dragged by the blades. “Help!”

And sure enough, the good Captain chose that moment to come through, as she fell into an opening and downwards. She powered up her repulsors, which staggered slightly, as she flew back into the ship, taking out a shooter who was aiming at the Captain, and fell on her back.

Her suit powered off, and she let out an exhausted sigh of relief.

“Agent Coulson is down,” Fury’s voice called out, and she listened, stunned.

“Paramedics are on their way,” an agent said, and she could hear Fury shaking his head, as she knew what happened.

“They’re here. They called it,” he said, and she could hear the hurt in his voice.

She let out a pained sound. She could see Rogers’ eyes trained on her, but she didn’t say a word. What was there left to say? She might not have always liked the man; she and him had butted heads often enough with how much of a stickler to the rules he could be, and she was never one to follow the rules well was she?

But she was a Stark, and she was made of iron.

She would not break.

Nor would she bend.

She moved through the halls carefully, as she headed towards the med bay, unable to say a word.

“Toni,” Ava said, as she entered the room Harry was being treated in. She looked over at her cousin carefully, and Ava shook her head as Harry nursed an icepack to his nose. “He's fine now. It seems being knocked unconscious was enough to break the connection. A little bit of cognitive recalibration if you will.”

“Cognitive recalibration,” Toni repeated drily, as she looked at him. “Glad to have you back, Harry.”

He smiled up weakly at her with a grin that didn’t quite reach his eyes. She knew that haunted look all too well. The look of realizing that they’d unintentionally hurt innocent people. She’d had nightmares for months of all the innocents who’d died by her weapons, and she’d built the suit in an
attempt to try and make it right.

“It wasn’t your fault,” she told him gently, as she placed a hand on his shoulder. “You didn’t do it, Harry.”

“It might not have been me, but it was my body,” he said, shakily. “I’m the one who shot all those innocent people. I killed our own men. I didn’t want to do it, but it doesn’t change the fact that it was still me, Toni.”

“I know,” she said softly. “I know. Nothing I tell you can make this better. I can tell you it wasn’t your fault all day long, but it won’t help alleviate the guilt. It won’t change anything that’s happened. But what you choose to do with this guilt is up to you. Are you going to let it eat you inside and destroy you? Or are you going to do something about it and help bring this son of a bitch down? At the end of the day, he’s the only one who is at fault. And it’s up to us to stop him.”

He nodded at her, as Ava gave him a grateful look.

“I should call your parents,” she told them. “They’ll want to know that you’re okay. I promised Uncle Daniel I’ll keep them in the loop.”

She kissed Harry on the forehead, and gave Ava a quick squeeze on the shoulder, before leaving the room.

“JARVIS, call Uncle Daniel,” she instructed, as she pulled out her phone.

“Calling,” JARVIS said as she raised it carefully to her ear.

“Toni?” he asked, picking up immediately. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she said, smiling slightly. “Just a few scratches. Nothing that’s going to keep me down, Uncle Daniel.”

“Good,” he said softly, and she could hear what he wasn’t asking.

“We got him back,” she said, “Well, Ava got him back really. Gave him a good punch in the face and knocked him out. It was enough to break the hold that Loki had on him. He’s in the med bay now, but he doesn’t have any injuries, other than a guilty conscious.”

“I’m glad he’s safe,” her uncle said. “Look after him okay? He always took things personally, even if they weren’t his fault. He blamed himself for months for not being able to find you. And when his mother was hospitalized, he spent a month straight trying to find any possible cure. I don’t want this to break him, Toni.”

“I won’t let it,” she promised him. “I’ll keep him safe. I’ll keep them both safe. Nothing is going to happen to either Ava or Harry if I can help it.”

“You be careful too, Toni,” Uncle Daniel told her gently. “Don’t go doing anything foolish. I want all three of my children home in one piece, you hear me?”

She nodded, as her throat closed slightly.

“Give Aunt Peggy my love for me,” she said, as she saw Rogers walking down the hall. She wondered how much of their conversation he’d heard, what with his super hearing and all.

“I will,” he told her, “I love you, Toni.”
“I love you too,” she said, as she ended the call right as the Captain approached her. “Rogers.”

He looked like he wanted to say something, and she wondered just what it was that he wanted to ask her.

“Fury wants to see us,” he said finally, and she nodded as she looked in to see Harry smiling at something Ava said. “Are they okay?”

“They’re fine,” she said, smiling at the sight of them, “Probably better than they’ve been in a while.”

He gave her a firm nod as they began walking down the hallway, towards the conference room.

“You can ask, you know,” she said softly, as he looked over at her. “I know you’re dying to ask.”

“Their mother is Peggy Carter,” he said, not as a question but a statement. She stopped then, turning to face him, knowing that they would need to have this conversation at some point. And well Loki was out there, and they had no idea what it was that he wanted, so now was as good of a time as any.

“Carter-Sousa,” she corrected, and saw him flinch slightly. “She met Daniel Sousa while working for the SSR. He was a good man, and Aunt Peggy grew to love him. They were married and had Harry a few years after I was born, and Ava after that.”

“I see,” he said, and she knew it must have hurt him. Peggy had years to move on from him, but what did he really have?

“She loved you,” Toni told him gently. “But she and Howard both believed you were dead. They searched for you for years, but they never were able to find your body. They never thought it was possible that you could have been alive, or I don’t think they ever would have given up searching for you. But eventually she had to move on. Life went on, and she had a life of her own afterwards.”

“Is he a good man?” Rogers asked he, and she could see that he wasn’t asking maliciously or out of jealousy. Just genuine curiosity.

“He’s the greatest,” Toni said with a soft smile. “He and Aunt Peggy were there for me a lot after my parents…”

Her voice trailed off and he gave her a gentle look. She took a deep breath as she continued.

“He’s the kind of man she needed. He never needed her to be anything other than herself. After the war women were expected to go back to their places, but she never could be anything like that. She was always her own woman. Uncle Daniel always respected that and followed her into danger more times than I can count. He stayed at home with the children just as often as she did, and the two of them were always equal partners in their marriage.”

“Good,” he said softly. “I don’t blame her for moving on. I’m happy that she did. I would have hated if she pined away of me the rest of her life, but Peg was never one to pine, now was she?”

She laughed lightly at that, “No she most certainly was not.”

“Do you know her well?” Rogers asked her, before backtracking, “I know you think of her children as cousins, and her as your Aunt, but do you have a close relationship with her?”

“She’s my godmother,” Toni told him as he listened to her. “She was the woman who told me that I didn’t need to fall down to the role the world wanted me to play. A female CEO of a weapons
company? The world hated that, but Aunt Peggy always believed in me, even when no one else did. I still remember meeting her when I was only a few years old. She had the prettiest red lipstick, and my father’s respect, and she told me that I would re-make the world in my image.”

“I always thought she’d make a good mother,” Rogers said, looking a bit lost, and she placed a hand on his arm.

“She is,” she said with a small smile.

“Ava takes after her,” he said, looking back towards the med bay. “I don’t know how I didn’t see it before, but she’s her mother’s daughter through and through.”

“You should see Harry,” Toni laughed. “It drives Uncle Daniel mad at times how often the three of them jump into danger.”

He shook his head, smiling lightly at the thought.

“We should go,” she said, growing slightly somber, as she gestured her head towards the direction of the conference room. “We don’t want to keep Fury waiting.”

“Yes,” he said, as they continued down the hallway.

She saw Fury standing there, as she took a seat next to Rogers at the table. She looked down upon seeing Fury’s face, and she knew he must have been in pain over the loss of Coulson. Immediately, any of the earlier happiness she’d had over the discussion of her family left her.

“These were in Phil Coulson’s jacket,” Fury said, throwing a set of Captain America Trading Cards on the table. She looked away, knowing that she’d given him one of the ones he’d been missing from her father’s collection. “Guess he never did get you to sign them.”

Roger’s jaw grinded as he picked the blood-stained cards up to look at.

“We’re dead in the air up here. Our communications, location of the cube, Banner, Thor. I got nothing for you. Lost my one good eye. Maybe I had that coming,” he paused to look at them. Roger’s shoulders were hunched in defeat, and she barely raised her head. “Yes, we were going to build an arsenal with the Tesseract. I never put all my chips on that number though, because I was playing something even riskier. There was an idea, Stark knows this, called The Avengers Initiative. The idea was to bring together a group of remarkable people, see if they could become something more. See if they could work together when we needed them to, to fight the battles that we never could. Phil Coulson died still believing in that idea, in heroes.”

She stood then, unable to listen anymore to what Fury was saying, as she walked off to the room where Loki had been held.

Tears were streaming down her eyes, and she struggled to whip them away, lest someone see and believe that she had a heart.

“Stark, wait,” she heard a voice from behind her, as she looked down at where the cell once stood. “Toni.”

She didn’t look up at him, as he leaned back against a wall.

“Was he married?” Rogers asked her, and she barely shot him a glance.

“No,” she shook her head, “He was seeing someone. A cellist, I think.”
“I’m sorry,” Rogers told her carefully, as he moved over to where she was standing. “He seemed like a good man.”

She let out a watery scoff, “He was an idiot.”

“Why?” he asked her, sounding disbelieving, “For believing?”

She shook her head, “For taking on Loki alone.”

“He was doing his job,” Rogers told her.

“He was out of his league. He should have waited. He should have-” she said with a wave of her hand, looking off distantly.

He moved closer to her, until he was just a few feet away.

“Sometimes there isn't a way out, Toni,” he said gently, as she looked up at him.

She turned, unable to face him anymore, “Right. How did that work for him?”

“Is this the first time you've lost a soldier?” he asked, and she turned sharply to look at him.

“We are not soldiers!” she exclaimed in pain. “I am not a solider, Steve. Bruce isn’t a solider. Ava isn’t a solider. None of us are! And I most certainly am not marching to Fury’s fife!”

“Neither am I!” Steve said in agreement. “He's got the same blood on his hands as Loki does. Right now we've got to put that aside and get this done. Now Loki needs a power source, if we can put together a list-”

She looked back at the wall at the exact spot that Coulson had died.

“He made it personal,” she said softly, cutting him off.

“That’s not the point,” Steve said, sounding slightly exasperated with her, as he shook his head.

“That is the point, Steve. That's Loki's point. He hit us all right where we live. Why?” she asked, looking back into his blue eyes.

“To tear us apart,” he said, with an understanding tone in his voice.

“He had to conquer his greed, but he knows he has to take us out to win, right?” she said, realization flowing through her, “That's what he wants. He wants to beat us, and he wants to be seen doing it. He wants an audience.”

She paced, as thoughts flooded her mind, as she felt a pit of dread grow within her.

“Right, I caught his act at Stuttgard,” Steve said, agreeing with her.

She started rambling on, and she could see the loss in Steve’s eyes as he struggled to keep up with what she was saying.

“Yeah. That's just a preview, this is opening night. Loki's a full-tilt diva. He wants flowers, he wants parades, he wants a monument built in the skies with his name plastered-” she let out an exhale.

A warm light for mankind.
Bruce hadn’t been lying when he thought Loki was talking about her with that statement. He had been, far more than any of them had known, far more than they had caught on. Because what had been all over the news just days before Loki’s attack? What was the largest building in the world run on an independent power source? Which building would make Loki’s victory all the sweeter when he defeated them?

“Sonofabitch!” she swore, before all but running out of the room.
The One Way Trip

Chapter Summary

The Avengers Assemble

Toni Stark sighed to herself, looking back and forth between Ava and Harry, who stood there facing her. Harry’s arms were crossed with a determined look on his face. And while Ava herself looked rather sceptical of the conversation, stood there beside her brother.

“You’re staying here,” she said, as she held the torch to her helmet. “Harry, we just got you back after you were mind controlled by Loki. We have no idea what long term effects it might have had on you. You absolutely cannot just jump back into the field and hope that everything will be fine. That’s not how this works”

“Toni,” Harry told her softly, “I love you, Cousin, but I’m sorry. I’m going out there and I’m going to help fight whatever it is that Loki is planning on doing. I cannot sit back on the sidelines and let him hurt innocent people any longer. You of all people should understand not wanting to sit back on the sidelines when there are people in danger.”

“I do,” she sighed again, “That doesn’t mean I like it, Harold Carter-Sousa. We just got you back. And we’re so lucky that you weren’t physically injured. But we don’t know what it is that we’re facing out there. We don’t know what’s going to happen when Loki opens that portal and what will be waiting for us on the other side. I can’t just ask you to throw yourself into a battle where you have no idea of what to expect.”

“You don’t need to ask,” Harry told her gently. “Besides, Fury’s given orders to all available agents to assist the Avengers in any way possible. I’m an available agent. And I will be assisting.”

“Son of a bitch,” she swore lightly. She wondered if he’d planted the cards he’d all but thrown at Rogers and her during their last conversation.

Her helmet lit up then, coming back online, and she took a deep breath before looking up at both of them.

“I will not lose anyone else today. The both of you better be safe and sound after all of this is over,” she told them. “And if I find out you needlessly put yourself in danger at any point, I will be telling Uncle Daniel on you.”

“Fair enough,” Ava nodded while Harry swallowed. While their mother might have a tendency to jump into danger, Uncle Daniel was more often than not, less than pleased with his family’s actions.

“Fine,” Harry said after a moment. “But the same applies to you. Don’t go pulling any heroics that could get you killed Toni.”

“I’ll try,” she smirked, as she grabbed the suit and let it piece itself together around her. “I’ll see you on the other side, Cousins.”

She met the other Avengers in Bay Six, as she nodded at the Captain. He gave her a tense smile, and she wondered if maybe they would be able to place whatever other issues they had aside for just long
enough for them to bring Loki down.

“Ladies first,” Rogers beckoned, and she smirked at him as she flew in front of the quinjet towards her city.

“JARVIS, place a call to the Parkers,” she said to her AI.

“Calling,” JARVIS said. She heard the phone ring for a few moments before Ben picked up.

“Toni?” Ben asked, sounding confused, “What happened, is everything alright?”

“I don’t have much time,” she told him quickly, “Something is coming for New York. Something that’ll put the city in grave danger. I need you to get Peter and May to safety. Try and leave town if you can. If you cannot, stay away from windows, lock your doors, and go underground. Keep yourself safe.”

“Toni-” Ben started, but she cut him off.

“I promise I’ll come by and explain everything that’s been happening. But there is no time now. An alien god is opening a portal, and I don’t think we’re going to like what’s waiting for us on the other side,” she told him quickly.

“Stay safe, Stark,” he told her kindly. “Peter looks up to you, you know? I don’t think he’d ever recover if you got hurt.”

She swallowed then, unable to say anything.

“I’ll let you go,” Ben told her, “Good luck, Toni.”

The call disconnected, just as she neared her tower. Her suit was still badly damaged, the thrusters barely keeping her up.

“Miss, I turned off the arc reactor. The device is already self-sustained,” JARVIS told her.

“Thanks baby boy,” she told him. While it was less than ideal that they’d stabilized the Tesseract, the last thing any of them needed was for them to supercharge it with her technology.

“Dr Selvig,” she said, hovering closer to where the possessed scientist stood. “Turn the machine off.”

“It’s too late,” the man said, looking as if he’d seen the light, “It can’t stop now. He wants to show us something! A new universe.”

She wanted to laugh at him but held her breath instead.

“Fine,” she muttered, as she lifted her arm up and tried to fire at the device. A force field of sorts lit up around it, as her own blast rebounded and hit her.

“The barrier is pure energy. It's unbreachable. The Mark VII is not ready to be deployed,” JARVIS said.

She lowered herself down to her landing pad, where a very amused Loki was standing.

It looked like she needed a distraction. One that was long enough to get her new suit ready to be deployed.

“Skip the show, J,” she said as Loki smiled up at her, “We’re on the clock.”
Her rims lifted, beginning to remove the suit from her body as she kept eye contact with the Norse God.

She hated strangers in her personal living space. It was why it had been afforded so many protections. So that only people she knew would be able to get in.

But clearly the God had gotten around them anyways.

It looked like she had some new projects for her and Ava to work on after all of this was over.

“Please tell me you're going to appeal to my humanity,” Loki said, sounding absolutely gleeful.

“Yeah no,” she shook her head, “I’ve known for years that men like you think you belong on top just because of some power you think you deserve. There will be no pleading, begging, or bargaining today.”

She held her voice steady, knowing she probably could be killed at any given time.

But she was a Stark.

She was made of Iron.

She would not beak.

Nor would she bend.

“Then why have you come, Lady Stark?” he asked her, looking amused as he stepped closer to her.

“I've come to threaten you,” she said, holding his gaze.

He scoffed at her, “You should have left your armor on for that.”

“I don’t need it to put people back in their place,” she shook her head, “And you've got the blue stick of destiny, so it wouldn’t really help now would it? Would you like a drink?”

She moved behind the bar, pouring herself a whiskey.

“Stalling me won't change anything,” he said, looking down at his scepter in amusement.

“Threatening,” she corrected him with a sharp smile. “No drink? You sure? I'm having one.”

“Then why have you come, Lady Stark?” he asked her, looking amused as she took a sip of the whiskey gingerly. “What have I to fear?”

She moved behind the bar, pouring herself a whiskey.

“I admit, it took us a while to get it together,” she said ruefully, thinking of her own rocky start with Steve Rogers. One pleasant conversation didn’t exactly make them friends. “Let’s see, we have your brother, the demi-God; a super soldier, a living legend who kinda lives up to the legend; a man with breath-taking anger management issues; a couple of master assassins. And you, Loki. You’ve given us something to fight for. Something to unify us against.”
She reached under the bar table, placing a pair of her colantotte bracelets on her wrist. Toni looked into Loki’s blue eyes as he moved closer to her.

“That was the plan,” he told he said, as if he knew something she didn’t know.

“Not a great plan,” she shot back at him. “They’ll come for you, regardless of what happens here. And they will get their revenge. Mark my word, Loki.”

“I have an army,” he said, “And you have, what again?”

“We have a Hulk,” she said, hoping Bruce would get it together in time.

“I thought he’d wandered off,” Loki rolled his eyes.

“You’re missing the point, Prancer,” she told him. “There is no throne. I don’t know about how they do things on Asgard but if you think you’re going to try and unify all of Earth to fall under your rule, you’re delusional. Dynasties and Empires have been trying for centuries. There will always be those who oppose you. There will be no version of this where you come out on top. And maybe we won’t be able to stop you. Maybe we will fail. But you can bet your sweet ass that if we can’t protect Earth, we sure as hell will avenge it.”

She held a bated breath as Loki came closer til she could feel his breath on her skin. He lifted the scepter.

“How will your friends have time for me, when you’re so busy fighting you, sweet Stark,” he asked her softly. “We could have been great allies in another life. But for now, I’ll settle for having you bow down to me.”

He lifted his scepter and touched it against her reactor.

“Performance issues?” she asked in mock sympathy. “It wouldn’t be the first time that’s happened to a man in my presence.”

He lifted her by the throat in anger and flung her to the ground. She winced slightly, still fielding her earlier bruises, as she tried to sit up.

“JARVIS?” she asked her bot softly, “Any time now would be great.”

The God stalked over to where she was as she tried to scramble to stand back up, but the man lifted her through the air once more.

“You will all fall before me,” he told her, face close to hers.

“Deploy!” she cried out, as Loki threw her backwards with full force.

She’d fallen freely before. The first time she flew with the suit and run into the icing issue. But she’d had the suit with her, and it had come back online just in time to be able to save her.

When she was younger, she’d always wondered what it would be like, to fall from a great height
with nothing there to catch her. No parachute, no suit, nothing.

She supposed it felt like this.

She held her arms out, as she heard the familiar sound of the red pod coming to her, trying to get a lock on her bracelets just in time.

The suit flitted around her and she let out a sigh of relief.

“JARVIS make a note for the next Mark suit to be able to come to me without a honing device,” she said, knowing she was lucky she got the bracelets on without Loki noticing her.

“Noted, Miss,” JARVIS said, as she flew back up just before hitting the ground.

She flew back up to where Loki was standing in her tower.

“And there’s one other person you pissed off,” she spoke, anger colouring her voice. “His name was Phil.”

Loki raised the scepter, trying to strike at her, but she was faster, raising her hand to fire at the man. He flew backwards, landing on his ass, and she smiled in satisfaction.

She heard the Tesseract device power up then, as a blue light shot up towards the sky, tearing a rip into it. A black portal opened, as she saw hordes of aliens coming through it.

“Right,” she said, mask scanning the portal. “Army.”

She flew upwards almost instinctively, trying to shoot down as many of the incoming aliens as she could. But the speed of which they were coming in was far greater than the speed she was able to take them out.

She deployed missiles from her suit, taking out a batch of them, but it didn’t stop the ones that slipped past her and down towards her city.

The Chitauri rained down on New York, and she could hear the screams below as the destruction began.

“Stark, we’re on your three, heading north east,” Romanoff said through his comm and she nearly laughed.

How long did it take them to get to the island? She’d nearly died twice already.

“What, did you stop for drive-thru?” she asked, slightly out of breath. “Swing up Park, I’m gonna lay em out for you.”

She swung around her tower, looking unamused as the letters began falling off it. It had been hard enough to get them up there and now a bunch of super-powered gods were knocking them down like legos.

She flew next to a building, ducking at the last moment as a Chitauri soldier crashed to the ground. She saw the quinjet ahead of her, as Romanoff brought the machine guns down from the ship and began firing, taking the ones who had been tailing her out.

“Miss, we have more incoming,” JARVIS said.

“Well let’s keep them occupied then,” she said, as she flew back up towards the portal.
She saw the quinjet come crashing down below, but she knew Clint was a good flier, and she trusted him to land the ship safely. Well, as safely as possible.

She watched in horror as the portal expanded, sending though massive ships that looked like mechanical sea monsters. It deployed more soldiers from it with every passing second and she groaned to herself.

Well, that was just great.

“Stark, are you seeing this?” Roger’s voice came over her headset.

“I’m seeing, still working on believing,” she said, flying parallel to the Leviathan flying through New York her. “Where’s Banner? Has he shown up yet?”

“Banner?” Rogers said in confusion.

“Just keep me posted,” she instructed him. She refused to believe he’d fail to show up now. “JARVIS, find me a soft spot.”

There were civilians below her, being blown up, attacked, and killed.

She felt anger flow through her then. Anger at Loki, at SHIELD for letting it get this far. At herself. If she’d stopped Selvig from opening the portal, then none of this would have happened.

She just prayed that Peter and the Parkers would be safe.

She flew by the Leviathan, wanting it to focus on her.

“Well we got its attention,” she said, wondering how much of a good thing that really was. “What the hell was my step two.”

“What’s the story upstairs?” Rogers’ voice came over the comms, as he talked to whom she assumed to be Thor.

“The powers surrounding the cube is impenetrable,” Thor said, sounding displeased.

“Thor’s right,” she said, remembering her own experiences with the cube. “We gotta deal with these guys.”

“How do we do this?” Romanoff asked.

“As a team,” Rogers said, sounding confident in their ability to work together.

“I have unfinished business with Loki,” Thor told them all.

“Get in line,” Clint scoffed at the man.

“Save it,” Rogers cut them both off, “Loki’s gonna keep this fight focused on us and that’s what we need. Without him these things could run wild. We got Stark up top, he’s gonna need us.”

“So, this all seems horrible,” a familiar voice called out, and she smiled internally.

“I’ve seen worse,” Romanoff said simply.

“Sorry,” Banner said, a bit sheepishly.
“No, we could use a little worse,” Romanoff said over the comms, and the super spy was right.

“Stark, we got him,” Rogers told her, and she cheered.

“Banner?” she asked, confirming with him that she wasn’t just delusional.

“Just like you said,” Rogers confirmed.

“Then tell him to suit up. I’m bringing the party to you,” she said, as she flew the Leviathan towards them.

“I don’t see how that’s a party,” Romanoff said wearily.

“Clearly you’ve never been to a Stark Party before,” Clint smirked.

“Ah Clyde you know me so well,” she grinned.

She watched from above as Bruce moved towards the beast approaching.

“Dr Banner,” Rogers said, “Now might be a really good time for you to get angry.”

“That’s my secret, Captain,” Bruce said with a pause. “I’m always angry.”

She cheered, as she saw Bruce shift into the Hulk then, punching the nose of the beast in front of him. He slid backwards, as the Leviathan lifted through the air.

“Hold on,” she said, as she raised an arm and fired a rocket towards the soft spot she’d found earlier, blowing it to shreds.

She hovered in the air, as the Avengers stood around her in a circle, ready to attack, and she thought in that moment, that they’d come together as the team that Phil had always wanted them to be.

She felt a pang in her chest at his loss, and she vowed to make sure he’d be avenged.

She looked up in horror when JARVIS warned her as more of the Chitauri fleet rained down on them.

“Guys,” Romanoff said, sounding worried.

“Call it, Cap,” she said, looking to the man.

“Alright, listen up. Until we can close that portal up there, we’re gonna use containment. Barton, I want you on that roof, eyes on everything. Call out patterns and strays. Stark, you got the perimeter. Anything gets more than three blocks out, you turn it back or your turn it to ash,” he told the two of them and she nodded.

Clint turned to her, giving her a grin, “Wanna give me a lift?” he asked her, and she winked at him.

“Better clench up, Legolas,” she said, and he laughed. She held onto his quiver and flew them straight upwards.

“Thor,” Captain’s voice came over the comms, “You’ve gotta try and bottleneck that portal. Slow them down. You’ve got the lightning. Light the bastards up.”

She placed Clint on the roof.
“Are you good, Brenton?” she asked him gently. “Harry is still a bit shaken up, even if he pretends to be fine.”

“Now’s hardly the best time, Stark,” Clint said, clenching his jaw.

“Good a time as any,” she said with a shrug. “We don’t know what’s going to happen today. I’m not going to miss any more chances to make sure the people I care about are okay.”

“I’m fine, Stark,” he rolled his eyes. “I’m going to put an arrow in Loki. But I’m fine.”

“And Hulk,” Roger’s voice finished their instructions. “Smash.”

She looked down as Hulk leapt through the air, breaking the soldiers below, and she grinned.

Looked like the Hulk had learned to strut.

“You can talk to me,” she told Clint softly, “Whenever you want.”

He nodded at her in acknowledgement, and she flew back towards the city, trying to wrangle in any of the aliens who tried to breach their parameter.

Lightning clouds swirled above them, and she could see Thor drawing it in as a source and channeling it towards the portal. She could see another Leviathan light up and fall backwards into the portal and she cheered.

“Way to go, Point Break,” she said with a grin.

“And you, Lady Stark,” he said, noting that she flayed a soldier.

“Stark, got a lot of strays sniffing your tail,” Barton told her, “And while I don’t blame them, do us a favour and get rid of them.”

“Barton you flatter me,” she preened, “Just try and keep them off the streets.”

“Well, they can’t bank worth a damn. Find a tight corner,” he told her.

“I will roger that,” she said, as she turned tightly around the corner, coming up on where Hawkeye was. He drew back and shot exploding arrows at them and she grinned. Maybe arrows weren’t as medieval as she’d thought.

Tight corners, huh?

Well, that was something she knew all too well about with this city.

It was how she’d taken out half the Hammer drones after all.

She rounded through the tunnels of the city, flying through parking garages, and just below bridges, before she looked back behind her. None left.

“Nice call,” she told him, “What else you got?”

“Well, Thor’s taking on a squadron down on 6th,” Barton told her.

“And he didn’t invite me?” she pouted.

She could see Hulk tackling another Leviathan, and she grinned. Looked like the man was having
some fun.

“Captain, none of this is gonna mean a damn thing if we don't close that portal,” Romanoff said over the comms to Rogers.

“Our biggest guns couldn't touch it,” Rogers said, referring to her and Thor.

“Well, maybe it's not about guns,” Romanoff said.

“You wanna get up there, you're gonna need a ride,” Rogers told her.

“I got a ride. I could use a lift though,” she said, and JARVIS showed her a clip of Captain vaulting her into the sky with his shield.

“She’s going to need back up,” Toni told JARVIS, changing plans.

She flew behind them, taking out another chariot that was trying to take her own. She flew downwards to where Captain was taking on a dozen soldiers by himself and blew up one who nearly blindsided him. She landed beside him, and shot his shield, as the Captain used it to reflect the blast and take down the Chitauri around him.

She looked around, and he gave her a nod to show he could handle the rest, so she flew back upwards.

The national guard seemed to have chosen that moment to make an appearance, and she was relieved to have some assistance.

“Harry, where are you?” she asked, needing to know that her cousin was okay.

“Helping with ground evacuation,” he told her, “These soldiers pack a mean punch.”

“Are you hurt?” she asked him, needing to know that he hadn’t been insured while fighting with them.

“I’m fine, Toni,” he said, and she could practically hear the roll in his eyes. “The guns you gave me before all of this are really helping though. I’ve never seen anything pack as much of a punch as these.”

“Stark Technology is the best,” she told him. And while she stood by her refusal to make weapons, that didn’t mean she couldn’t make sure her cousin was armed with tech to fight against aliens.

“Captain,” Harry said, and she wondered if Captain America and Harry Carter-Sousa were going to fight some aliens together.

“Mr Carter-Sousa,” Rogers said, “Let’s get these civilians out.”

“Roger that,” Harry responded.

God help the Chitauri.

“Hulk took down Loki,” Romanoff said, “He’s smashing him against your floor Stark.”

“Big man’s learned to strut,” Toni said appreciatively.

“I got eyes on Dr Selvig,” Romanoff said. “I think the compulsions broken.”
“Get him to shut it down,” Rogers instructed. “By any means necessary.”

“He says there’s a safe guard,” Romanoff said, “I’m going to try and shut it down.”

“JARVIS,” she asked, looking down at the Leviathan headed her way. She knew she couldn’t cut into it, not with the power her suit had. But she had another idea. “You ever heard the tale of Jonah?”

“I wouldn’t consider him a role model,” JARVIS sounded alarmed.

She flew straight at the beast, as it devoured her whole. Her thrusters lit up, as she flew through him, lighting him up from the inside.

She crashed to the ground, as the beast fell, and she nearly laughed. She couldn’t believe that worked. Her suit began to flicker and she knew it had taken a lot of damage.

She looked up, groaning slightly as she knew the ships would not stop. More and more soldiers were piling out of the portal by the minute. They needed to get it closed.

“Stark, you hear me?” Fury’s voice came over her comms. “We have a missile headed straight for the city.”

She took in a quick breath, “How long?” She tried to stand up, as a solider attacked her.

“Three minutes, at best. Stay low and wipe out the missile.”

She flew quickly, “Jarvis, put everything we got into the thrusters!”

“I just did,” JARVIS told her, and she flew upwards.

“I can close it,” Romanoff’s voice came over her headset. “Can anybody hear me? I can shut the portal down!”

“Do it!” Rogers demanded, sounding slightly in pain.

“No, wait!” she said quickly.

“Stark, these things are still coming!” Rogers sounded incredulous at her.

“I got a nuke coming in, it’s gonna blow in less than a minute. And I know just where to put it,” she told them. There was no way she could stop it from detonating. And there was no where she could put it without it damaging where it landed. But she could stop it from destroying her home town.

Her mother’s home town.

She caught up to the missile, grabbing it, as she pushed it upwards. She winced as she pushed her full weight into it.

Perhaps her family wasn’t entirely wrong when they told her she needed training without the suit as well.

“Stark,” Roger’s voice came over her comm again. “Toni. You know that’s a one-way trip?”

She swallowed, unable to respond.

“Save the rest for return, J,” she told her AI instead.
“Shall I call Mr Rhodes?” JARVIS asked her and she let out a shaky sigh.

“You might as well,” she said, trying to keep her voice level.

The phone kept ringing, and for once in her life, she knew Rhodey wasn’t going to pick up her call.

“You have reached Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes,” her brother’s voice came on the answering machine, “Please leave your name and number and I’ll try and call you back as soon as possible.”

“Rhodey it’s me,” she said, keeping her voice steady as the recording started. “I just wanted to let you know that I love you. Thank you so much for everything you’ve done for me. You were my first friend, the first person outside my family to care for me, and you mean everything to me. I know you wanted me to stop doing stupid things, and I want you to know that I’m sorry. There was no other choice. There was no more time. Tell Pepper and Happy that I love them. Tell Peter to keep on conducting science experiments even though I’m gone. Tell the Carter-Sousas that they mean the world to me. Tell Jeanette I’m sorry I haven’t sent her any chocolate recently and your mother that she makes the best apple pie I’ve ever had. I love you so much, and if there is anything out there for us after life, I hope I get to see you again.”

The call ended, and she knew she had tears streaming down her face.

But now wasn’t the time for such emotions.

She could not break or bend.

She was Iron Woman.

And she had a city to save.

The portal neared, and she threw the missile into it with everything she had. Space surrounded her, and perhaps in another life she would have admired all the stars sparkling around her, shining brightly. But today was not that day.

Her suit began to give out, as the systems powered down, oxygen getting cut off, and she fell backwards as she watched the missile fly towards the mothership of the Chitauri army, hitting the main ship and exploding.

She fell backwards for the second time that day, free falling down.

Except this time there was nothing that would catch her.

This time she was on her own.

Her eyes closed as she lost oxygen, and she thought to herself, at least if she died today, she would have saved everyone she loved.

The darkness surrounded her as a smile filled her face.

At least if she died today, it would have been as a hero.

Except.

She didn’t die.

Because the next thing she knew, the Hulk was screaming in her face.
She could see Captain Rogers looking at her, visibly relieved.

“What the hell? What just happened?” she groaned. “Please tell me somebody kissed me?”

She looked over at Thor and winked and the Norse God gave her a wide grin.

“We won,” Rogers told her, looking stressed still.

“All right. Hey. Alright. Good job, guys.” She said, as Clint helped her sit up. “Let's just not come in tomorrow. Let's just take a day. Have you ever tried shawarma? There's a shawarma joint about two blocks from here. I don't know what that is, but I wanna try it.”

“We're not finished yet,” Thor said softly, looking up. Because there was still one more person to deal with.

She sighed, knowing he was right. Rogers gave her a hand and she accepted it with a smile as he pulled her gently to her feet.

“That was a brave thing you did,” he told her softly, as the two of them walked behind the rest of the group back to her tower.

“I guess I’m able to fall down on the wire for everyone else sometimes,” she told him without malice in her voice.

“I was wrong,” he told her gently. “I’m sorry. I know the two of us didn’t exactly get off to the best start, but I was wrong about what I said about you, and I know that now.”

“Perhaps if we’d met under less stressful circumstances it would have been different,” she said lightly. After all, it was hardly the first time she'd been judged by someone she didn’t know.

“If it isn’t asking too much, I would like to re-introduce myself to you,” he said, facing her. “Properly. Without the duress of the end of the world on our door. Hi, I’m Steve Rogers, Soldier, Man out of Time, and just a boy from Brooklyn.”

“Hi,” she greeted him, taking his hand to shake in her own. “Toni Stark. Genius, Philanthropist, and just a girl trying to deal with the cards she’s been dealt.”

“Nice to meet you,” he told her, as Clint hollered back at them.

“If the two of you could stop flirting for just a second, we still have a God to deal with,” he screamed, and she flipped him off.

Rogers blushed slightly and she simply laughed it off. “Don’t pay any attention to Barton, Captain. He’s just jealous his attempts at flirting with me to spy on me for SHIELD didn’t go his way.”

“SHIELD did what?” he spluttered as they entered her damaged, newly built building.

“Guess there’s a lot of things we need to bring you up to speed on, huh Pretty Boy?” she asked, as they piled into the elevator. “JARVIS, to the penthouse pleases, Baby Boy.”

“Right away, Miss,” he told her, and Steve looked up surprised.

“You have a man controlling your elevator?” he asked, looking around a bit amazed.

She laughed lightly, “He’s an AI,” she said, looking at the confused look on Steve’s face. “Artificial Intelligence. He’s not a human, not in the same way as you and I. I coded him a few years back. And
he controls a lot more than my elevator. He helps manage everything in my life.”

“He’s a robot?” he asked, looking up in awe.

“It’s a bit more complex than that,” she smiled, “He’s a learning AI. It means that he makes decisions himself. I gave him the code to make his own choices, just as you and I make any choices.”

“Is this a common thing for the future?” Steve asked, a bit amazed, as the doors opened to her penthouse.

“No,” Harry’s voice called out from her living area, “Our Toni is just a genius like that.”

“Harry,” she breathed, as she moved forward to hug him. She pulled away, assessing him carefully, trying to make sure that he hadn’t been injured in any way.

“I’m fine, Tonia,” he told her gently, “But you won’t be. Dad’s been calling me nonstop since you nuked the portal. You’re going to have a lot of explaining to do.”

She groaned slightly, knowing she was going to have quite a bit of unhappy family to deal with.

“I’ll call him,” she said with a sigh, “After we deal with him.”

She gestured over to Thor’s brother laying on the ground, looking pained, where Hulk had left him smashed. He was surrounded by SHIELD agents, but it didn’t stop her from raising her armoured hands for protection.

“JARVIS, in the meantime, send a quick note to the family and let them know I’m safe. Check in with the Parkers too, make sure they’re okay,” she said carefully,

The Avengers moved towards the man, holding their respective weapons up, and she saw as Loki blinked at them, groaning.

“If it's all the same to you. I'll have that drink,” Loki said, blinking back up at them with bright green eyes.

Hulk snorted at him in anger, and Loki flinched away. She watched as Thor slapped a pair of handcuffs on him, ready to drag him back into SHIELD’s custody.

“Wait!” she said, grabbing Thor’s hands. The Asgardian Prince looked at her in confusion. “Look at his eyes.”

“Please tell me you aren’t admiring the colour of his eyes,” Natasha said, rolling her eyes at the CEO.

“They’re green,” she said, ignoring the spy. “Earlier, when I spoke to him in the tower, they were blue. Bright blue.”

“You mean,” Harry said sharply.

“Like yours and Clint’s were when you were under his compulsion,” Toni said, gesturing to the pair of them.

“You think he was controlled?” Thor demanded, as he turned to her.

“Please,” Clint snorted, “No one made Loki do anything.”
“Brother?” Thor asked, looking back at him, “Is it true? Were your actions not your own?”

Loki didn’t say anything, simply looking down.

“Why did you not say anything, Loki?” Thor moved closer to the man.

“Would you have believed me?” Loki asked with a shallow laugh, “You were always so quick to believe the worst of me.”

“That’s not true,” Thor argued.

“Isn’t it?” Loki asked him with a frown.

“We still have no proof of this,” Natasha pointed out.

“JARVIS, do we have footage of my encounter with Loki earlier?” she asked, “One we can specifically make out the colour of his eyes?”

“Hold on,” Clint protested, “He’s a shape shifter. He could have just changed them to fool you.”

“We scanned yours and Harry’s brain earlier, so we can scan his brain for similar activity,” she reminded him. “Clint, I’m not saying we should excuse his actions. New York has suffered badly because of it. But just as your actions under the compulsion were not your own, if there was a chance that Loki was not acting under his own accords, don’t we owe it to him to try and find out?”

She looked over at Harry, “Make sure SHIELD scans his brain when you take him back. Even if he is to face Asgardian justice, he deserves to have a fair trial.”

“You would do all this for me, Midgardian?” Loki turned to face her, masking his emotions, and she felt a small wave of sympathy towards him. “Why?”

“I know what it’s like to be judged for actions that were not entirely my own,” she said with a simple shrug. “I just want to make sure you get a fair trial. If you did the things you did out of your own free will, then I want you punished for it. But if not, then you deserve the chance to explain your side of the story.”

Rogers was looking at her carefully, as if he was analyzing her words, but she refused to put any weight into it.

“Got it,” Harry said, as the SHIELD agents began to lead him away.

“So, shawarma?” she asked, turning to the group.

It was indeed several hours later before she got her shawarma. Later, after Loki had been taken into custody and his brain activity monitored. After the clean-up of the city had begun and no one was left in immediate danger in the aftermath of the attack.

She’d walked into the store and paid them the full amount to repair their store, if not more, only asking that they got some food.

The owners had been a little dazed, but when they saw the wad of cash, they quickly nodded and began to cook for them.
She was exhausted, and she knew the rest of the team was just as drained as she was, and she was sure she was going to fall asleep at any given moment.

Clint had his head on Natasha’s shoulder, slowly dazing off, while Natasha picked apart her plate carefully. Bruce looked like his head was going to fall down onto his plate, while Ava kept poking him carefully any time he got too close to falling. Harry kept stabbing the same fry in the sauce, like he was lost in thought, and Steve, poor Steve, looking like he just wanted to go back out there and keep helping, even though he was dead on his feet.

She was about to place a fry in her mouth when she heard a familiar whirring of thrusters outside, and she quickly leapt to her feet. She saw the team’s attention snap around her, all of them grabbing their weapons in case of another attack, but she didn’t stop to tell them off. Instead, she watched as her Rhodeway Bear moved towards the shawarma joint.

“Antonia Stark,” his voice boomed through the mask, “What the hell were you thinking? Out of all the ridiculous, hairbrained schemes you’ve ever had, and trust me, you have had a lot, this has got to be your stupidest idea ever.”

Steve stepped forward, raising his shield slightly like he was worried for her safety, but she ignored him. She watched Rhodeway take the suit off carefully, before moving closer to her.

She threw her arms around his neck and Rhodeway held her tightly, as if he was worried she would disappear.

“I was so worried,” he said softly. “When I heard your voicemail, I was already flying to New York but I was hours away. And then I saw the report the you took the missile into the portal. They didn’t know if you were alive, Toni. And I missed your call. If you were dead and I didn’t get to talk to you before it happened. If you had called me before you died and I didn’t pick up, I don’t think I ever could have forgiven myself. I’m so, so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she told him gently, “I don’t think I could have talked to you before doing it. I think I would have broken if I had to say goodbye to you. It was easier to leave a message.”

“Easier for who?” he asked her carefully. “It would never be easy to lose you, Toni. I thought you knew that by now.”

“Is everything okay here?” Rogers asked, as he carefully came up to them. He was looking at Rhodeway suspiciously, and she nearly laughed. As if her Sugar Plum could ever hurt her willingly.

“Everything is fine,” she said, pulling away from Rhodeway, as she wiped a tear she didn’t even know she’d shed. “This, Captain Rogers, is my best friend and brother, Honey Bear.”

Rhodeway rolled his eyes at her, as Steve looked a bit unsure at his name.

“Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes,” Rhodeway said, and she pouted at him. “Pilot of the War Machine armour, and the reason this girl is still alive.”

“Mean,” she said, glaring at him slightly.

“Accurate,” Ava piped in and Tony gave her a disapproving look.

“I’m taking away your lab time,” she said, and Ava rolled her eyes.

“I’d like to see you try, Stark,” Ava said, and Toni laughed.
“I also would like to inform you that my mother wants to have a word with you,” Rhodey said, looking at her seriously, as Toni paled. “She is less than pleased with your actions.”

“I saved the world!” Toni threw her arms up in the air, “Why does everyone keep wanting to yell at me for it.”

“Because you nearly died,” Harry told her calmly, “And no one would be okay with losing you. Not after we went through your Palladium scare a few months ago.”

She winced, rubbing her chest slightly.

“Well it’s good to meet you, Lieutenant Colonel,” Steve said, shaking Rhodey’s hand firmly. “Would you like to join us for some shawarma?”

Rhodey nodded, sitting down with them at the table.

“I would like that quite a bit,” he said, sitting down at the table they were at earlier, next to her.
After New York

Chapter Summary

The Avengers come together in the aftermath of the battle.

Needless to say, the clean-up of New York did not go as smoothly as some would have wished it did.

Unlike prior alien invasions on the planet, there was nothing SHIELD could do to simply wipe it under the rug and tell people to move along as if there was nothing to see.

The fact was that the Chitauri had attacked one of the largest cities in the world, and there were plenty of witnesses to the invasion. And if that weren’t enough, news outlets were still covering the story for days to come.

She and the team had been out there nearly day, trying to clean up the damage to the city. She could see the exhaustion in her hometown as they struggled to move forward. And she didn’t blame them. Even with the Iron Woman suit, she was exhausted from all the heavy lifting and from being out for as long as they were each day.

But New York was her mother’s city. The city Jarvis had raised her in. And she refused to let it fall apart because a few aliens believed they were more powerful than humans.

They had won the battle in the end, and she would not let the aftermath be what destroyed them.

“Toni, you need to take a break,” Ava told her softly, as she entered the lab where Toni was trying to design a new system to help clean up the messes. If they just had more man power that couldn’t get tired, then it would be easier for all of them. If they had some sort of superpowered suits akin to hers that didn’t need her to pilot it, then it would make all their lives easier.

“Not now,” she said, waving her had at her cousin, “I’m working on something huge Ava. If I can only get the calibration on these suits to function correctly then I could make revolutionary changes to the technology sector as we know it! I just need to get this right. I know I can do it.”

“Toni,” Ava said, moving closer to her, “You haven’t slept in nearly forty-eight hours. Take a break. I know you’re worried about the city, but it’s recovering. It might be a slow effort, but every day they’re healing slowly. It’s not on you to singlehandedly save the city. You have an entire team now for that. Take a break. I know Bruce wants to leave and go back into hiding. Barton keeps climbing in our vents, trying to make sure your security is up to snuff. Romanoff keeps trying to get me to train with her. And Rogers keeps giving Harry and I looks like he wants to talk to us about Mom and I can’t face all of it alone. I need you to help me with all of it. Please.”

She turned to see Ava’s face, and saw genuine worry, both for herself and as the girl tried to cope with everything that life had thrown her way.

She forgot sometimes that Ava was the youngest of them all. Even with the age difference between the two of them, Ava had grown up in a loving home. She’d never been forced to grow up quickly because her father wanted her to know just how much he hated her. She’d never been subjected to
abuse of the physical and emotional kind. She’d never cried into Jarvis’ arms in pain, both from broken bones and from the fact that she couldn’t understand why Howard hated her.

But Ava, sweet Ava, had never gone through any of that. She’d been loved unconditionally by her parents. And for how much Harry would tease her, he’d sooner hurt anyone who made his sister than see her cry.

So she took a deep breath as she nodded at Ava.

There had been so much going on lately. And while Ava might not have been involved in the fighting directly, she’d seen her brother get mind controlled, and nearly lost Toni to the wormhole.

It was a lot for any of them to handle.

And if there was anything she could do to make things slightly easier for Ava in the aftermath of the invasion, then Toni would do so.

“Let’s go see what these so-called Avengers are doing to my tower,” Toni winked at her cousin, and Ava beamed at her as the two headed to her private elevator.

“You should also know that Peter wants to come by later today,” Ava told her as JARVIS sent the elevator up to the common floor that she’d set up temporarily for them. She knew the tower was going to be rebuilt anyways and she’d keep her new guests in mind when she did so. But for now, they’d just have to share. “He sounded on edge and I think the attack has shaken him up.”

She closed her eyes slightly. A naïve part of he had hoped that there was a chance that Ben and May had managed to keep him away from all of it. But she knew with the extent of the damage that there was no way Peter wouldn’t know exactly what had happened in New York.

“Ohay,” she murmured as the elevator doors opened. “Tell him he can come over later. Maybe he can even meet some real superheroes.”

“Toni,” Ava said warningly as Clint shot an arrow that narrowly missed her.

“You better not be actively damaging my tower, Brenton,” She said, scowling at the man, who shot her a sheepish smile.

“I was bored,” he said, a slight grimace. “You’ve been hiding Stark, and a man’s gotta keep himself occupied somehow.”

“By shooting arrows into my walls,” she deadpanned. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you that it was impolite to impale another person’s house, especially when said person has taken you in?”

“I’ve been trying to tell him that all morning,” Harry said, as he sat up lazily on the couch. “But no one ever does listen to me.”

She sighed slightly as she moved towards the kitchen. “JARVIS, do we have any leftover pizza from last night?”

“No, Miss,” JARVIS responded, “Mr Odinson and Dr Banner finished the rest of it late last night.”

Of course they had.

She supposed it was asking for too much for there to be food in her own house.

“Mr Rogers made breakfast a half hour ago,” JARVIS continued, “A plate of eggs, sausages, and
toast has been left for you on the counter.”

She grinned as she turned to the plate, covered by foil.

“If this is empty, I’m kicking everyone out,” she told them all with a serious face.

“Maybe if you just came to eat with us at normal times there would be food left for you,” Ava shot at her, and Toni pouted.

“I’m being bullied in my own home,” she said with a sigh. “JARVIS these ingrates are being mean to me.”

“Would you like me to place a call to Miss Potts?” JARVIS asked her, seemingly amused.

“No!” Toni said quickly, as she looked up from pouring herself a cup of coffee, “Pep would take their side if she found out I haven’t slept in two days.”

She winced as the words left her mouth, as Rogers came into the room just then. Of course he did.

“What do you mean you haven’t slept in two days?” he asked her, looking disapproving of her actions.

“Things to do Capscicle,” she said with a wave of her hands. “This is normal for me. Besides, I once went ten days without sleep when I was trying to work on DUM-E to get him to at least pretend to listen to what I wanted him to do.”

“And if I remember correctly, you were nearly hospitalized at the end of it,” Ava told her with a frown. “It took Mom calling you finally to get you to sleep Toni. Just because you’ve gone longer without sleep doesn’t mean that it’s good for you to continue to do it.”

“Sleep is for the weak,” she said lightly, and Harry simply shook his head at her.

“You should go to bed after you eat,” Harry said, trying to push the cup of coffee away from her. She scowled at him, as she brought it in closer, holding it tightly.

“Mine,” she said, glaring at him. “How dare you even think about taking it away from me?”

“Should you really be drinking that?” Rogers asked, as he sat down beside her, looking at her worriedly.

“It hasn’t killed me yet,” she shrugged, “Besides, out of all the ways I’ve almost died, I’ve decided that if coffee could kill me then it’s the way I want to go. At least I’ll die by the hands of something I love.”

“You’re being dramatic again,” Harry told her as she saw Romanoff glance furiously at Barton when one of his arrows skimmed her hair, dropping half an inch of it to the ground. Barton immediately ran out of the room, as Romanoff looked like an animal about to pounce on her prey.

Meaning she was alone with the Carter-Sousas and Steve Rogers, their Mother’s once wartime flame.

Great.

“I’ll have you know that plenty of things have tried to kill me,” she glared as Ava picked up a fork and took a bite off her plate. “There was the Ten Rings and Obie, Vanko, Hammer indirectly with his own stupidity. The Arc Reactor with the palladium core, the missile I just launched into space
and fell from that high of an altitude. And honestly, if it weren’t for Jarvis, I’d probably be dead many times over while growing up. So I’d take the coffee thank you very much.”

Rogers glanced up at her, “Just because you’ve nearly died doesn’t mean you can continue to run yourself ragged, Stark. You need sleep just as much as the rest of us. The clean-up effort is nearly done. Go take a break and let us handle the rest for today. You’ve more than done your part.”

“No,” she said, looking up at him.

He looked at her in confusion, “Toni-”

“I don’t want to go to sleep, Captain Rogers,” she said firmly, “And you have no authority to make me do so.”

“Toni,” Ava said softly, gripping her hand.

“I see them,” she whispered slightly, “I see the ships in space every time I close my eyes. You weren’t there. You didn’t see how many there were. You think the damage the ones who came through did was bad? That was a mere scouting party for what was up there. Fury wasn’t lying when he was we are hopelessly outmatched. We would have had no chance if it weren’t for us closing that portal. Because otherwise they would have decimated us.”

“But they didn’t,” Steve told her softly. “We can’t get lost in the could have beens. We won, Toni. One way or another, we won. And you need to take a break. A genuine break.”

She sighed, as Harry gave her a soft smile.

“Dad wants you to go visit them,” he said softly. “Mom’s been asking after you, and Dad couldn’t keep what happened from her. Too many of the staff were talking about it. And on her good days she remembers every word of what they say to her. If you think you’re going to keep her from finding out, then you have another thing coming.”

She sighed, “I just got chewed out by Mama Rhodes. I had to promise to go visit them this year for Christmas to get her to stop crying. And Uncle Daniel wasn’t pleased either. I don’t know how much more of this that I can take.”

“Just ask what you’ve been meaning to,” Ava said, as Toni watched her look up straight at Steve Rogers. “I know you’ve been dying to.”

Steve looked like a deer caught in headlights and she nearly laughed.

“You’ve been giving Harry and I glances for the better part of the last few days. And even on the ship you used to look at me unsure of whether to talk about whatever it is that you’ve wanted to ask,” Ava said with a roll of her eyes. “You want to know about our mother, Peggy Carter-Sousa.”

“Yes,” Steve said finally.

“She moved on,” Harry said without holding back. “She lived a life, Rogers. A good life. She didn’t spend the rest of her life pining after you.”

“Harry!” Ava hissed and Toni simply sighed.

“I know she did,” Steve told them both. “Look, I know this is strange for you three. I don’t want to come in an assume I have any place in any of your lives. I know she moved on and met a new guy and had a life even after I was gone. And I’m not going to lie and say that it doesn’t hurt, because it
did, it does. I loved her, and if things were different maybe I could have had a life with her, or maybe the two of us wouldn’t have worked. But that didn’t happen. I went in the ice and everyone thought I was dead. And now I’m almost seventy years in the future and the world I once knew was gone. Everyone I knew then is now gone. Bucky, Howard, the Commandos. All of them are gone now. But Peggy isn’t. She’s the last link I have to the life I once knew. And I just want to know about her, and maybe get to know her as friends, as I try and move on and adapt to this new life I’ve been thrown into.”

Harry looked unsure still, but Ava nodded.

“Mom used to tell us stories about you growing up,” Ava said softly. “Dad never asked her to stop or pretend that there wasn’t a part of her who didn’t once love you. She loves my father with her whole heart, but she did care about you once.”

“She’d tell us all about Captain America and his best friend Bucky Barnes who’d saved the world,” Harry said finally. “I used to think you were so cool when I was growing up. All I wanted to do was help try and make the world a better place. It was why I followed in Mom’s footsteps and joined SHIELD.”

“Does she know?” Steve asked after a moment. “That I’m back?”

“She knows,” Toni said softly, “We told her on one of her good days. She’d like to see you, if you wanted to visit her.”

“Good days?” Steve asked, with a slight frown.

“She’s getting older, Captain,” Harry told him. “Her memory isn’t quite what it used to be. She has Alzheimer’s, and there are some days when she looks at us and can’t even recognize our faces. It’s hard, and nothing about it is easy. But she’s getting the best care she can get.”

“She’s in a home?” Steve asked, sounding somewhat disapproving, and Toni cut him off almost immediately.

“It’s not the same as it was back then, Rogers,” Toni said. “She needs a lot of assistance for her condition. She needs constant medical care. It’s not that we don’t want to take care of her or that we’re unwilling. I’d gladly let her live her with me if it would be what was best for her. But she needs proper care that we’re unable to give her.”

He sighed, “There’s a lot of catching up that I need to do, isn’t there? About this new modern world that I’ve found myself in.”

She grinned at him, “Not to worry, Captain. I’m something of a futurist, if you will.”

“Meaning?” his eyes narrowed at her.

“Meaning you’re right,” she told him firmly, “A lot has changed since you went under. Segregation ended. There was the Cold War, the Korean War, The Vietnam War, Panama, 9/11. Homosexuality was decriminalized. A lot has happened in the last seventy years, and if you’re going to live in this century, you’re going to need to know exactly how much has changed beyond a few pop culture references that the others insist you catch up on. The world is a lot different than it was back then. And I’ve been named the greatest futurist of our generation. If anyone can get you up to speed, it would be me. Besides, Aunt Peggy asked me to help you.”

“She did?” Rogers asked, relaxing slightly.
She nodded, “She did. So let me put together an educational video for you documenting exactly what’s changed since you’ve been under so we can get you up to speed. See about getting you reintegrated back in society, if you will.”

“Besides, Toni makes the best toys,” Harry nudged her lightly. “If anyone is capable of crash coursing you into the twenty first century, it would be her.”

“Okay,” Steve nodded slightly, “Thank you, Stark.”

“My pleasure, Captain,” She said, and he gave her a soft smile.

“Ms Stark,” JARVIS said, and Steve jumped slightly, “Mr Parker, alongside his aunt and uncle have entered the building. They should be on your floor shortly.”

Steve stood up suddenly, as if he was worried that she was in danger and she shook her head at him almost comically. He seemed to fear that quite often when it came to those in her life who cared about her.

“Toni!” Peter said, as the elevator door opened. His aunt and uncle stood behind him, looking worriedly at her. “You’re okay.”

“I’m fine, Peter,” she said, as she stood and moved closer to where the boy was. She looked him over, trying to see if he’d been hurt at all in the invasion, and she gave Ben a quick nod as she looked down at the boy.

He threw his arms around her, and she bent down to hug him tightly. The eleven-year-old was growing quickly, and she wondered just how long it would be before the boy was taller than her, even in the heels she often wore in public.

“You took the missile into space!” he said quickly, lip quivering slightly. “And then it closed, and you didn’t come out! I thought you were gone! I thought something happened to you. What if you got hurt? What if you died?”

“I know, Peter,” she said softly. “I was scared too. But I did it because it was the right thing to do. Because it kept you and your family safe. Because it kept Ava and Harry safe. It wasn’t an easy decision to make, Peter, and I didn’t make it lightly. But I did it because I wanted my family to be safe.”

His arms tightened around her, and she rubbed his back gently.

“He’s been worried about you for days,” May told her. “He wanted to come over right away, but we wanted to give you some time to recover, and for the tower to be safe again before we came by. I know you’ve had your hands full, and I didn’t want us to burden you any more than you’re already facing.”

“You’re never a burden,” Ava told her, and May smiled at her cousin.

“Toni’s been worrying about you all week,” Harry nodded, and she glared at her cousin.

“What if you died?” Peter asked again softly, shaking as he tried to hold back tears, and she knew that the boy was especially shaken up given the fact that he’d lost his parents a few years ago. Death was a sore subject for the young boy, and she knew he didn’t want to lose any more people he’d cared for. “What if you died and I lost another person I cared about. I don’t want to lose you, Toni.”

She smiled softly, as she pulled away from him so she could look at his face. She glanced up at May
and Ben, wanting to make sure they weren’t uncomfortable with the interaction. But neither seemed to mind, given the fact that she’d been in their lives for last few years.

“Peter,” she said softly, wiping away one of his tears. “I would do anything to keep the people I care about safe. I would carry a hundred missiles off into space if it meant making sure you didn’t get hurt. But I also promise that I’ll always be there for you. I will do everything in my power to make sure that I come home safely. I won’t ever leave you willingly if I can help it.”

He nodded slightly, and she saw Steve looking over at them curiously.

“Say, Peter, would you like to meet Captain America, and the other Avengers?” she asked, as the boy seemed to realize there were others in the room. He pulled back from her, and she stood as she carefully guided the three Parkers to where Steve was standing.

“Peter, meet Steve Rogers, also known as Captain America,” she said as the boy’s eyes lit up.

“Steve, meet Peter Parker. My prodigy, and my favourite lab assistant.”

“Hey!” Ava argued playfully, and Peter stuck his tongue out at her.

“Nice to meet you, Peter,” Steve said kindly, as Peter shook his hand, looking awed.

Of course at that moment, Romanoff chased Clint back into the room, as Banner came out of his quarters looking exhausted, and Thor flew in through her landing pad.

“Peter, meet the rest of the Avengers,” she said drily, as they all froze, realizing a civilian family was in her tower.

“Bruce Banner?” Peter said, looking up at the other scientist avenger in shock. She sighed dramatically as Banner looked over at the boy, slightly guarded.

“That’s me,” he said tiredly, clearly waiting for the Hulk questions to be thrown his way.

“Wow I can’t believe you’re here,” Peter gushed, practically bouncing. “You’re one of my favourite scientists of all time! Your work on gamma radiation is amazing! We have your poster up in class and I did a report on you for my last paper.”

“You read my research?” Bruce asked, sounding slightly surprised.

“Genius,” Toni gestured to the boy and Peter lit up. “I thought I was your favourite scientist, Kid.”

“I can have more than one!” Peter argued, “He does research with biophysics and radiation! Your work is based on mechanical engineering! Why can’t I just like all the science fields?”

He pouted slightly at that and she heard Clint lean over to Natasha, “Are we sure he isn’t her kid?”

She shot a glare at him as Ava grinned at Bruce.

“Fine,” she said with mock hurt. “I guess you don’t want to see the newest additions I added to the lab.”

“I do!” Peter said quickly, snapping his focus back on her. “Please can we go to the lab?”

She looked over at May and Ben, wanting to get their permission and the two nodded. “Just don’t be too late. Tomorrow still is a school day after all.”

“Of course,” she nodded. “I’ll get him home by seven.”
“Can Dr Banner come down to the lab with us?” Peter asked, and she sighed, knowing she’d lost this round.

“Fine,” she grumbled as rest of the Avengers watched her gather up her little science family and headed down to the lab.

“Don’t forget that you need to sleep at some point!” Harry yelled after her and she followed Peter’s lead and stuck her tongue out at him.

It took SHIELD almost a month of poking and prodding at Loki’s brain for them to come to a decision on whether or not he was truly guilty of the crimes they wanted to place on his shoulders. And it took her constant badgering and Thor’s insistence that Loki be returned to Asgard before they finally gave in and came to a decision. Without it, she was certain they would lock him in the deepest hole they could and throw away the key.

“I owe you my thanks, Lady Stark,” Thor said to her, as SHIELD brought his brother towards them. They were in Central Park, and she knew the onlookers were watching them curiously, trying to find out just what was going on with the man who almost conquered New York. “If it were not for your assistance, then I do not think my brother would have been found innocent.”

“Earth was attacked,” she told him carefully. “And I intend to punish those responsible. If Loki was not at fault, it means that there is still someone out there pulling the strings. Someone that we do not know of. And we need to know who that is because I have a feeling that this is far from over.”

As Harry brought Loki over to them, he released the handcuffs that were on his wrists, freeing the man.

“Thank you,” Loki said, as he looked at her directly in the eyes. “If not for your power of observation, then my guilt would be determined, regardless of what defense I try to use for myself.”

“Next time you come to Earth, perhaps you can try a more peaceful approach,” Toni said giving him a smile. “But I do intend to pick your brain on your magic and just how it works. There must be some scientific basis behind it.”

“Perhaps you can even be my guide on the planet,” his eyes twinkled, practically purring, “I have a feeling we have a lot we could learn from each other.”

Steve stepped in front of her slightly, but she simply laughed.

“Oh I don’t doubt that,” she said smile widening.

“We must go,” Thor told them all, with a slight sadness in his eyes. “I wish I could stay longer, but I need to return to my planet. If there is a greater threat out there, then we will need all the time and knowledge we can get to prepare for it.”

“Don’t hesitate to visit,” Harry told them both. He looked slightly warily over at Loki, and she knew it was hard for him to accept that the man had been controlled. But he had seen the footage of what he’d done while he was under and knew that none of them had acted like themselves due to the staff’s power.

“I will return,” Thor told them, “When the time comes for our next battle, I will gladly raise arms with you against our foes.”
“Looking forward to it, Point Break,” she clapped him slightly on the shoulder.

Bruce nodded at them, as Clint carefully opened the suitcase he’d been carrying. Bruce turned to it, as he used a pair of metal tongs to lift it up and seal it in a special container to ensure its safety through their transport.

She knew it was for the best if the Tesseract left the planet. SHIELD had already proven incapable of safeguarding it, and whoever was coming was after it. Let Asgard deal with the Alien invasion next time; they were apparently far more advanced than Earth, according to Thor anyways.

Thor took the Tesseract, holding on to one side of the container, as he offered the other side to Loki.

“Until next time,” Thor nodded at them. He turned the handle he was holding, and she watched in near awe as the two materialized away.

“Well, that’s that then,” she said with a sigh. She watched as Natasha handed Bruce a bag of his things and she wondered who had gotten them for him.

“I heard you asked Bruce to move in with you,” Steve said, and she turned to face him.

“He’s still on the run technically from Ross,” Toni said with a sigh, “But the people of New York know that he’s a hero. And besides, I can protect Bruce from Ross. I might not have any more weapons contracts with the Military, but I still produce all their armour and hold other defense contract. I have enough sway to get the government to drop whatever vendetta Ross has against him.”

He looked at her carefully, and she tried not to let it get to her

“It took a while to convince him,” she admitted. “But I know a thing or two about what it’s like not to feel in control of one’s life. He knows he’s free to go whenever he wants. I’m sure he’s mainly agreeing for Ava. The two of them seem to have gotten close lately,” she said, gesturing to the two scientists talking. But hopefully he feels at home at the tower.”

“He’s agreeing for you too,” Steve told her gently, “You’re doing a good thing, Toni. You’re giving Bruce a home; something he hasn’t had in years. And not because of whatever publicity you can get out of it, or because you think he’ll be beneficial towards Stark Industries. But because you’re a kind person.”

“The same offer extends to you too,” she looked up at him. “I know you want to tour the country and catch up on the life you’ve missed. But there is always room for you in the Tower if you want it.”

He smiled at her, looking thoughtful.

“What?” she asked, growing self-conscious.

“You’re nothing like the press says, are you?” he said after a moment. “The persona they paint of you: spoiled socialite who parties too hard and sleeps around. It’s all made up by them isn’t it?”

She sighed, “Yes. Something you’ll do well to remember Captain, is that the Press’ number one goal is to sell papers. Stories about me being trashy make more money than the non-profit work we do in Africa to bring clean water and food to those without it. No one wants to read about that. They want to read about whoever they think I’m sleeping with or to make up another story about me spiralling out of control.”
“I was wrong about you,” he told her softly, “And I’m sorry. I let biases cloud my opinion of you and judged you before I even got to know you.”

“It’s okay,” she said lightly, “You already apologised for it, remember?”

He shook his head, “It’s not. But I would like to get to know you properly, without the threat of the end of the world looming over our shoulders.”

“Consider it a date, Captain,” she winked, causing him to blush.

She climbed into her sports car, with Bruce in the passenger seat, and Carter-Sousa’s in the back. She watched as Steve Rogers climbed onto his 40s style motorcycle and start his engine as she grinned back at him.

This was the beginning of a brand new journey, and she had a feeling it was going to be an interesting ride.
Rust

Chapter Summary

Toni isn't okay after New York

She dreamt of darkness whenever she closed her eyes. Of a million ships lined up and ready to attack Earth if the portal hadn’t closed.

Whenever she shut her eyes, she felt the same sense of fear and dread she had when she launched that missile into space, knowing fully well she probably wouldn’t return home.

Every time she started to drift off to sleep, she couldn’t help but feel the fear that something big was coming. Something they were all unprepared for. Because whoever sent Loki and the Chitauri would be back, and when they returned, she wasn’t all that convinced that they would come out on top.

She couldn’t sleep. Not really. Not when every time she tried, she was haunted about what could have happened, of the losses they could have suffered. And she never could forgive herself if Peter was injured in the attacks. Or if Pepper’s flight had been brought down by a ship. What if Rhodey had been shot out of the sky? Or Ava, sweet, innocent Ava, had been attacked when Loki’s men had attacked the Helicarrier? What if Harry had been hurt through all of it?

There was too much to lose. Too many people she cared about could have been hurt.

And she knew every time that she closed her eyes that when she took the missile into space she’d saved them all. But none of it would matter if whomever was behind it all returned to earth. Because then they would all be severely, woefully, underprepared.

So she did what she did best on those long nights where she couldn’t sleep.

She went to her lab, and she created, she built, and she made.

She designed suit after suit, ones for different combat situations. Suits that were better adapted for space. Suits that would function underwater. Suits with better weapons, bigger weapons. Suits that could take more of a beating. Suits made out of different combinations of materials that could be more durable. Suits that would discharge sooner so she wasn’t leaping out of a building without a suit, hoping it would reach her in time.

But it wasn’t nearly enough. Not really. Not when it would just protect her. No, she needed to think bigger. The entirety of Earth was at stake, and no matter how hard she tried, how hard she lobbied, she couldn’t convince the rest of the world that it wasn’t just a one off. That the aliens could come back. In their eyes the threat had been contained, and the Avengers had saved them. And that was enough.

Except it wasn’t. The name Avengers itself suggested they were a reactive team. They waited for a threat, then they reacted. But they needed to be proactive. They needed to plan contingencies for all the cases. They needed to be prepared for threats that could still come at any given moment without waiting for the damage and death counts to rise before actually doing anything about it. Otherwise they were going to lose this fight. They would always lose the fight.
She didn’t sleep a lot anymore.  

Not when there was too much that needed to be done. Too many lives at stake. And well, she never was the healthiest person when it came to caring about herself and her own needs. 

The Avengers had disassembled.  

They hadn’t heard anything from Thor since he’d left the planet all those months ago. And Barton and Romanoff were off doing their own secret SHIELD missions. Steve Rogers had decided he needed to find himself after viewing the educational materials she’d put together, and he was currently driving around America, trying to take in the culture and reintegrate into society after all this time.  

Not that she blamed him. The man had missed seventy years while in the ice. A lot had changed in America. A lot still needed to change. But they were better than they were in the 1900s. 

She knew he planned on settling down in Washington after, despite her offer of an open door. He wanted a chance to move out of the city that was so similar yet so different from the one he’d grown up in. And she couldn’t blame him, not really. Not when she saw the ghosts of the life she once lived everywhere she looked. She saw her mother’s soft smiles whenever she entered her childhood home. She saw Jarvis whenever she saw books in stores that he’d read to her growing up. She saw Peggy whenever she wore the red lipstick her Aunt had loved so much. And she saw Ana whenever she’d cook Piccata.  

So she understood the desire to run away from it all. She had, all those years ago, when she moved to Malibu. She couldn’t stand the sight of any of it as everywhere she looked it felt like their ghosts taunted her with everything she’d lost. 

The only one who stayed despite it all was Bruce. Bruce who’d set up shop in her lab, assisting her in building whatever insane invention she had dreamt of. Bruce who shot Ava worried looks whenever Toni came in with darker and darker bags under her eyes. And she may have the most expensive concealers on the market. But there was only so much one could do to cover up the depth of the bags.  

She knew the press speculated on it. The current theories were a mix between drugs, eating disorders, and the fact that she never got any sleep because she and the Hulk were currently in the middle of a torrid affair. 

She’d laughed at the last one. Because while Bruce Banner was certainly an attractive man whom maybe in another life she’d enjoy thoroughly, it was clear from a simple glance that the only woman he seemed to currently have eyes for was his cousin.  

Not that she thought Ava had any indication of his blossoming feelings. 

But if the jealousy over the article showed anything, it was that maybe his feelings weren’t all that unreciprocated.  

“Toni, did you hear anything I just said?” Pepper asked, breaking her out of her trance, as she saw Pepper staring down at her carefully. She was on the lower levels of Stark Tower, well Avengers Tower as she’d renamed it. But Stark Industries still held several offices and facilities in the building. Just because she’d opened up the higher levels to her newfound teammates didn’t mean the rest of the tower lost its’ purpose. 

“Something about us coming short on this quarter’s earnings?” she said, rubbing her temples slightly.
It was on days like this she wondered why she didn’t just pass over the CEO position to Pepper already and have it done with.

She was getting older, and she was tired. She couldn’t keep doing this lack of sleep thing, but really what were her choices? Nightmares plagued her every time she tried to close her eyes, and she didn’t know what else to do. She’d be able to rest properly when the planet was safe from all threats. Well, either that or her death. She could sleep when she was dead.

“Very short,” Pepper told her, giving her a strange look, “But it’s to be expected given New York is still recovering from the attack. The Military wants more weapons contracts, especially after they pulled theirs with Hammer Tech. They’re in talks with Viastone but they want to see if they can leverage that to get a deal with us.”

“Absolutely not,” she said firmly, shaking her head. “Stark Industries shut down its weapons department years ago. We will not be creating any new weapons for the military. Not now, not ever.”

“I told them that,” Pepper told her gently, “They just thought that after the attack on New York, you might have changed your position on the matter.”

She paused briefly, as Pepper’s words hit her.

Had she?

She was trying to protect the planet after all. And weapons would be one sure fire way of making sure they were ready for whatever it was that was going to come their way.

And she had been good at making weapons. Hell, she’d been the best. So if Earth was going to use any weapons to protect themselves against this future threat, then her weapons would be their best bet.

But even with that said, once she sold the weapons to the Military, she had no hand in what they were used for. She couldn’t control if they sent it off at an alien ship or at innocents in the Middle East who were caught in the cross fire. She couldn’t stop them from using her weapons then so what made her think she could help them now?

No, their best bet was still preventative measures. To launch a satellite into space which would give them ample notice of any threats. To build a giant shield around Earth to protect them. Not more nukes and missiles.

“No,” she said simply, “If they want to bargain with Tiberius Stone for contracts then that’s on them. But Stark Industries is done with that. We will keep our contracts with them for our defensive measures and nothing else.”

Pepper nodded, “Good, I’ll send them a formal response on our position on that matter.”

“Anything else?” Toni asked, looking at her with heavy eyes.

“Many more things,” Pepper said, “But none of them matter since you look like you’re dead on your feet. Toni, have you been sleeping?”

“No time,” Toni laughed wryly, “I have a company to run, new tech to churn out, and to be a superhero. I don’t have time for sleep.”

“There’s always time for sleep,” Pepper told her softly, “Toni, you’re going to kill yourself if you
keep running yourself ragged like this. You need to rest. You have Ava helping you with Research and Development, as well as Dr Banner, now that we’ve hired him as an official consultant for Stark Industries. And I can take on more of your responsibilities. God knows you already have so much on your plate. You shouldn’t be sacrificing your rest like this. It’s unhealthy.”

“And I always was the epitome of health,” she said sarcastically. “I’m fine Pep. I just really need to get some new designs into the pipeline then I’ll have some time to take a break. But until they’re out, there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“Toni,” Pepper said warningly. “You know this isn’t all on you right? You’re not the only one responsible for the safety of our planet. There are seven billion people on this world. You can share some of the burden of their protection with other people. Bring in the UN; this is what they’re there for. Talk to some of the other scientists. I’m sure they’d have some great ideas themselves. But you cannot do this alone. You need help Toni. Or you’re going to end up killing yourself.”

“I’ll be fine Pepper Pot,” she said fondly. “Besides, none of their plans ever hold a candle to anything that I can think up so it doesn’t really matter. I’ll get it done, and when I think we’re finally safe, I’ll take a break. I need to do this. Otherwise I don’t think I’ll ever be able to properly rest.”

“Resting never was your forte,” Pepper said with a sigh. “Toni, please. I’m not asking you to stop trying to protect everyone. I know that you never would be able to do something like that. I’m asking you to just take a break every once in a while. Just close your eyes for five minutes and take a step back. Your work will still be waiting there for you when you’re done.”

“I see them,” she told Pepper softly. “Every time I close my eyes, I see all those ships ready to attack us. I see my suit begin to crack from the coldness of space and begin to shut down. The fear I felt all those months ago comes back like I’m reliving the moment. And the only thing that helps is building something so it never will happen ever again.”

Pepper’s face grew concerned, “Toni, you aren’t alone in all of this. You have friends and family who love and care about you. You need help, professional help. You suffered a trauma, and now you need to be able to move past all of this. I can look up some therapists in the area, see if I can’t get you the help you need.”

“No!” she said quickly, as Pepper looked at her in surprise. “I don’t need help, I’m fine. Really Pepper. I just need to be able to get to work and try and move past all of this.”

“You’re not fine, Toni,” Pepper narrowed her eyes. “You’re anything but fine. But I can’t make you talk to someone. Just promise me that you’ll talk to somebody. It doesn’t need to be me. But James has a lot of Military experience. If anyone knows what you’re going through, it would be him. Or even Harry or Bruce. Just promise me you’ll talk to someone.”

She sighed as she saw Pepper staring at her.

She knew the conversation wouldn’t end, not until she at least pretended to give Pepper what she wanted. So she sighed and nodded. Pepper didn’t look convinced, but thankfully for her she let the subject drop.

“Now back to this quarter’s earnings,” Pepper said, bring back her COO voice as Toni listened to her friend, trying to push the panic out of her mind as she focused on Pepper’s voice instead.

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Toni sat in her office, trying to make sense of the quarterly reports that Pepper had left in her office.
She wasn’t worried about the drop in their stocks, given that most companies had suffered a hit after 
the New York attack. A lot of people had sold their stocks in the aftermath, terrified that the world 
was going to end and that they’d need all the money they could get. Grocery stores had been wiped 
out for weeks at a time, everyone trying to stock up on as many non-perishable items as they could 
get.

Only now was the world starting to relax and get back to normal.

Everyone was starting to move on.

Everyone but her.

She knew she needed to try. Knew that what she was doing wasn’t healthy. That she needed to open 
up to someone and not carry the weight of the world on her shoulders.

But she was a Stark. And Starks did not break, nor did they bend.

She would find a way to save the world, even if it meant losing herself in the process.

“Miss?” JARVIS called out for her. She looked up at her child to see what it was he was getting her 
attention for. “Mr Ben Parker is here to see you.”

She frowned, she didn’t think Peter was coming to visit today. Had she missed something?

“Did Peter and I have a session for today?” she asked, trying to pull up her calendar on her StarkPad.

“No Miss,” JARVIS said, “I believe Mr Parker wished to discuss some matters with you.”

“Oh?” she said in surprise, “Send him up J.”

She stood from her desk, as she waited for the elevator to bring Ben up to her level.

“Miss Stark,” Ben said, greeting her with a strained smile.

“I thought we established you calling me Toni,” she tutted lightly. “What brings you to my humble 
abode, Mr Parker?”

She gestured for him to take a seat across from her desk and he nodded as he moved to sit down in 
the chair.

“How have you been doing, Toni?” Ben asked her softly. “How have you really been doing?”

“I’m fine,” she said with a slight frown. It seemed like those words left her mouth often over the last 
few months, and she wondered if she said them often enough if they’d come true.

“You’re not fine,” he told her gently, “Toni you’re suffering from PTSD. Do you think I don’t know 
the signs? I’m a cop. I’ve seen my fair share of men and women suffering from it after stressful 
situations. Denying it won’t make it go away. You’re killing yourself slowly by running yourself into 
the ground.”

“I’m doing fine, Ben,” she affirmed. “I’m doing what I need to, to be able to move past this. Sitting 
around and talking about my feelings won’t change the fact that aliens attacked us. It won’t change 
the fact that at the end of the day we’re still vulnerable. And it won’t change the fact that whatever it 
was that came for us is till out there, and that they could return at any moment. We’re not prepared 
Ben. You saw what they did. We barely were able to stop them and that was just the scouting party! 
What if the rest of them made it through? Do you think we stand a chance against them? Because we
don’t. I might not agree with how SHIELD went about trying to deal with the situation, what with them making weapons out of the Tesseract, but they were right that we need to do something. We can’t just wait here until they come back. Otherwise we’re sitting ducks, burying our heads in the sand and hoping that whatever it is that attacked us won’t ever come back.”

“I’m not disagreeing with you, Toni,” Ben told her softly. “You’re right, what happened was terrible. And we don’t have a good way of dealing with it. But at the same time, what you are doing is not healthy. Both of those statements are equally true. You need to take a step back and re-evaluate things. Otherwise think of the example you are setting.”

She grew cold at that, as she looked up at Ben. Suddenly, the reason for his visit made more sense to her.

It wasn’t about her at all.

“Why are you here, Ben?” she said tiredly. And she was. She was tired of all the games, tired of all the whispers behind her back. She was tired of trying to constantly cover all bases, only for new unknown variables to be thrown at her. How was she able to ever calculate things efficiently on no sleep when everyone kept changing the equation?”

“What you’re doing isn’t healthy, Toni,” Ben told her softly, “You know that as well as I do. You can deny it all you want but you’re suffering from PTSD. May and I agreed to let Peter be mentored by you as long as it was in his best interests. And him seeing you like this isn’t. I don’t want my nephew to think it’s healthy to try and sweep away all his issues and pretend like everything is fine. I might not have any control over what it is that you do. But he deserves better. He deserves to know that it isn’t right for him to grow up thinking that it’s better to run from his problems than to face them head on. That it’s better to slowly kill himself and suffer in silence than accept help.”

“Meaning?” she asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Until you work through whatever it is you’re going to, I think it’s better if we put a pause on your mentorship with Peter,” Ben told her gently. “You need to work through your issues, and I have no doubt that you will be able to move past this, Toni. You’re one of the strongest people I know. But until then, I think it’s better if Peter didn’t have a front row seat to watching you kill yourself slowly.”

“I see,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I understand. I’m hardly the shining example of healthy behaviour. I’m just surprised you let me mentor your nephew for as long as you did. But I won’t hold it against you. You only want what’s best for him. And clearly I’m not what’s best for him.”

“That’s not what I’m saying, and you know it,” Ben told her firmly. “We’re very grateful for all that you’ve done for our family. Peter has never been happier than he has when he gets to build things with you. But it does not change the fact that what you are doing is not healthy. You need a break from everything. And hopefully when you make strides to recover, we can see about getting Peter to work with you once more.”

“I understand,” she said, putting on her best press smile, one she had patented all those years ago when she pretended, she wasn’t dying inside over all the barbs that the press threw her way.”

“I’ll see myself out,” Ben nodded at her, “Take care of yourself, Stark. The world would be worse off without you in it. I just wish you could see that.”

She waited til the man left the room, before she began to shake.
He wasn’t wrong, was he? She was a mess. And Peter was too pure and innocent. He didn’t deserve to watch her throw away everything while trying to make a difference. He didn’t deserve to watch her kill herself slowly while trying to make the world a better place. He didn’t deserve to watch the train wreck that was her life. No, it was for the best really, if he was away from all of it.

She wondered if she could go to Malibu for a few months. To throw herself fully into SI and pretending that everything wasn’t falling apart around her.

A sob escaped her as pain filled her chest. Why did it feel like she was losing everyone once again? Peter had left, the Avengers had run off to do their own thing as they left her to deal with the aftermath, Rhodey was off on a mission, and Pepper in California with Happy. The family she had built for herself was crumbling all around her and she never felt so alone as she did in that moment.

She was a Stark, and Starks were made of iron.

They didn’t break, nor did they bend.

But iron still could rust if it wasn’t pure enough. If it wasn’t strong enough.

And she didn’t know if she was strong enough.

“Miss,” JARVIS said softly, “I am here for you. DUM-E, U, and Butterfingers are here for you. We all love you and none of us would ever leave you. You are not alone. If only you knew just how much we all love and care about you.”

“Thanks Baby,” she said with a watery voice, as she looked up at one of his cameras. She couldn’t help but wonder if they would still love her if it hadn’t been her who brought them all to life.

“You are our mother, and we would do anything to protect you,” JARVIS said gently. “We will always be here for you, no matter what.”

She let another sob escape her, as JARVIS spoke soothing words to her.

“Perhaps I may place a call to Colonel Rhodes?” JARVIS asked her carefully, “Allow him to reassure you that none of us are leaving you. Even in his distance, he cares about you greatly.”

“Sure, J,” she said softly. What did she really have to lose anyways? He was already leaving her, but at least this way she could pretend that he was still in her life for a few more moments.

“Dialing Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS said, and she listened to the dial tone ring slightly, heart pounding more and more with each passing moment. She wondered what it was that he would say. What would he think of how she’d been trying to handle everything?

“Toni?” his voice came over the speakers in her office. “Is everything alright? I just got back from a mission, and still have a lot of paperwork to file after it all. Did something happen? Are you okay?”

She took a deep breath, trying to think about what she was going to say. She could lie of course. She could pretend that everything was fine. Like she wasn’t secretly dying on the inside. She could tell him that she’d made a mistake in calling him or that she simply wanted to hear his voice. All of which would work.

But instead she took a deep breath, “No,” she said, voice wavering. “I’m not fine, Rhody.”

There was silence on the other end, as she heard him shuffle around the room, “I’m packing up my things, Baby Girl. I’ll be there by morning. But until then, why don’t you tell me what’s wrong?”
A sob of relief escaped her, and she broke down, telling him everything that had been plaguing her mind for the last few months.
Chapter Summary

Toni just wants to be okay, but a certain new terrorist is making that hard to do

She wasn’t okay.

She knew she could admit at least that much now, without immediately throwing herself into a fit of denial and pretending she was doing okay.

Her breakdown in calling Rhody had sent her best friend straight back into her life, as Rhody spent the weekend with her, hiding away on her level of Stark Tower, ordering Chinese takeout from the place around the corner, as they watched bad nineties romcoms.

It didn’t make her fears go away, nor did it take away any of the trauma of what she had faced. But at the same time, she knew she had Rhody in her corner still. Even if it felt like everyone else was leaving her.

But like everyone else, he had to leave too.

She sighed to herself as she heard JARVIS count aloud to her, as the injection pierced her skin.

The move to Malibu was temporary. A little sabbatical to get her away from the city that had nearly fallen to pieces a year ago. Where every step outside was a reminder that she almost hadn’t been enough.

That if she wasn’t fast enough the entire city would have been decimated.

“Miss, please,” JARVIS said, as she picked the device back up. “May I request just a few hours to calibrate.”

“No,” she said, cutting him off.

She hadn’t been fast enough in the past. The suit took too long to assemble. Too long to get to her.

But that would not be a problem for much longer.

“Forty-eight,” she exhaled, as she injected herself again, before wincing. She picked up a stray napkin and wiped the blood away. “Micro-repeater implanting sequence complete.”

JARVIS sighed and she looked up at her AI.

“As you wish, Ma-am. I’ve also prepared a safety briefing for you to entirely ignore,” her son all but rolled his eyes at her.

“When have I ever followed the rules, J?” she grinned.

She looked up as DUM-E sadly swept the broom back and forth, with a ‘DUNCE’ cap on its head.

“DUM-E,” she said softly, “What are you doing round in the corner? You know what you did. You
got blood on my mat. Wipe it up, please.”

DUM-E looked like it was pouting at her, and she patted him on the arm slightly. “I still love you baby. But you cannot go around making a mess of my lab.”

“Miss, you’ve been up for seventy-two hours,” JARVIS chided her lightly as she stood in front of her suits.

She looked at one of J’s cameras, “Good evening, Darlings. I’m pleased to announce the arrival of your new, bouncing, bad-ass baby brother. Mark 42, autonomous prehensile propulsion suit test. Initialize sequence. JARVIS, play me some music.”

She raised her hands slightly, to dance, as the Christmas Carols played over her speakers. And once the melody began to play, she thrust her arms out, trying to beckon the suit to her.

She sighed when nothing happened.

“Crap,” she swore, slightly disappointed. She hit the implants in her, trying to activate it, as she placed her hand out once more.

And to her utter joy and surprise, the left-arm piece came over instantly. Followed by the left.

She giggled in pleasure.

“Alright, I think we got this. Send them all,” she all but squealed. If Ava had been here, she would have loved this.

The rest of the suit came over rather quickly, knocking her back in surprise as part after part attached themselves to her.

“Slow it down a bit, J,” She said, slightly out of breath, as she dodged a piece trying to hit her on the head. “Cool it, Baby.”

She stared back at her face plate, the last remaining part to attach itself to her.

“Come on,” she cooed her suit. “Come to Mommy.”

The faceplate flew onto her face, as her screen lit up in front of her. She let out a happy laugh, pleased that it had worked. Especially given her lack of sleep, she knew things could have gone very wrong, and it was what JARVIs had tried to warn her about. Not that she’d ever been all that good at listening to others about safety precautions. Especially pertaining to herself.

“I’m the best,” she beamed, as she stood in position, before a rogue piece of her suit came from behind her and knocked her to the ground.

“As always, Miss, a great pleasure watching you work,” JARVIS said, sounding very unimpressed with her.

“Hush you,” she said without any heat, as she stood back up again. “This was nothing but a setback really.”

She winced, limping to the couch as she had J turn the tv on.

And boy did she regret that.

Because that’s when he happened.
She watched in horror as the man on the screen had a series of people executed, before footage after footage of destruction played for her.

“Some people call me a terrorist, I consider myself a teacher,” the American sounding man said. “America, ready for another lesson. In 1864 in Sand Creek Colorado the U.S. military waited till the friendly Cheyenne braves all gone hunting, waited to attack and slaughter their families left behind, and claim their land. Thirty-nine hours ago, the Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait was attacked. I did that. A quaint military church filled with wives and children, of course. The soldiers were out on maneuver, the braves were away. President Ellis you continue to resist my attempts to educate you, sir. And now, you've missed me again. You know who I am, you don't know where I am, and you'll never see me coming.”

She struggled to calm her breathing, furious at the murder and death on the screen, wanting to stand up immediately, grab her suit and charge after the man in the video. The man who callously took credit for murdering a village of women and children, just because they could.

But she didn’t even know his name. Not his real one anyways.

Nor did she know where he was, or what he wanted.

But she knew who would.

“JARVIS, begin facial recognition on the man,” she told her AI. “I want him found immediately. I don’t care what I’m doing when you get the results. But you bring this to me as soon as you can.”

“Yes Miss,” J said, and she grabbed her suit.

She had a Rhodey to go find.

“It tested well with the focus groups okay?” Rhodey said, trying to defend the horrible paint job the military had given her suit.

“I am Iron Patriot,” she said, rolling her eyes at her friend, as she sat back and ate a fry.

“War Machine was too aggressive apparently,” Rhodey told her gently. “This sends a better message.”

“So what’s really going on?” she said, bringing up what she had brought him here to talk about.

“With Mandarin.

“It’s classified, Toni,” Rhodey chided her lightly. She gave him an innocent look and she sighed. “There have been nine bombings.”

“Nine,” she repeated, sounding shocked.

“The public only knows about three. Here’s the thing, nobody can ID a device. There’s no bomb casings.”

“You know I can help,” she told him. “No one knows bombs better than I do. I got a lot of new tech, a prehensile. A new bomb disposal that catches explosions mid-air.”

After New York she wanted to be prepared for anything and everything.
“When was the last time you got a good night’s sleep?” he raised a brow at her. “Don’t give me that look. It’s barely been a month since you had a break down and called me. And you don’t look much better off, Toni. You know you can talk to me right? Even when I’m away? You can always just call me to talk.”

“Einstein slept only three hours a year,” she said, stealing one of his fries. “Look what he did.”

“You’re not Einstein,” he told her softly. “No one wants you to run yourself ragged just so you can bring new innovations to the world. You already do so much, Baby Girl. People who love you are concerned. I’m concerned. Ava and Harry are concerned. Pepper and Happy are concerned. I know you’ve convinced yourself that everyone’s left you. But your family is still right here, and always will be here. Even if we’re not with you in person.”

“You’re gonna come at me like that?” she asked, throat closing slightly, not knowing what to say.

“We’re here for you, sweetheart,” he said, taking her hand in his. “Even if you’re a pain in my… side”

He caught himself as two kids approached the table and she snickered at him.

“Do you mind signing my drawing?” she asked, and Toni grinned as she looked down at the girl’s iron man picture.

“Wow, you did a good job,” she said, looking to the girl for her name.

“Erin,” she supplied shyly, and Toni signed the picture carefully.

“Toni, the Pentagon is scared,” Rhodey said to her in a low voice. “After what happened in New York... aliens, come on. They need to look strong. Stopping the Mandarin is priority, but it’s not—”

“It’s not superhero business,” she said with a simple shrug. “I got it.”

“It’s not,” he shook his head, “It’s American business.”

“That’s why I said I got it,” she said, before freezing as the crayon broke in her hands.

“Are you okay?” Rhodey asked her, as their words began to grow distant. “Take it easy.”

“How did you get out of the wormhole?” the boy asked her, looking curious, but in that moment, all she felt was panic.

“I’m sorry, I need to go,” she said, standing as she ran out of the restaurant.

“Toni,” Rhodey called out for her, as she ran towards her suit. “Toni, wait.”

She stepped into her suit, as she struggled to breath.

Was this what a heart attack felt like?

“Check the heart,” she demanded. “Is it my brain?”

“No sign of cardiac anomaly or unusual brain activity,” JARVIS told her softly. “Miss, I believe you are suffering from a severe anxiety.”

She looked at the body scan JARVIS pulled up of her and sighed.
Of course she was.

Einstein, now everyone was going to think she was crazy.

“Baby Girl,” Rhodey said softly, despite everyone looking at them, “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know,” she gasped out.

“How about you and I go somewhere private?” he asked her gently. “We’ll talk about it, okay? Let’s get away from all these people and go somewhere; just the two of us.”

“Okay,” she said, as she stood up carefully. “Okay.”

“Mind giving me a ride?” he asked her, not wanting to encroach on her space. She nodded and he wrapped his arms around her waist as she shot straight upwards, flying them back to her house.

The ride back was quiet and quick, with Rhodey not wanting to yell over the sound of their flying and her not wanting to speak. Honestly, if it weren’t for JARVIS doing half the piloting, she wasn’t even sure she’d be able to fly right now.

When she landed, Rhodey stepped out of her arms, and the suit disengaged from her body.

“Are you okay?” Rhodey asked her gently, cupping her face.

“I don’t know why I panicked like that,” she sniffled lightly. “It was like I was back in outer space, and I couldn’t breathe again. It was so cold up there Rhodey. So alone and afraid. And when the crayon broke, I just snapped. I felt like I was still up there, and like I was going to die.”

“You have PTSD, Toni,” Rhodey said, as he led her to her sofa. She sat down, and he wrapped a blanket around her. He took her hands in his and she looked at him.

“Why does everyone keep saying that?” she scoffed. “I’m a superhero. Superheroes can’t get PTSD. That’s not how it works.”

“Because the things you do aren’t remotely stressful at all,” Rhodey deadpanned. “Toni, soldiers get PTSD all the time. Cops get PTSD. Firefighters get it, and doctors can get it. What’s to say that Iron Woman can’t also get PTSD?”

“Because I’m supposed to be stronger than that,” she said looking down. “I’m supposed to be able to get through things like that. I’m a Stark.”

“But you’re also human,” he told her. “And there’s nothing wrong with that, Darling. You’re not alone. You have so many people in your life who love you, and we’ll get through this together. You and I, Toni.”

“You and I,” she repeated, trying to calm her breathing.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he told her, as she leaned against him. “I, can you cue up She’s All That?”

“Right away, Colonel,” JARVIS said. He wrapped an arm around her, and she let out a content sigh.

As the movie played out on the screen in front of her, she felt her eyes slowly close.

And for the first time in months, she felt safe enough to sleep.
Happy’s call woke her up a few hours later. She was still resting against Rhodey, so she carefully extracted herself from his arms as she moved into the workshop to take the call.

“Happy?” she said, as she nearly laughed while seeing Happy’s forehead. “Lower the tablet slightly so I can see your face. What’s wrong?”

He sighed at the other end, “I take this job very seriously, Toni, you know that. Just because you went and got yourself a fancy suit and don’t need me anymore.”

“I’ll always need you,” she told him firmly, “You’re family, Happy. But I do understand why you wanted a change of scenery. Tell me you’re not calling about that. We’ve discussed this, if you think Stark Industries is where you can make the biggest impact, then I’m more than happy to support you.”

“I know, Toni,” he told her gently. “I think something is wrong here. It’s about Pepper. Alright, so she’s meeting up with this scientist. Rich guy, handsome. I couldn’t make his face at first, right? You know I’m good with faces.”

“Of course,” she said immediately, as she paced around her workshop, “You’re the best.”

“Yeah. Well, so I run his credentials, I make him Aldrich Killian. We actually met the guy back in, where were we in ’99? The science conference?”

“Bern?” she asked, seeming a bit confused what that had to do with anything. It wasn’t a night she’d particularly remembered very well, once of those boring conferences where she’d had too many to drink to numb the fact that everyone was looking like her like they didn’t quite believe she belonged.

Even though she’d been proving them wrong for decades.

“Right, right, exactly,” Happy said quickly.

“Killian? No, I don’t remember that guy,” she shook her head.

“Of course you don't. He's not a big bottle of whiskey. At first it was fine, they were talking business, but now it's like getting weird. He's showing her his big brain,” Happy said, sounding weirded out.

She nearly laughed, “I’m sorry, what?”

“Big brain, and she likes it. Here, let me show you. Hold on. See?” He said, holding the StarkPad up, only for her to continue to see his face.

“Hap, we talked about this,” she said gently, “You need to flip the screen for me to be able to see what’s on the other side.”

“I'm not a tech genius like you. Just, just trust me, get down here,” Happy said frantically.

“Happy, breathe,” she said in a calm voice, “Click the little icon that looks like a camera with two arrows in a circle. It’ll flip it around so I can see what you’re seeing.”

“I don’t see it,” Happy said, bring it closer to his face. “Oh I found it!”

He turned it around then, and she looked on in amazement as the brain filled her screen.
"Oh wow," she breathed out.

"Now you see why I’m so worried!" Happy said quickly, "I don't trust this guy. He's got another guy with him, he's shifty."

"Relax, Happy," she said, trying to calm him down as she pulled up a bio for Aldrich Killian.

"Seriously, Toni?" he asked, incredulously.

"I'm just asking you to secure the perimeter. Tell him to go out for a drink or something?" Toni said, trying to calm Happy down.

"You know what? You should take more of an interest in what's going on here. This woman, your COO, is one of the best things to have ever happened to this company. Why isn’t he bringing this to you, and why to her? I don’t trust this at all."

"People have to go through several levels to get a meeting with me, Happy, you know that," Toni told him carefully. "Pepper vets these things first to see if it’s something work Stark Industries time. You need to as well."

"I do trust her!" Happy said defensively, "She’s the best thing ever to happen to this company."

"She is," Toni said with a nod, "So a giant brain."

"Yeah, there's a giant brain, there's a shifty character. I'm gonna follow this guy. I'm gonna run his plates and if it gets rough, so be it," Happy said, sounding antsy.

"I miss you," she said with a slight laugh. "I'll come in if you think I should. It still is my company and if you, my Head of Security, think I need to come in and see what’s happening, then I will."

"Yeah, I miss you too. But the way it used to be. Now you're off with the super friends, I don't know what's going on with you anymore. The world's getting weird, Toni."

"I know," she said softly, "I haven’t been around as much as I should be. And I’m sorry you and Pepper have had to pick up as much of the slack as you’ve been doing for me. So do you want me to come in?"

"No," Happy breathed out slightly. "I got this handled. I just wanted you to be appraised of the situation."

"Thanks, Hap," she said softly, "I trust you."

Happy nodded and hung up the call then, and she let out a sigh. She really was letting down everyone in her life wasn’t she?

"Toni?" Rhodey said, as he entered her lab. "I ordered us a pizza. You should come up and eat something before you try and do anything else today."

She laughed slightly to herself.

"I'll be right up," she said, dropping the tablet, as she moved to make her way up the stairs. And all thoughts of Aldrich Killian left her mind.
The space around her was growing cold as she saw the hole beneath her close. She shivered as her mask began to crack, and suddenly she was falling.

Down.

Down.

Down.

Please.

She just wanted someone to catch her.

She was going to die.

“Toni!” she heard a voice scream, and she woke up to see Pepper trying to shake her awake, before she saw her suit try and pull her away.

“Stop!” she shouted at her suit, “Power down.”

Pepper looked startled, as she turned to her, “What was that? Why was your suit coming to you like that?”

“I calibrated it,” she whispered, “So that it would always catch me, even when I was falling.”

“Oh Toni,” Pepper said gently, climbing into the bed with her. She leaned against her friend.

She knew Rhodey had to step out for a few days and that he’d asked Pepper to spend time with her.

She knew her family was worried that she was rattling away in her house, and even if she said she was fine, they refused to believe her.

“I’m okay,” Toni said softly.

“No, you’re not,” Pepper told her gently. “And that’s okay. You don’t need to always be okay, Toni.”

“I’m a hot mess,” she gave a watery laughed. “Nothing’s been the same since New York. You experience things and then they’re over and you still can’t explain ‘em. Gods, aliens, other dimensions. I...I’m just a girl in a can. I don’t know if I’m enough.”

“You are Toni Stark,” Pepper said, “You are the strongest woman I know. You were CEO of your company at twenty-one. You’ve revolutionized the world of modern technology. You took your father’s weapons company and turned us into a multi-billion-dollar global company. You are by far the smartest, bravest, and kindest person I know. And you most certainly are enough.”

“I’m scared, Pepper,” Toni whispered. “I’m scared that something out there is coming. And I’m scared that when it does come, that nothing I do will be enough to save us all from it.”

“Let it,” Pepper said calmly. “Because when it does, I’ll be right here beside you. And whatever happens, I know you would have given it your best shot. I don’t trust a single person more in this world to do everything in their power to try and save us. So if we fall, then we fall together. But don’t think for even a single second that it would have been your fault.”
Toni tried to steady her breathing, as Pepper stroked her hair gently, “Sleep Toni. I’ll be here to keep you safe. And if the nightmares get too bad, then we’ll have JARVIS play movies for us all night long. But either way, I’m not going anywhere.”

She closed her eyes again, as she listened to the sounds of Pepper’s breathing, and closed her eyes. She was still so shaken from everything that had happened, but she knew that she was safe, and that at least for now, nothing could hurt her.

The call came in later that night, and Pepper drove her to the hospital, given her own shaky state.

She was furious. She should have listened more to what Rhodey had been saying about the Mandarin. Should have pushed for more information and gotten him to tell her everything he knew, even if he didn’t think she needed to know.

Because now she was sitting in the hospital room watching a video of the Mandarin take credit for the attack that left Happy in the hospital, attached to so many wires and cables.

Pepper had left her alone for a moment, going to grab them both a cup of coffee, and she was grateful for the few moments of silence.

“Mind leaving that on?” she asked the nurse, startling her as she went to turn off the TV. She stood then, as the nurse looked at her confused.

“Sunday night's PBS 'Downtown Abbey'. That's his show, he thinks it's elegant,” she paused, trying to calm herself.

The nurse gave her a sympathetic smile and she kept speaking, “One more thing, make sure everyone wears their badges. He's a stickler for that sort of thing, plus my guys won't let anyone in without them.”

She turned then to leave the hospital room, wanting to go call Rhodey. If anyone knew what was happening, it would be him.

She stepped out of the hospital, sunglasses down, as the reporters crowded her space, and she felt anger fuming through her.

The world wanted to hear what she thought, and all she wanted was privacy. She wanted Happy to be home and safe. She wanted the Mandarin never to have shown his face in the first place, because he was going to regret it.

She wanted justice.

“Ms Stark!” A reporter yelled out, “Ms Stark. Our sources are telling us that this is another Mandarin attack. Anything else you can tell us?”

“No comment,” she said firmly as she moved towards her car.

“Hey, Ms Stark,” a tabloid reporter holding a phone up to her face asked. “When is somebody gonna kill this guy? Just sayin'.$

Is that what they thought of her?

Murderer?
Turns out being a superhero wasn’t enough to wipe off all the blood from her ledger.

“Is that what you want?” she asked, growing angry. “Here’s a little holiday greeting I’ve been waiting to send to the Mandarin. I just didn't know how to phrase it until now. My name is Toni Stark and I'm not afraid of you. I know you're a coward, so I've decided that you just died, pal. I'm gonna come get the body. You hurt someone very important to me, and now you’ve made this personal. Did you think I don’t know why you attacked that theatre? There's no politics here; it's just good old-fashioned revenge. There's no Pentagon; it's just you and me. And on the off-chance you're a man, here's my home address: 10880, Malibu Port, 90265. I'll leave the door unlocked.”

She turned back to the reporter, giving him one of her most deadly glares. “That’s what you wanted right? To hear me say I’m going to have him killed? Well you got it.”

She grabbed his phone and dropped it to the ground, crushing it one of her heels, as she sat down in her car and drove away.

She had a terrorist to catch.
Connected

Chapter Summary

Toni is attacked, makes a new friend, and takes on some enhanced soldiers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She knew as soon as she had driven off that she made the wrong decision.

She had been angry, so angry, that Happy had been put in the hospital. Her family had been hurt by this man who thought for some reason that he deserved to rain down the horrors he was bringing on the world.

And why? Because he thought he was better than them. Because he wanted to hurt America, the country that she had grown up and loved. And he had hurt her family in order to prove his point.

She knew that logically homicide was not the correct answer. It never worked out well to get revenge on someone by killing them.

But that wasn’t to say that she hadn’t been responsible either for the deaths of others while trying to defend herself.

Obadiah had tried to kill her, and she had given Pepper to light up the arc reactor core, which had killed him.

And well Vanko had blown himself up while trying to kill her. And maybe if she was faster, she could have stopped it. Maybe if she had gotten ahead of it, she could have made sure none of those bombs went off.

But that was different. She hadn’t killed anyone outright.

It was another thing if Iron Woman just started killing people.

If the government hadn’t been trying to take her suit before, she knew that they most certainly would try once she started going after American threats.

There would only be so much that Rhodey would be able to do if the government came knocking down on her door then. And they would have more than enough cause and public support to be able to do this.

She had to be smart with how she handled this. She had to think with her brain and not her heart, no matter how much it hurt to see Happy lying in the hospital, unconscious and injured. Because of her. Because he thought Pepper was in danger from some threat to the company and wanted to take matters into his own hands.

But despite that, she had openly challenged a terrorist on national television, and given out her own personal address.
It wasn’t like people didn’t already have a decent idea where she lived. She’d thrown many parties over the years and have several flings spend the night. Yet they had all had to face the wrath of Pepper Potts if they as much as thought about breathing a word about where it was that she lived.

And now Toni Stark had just gone and outed her home live on the news.

There would only be so much Pepper would be able to do to minimize the damage of such a thing, and she already felt a headache just thinking about having to deal with all of it.

Copernicus, she’d really made a mess out of everything, hadn’t she?

“Miss, might I advise you to enter through the back entrance?” JARVIS said, coming over her car speakers. “The press have begun to gather at your home.”

Of course they had.

She sighed to herself, knowing really, she had no one but herself to blame over all of this.

She wondered briefly who would be the first to yell at her over her rash decisions. Would it be Pepper, mad at the shitstorm she’d stirred up?

Or Rhodey, angry at the fact that he’d have to leave his post because she’d told a terrorist she was coming for him and now he was worried about her safety?

Surprisingly, when she answered the first call without looking at the caller ID, it was neither of them.

“Patch them through, J,” she sighed, as JARVIS connected the call.

“What the hell were you thinking, Toni?” Bruce’s voice demanded over the phone. “Do you have any idea what you’ve done? You can’t just challenge terrorists! What do you think is going to happen, Toni? That you’ll just put on the suit and everything’ll be fine? What happens when they send several explosions to your home? You’re fast, but even you aren’t fast enough to deal with that. For the smartest person I know, you sure are an idiot at times.”

“Aww Brucie-Bear,” she cooed, trying to keep the emotional rush she was feeling out of her voice, “Don’t tell me you’re worried about little old me.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Toni,” He snapped at her, “Of course I’m worried about you. And you just put yourself in danger. Why wouldn’t I be worried about you?”

She was quiet for a moment, and Bruce sighed.

“Toni, I know things have been rough for you since the invasion, and I’ve tried to give you privacy about it. I figured you’d talk to me if you wanted to. But just because I haven’t said anything doesn’t mean I don’t care, okay? You were one of the first people after the accident who didn’t treat me like I’m some sort of monster that you need to constantly watch yourself around me. You mean a lot to me and the Big Guy, and I don’t want you to think otherwise, okay?”

She swallowed and nodded.

“I know, Bruce,” she said softly, and he dropped something on his end, swearing quietly.

“Look, Toni,” Bruce said, clangs coming through the phone as he picked up whatever it was, he dropped, “Ava and I are coming okay? Neither of us want to leave you alone, especially given that you’ve put yourself in immediate danger. And Ava quote on quote said to me, ‘if that idiot cousin of
mine thinks she’s going to do any of this without her girl in the chair, then she has another thing coming.’ Ava’s arranging for the quinjet to bring us to Malibu okay? We should be there in a few hours. Just don’t do anything stupid until then, okay?”

She grinned at the mention of her cousin, knowing fully well that it was something she would say. “Tell Ava not to worry. I can handle myself for a few hours until you get here.”

“Good,” Bruce told her firmly. “See you soon, Toni.”

When she got into her lab, after dodging the press and going through several more angry phone calls from Harry, Pepper, and Rhodey, she immediately got down to work.

There wasn’t really time to spare, not really. Not when she’d just put a time bomb on her own home and painted a target on her back.


She threw up the data, walking around it as she took it all in.

“Okay, so let’s see what we’ve got. He’s not Chinese, yet his name comes from ancient Chinese war mantle, meaning "adviser to the King". He has South American insurgency tactics, but he talks like a Baptist preacher. Almost as if there’s more than one person behind the man. And I’m not talking about a façade. There's lots of pageantry going on here, lots of theater.”

And if anyone knew a thing about putting on a show, it was her.

“The heat from the blast was in excess of 3000 degrees Celsius. Any subjects within 12.5 yards were vaporized instantly,” JARVIS told her as she shut down the data and pulled up a rendering of the blast.

She paused at that, remembering something Rhodey had told her, “No bomb parts found in a three-mile radius of the Chinese theater.”

“No, Ma-am,” JARVIS confirmed.

“Talk to me, Happy,” she said, as she watched Happy’s fallen body rendered in front of her. She ignored the pang in her chest as she took a closer look at her friend pointing at some dog tags on the ground.

“When is a bomb not a bomb? She mused to herself. “Any military victims?”

“Not according to public records, Miss,” JARVIS told her, and she looked puzzled.

“Bring up the thermogenic signatures again, factor in three thousand degrees,” Toni said, climbing onto a shelf.

“The oracle cloud has completed analysis. Accessing satellites and plotting the last twelve months of thermogenic occurrence now,” JARVIS responded.

“Take away everywhere that there's been a Mandarin attack,” She looked at the information, swiping away the ones that weren’t accurate. “Nope. Nope. Wait, that!” she said, looking at the report for Rose Hill, Tennessee, with the high temperature signature. “That. You sure that’s not one of his?”
“It predates any known Mandarin attack. The incident was the use of a bomb to assist a suicide,” she was informed.

“Bring it around,” she said, as the report circled closer to her.

“The heat signature is remarkably similar. Three thousand degrees Celsius.”

“That’s two military guys. Ever been to Tennessee, Jarvis?” She asked, as her baby knew what to do.

“Creating a flight plan for Tennessee,” J confirmed as she wiped the data aside, ready to go.

Except the doorbell rang.

At that very moment.

“I thought we were on total security lock down,” Toni said, looking towards the roof. “Who is that?”

“There is only so much I can do when you give the world's press your home address.

She ran up the steps, suit on her body as she took a look at the young girl on her front steps.

“Right there’s fine,” she said simply, “You don’t look like the Mandarin.”

“You don’t remember me, do you?” the woman said, with that same look of disappointment that most men and women had when Toni couldn’t remember their names. “Why am I not surprised?”

“The nineties were a rough time,” she said with a simple shrug. “Besides, I can barely remember what I even had for breakfast.”

“Gluten-free waffles,” J supplied to her helpfully and she would have laughed if she weren’t a bit stressed.

“Yeah, that,” she said, as she lifted her face plate carefully.

“Okay, look, I need to be alone with you. Someplace not here, it's urgent,” the woman said and Toni nearly laughed at her.

“I don’t know if you got the memo but I’m on lock down. I’m not going anywhere. None of us are,” Toni said, and at that moment, she saw several bags drop in front of her. “Or I thought none of us were.”

“Toni?” Pepper called as Toni took the suit off, and Pepper came down the stairs. “Is someone there?”

“Yeah, Maya Hansen,” Toni said and at the surprised look on the woman’s face she nearly shrugged. “I do remember some things about that night, contrary to popular belief. And for the rest, I’ve taken a look at the footage. Seems like I keep running into people I met then.”

She turned to Pepper, “Old botanist pal that I used to know, barely,” she turned back to the girl, “Please don’t tell me there’s a twelve-year-old in your car.”

It shouldn’t be possible, but the woman was into genetics, so who knew what she could have cooked up.

“No,” Hansen shook her head with a smile, “I need your help.”
“Me?” Toni furrowed her brows, “Why? And why now?”

“Because I don’t think you’ll last the week,” she said bluntly, “I read about your challenge to the Mandarin.

“I’ll be fine,” she shrugged simply.

Pepper looked over at the two of them, eyeing up Hansen carefully, “I'm sorry. With Happy in the hospital, I didn't know we were expecting guests.”

“We aren’t,” Toni said, looking at the woman carefully.

“Especially old girlfriends,” Pepper said, glancing back at Toni.

“She's not really,” Toni said with a simple shrug. “Just one night.”

“Of course,” Pepper said, with a bit of edge. “Now you and I are going out of town.”

“What?” Toni asked, a bit surprised.

“You heard me,” Pepper narrowed her eyes, “I’ve already arranged with Harry to go to a safe house for a few weeks.”

“We can’t,” Toni protested.

“We are,” Pepper gave her a glare, “Jim, Ava, Harry, and I are all in agreement. You don’t get a say in this.”

“Great idea. Let's go,” Hansen agreed.

“You are not coming with us,” Pepper told her firmly, “We don’t even know you.”

“I’m not leaving!” Toni argued, “I am going to stay here until I find out who this threat is, and you can’t make me leave.”

“Toni-”

Pepper said, as Hansen interrupted them. “Guys!”

She pointed at the footage of her tv streamed on television as a bomb came straight towards the house.

The impact felt slow, as she felt herself falling backwards. She jerked her arms, trying to wrap Pepper in the suit. She’d be damned if she let another person get hurt because of her. She looked over at Hansen, unconscious on the ground, as the ceiling began to crack on top of her.

She felt a wave of fury fill her. This was the house she’d built for herself when her family had died. The one she’d built her new family in.

And now some terrorist was going to take it away from her.

The ceiling began to fall on top of her, and she watched in amazement as Pepper blocked it.

Damn her friend was a badass in that suit.

She stood as more missiles impacted the house, dividing up her path to escape.
“I’ll find a way around,” she told Pepper when her friend looked at her terrified. “Get her and get out. Don’t worry about me.”

She watched as Pepper exited the building, as her home crumbled around her. The house began to tilt,

and she fell backwards.

“Miss Pott’s is clear of the structure,” J told her, and she nodded, as she summoned her suit back to her. It flitted around her body quickly, and if it weren’t for the stress of the current situation, she would have been more pleased.

“JARVIS, where’s my flight power?” she asked JARVIS hurriedly, as the suit struggled to come to life.

“Working on it, Miss,” J told her. “This is just a prototype after all.”

She lifted the piano and threw it at a helicopter, “That's one,” she said, to herself.

Ma-am, the suit is not combat-ready,” JARVIS warned her. She dodged the bullets coming down at her, as she adjusted her suit and shot a repulse out of it. “That’s two.”

The helicopter exploded, crashing into the house and she swore to herself.

She fell backwards, as she felt her house begin to collapse. Who’s idea had it been to build a house overlooking a cliff?

Hers, probably.

She saw DUM-E struggle to pick up a part of U that had broken off and she felt her heart ache over her bots. Would they be okay? Would they survive? Would she?

She watched as her suits were destroyed in front of her eyes, anger filling her chest.

They would not take everything from her. Not again.

She felt herself falling, the water surrounding her. She tried to make her way back to the surface, but she couldn’t, the suit was weighing her down.

Perhaps this was how she’d die.

Drowned due to her own arrogance.

“Miss, take a deep breath,” JARVIS told her, as her suit disengaged at the arm to pull her upwards. He must have taken over control over the suit, because while her mask filled with water, her repulsors lit up, and she propelled out of the water.

Steve Rogers just wanted to take a road trip in peace. But he supposed really, he was asking for too much.

He knew it would have been. Really, he was lucky he was able to make it to most of the cities on his bucket list without being to widely recognized, shy of having to sign a few autographs and pose for some pictures. He was lucky really, as most people looked at him, did a double take, then simply
thought they were imagining things.

Maybe it was easier slipping under the radar when less people expected to see him.

Perhaps it was why it had been harder for Stark, because people always expected to see her. Her very presence was enough to draw every eye in the room. If there was one thing he’d learned during his travels about her, it was that the people wanted a story even if there was none to give.

And with the creation of the Avengers, stories speculating her love life only grew, and he knew that none of them were true.

Well maybe the one about her and Bruce. The two of them had been close, and he wondered if maybe there was some truth to that rumour.

But none of that mattered. Not when he’d got the news about the attack on Toni’s home.

It was why he’d made his way directly to SHIELD headquarters. Needing to know what he could do to help.

“What’s the status on the debris?” Fury demanded, as he watched agents running around the control room. “Has anyone found a body yet? Do we have a confirmation on the source of the attack?”

“Fury,” Steve nodded at the man and Fury nodded back at him.

“Just in time, Rogers,” Fury said, gesturing at Harry Carter-Sousa. “Get caught up and get to work.”

He turned towards the agent he’d worked with during the battle and had kept in contact with after it had ended. The two of them had a strange relationship, to say the least, and he didn’t think anything would make it less strange. But they were becoming friends, or at least he hoped so.

“Do we know what happened?” he asked the man as he looked at the footage playing on the screen.

“Toni’s house was attacked at 1800 hours,” Harry nodded at him. “Pepper Potts and a Maya Hansen were also on the site but made it out. There’s no new on Toni yet. She’s not among the debris fished out of the water as of yet, and she wasn’t in any of the rubble on the land. As of now, she’s been declared MIA.”

“Why did she have to threaten him” Steve sighed, running a hand through his hair. “She should have stayed out of it. She’s a civilian.”

“She’s never been one for sitting it out,” Harry said, in a rough voice. “We’ll find her, Captain. One way or another. And if anyone’s hurt her, then they’ll damn well pay for it.”

He nodded at the man, a mutual understanding passing over them both.

He wasn’t sure when he’d become protective over her and wasn’t even sure he’d had a right to be. But he’d be damned if he sat on the sidelines, without knowing what happened to her.

Asdf

The loud alarm woke her up immediately and she groaned. She hadn’t felt this hungover in years, really.

“Miss,” JARVIS tried to get her attention, “Miss!”

“I got it, J,” she groaned, “Kill the alarm.”
“That's the emergency alert triggered by the power dropping below five percent,” JARVIS told her. She looked around her surroundings, noting the snow and forest around her. Well, she wasn’t in Malibu anymore, that was for sure. She crashed to the ground, screaming, as she stared up at the sky above her.

“It's snowing, right? Where are we, upstate?” She questioned

“We're five miles outside of Rose Hills, Tennessee,” JARVIS informed her, and she nearly jumped in shock.

“I’m sorry, what now? What are we doing here? This is thousands of miles away, I gotta get Pepper, I gotta-” she stumbled off. Was Pepper even okay?

“I prepared a flight plan. This was the location,” J told her, sounding off.

“Who asked you?” she demanded, “Open the suit, Baby boy.”

“I, I think I may be malfunctioning, Mother,” her bot said, sounding scared.

“It’s going to be okay, Baby,” she said softly, “We’ll figure this out. Open eject.”

The suit slid off around her, and she shivered to herself, “I forgot how much I hated winter. I think I might just get back in for a bit.”

“I actually think I need to sleep now, Mother,” JARVIS said, before powering down.

“J? JARVIS?” She called out for him, “Don’t leave me, Baby.”

But it was no use, her suit wasn’t coming back to life.

She stood then, knowing she needed to get to warmth, or she’d die out here, in the dark cold expanse, alone.

Not today.

She pulled her suit behind her, as she trekked towards the town, before she came to a gas station.

There was a statue of a Native outside and she looked at him sadly.

“You people have been so wronged by mine, and I promise, I’ll try and make amends. But for now, I really need to borrow your poncho. I’m sorry,” she told it softly, as she placed it around her arms for warmth.

She walked to the phonebooth, dialing in a secure line that very few people had access to. She waited for it to ring, “Stark Secure Server: Now transferring to all known receivers.”

She took a deep breath, “Pep, it’s me,” she said softly, “I’m alive. And I’m sorry. I’m sorry I put you in harm’s way. Sorry I told the press about where I lived, and I know I’ve made life for you and Rhodey hard lately. And I’m sorry you’ve had to put up with me. Tell Uncle Daniel I’m sorry and that I’ll try and make it for Christmas. Tell Ava and Harry that I love them. And tell Rhodey he means the world to me. I can’t come home, not yet. I need you to stay safe, and you won’t be if I’m there. I’ll get him though, and I’ll come home soon. I promise.”

She moved through the city, as she found a farm on the outskirts. The lights were off, and she prayed whoever lived there wouldn’t throw her out on her feet when they found her in their home.
She sat her suit down, as she moved to the table in the garage. Her micro-repeater implants had been damaged and she tried to fix them when she heard a young boy’s voice.

“Freeze!” he demanded. “Don’t move.”

She nearly smiled at the site of the boy pointing a toy gun at her.

“Nice gun,” she said, raising her arms, “Barrel’s a little long, and the gauge too wide. It’ll diminish your FPS.”

He aimed the gun behind her and shot it, breaking the glass, as the rest of the ammunition fell out of his gun, just like she knew would happen.

“And now you have no ammo,” she told him quietly. “I’m not here to harm you, I promise. I just need a place to spend the night.”

He looked at her chest, as the arc reactor lit up the room.

“What’s that thing on your chest?” he asked her without lowering the empty gun.

“An electromagnet. You should know, you've got a box of them right here,” she said, gesturing to his desk.

“What does it power?” he asked her curiously.

She grinned at him, standing, as the suit sat on the ground behind her.

“Is that Iron Woman?” he asked, eyes widening.

“I mean, I am Iron Woman, technically,” she said with a smirk.

“You're dead,” he said in a deadbeat voice, “Technically.”

“Touché, kid,” she grinned at him, as she took the article claiming she had perished.

“What happened to the suit?” he asked her carefully.

“Life,” she shrugged, “I built her, I take care of her, I'll fix her.”

“Like a mechanic?” The boy asked, curiously.

“Yeah, like a mechanic,” she said simply. Because really, was he wrong?

“If I was building Iron Woman and War Machine-” he started before she cut him off.

“It’s Iron Patriot now,” she said, unimpressed.

His eyes widened, “That's way cooler!”

“It most certainly is not,” she spluttered back at him.

“Is so,” he grinned, “Anyways. I would have added in um, the retro- “Retroreflective panels?” she offered up, knowing what he was trying to say.

“To make him stealth mode,” he said with confidence.
“You want a stealth mode?” she asked, with a small laugh.

“Cool, right?” he grinned at her.

“That’s actually a good idea. Maybe I’ll build one,” she said, and he beamed up at her.

She watched as the boy played around with her suit, snapping off one of the fingers.

“Not a good idea,” she sighed, “I’m trying to fix the suit, not break it.”

“Sorry,” he said, a bit sheepishly.

“It’s fine,” she waved it off, “So who’s home?”

“Well, my mom already left for the diner and dad went to 7-Eleven to get scratchers. I guess he won, cause that was six years ago,” the boy said, without even a stutter in his voice.

She felt her heart pang for the boy. If anyone understood shitty fathers, it was her.

“Which happens, dads leave. They don’t always know what they’re missing out on,” she said, and she saw him look uncomfortable, “Here’s what I need: a laptop, a digital watch, a cell phone, the pneumatic actuator from your bazooka over there, a map of town, a big spring, and a tuna fish sandwich.”

“What’s in it for me?” the kid bartered with her and she nearly laughed.

“Salvation,” she said sarcastically, “So what’s his name.”

“The kid that bullies you at school, what's his name?” she asked again.

“How'd you know that?” he asked, looking a little upset.

She opened her suit up as she took out a metal cylinder, “I got just the thing. This is an anti-bullying device. Non-lethal, just to cover one’s ass. I’ll give it you if you help me out, deal?”

“Deal,” the boy confirmed, taking it eagerly.

“So what’s your name,” she asked the boy.

“Harley,” the boy offered up. “And you’re?”

“The mechanic,” she said with a grin, “Or Toni. Whichever you prefer. Now, can I get a sandwich, please?”

The boy grinned at her, before scampering off the chair he was on to get her the things she’d asked for.

She walked down the streets of the city with the boy, cap on his head to mask who she was, as best as she could.

“So that sandwich was fair, the springs rusty, the rest of the materials, I'll make do. By the way, when you said your sister had a watch, I was kinda hoping for something a little more than that.”

Not that she wasn’t rocking the Dora watch. But she had class.
“She’s six!” The boy giggled, “Anyway, it's limited edition. When can we talk about New York?”

“It happened and now it’s over,” she breezed over it, not wanting to go into details with the kid.

“What bout The Avengers?” he asked, “How cool are they?”

“Really cool,” she said blankly as they got to the site of the explosion. “What's the official story here? What happened?”

“I guess this guy named Chad Davis, used to live roundabouts, won a bunch of medals in the army. One day, folks said he went crazy and made, you know, a bomb. Then he blew himself up right here.”

“Six people died, right?” she said, a bit confused, and he confirmed it. “Including Chad Davis?”

“Yeah,” the boy said, taking a seat on the curb, and she shook her head.

“That doesn't make sense,” she said, sitting down beside the boy Think about it. Six dead, only five shadows.”

“Yeah, people said these shadows are like the mark of souls gone to Heaven. Except the bomb guy, he went to Hell on account of he didn't get a shadow. That's why there's only five,” he said solemnly.

That was the dumbest shit she’d ever heard in her life.

“That doesn't make sense,” she asked him curiously.

“That's what everyone says,” he shrugged. “You know what this crater reminds me of?”

“Don’t care,” she said, not wanting to know what he was fishing for.

“That giant wormhole, in New York. Does it remind you?” he peered over at her.

“That's manipulative,” she wagged a finger at him. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“Are they coming back? The aliens?” he questioned, and she felt herself begin to shake.

“I don’t know,” she said, “Can you stop? Remember when I told you, that I have an anxiety issue?”

“Does this subject make you, make you edgy?” he prodded.

This was why she didn’t have a therapist, Darwin.

“Yeah, a little bit,” she said, on edge, “Can I just catch my breath for a second?”

“Are there bad guys in Rose Hills? Do you need a plastic bag to breathe into? Do you have medication?” He asked her as she began to shake, breath getting shaky.

“No,” she grunted out.

“Do you need to be on it?” he badgered.

“Probably.”

“Do you have PTSD?” he questioned again.
“I don't think so,” she said shakily.

“Are you...are you going completely mental? I can stop, do you want me to stop? Do you want me to stop?” he asked again, and she nearly laughed hysterically.

“Remember when I said to stop doing that? I swear to God, you're going to freak me out!” She said, standing, “You really did it now!”

She took off running, not that she knew where, and she knew he was chasing after her.

“What did I say?” he called out after her, “Hey, wait up! Wait, wait.” She stopped running and he caught up to her, giving her a weird look. “What the hell was that?”

She sunk to the ground and threw some snow at the kid.

“Your fault, you spazzed me out,” she said, trying to steady her breathing. “Okay, back to business. Where were we? The guy who died; relatives? Mom? Mrs. Davis, where is she?”

“Where she always is,” he simply shrugged, and she really wanted to throw more snow at the little shit. Why couldn't he be more like Peter and respect her? Even a little?

Instead he seemed to enjoy this.

At least he hadn’t asked for money, she supposed.

“See, now you're being helpful,” she said, knowing she’d have to question him further.

She walked towards the bar, after questioning him a few more moments, knowing she’d have to keep a low profile.

She really hoped the hat would be enough.

She bumped into a lady just then, as she dropped something, “Lady, this is uh,” she said, handing it over to her.

“Thank you,” the woman said with a nod, as she noted the scars on her face.

“Nice haircut, suits you,” Toni nodded.

“Nice watch,” the woman smirked at her.

“Yeah, limited edition,” she said simply.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” she said carefully, “Well, have a good evening.”

She walked off and Toni didn’t give it a second thought as she walked to the bar and sat down beside the woman drinking alone.

“Mrs. Davis, mind if I join you?” Toni said politely.

“Free country,” she said with a shrug.

“Sure is,” Toni said simply, sitting down beside her.

“Alright. Where'd you like to start?” she said, looking impatient.

“I just want to say I'm sorry about your loss. I want to know what you think happened,” Toni asked
“Look, I brought your damn file. You take it and go,” she said, dropping a file in front of her. “Whatever was in here, he wanted no part of it.”

She flipped through it carefully. “Clearly, you're waiting for someone else. Yeah? Supposed to meet somebody here?”

“Yeah,” Mrs Davis said again, as Toni landed on the photo of Chad.

“Mrs. Davis, your son didn't kill himself, I guarantee you. He didn't kill anyone. Someone used him,” Toni told the woman.

“What?” Mrs Davis asked, a bit confused.

“As a weapon,” Toni repeated herself.

“You're not the person who called me after all, are you?” Mrs Davis said, a bit dazed.

“Actually, I am,” the woman from earlier said, dropping a badge on the table. And the next thing she knew, her hands were behind her back, and head slammed into the table. She grabbed the dog tags and shoved it in her pockets, before anyone could see.

“Hey, hey, hey! What's all this about? What the hell's going on here?” An older man asked.

“It’s called an arrest,” The woman said, as she shoved Toni to the ground.

“Sheriff, is it?” She asked in a smug tone.

“Yes ma'am, it is. And you are?” The sheriff asked, sounding unimpressed.

“Homeland Security,” The woman raised a badge. “We good here?”

“No, we're not good. I need a little more information than that.” The sheriff scoffed at her.

“Well, I think it's a little above your pay grade, Sheriff,” she said, speaking down to her.

She nodded at Mrs Davis, as the lady got the hint as she hid the file, throwing it under a bench.

“Yeah, well, why don't you get on the horn to Nashville and uh...upgrade me?” He asked her.

“Alright, you know what? I was hoping to do this the smart way, but uh...the fun way's always good.”

Her hand began to turn bright red as the badge in her hand glowed.

“Deputy, get this woman and,” he started as the lady shoved the hot badge in his face, before shooting him and the Deputy.

The bar patrons began to scream, and Toni ran out of the bar, hands cuffed behind her back.

“Hey hot wings, you wanna party? You and me, let's go,” She taunted, as she started to run, before seeing the man Happy had identified earlier in front of her. Oh he definitely was going to pay.

The man raised his cup of coffee at her and spilled it on to the ground.

Monster.
She ran backwards as he raised a gun, and she ducked behind a car where a man was lying on the ground holding a Christmas tree.

“Crazy, huh?” she asked him, and the man looked at her dazed.

“Yeah,” he said, unsure of how to respond.

“Watch this,” she said, as she smashed a store window with her head, falling onto the floor of the store. She saw the woman raise the gun and she ran, sliding across the counter and falling behind it, as the shot narrowly hit her.

She turned to leave, and came face to face with the woman, as she lifted Toni up and shoved her against the wall.

“Kinky,” Toni leered at her and the woman punched her in the face before throwing her behind her back and onto the ground. Toni spun her around using her handcuffs and the woman dragged her up, shoving her back against the wall, as her arm lit up.

She spun around the room, using the shelves as leverage, and had the woman on her back, handcuffs pressed to her neck.

Happy and Harry would have been proud of her fighting abilities. If they didn’t kill her first.

Her neck began to heat up, as her cuffs snapped off, burning her wrists as she threw off the bracelets.

Her eyes began to glow then, and Toni scrambled to grab a large jug of oil, spilling it as she kicked it towards the woman, and kicked the hot handcuffs into it.

The kitchen lit up, and Toni saw her walk through the fire without even flinching, as she set the timer on the microwave, with the dog tags in them.

“You walked right into this one, I've dated hotter chicks than you,” Toni taunted. She broke the pipe off the gas.

“That’s all you got? That's all you got? Cheap tricks and a cheesy one-liner?” the lady taunted her, “I almost feel bad for all your partners.”

“Sweetheart, that could be the name of my sex tape,” she said in a sweet tone, as she ran out the back door. “Or autobiography. Take your pick.”

The microwave went off then, as the kitchen erupted into flames, and she was glad her metal door held up against it.

She stumbled back towards the town, as the people ran, their screams filling the air. The lady was on the electrical line, burnt to a crisp. Well she wouldn’t be a problem anymore.

The town’s water tower began to buckle then, glowing bright orange and she swore again.

She ran backwards trying to get out of the path it would fall on, as she watched the water pour out of it, and around her.

The pipes fell around her, and she struggled to sit up as the water flowed past her. Her foot was trapped and she winced, as she tried to pull it free.

“Let me go!” Harley screamed.
“Help me!” The man mocked, as he carried him over his shoulder and towards Toni. “Anyways,” he said, sitting down across from Toni, kid on his lap as his arm glowed red. “Hey kid, what would you like for Christmas?”

“Ms. Stark, I am so sorry!” Harley struggled, and anger flowed through her again. This man and the Mandarin would not hurt any more people she cared about. Not if she could help it.

“Oh. No, no. I think he was trying to say, I want my goddamn file,” The man said staring at her.

“It’s not your fault kid,” she said calmly, “Remember what I told you about bullies?”

She nodded at the kid and he got the message, lifting up what she’d given him as it flashed a bright colour. The man grimaced, falling to the ground and releasing his hold on Harley.

“You like that Westworld?” she called after him, “That’s the thing about smart people. We always our ass,” she said, lying there still.

She lifted her arm up then, as a makeshift repulsors shot the guy backwards, frying him.

She created a lever with a piece of metal, and lifted the piece trapping her foot, as she stood up gingerly.

She reached into the guys pocket, taking his car keys and headed back towards the town.

“You’re welcome,” an annoyed voice said as she flipped through the file.

She turned and paused, looking at Harley as he stood there, arms crossed.

“For what?” she asked him with a grin, “Did I miss something?”

“Me saving your life,” he punched her lightly.

This boy, in so many ways reminded her of Peter. He was smart and clever, and she wondered if she ever got Peter back in her life, if the two would be friends.

“A, I saved you first,” she pointed out. “B, thanks, sort of? And C, if you do someone a solid, don’t be a yutz. All right? Just play it cool. Otherwise you come off grandiose.”

“Unlike you?” he asked her carefully. “Admit it, you need me. We’re connected.”

She laughed, “What I need is for you to go home, be with your mom, keep your trap shut, guard the suit, and stay connected to the telephone because if I call, you better pick up. Okay? Can you feel that? We're done here. Bye, kid, I’ll call you soon. Promise.”

He gave her a sad look and she sighed.

“I'm sorry, kid. You did good,” she told him softly.

“So, now you're just gonna; leave me here, like my dad?” he asked, and she almost bought it for a damn minute.

“Yeah,” she said at first, before narrowing her eyes at him. “Wait, you're guilt-tripping me, aren't you?”

“I’m cold,” he pouted at her.
“I know, I can tell. You know how I can tell? Because we’re connected” she grinned at him, “But like go home kid. You’ll warm up. You did good, okay. Promise.”

“It was worth a shot,” Harley shrugged, and she laughed, before driving off.

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully you all enjoyed this chapter! I wanted to thank you all for your words of encouragement and comments. I love hearing what you think of the story so far, and I can't wait for you to see what'll happen next. I've gotten a few questions about the update schedule, which is every Sunday.
The Mechanic

Chapter Summary

Toni goes after The Mandarin

She drove down country road, flipping through the files she had been given angrily. There was nothing there, nothing usable, nothing that she could even try and take advantage of when it came to bringing down the Mandarin.

All that was listed was a big bold MIA on the case files.

MIA…MIA.

She knew the soldiers were working on a classified project, but were they really MIA? What when in the last few hours she’d fought several of them.

But why did those letters sound so familiar.

MIA.

She turned the paper around and gasped.

AIM.

Why did that sound familiar?

She picked up her cellphone and began dialing.

“Hello?” Her Rhodey Bear called out.

“You ever have a chick straddling you and you look up and suddenly she's glowing from the inside out, kind of a bright orange?” she asked, wondering if he'd encountered any of these glowing people himself.

“Yeah, I've had that,” Rhodey deadpanned, “Who is this?”

“It’s me, Sweetheart,” she said with a grin, “Now, last time I went missing, if I remember correctly, you came looking for me. What are you doing?”

“A little knock-and-talk, making friends in Pakistan. What are you doing?” Rhodey asked, and she could hear the worry in his voice, despite his words.

“Your redesign, your big rebrand, that was AIM, right?” She asked, needing to know if she was just acting crazy or if there was any truth in all of this.

“Yeah?” Rhodey said, sounding a little puzzled.

“I'm gonna find a heavy-duty comm sat right now, I need your login,” She told him.

“It's the same as it's always been, WarMachine68,” He told her.
“Password?” she asked, throwing the file to the ground as she drove faster.

“Well, look, I gotta change it every time you hack in, Tony,” Rhodey said exasperatedly.

“It’s not the '80s, nobody says "hack" any more. Besides am I really hacking if you give it to me? Please?” she asked.

“WAR MACHINE ROX,” He sighed, “with an ‘X’, all caps.”

She laughed at that, “Yeah he does. That is so much better than ‘Iron Patriot’.”

She saw a Memorial Hall, and she quickly spun the car around. She grabbed the Coyboy hat and covered her face, as she moved towards a news truck. If this backfired, she might as well have just told the Mandarin where she was.

She climbed in, and took Channel D offline, as she checked the internet speeds. 9.8 MBPS? What kind of speeds were that?

The truck door opened just then, and she heard the guy sound tired.

“Excuse me, Miss. I don’t know who-” he started. and she spun around in her chair in a villain like reveal.

“Shh,” she said, raising a finger to her lips. “Keep it down.”

“Mom I need to call you back, something magical is happening,” he said, hanging up the phone and looking at her in awe. “Toni Stark is in my van!”

“No, she's not!” she said quickly, trying to make sure he didn’t draw any attention to them.

“I knew you were still alive!” He said excitedly, looking like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Come on in. Close the door,” she whispered, trying to draw him inside and attention away from them.

“Oh, wow. Can I just say, Ma-am-” he chattered. “I am your biggest fan.”

She shifted uncomfortably. She had long since gotten used to her fame, but it didn’t make it any easier.

“Okay. First, is this your van?” Toni asked, trying to get right into it, “Is anyone else gonna come in?”

“No, no, no. Just us,” he told her quickly.

“Great. What's your name?” she said, standing to shake his hand.

“Gary,” he said amazed, as he took her in.

“Gary,” she confirmed.

“Oh, wow,” he said dazed.

“Right there is fine,” she said, trying to keep him calm. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he looked up at her.
“I get a lot of this, it's okay,” she reassured him.

“Oh, good. Can I just say?” He started.

“What do you want? Yeah,” she encouraged him. The sooner this was over the sooner she could get into the servers.

“I love you,” he blurted out, “I used to have your poster on my wall as a kid, and I’ve just always thought you were amazing. Your inventions are absolutely brilliant, and you’re so beautiful. Man. This is surreal.”

“Okay,” she said, a little unsure of how to react to that. Of course she’d known that she’d been on the walls of teenage boys. But that didn’t make it any less weird to hear about.

“I don't want to make things awkward for you, but I do have to show you, Boom!” he said, lifting up his sleeve, and there, on his arm, was a tattoo of her face.

Dear Sweet Curie.

She was not prepared for this.

“I'm sorry. Is that me?” she asked, unsure of what to say.

“Yeah. It's... I mean... I had them do it off a doll that I made, so it's not like it's off a picture. So it's a little bit...” she cut him off there.

“Gary. Listen to me, okay?” she said, not having any more time to waste on this, “I don't want to clip your wings, here. We're both a little over-excited. I got an issue. I'm chasing bad guys. I'm trying to grab a little something from some hard-crypt data files. I don't have enough juice. I need you to jump on the roof, right? Recalibrate the ISDNs. Pump it up by about 40%.”

“Got it,” he nodded, looking excited.

“All right? It's a mission,” she said, hoping it would give him the motivation to act fast.

“Yeah,” he breathed.

“Toni needs Gary,” she told him firmly.

“And Gary needs Toni,” he repeated, and she wanted to roll her eyes.

“Be quiet about it. Go,” she said, as she sent him on his way.

“Yeah,” he nodded, as he left the van. She only had to wait a few moments before she could hear him banging on the side. She knocked back before pulling up a Control Module and setting the IP address to 934.554.32.3 and began overriding the admin access.

She pulled up a log in for the National Security Contractors, and filled it in with Rhodey’s log in, laughing to herself slightly as she typed in his password.

And just like that, she had full access to the AIM Systems, firewalls down, and their full database of files.

She pulled up a video of Chad Davis, and watched the file labelled as Extremis Candidate. He talked about not letting his injuries beat him.
The next video, Brandt; the lady who attacked him in the bar. Yet part of her left arm was missing in the clip. And it hadn’t been when she’d fought her.

And on the other side of the video?

Aldrich Killian.

Well wasn’t that an interesting turn.

She pulled up another video of him talking to a group of people.

“*Once misfits, cripples. You are the next iteration of human evolution,*” he spoke, and she pulled up another video.

“*Everybody, before we start, I promise you, looking back at your life, there will be nothing as bitter as the memory of that glorious risk you prudently elected to forego. Today is your glory. Let's begin,*” He said in the video, as human subjects were strapped down, and injected with substances.

He watched as Brandt began to glow a bright orange, just as he’d seen her do.

Screams filled the screen, as one of the subjects burned too brightly and exploded.

“A bomb is not a bomb when it's a misfire,” she said, answering the question she’d been asking since this had all started. Why there were no explosives at the sight of Happy’s accident. Why there were only five shadows in Rose Hill. “The stuff doesn't always work. Right, pal? It's faulty, but you found a buyer, didn't you? Sold it to the Mandarin. Got you, pal.”

The ride back to Malibu was long and exhausting. Seriously, this is why she had her own personal jet.

She liked driving as much as the next person, but she also liked reaching places at reasonable times, and honestly she didn’t think that was too much to ask.

How was Steve Rogers fine with driving around the entire goddamn country on a motorcycle and not tired of it all?

She sighed, as she called the boy, wanting a status update, “Harley, tell me what's happening. Give me a full report.”

“Yeah, I'm still eating that candy,” he told her, and she stifled a laugh, “Do you want me to keep eating it?”

“How much have you had?” she asked.

“Two or three bowls,” he admitted to her. She really wasn’t cut out to be a parent was she if she was the reason why this kid had so much candy.

“Can you still see straight?” She questioned him curiously.

“Sort of,” he said quickly.

“That means you're fine,” she said with a roll of her eyes, “Give me JARVIS. JARVIS, how are we?”

“It's totally fine, Miss. I seem to do quite well for a stretch, and then at the end of the sentence I say the wrong cranberry,” J said, sounding a bit off. “And, Miss, you were right. Once I factored in
available AIM downlink facilities I was able to pinpoint the Mandarin's broadcast signal.”

“What are we talking?” she asked, wondering if her suit would be fine enough to fly across the ocean. “Far East, Europe, North Africa, Iran, Pakistan, Syria? Where is it?”

“Actually, sir, it's in Miami,” JARVIS told her.

Okay, so she supposed JARVIS might be a bit more broken than she thought.

“Okay, kid, I'm gonna have to walk you through rebooting JARVIS' speech drive, but not right now. Harley, where is he really? Just look on the screen and tell me where it is,” She asked him carefully.

“Um, it does say Miami, Florida,” the kid said a bit confused.

No fucking way.

She took a deep breath and made a list of all the things in her head she’d need to do to deal with all of this.

“Okay, first things first, I need the armour. Where are we at with it?” she asked the kid.

“Uh, it's not charging,” he told her, and she slammed on the breaks, pulling over to the side of the road. What did he mean it wasn’t charging?

She felt her breath begin to quicken. She couldn’t do this without the suit, she needed the suit.

She was nothing without the Iron Woman armour.

“Actually, Miss, it is charging, but the power source is questionable. It may not succeed in revitalising the Mark 42,” JARVIS responded

“What's questionable about electricity?” she demanded. “All right? It's my suit, and I can't. I'm not gonna. I don't wanna. Oh, Faraday, not again.”

She opened the car door, needing air, needing not to be trapped in this tight car. She couldn’t breathe. She felt the world around her grow dark, as she felt herself, off in space again. Surrounded by the Chitauri army. They were coming for her. They were coming for all of them.

“Toni? Are you having another attack?” Harley asked her softly, “I didn't even mention New York.”

“Right, and then you just said it by name while denying having said it,” her voice said shakily.

She could hear Harley sound unsure of what to do or say and she sunk to the ground.

“God, what am I gonna do?” she asked out.

She’d never been religious. Not as a woman of science.

But her mother had been. Her mother, who had loved her, who had cared for her when her father did not.

She felt so alone.

“Just breathe,” Harley’s voice came over the phone. “Really, just breathe. You're a mechanic, right?”

“Right,” she said back shakily.
“You said so,” he reminded her.

“Yes, I did,” she said softly. “I am.”

“Why don't you just build something?” he asked her, like it was the simplest thing in the world.

She had built the Mark I suit in a cave with nothing but scrap metals.

She had built every suit until then.

It was what she did.

She built.

She created.

And she made.

She was not nothing without Iron Woman.

Iron Woman was nothing without her.

“Okay,” she said, voice steadying. She stood up then and got back in the car. “Thanks, kid.”

She hung up the phone then; she had work to do.

She hit up the nearest hardware store, buying everything from an unquestionable amount of fertilizers, to bolt cutters, bug spray, ant control, and anything she could turn into a weapon.

She had built them for so long, and that didn’t just go away.

Besides, The Mandarin had hurt her family, and now there would be hell to pay.

She got a cheap motel, one she could book with a minimal amount of cash, and she began to build everything she could think of, from electric gloves, tasers, stun guns, and makeshift grenades.

She would be ready.

And off she went to Miami.

She should have known this lunatic would live in some sort of castle. Talk about hating the American Dream when living it all along.

She took out a pair of binoculars and eyed up the people guarding the perimeter and nearly laughed at the minimal security.

Hopping the wall was easy enough, and she supposed once again, she owed her physical strength to her cousin and bodyguard.

She used the grappling hook to pull the first guy down the stairs, shot the second guy with a nail gun, and tazed the third guy.

Was it supposed to be this easy?

She threw one of her Christmas grenades at a pair of guards as it took out one and she shot the second one a few times, nearly laughing to herself.
This was like Home Alone but better.

The house itself looked like a drug den, with hungover models sprawled all over every surface.

“Why is it so hot in here? I told you to put it at 68,” one of the girls complained.

“My fault again,” one of the guards scoffed at her, “Let me tell you something, sweetheart. I am not your personal air con-”

She grabbed the back of his head with her electric glove and immobilized him as she shoved his face into the table. She picked up his gun and looked over at the girl.

The model looked like she didn’t care, simply pointing which way Toni should go, and she nodded at her, raising a finger to show her to be quiet.

She moved into what looked like a tv room, with footage of the Mandarin’s speeches on the screens. She moved quietly through the room, clearing it, as she took a look around.

And there, in the middle of the room, was a giant bed, the covers pulled high, as it looked like people were asleep in it.

She held her breath; was she actually about to find the Mandarin asleep in bed?

It couldn’t be that easy, could it?

She pulled the covers down, aiming the gun at them.

And of course it wasn’t that easy; in the bed lay two models cladded in lingerie. And while Toni liked to appreciate the finer things in life, it most certainly was not the time for that.

She heard the toilet flush, and she spun around quickly, aiming the gun in that direction.

“I wouldn’t go in there for 20 minutes,” she heard a man laugh, and she snuck behind a mirror, “Now, which one of you is Vanessa?”

“That’s me,” one of the girls said, looking unworried.

“Ah! Nessie. Did you know that fortune cookies aren’t even Chinese?” he told her, losing the accent he’d had for all his videos, and yet somehow gaining a British one? “There’s some guy over here. They’re made by Americans, based on a Japanese recipe.”

Was this guy for real?

She gave the man an incredulous look. This was the man who executed several people on television? Who was responsible for all the explosions?

There was no bloody way.

There was no way she was dealing with this any longer. She snuck out from behind the mirror and pointed the gun at the man, “Hey!”

“Bloody hell. Bloody hell,” he said, looking a bit startled.

“Don’t move,” she told him firmly.

“I'm not moving. You want something? Take it. Although the guns are all fake because those
wankers wouldn't trust me with the real ones,” he told her

“What?” she asked, a bit confused.

“Hey, do you fancy either of the birds?” he asked her, pointing at the girls in his bed.

Edison helped her. Maybe she could shoot him just for being annoying.

“ Heard enough,” she told him, putting the gun close to him. “You're not him. The Mandarin, the real guy. Where? Where's the Mandarin? Where is he?”

She all but shouted the last part, needing to know what this façade was.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. He's here. He's here, but he's not here. He's here, but he's not here,” he said, running to take a seat.

Who did that when a gun was even pointed at them?

“What do you mean?” she demanded.

“It's complicated,” he said, and she shot him a look. “Hey, it's complicated.”

“It is?” she asked in disbelief.

“It's complicated,” he told her again.

“It's complicated,” he told her again.


She watched the two girls leave the room, complaining immediately about having to be in the bathroom, and she supposed whatever it was the man did in there must have been as bad of an explosion as he could pull off.

She turned to see him crawling away and she shot on the ground next to him. Guess those lessons with Aunt Peggy really paid off.

“My name is Trevor. Trevor Slattery,” he told her.

“What are you? What are you, a decoy? You're a double, right?” she asked, trying to get her head around what was happening.

“What, you mean like an understudy?” he asked, a bit offended. “No, absolutely not.”

She pointed the gun back at his face and he winced.

“Don't hurt the face! I'm an actor,” he tried to explain to her. “It's just a role. ‘The Mandarin’, see, it's not real.”

“Then how did you get here, Trevor?” she asked him pointedly.

“Well, I, um, had a little problem with, um, substances. And I ended up doing things, no two ways about it, in the street, that a man shouldn't do,” he tried to justify. Like she didn’t know what it was like to have a substance abuse problem. And yet she was still standing here wasn’t she? CEO of Stark Industries. Iron Woman.

“Next?” she asked, growing more annoyed with the man with each passing moment.
“Then, they approached me about the role, and they knew about the drugs,” he told her.

“What did they say? They'd get you off them?” she asked, unsure of what she was expecting. Because maybe they did offer to help.

“They said they'd give me more. They gave me things. They gave me this palace. They gave me plastic surgery. They gave me things,” he told her, closing his eyes.

And then he started snoring.

She might shoot him just because she could.

“Did you just nod off? Hey,” she said, kicking him with her shoe.

“No, and a lovely speedboat. And the thing was, he needed someone to take credit for some accidental explosions,” the man explained to her, as he mimicked an explosion with his hands.

"He?" she questioned. “Killian?"

“Killian,” the man confirmed.

She exhaled then, and suddenly everything was making a lot more sense to her. There was no Mandarin. There never was. There was only Aldrich Killian.

“He created you?” she asked him.

“He created me,” he confirmed again, agreeing with what she was saying.

“Custom-made terror threat,” she let out a sigh. And the world was eating it up. Letting him get away with faulty science experiments. On human experiments. All the while blaming some terrorist, when the real threat was closer to home all along.

“Yes. Yes. His think tank thought it up,” Slattery said excitedly. And suddenly, the accent returned, “The pathology of a serial killer. The manipulation of Western iconography. Ready for another lesson?”

He dropped it then, turning back to face her, offering her a beer, which she waved away, “Blah, blah, blah. Of course, it was my performance that brought the Mandarin to life.”

She wanted to throw something at him, “Your performance? Where people died?”

“No, they didn't. Look around you. The costumes, green screen. Honestly, I wasn't on location for half this stuff. And when I was, it was movie magic, Love.”

Movie magic?

Happy getting hurt was just ‘Movie Magic’?

No fucking way.

“I'm sorry, but I got a best friend who's in a coma and he might not wake up. So you're gonna have to answer for that. You're still going down, pal. You under-“

She cut herself off, as Trevor Slattery’s eyes widened.

She tried to turn around quickly, but the next thing she knew a fist was in her face.
When she woke up, she was tied up, and the part of her that never properly reacted to issues wanted to make some sort of kinky joke.

But now was not the time.

“Okay,” she said, as she looked around the room.

Only to see Maya Hansen looking at her.

“just like old times, huh?” she said with a smile

“Oh, yeah. With zip ties. It's a ball,” Toni said, plastering a press smile on her face.

“It wasn't my idea,” Hansen simply shrugged.

“Okay. So you took Killian's card,” Toni said, wondering how she’d missed the Botanist’s obvious betrayal.

“I took his money,” Hansen nodded in agreement.

“And here you are 13 years later, in a dungeon,” Toni said with a sarcastic laugh.

“No,” Hansen denied.

“Uh, yeah you are,” Toni shot back.

“No, you're in a dungeon. I'm free to go,” Hansen gave her a simple shrug.

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh.

“A lot has happened, Toni,” Hansen told softly, “But I'm close. EXTREMIS is practically stabilised.”

Stabilized?

Is that what she would call the people turning orange and blowing up.

Sure.

“I'm telling you it isn't,” Toni laughed. “I'm on the street. People are going bang. They're painting the walls. Maya, you're kidding yourself.”

“Then help me fix it,” Hansen urged her, holding up her name tag from that night. Bern. 1999. The night of the New Years Eve Conference. And she turned it around to see a simple calculation on the back.

When she and Hansen had science’d while she was wasted.

She really needed to stop doing that.

“Did I do that?” she breathed.

“Yes,” Hansen confirmed
“I remember the night, not the morning,” Toni told her. “Is this what you've been chasing around?”

“You don’t remember?” she said, sounding hurt.

Huh.

Usually people got mad at her for not remembering she’d had sex with them.

Not because she forgot that they did math together.

“I can't help you,” Toni told her gently. “You used to have a moral psychology. You used to have ideals. You wanted to help people. Now look at you. I get to wake up every morning with someone who till has their soul. Get me out of here. Come on.”

“You know what my old man used to say to me? One of his favourite of many sayings: ‘The early bird gets the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.’” Killian told her, looking chirper.

“You're not still pissed off about the Switzerland thing, are you?” she asked, wanting to punch the man in the face. She should have trusted Happy more when he told her Killian was up to no good.

“How can I be pissed at you, Toni? I'm here to thank you. You gave me the greatest gift that anybody's ever given me. Desperation. If you think back to Switzerland, you said you'd meet me on the rooftop, right? Well, for the first 20 minutes, I actually thought you'd show up. And the next hour, I considered taking that one-step shortcut to the lobby. If you know what I mean,” he told her.

“Honestly, I'm still trying to figure out what happened to the first mouse,” she said, ignoring him altogether. “If the entire point of this story is to tell me that you’re doing all of this because I ignored you, then sorry to tell you pal, you’re a lunatic. You're not entitled to my time simply because you think you deserve it. That’s not how this works, not even close, Killian. I don’t need to just hand it to you. Not when you’ve done nothing to earn my respect. That’s not how the world works. And if you think anyone, women, men, children, etc., should bend over backwards to meet your needs, then that’s where you’re wrong. So you can stop blowing up people now. Because I have the moral high ground here, not you.”

He ignored her, because of course he did. It was like he didn’t even hear a single word she said, as he continued to monologue

“But as I looked out over that city, nobody knew I was there, nobody could see me, no one was even looking. I had a thought that would guide me for years to come. Anonymity, Toni. Thanks to you, it's been my mantra ever since. Right? You simply rule from behind the scenes. Because the second you give evil a face, a bin Laden, a Gaddafi, a Mandarin, you hand the people a target.”

“You're something else,” she told him exasperatedly, meeting his gaze. “You’re worse than those terrorists. Worse because at least they believe their ideals, as fucked up as they are. You just want to exploit the same hatred to make a profit.”

“You have met him, I assume?” Killian asked, opening a brief case.

“Yes. Sir Laurence Oblivier,” she said, utterly unimpressed.

“I know he's a little over the top sometimes. It's not entirely my fault,” Killian shrugged. “He has a tendency. He’s a stage actor. They say his Lear was the toast of Croydon, wherever that is. Anyway, the point is, ever since that big dude with the hammer fell out of the sky, subtlety has kind of had its day.”
Why was everyone blaming Thor for making weapons?

She’d met the man, and really, he was nothing but a giant sweetheart.

It would devastate him to know he was the reason villains were using to justify their actions.

“What’s next for you in your world?” she asked, wondering if she could find out his master plan.

“Well, I wanted to repay you the selfsame gift that you so graciously imparted to me,” he told her and she hid her panic. He pulled up a hologram then, of Pepper, strapped to a chair. She wanted to scream, wondering if her friend was doing okay. Goddammit she should have sent someone to check in on her, the moment she knew Killian was remotely connected to this.

She could see Pepper glowing that same dangerous orange, and she sent up a prayer, that Pepper would be okay. That she wouldn’t end up the same way so many others connected to the experiments tended to go.

“Desperation. Now, this is live. I'm not sure if you can tell, but at this moment the body is trying to decide whether to accept EXTREMIS or just give up. And if it gives up, I have to say, the detonation is quite spectacular. But until that point, it's really just a lot of pain.”

He stood up then, coming closer to her until he was inches from her face.

“We haven't even talked salary yet,” he grabbed her neck, his breath on her skin. “What kind of perk package are you thinking of?”

“Let him go,” Hansen said, looking irritated.

“Hold on, hold on,” he said, as he caressed Toni’s face. She would have spat at him if the hand on her neck wasn’t choking her.

“I said, let him go,” Hansen shouted, and he turned around to see her with a injection device up to her neck

“What are you doing?” he asked her, sounding stunned. Either this was well rehearsed, or there was some discord in their partnership

“1200 CCs,” she threatened. “A dose half of this size, I'm dead.”

“It's times like this my temper is tested somewhat,” he said, sounding exhausted. “Maya, give me the injector.”

“If I die, Killian, what happens to your soldiers? What happens to your product?” she told him, eyes watering.

“We're not doing this, okay?” he told her firmly.

“What happens to you?” she asked. “What happens if you go too hot?”

He turned around, meeting Toni’s gaze, as he raised his arm and pointed the gun at Hansen.

Only to shoot her right in the stomach.

Well, she was probably in trouble

“The good news is, a high-level position has just been vacated,” Killian said, without looking slightly
“You are a maniac,” she spat in his face.

“No, I’m a visionary,” he countered. “But I do own a maniac. And he takes the stage tonight.”

He turned then, leaving her behind in the room, with two guards to watch her.

She wondered if she could just get out of the zip ties somehow. Then she’d be free.

Her watch began beeping then, sitting on the counter, and she nearly grinned. One of the guards picked it up and she gave him a warning look.

“Careful, there. It's a limited edition,” she told him firmly. He began to shake it. “Hey, uh, Ponytail Express. What's the mileage count between Tennessee and Miami?”

“832 miles,” he answered her quickly and she shot him an impressed look.

“Very nice,” she admired.

“I'm good like that,” he said, taking the compliment, and as the beeping continued, he pointed to the watch with his gun. “Can you, uh, stop that?”

“Break it, you bought it,” she warned them. The man met her eyes, dropped the watch, and stomped on it.

Oh they were going down.

“I think I bought it,” he gave her a smug look.

“Okay, that wasn't mine to give away,” she said, unimpressed. “That belongs to my friend's sister. And that's why I'm gonna kill you first.”

“What are you gonna do to me?” he taunted her.

“You'll see,” she said quickly.

“You're zip-tied to a bed,” he deadpanned.

“This,” she said raising her arms. And when nothing happened, “That.”

Ugh she hated delayed responses. She’d have to work on that.

“Trust me, you're gonna be in a puddle of blood on the ground in five, four, three; come on! Two,” she tried.

Where was her suit?

Why was this taking so long.

“How did we get this shift?” the shorthaired man looked done with her. Well, she was just as done with him too.

“All right,” she warned them. “I'm gonna give you a chance to escape. Put down your weapons. Tie yourselves to those chairs. I'll let you live. In five, four, bang!”

The two of them looked at her utterly unimpressed and she sighed internally.
It was hard to be intimidating when things weren’t working.

“You should be gone by now. You should’ve already been gone,” she said seriously.

“I am just beyond terrified,” the long-haired man said, still pointing the gun at her.

“Here it comes. Three, four,” she started again.

“Shut up,” the man told her again.

“Five, four, three, two, one!” she said quickly as something broke the glass then.

She shot them a smirk, as her hand piece hit the man in the head and attached itself to her wrist, “Told you.”

She shot the shorter haired man with her repulsor, as the bed frame she was on span around. She used the armour to break herself out of the zip ties, as the man with the gun game for her again. She hit him on the head with the part of the armour she had, as the foot piece came in then, and attached itself to her.

She raised the gun in their direction as she looked upwards.

“Where’s the rest?” she wondered, as she could see more men coming into the room. She shot them with a mixture of her armour and the gun, before using the one thrustor she had to shoot herself up in the air. She tried to take out as many men as she could before the gun she had ran out of ammo.

She was still outnumbered, and without the rest of the suit, she was still very vulnerable to their bullets.

She knew she’d have to be careful, and she maneuvered around the room with the parts of the suit she did have with ease, dodging their shots.

Until there was just one man left.

She pointed her gun at him.

“Honestly, I hate working here. They are so weird,” he told her as he dropped the gun and backed out of the room.

She could respect that.

She ran through the halls, trying to leave the dungeon, as the rest of the suit slowly came and attached itself to her.

“Ah! Better late than never,” she said, as she waited just for her faceplate to arrive. But she wouldn’t let it go the same way as it did before. “Not this time. Not the face.”

She held her hand out, catching the mask as she carefully put it on.

“Phew! It’s good to be back. Hi, Baby,” she said, greeting her soon.

“Hello, Miss,” JARVIS said, “I am glad to see you are still doing well.

A Helicopter flew above, and she knew it was just beginning. She looked up and saw the War Machine armour flying above.
Well, that couldn’t be good.

“Let’s go!” She said, trying to power up her thrusters.

Only for them not to work.

Well, that was great.

She hobbled down the stairs, as she placed a call to her Honey Bear.

“Toni,” he said, picking up instantly.

“Tell me that’s you in the suit,” she asked him, even know she knew the answer already.

“No,” he confirmed, and she swore, “You got yours?”

“Uh,” she said, “Kind of. Main house, as fast as you can. There’s somebody I’d like you to meet.”

She walked into the room, holding up a ping pong battle as the two men aimed guns at her. Only for Rhodey to burst through the window and take them out.

Without a suit.

How did he manage to always look so much cooler doing everything?

“What have you come as?” Slattery asked, looking interested.

“You make a move, and I break your face,” Rhodey pointed a gun at him.

“I never thought people had been hurt. They lied to me,” Slattery said, looking pitiful.

“This is the Mandarin?” Rhodey said with the same exasperation she’d had earlier.

“Yeah, I know, it's embarrassing,” she said, just as annoyed as he was.

“Hi, Trevor. Trevor Slattery,” he said, trying to stick his hand out for a shake, as Rhodey slapped it away. “I know I'm shorter in person. A bit smaller. Everyone says that. But, um, hey, if you're here to arrest me, there's some people I'd like to roll on.”

“Here's how it works, Meryl Streep,” she said firmly, “You tell him where Pepper is, and he'll stop doing it.”


Rhodey leaned down and burned him with a weapon he’d concealed, “Ow,” he whined, “That hurt. I get it! I get it! I don't know about any Pepper, but I know about the plan.”

“Spill,” she told him.

“Do you know what they did to my suit?” Rhodey wanted to know.

“What? No,” Slattery brushed him off. “But I do know it's happening off the coast. Something to do with a big boat. I can take you there.”

He screamed then, as a goal on the tv behind them had been shot in. “Ole', ole', ole', ole’”

“Toni, I swear to God, I'm gonna blow his face off,” Rhodey warned her.
“Oh, and this next bit may include the vice president as well. “Is that important?”

“Somewhat,” she shrugged, like it meant nothing in the world.

She probably would be the one to shoot the man.

“Yeah, a little bit,” Rhodey said sarcastically.

“So?” she said, turning to him.

“What are we going do? I mean, we don't have any transport,” he reminded her.

“Hey, Ringo. Didn't you say something about a ‘lovely speedboat’?” she asked, turning to the man their country had united against.

They had a Pepper to go find.
Not Alone

Chapter Summary

Toni and some friends take on the true Mandarin

“If he's right about the location, we're twenty minutes from where Pepper is,” she said determinedly as the boat sailed on through the waters.

“But we also have to figure out this Vice President thing, right?” Rhodey confirmed with her, looking slightly torn.

And she didn’t blame him.

One was a matter of choosing one of the most important men in America. And the other was their family.

And if they could only save one, how did they make that decision?

“I'll get on calling him,” she said, as she began to dial him on the phone.

“Hello?” the vice president answered, almost immediately.

“Sir, this is Toni Stark,” she said, as Rhodey stood beside her.

“Well, nice to know people cared about her.

“We believe you're about to be drawn into the Mandarin campaign. We have to get you somewhere safe as soon as possible,” she told him quickly, wanting to get across the information she and Rhodey received.

“Ms Stark, I'm about to eat honey-roast ham, surrounded by the Agency's finest. The president's safe on Air Force One with Colonel Rhodes. I think we're good, here,” he said, brushing off her attempts to keep them safe.

She hated men like him sometimes.

But despite that, her blood ran cold. Did he just say the President was on Air Force one with Rhodey?

She looked over at her friend, as she realized suddenly where the Iron Patriot Armour had taken off to suddenly.

“Sir, this is Colonel Rhodes,” Rhodey took the phone from her. “They're using the Iron Patriot as a Trojan horse. They're gonna take out the President somehow. We have to immediately alert that plane.”

“Okay, I'm on it,” his voice grew somber. “I'll have security lock it down. If need be, they can have
F-22s in the air in 30 seconds. Thank you, Colonel.”

“Rhodes and Stark out,” Rhodey said, ending the call.

“We gotta make a decision. We can either save the President, or Pepper. We can't do both,” Rhodey told her and she felt her heart drop.

How could they choose? How could they choose between the President and her best friend? The woman who had been by Toni’s side for over a decade, through all the things in her life? Through the many times she’d nearly died, all the scandals the media had concocted? Through everything?

“I know this isn’t easy for you, Baby Girl,” Rhodey said softly, “Whatever you want to do, we'll do it. There’s no right answer. Not with a situation like this. We can go save Pepper; the President has the Military and several soldiers. But Pepper is alone.”

“Miss, I have an update from Malibu. The cranes have finally arrived, and the cellar doors are being cleared as we speak,” JARVIS spoke through the suit.

“And what about the suit I'm wearing?” she asked, looking down at the damaged suit on her body.

“The armour is now at 92%,” J told her.

“That's going to have to do,” she sighed. “Rhodey, I know what we need to do. And I don’t like it one bit.”

“Oh?” he asked, looking over at her.

“Call Harry. Ask him to send SHIELD to get Pepper. I trust him to get her out of there safely,” she told him firmly. “See if they can’t send one of the supers spies or something with them.”

“And you?” he looked over at her, wanting to hear her say it.

“I’m going after the President,” she told him calmly.

“Not alone you’re not,” he said, coming closer to her.

“Sugar Plum, you don’t even have a suit,” she reminded him gently. “I know you’re more than capable without one, I’ve seen you in action. But you won’t be able to get there in time. Not like I would.”

“Okay,” he let out a sigh. “You know, I think I finally understand how hard it must have been for you all these years to watch me leave. I hate knowing you’re going out there, alone, and that I can’t come and fight by your side.

“I know, Rhodey,” she told him softly. “I’ll be careful. I promise.”

He came close to her and pulled her into a tight hug, “I know you’ll be fine, Toni. But promise me you’ll come back to me, okay? Promise me you won’t put yourself needlessly in danger if you can help it.”

“I promise,” she whispered.

“Then go get them, Baby Girl,” he told her with a smile. “Your country needs you.”

“Miss if I may,” JARVIS cut in then, and she listened carefully to what her child was telling her.
She got onto the plane easily, and part of her was concerned how little effort it took for her to do so. She might not be in the business of creating weapons anymore, but she still cared about defense. Enough so that she knew the plane was in dire need of an upgrade.

She snuck through it quietly, worried by the lack of people on the plane.

Except for the one asshole who she kept running into.

She threw him into the wall before he saw her coming. Why wasn’t he wearing the suit?

He flared slightly orange, and she knew already that something must have happened.

“The President,” she demanded, “Now.”

“He’s not here,” he told her calmly. His hand glowed brightly, as he grabbed her suit, and she could feel the power surge in her suit.

“Try the jet stream?” he suggested, as he released his grip on her. “Speaking of which, go fish.”

He raised a remote, and she watched in horror as one of the doors of the plane blasted open, leaving a hole in the side of the plane.

She could feel it begin to shift, as the screams filled the air.

She tried to punch the man, only for him to grab her again, and she knew it was no good. Even if she brought him down, there were still several people falling to their deaths at that very moment.

Her suit flared to life then, as the arc reactor let out a fatal pulse of energy, blowing a hole straight through the man’s chest.

Well, that was one less problem for her to deal with.

“Walk away from that, you son of a bitch,” she told him, feeling no remorse. He’d hurt Rhody and Pepper; there was no compassion for men like him.

She turned then, flying quickly through the plane as she shot after the falling passengers.

“How many in the air?” she asked as the exited the plane.

“Thirteen, Miss,” JARVIS told her carefully.

“How many can I carry?” she asked, as she scanned the passengers, trying to formulate a plan in her head.

“Four,” J told her, and she swore.

Four meant that nine people would die still. Four passengers was unacceptable. It wasn’t enough.

She felt her breathing falter slightly, as she flew towards the falling people.

And suddenly, she was free falling again, as the portal collapsed around her.

Oh God.

She couldn’t do this.
Her mind began racing, as she struggled to keep herself calm.

She felt so alone, and she had no idea what she was doing.

Maybe she should have sent Rhodey after the President. She wasn’t a hero. She was just pretending.

‘Shine bright, my sweet girl, and know that I will always be with you. You will never be alone,’ she heard the words echo in her head.

The words she had memorised from reading so many times over.

Jarvis’ final words to her.

‘You will bring the world down to its knees and show them all in time that you do not fall down to their expectations,’ She heard her mother say to her.

She let out a sob.

‘You will unmake the world as it is and write it in your image,’ her Aunt Peggy said in her head, in her strong confident voice that always made Toni believe she was capable of being more than what she was told she would be.

She was Toni Goddamn Stark.

She was made of iron.

She would not break.

Nor would she bend.

She had survived Afghanistan. She had survived her father. She survived Obie. She survived being poisoned, and an alien invasion.

She would survive this too.

She took a deep breath. She had people to save.

She flew straight into the first air hostess she came across, grabbing her as they continued to fall.

“Oh, God! No! No!” the lady screamed, still panicking.

“Slow down,” she told her softly, “I need you to relax. What’s your name?” She scanned the lady’s nametag. “Heather?”

The plane went up in flames then, falling out of the sky, as the screams around her continued.

“Listen to me. See that guy? I’m going swing by; you’re just going grab him. You got it?” she asked Heather, trying to keep her as calm as possible.

“What?” the lady asked, seeming stunned.

They flew towards the man, as a plan formulated in her head, “I’ll electrify your arm, you won’t be able to open your hand. We can do this, Heather.”

She hovered close to the first man, as Heather missed grabbing onto him. She took a deep breath and flew them closer, the second time, she grabbed onto him tightly.
“Easy, see? Eleven more to go,” she told the two of them, as they flew towards the rest of the falling passengers. “Remember that game called Barrel of Monkeys? That's what we're going to do.”

“18,000 feet,” JARVIS spoke in her ear.

“Come on, people. Everybody, grab your monkey,” she told them, as they gathered up more people into their chain. “Nice.”

“10,000 feet,” JARVIS said, and she flew them close enough to grab two more people. Her mask showed the missing passengers and drew a chain for her to follow. “6,000 feet.”

“Come on, people,” she said, urgency increasing in her voice, as they nearly missed grabbing the next passenger. “Come on, come on, come on! Yeah!”

One more.

They could do this.

They just had to grab one more passenger.

“1,000 feet. 400 feet. 200 feet, Miss.” JARVIS’ voice grew more alarmed.

The last one was falling rapidly, and she tried to fly them down to him faster. “He's a chunky monkey, let's get him. Hello.”

They managed to grab a hold of him, just before he hit the water and she let out a sigh of relief.

Her suit grew heavy then, and she knew she had no choice but to let them all drop as they hovered a few feet above the water. They would have to tread water for a bit, but they had made it. All of them were alive.

She flew above them, making sure none of them had gone below the surface of the water.

The passengers began cheering, and she spotted a boat a few yards out that would pick them up.

“Nice work guys,” she said, smiling. “Excellent. Good team effort all around. Go us.”

She flew forward then, as the suit collided with a truck and fell apart on the ground.

She lost connection then to the suit as Rhodey turned to her.

“You flew into a truck,” he deadpanned. “And you say you’re the better flier.”

“I would have been better if I was there,” she pouted, “You’re the one who convinced me to stay.”

Rhodey snorted, “Please, JARVIS suggested it and you practically jumped at it.”

She was quiet for a few minutes before turning back to him.

“I missed the President,” she said softly.

“You couldn't save the President with the suit,” he told her gently, “He wasn’t there when you arrived.”

“I should have been faster,” she lamented.

“Now what?” he asked her carefully, wanting to know how she wanted to proceed going forward.
“Say, JARVIS, is it that time?” she asked, an idea forming in her head.

“The House Party Protocol, Miss?” JARVIS asked her carefully.

“Correct,” she said, eyes lighting up.

Despite those idiots taking over her Honey Bear’s suit, they weren’t smart enough to disable the tracker on it.

That was on them really. But if anything, it made her life easier, as it led her and Rhodey Bear straight to them.

She snuck carefully onto the loading dock, climbing up the ladder in the shadows so no one would see her.

Only to be tapped on the back the moment she got on.

She turned quickly, pointing the gun she had been carrying at him.

And found she had been aiming it at her cousin’s head.

He put a finger to his lips to make sure they didn’t draw any attention, but the amused look on his face showed he was more entertained than worried for his life.

She could have shot him.

That jerk.

Beside him stood Steve Rogers, decked out in a SHIELD issued uniform and she could see evident relief on his face.

“Toni,” he breathed out, looking glad to see her. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“It’s going to take a lot more than a missile to take me down,” she said, giving him a smile. “I’m harder to kill than that.”

He didn’t look amused by her jokes, but instead of saying anything, he pulled her into a tight hug.

She didn’t say a thing, shocked, as she wrapped her arms around him carefully. The two of them had never hugged before, but she supposed her supposed death had affected the man far more than she thought it would.

His body felt warm against hers, and she wondered if he always felt like this.

Safe.

“I missed you too, you know,” her cousin coughed from behind them, and she quickly pulled away from Steve and hugged her cousin.

“I’m okay,” she told him, knowing he was wondering the same thing.

“Good,” he said firmly, “I was worried about you. You have to stop getting yourself into near death situations, Tonia.”
“I’ll try,” she gave him a wry smile. “Now where are the super spy twins?”

“On the other side of the boat,” Steve told her. “Clint wanted to take out a few people for what they’d put you through. And it means less guards for us to go through, so I was hardly going to stop them.”

“Wow, it’s almost as if all the Avengers came through for me,” she laughed quietly.

“Bruce is with Ava,” Harry told her softly, “She wanted him to be here, but he doesn’t feel comfortable releasing the Hulk unless necessary.”

“Good,” she nodded, “He can keep her safe. I’m not having anyone else I love be targeted because of me.”

“Toni,” Rhodey warned her. She simply shook her head at him, and he sighed. “Okay, let’s get this show on the road. We still have to save Pepper and the President.”

She nodded as they moved through the shipping yard.

And there, in the middle of it all, wearing the suit she had made to keep her Rhodey safe, was the President, suspended in the air by chains.

“Oh, my God,” Steve breathed out.

“He’s strung up over the oil tanker. They’re gonna light him up, man,” Rhodey said, sounding worried.

“Viking funeral,” she said in understanding.

“Public execution,” Harry said grimly.

“Yeah, death by oil,” Rhodey confirmed.

“We need to move fast,” Toni told them all. “Get him down before the broadcast starts.”

“You don’t have a suit, Toni,” Steve reminded her gingerly, “Plus you’re hurt.”

“I know how to fight, Captain,” she told him firmly. “And right now, we need all the help we can get if we’re going to bring this guy down.”

“Stay in the shadows,” Harry told them carefully. “We can’t be seen.”

She nodded, as they made their way through the shipping yard, carefully climbing on top of a ladder to get closer to the President.

“Broadcast will commence shortly. Take final positions,” she heard a voice say on the PA system.

“Is your gun up?” Rhodey asked her as through the levels.

She was glad he was in front of her, and she quickly raised her gun, “Yep. What do I do?” she asked, as Harry snickered at her.

“Stay on my six, cover high and don’t shoot me in the back,” Rhodey said, sounding fond of her, despite the slightly tense situation they were currently in.

“Mmhm,” she nodded, “Six, high, back. All right.”
The shot came out of nowhere as Steve pushed her to the ground, “Watch out,” he said, dropping on top of her to cover her from getting hit.

He got off of her, and she held her gun up, shooting back at the man at the roof.

The shots came down like rain fire and she ducked behind a shipping container.

“You see that? Nailed it,” she said, sounding proud of herself.

“Yeah, you really killed the glass,” Rhodey deadpanned.

“You think I was aiming for the bulb?” she asked, giving him a look, “Besides, it’s not like you can’t hit a bulb at this distance.”

He gave her a look, before moving away from the safety of the container to shoot a bulb dead on.

“Fine, I guess you can,” she sighed.

“Not the time,” Steve said tightly, as he threw his shield at a man approaching, knocking him out.

“All personnel, we have hostiles on east unit 12. I repeat, hostiles on east unit 12,” a voice cried over the PA.

“Well I guess our cover is blown,” Harry said, with a roll of his eyes.

She strained to look over the shipping container, as she saw a group of men approaching their way. And as two spies came up from behind them, taking them out swiftly, she nearly let out a cheer.

“What did you see?” Steve asked her.

“Clint and Natasha are kicking ass,” she grinned. “Glad we brought the spy twins. But also, there’s another group heading out way. Three guys, one girl, all armed.”

The four of them carefully looked over the shipping container, guns raised.

“God, I would kill for some armour right now,” Rhodey said, frustrated.

“Can’t keep up without it, Old Man?” Harry grinned at him.

“I’m sorry when you can shoot cool weapons out of your body without a suit then we can talk,” Rhodey smirked at him.

“We need backup,” Toni agreed with Rhodey.

“Yeah, a bunch,” Rhodey nodded, as the amount of men increased.

“You know what?” Toni said, as she gestured with her head as she knew the House Party Protocol was being carried out.

“Is that?” Harry asked as the bright lights came their way.

“Yep,” she said, proud.

“Are those?” Rhodey asked in awe.

“Yeah,” she beamed, as the suits stood in front of them in the sky, ready for action. “Merry Christmas, buddy.”
“I didn’t know you made so many,” Steve breathed out. “Toni, those are incredible.”

“Thanks,” she flushed slightly, before turning to speak to her AI. “JARVIS, target Extremis heat signatures. Disable with extreme prejudice.”

“Yes, Miss,” JARVIS responded, voice coming through all the suits he was piloting.

What would she do without her baby boy?

“What are you waiting for? It's Christmas,” she said, raising her arms, “Take them to church.”

And just like that, the suits began taking out Killian’s lackeys, one by one.

“Incoming!” she shouted, as they ducked while a suit crashed by them and onto the ground. She could feel the ground begin to shift under her. “JARVIS, get Igor to steady this thing.”

“This is how you’ve been managing your down time, huh?” Rhodey asked her carefully, “Instead of sleeping?”

“Everybody needs a hobby,” she said nonchalantly. Steve looked at her carefully then, and she wondered if she would get another lecture now, or if it could wait til after.

“Heartbreaker, help Red Snapper out, will you?” she asked, as one of her suits struggled to take on three of the Extremis powered soldiers.

She watched as fire emerged around her from the Extremis attackers and her suits.

A suit dropped in front of her, one of her earlier models, and she let it envelop her carefully.

“Time to put an end to this,” she said.

“Go,” Steve said to her carefully, “We’ll take the soldiers. Find Miss Potts and the president.”

“Oh, yeah. That's awesome. Give me a suit, okay?” Rhodey said, looking at her expectantly.

She wanted to laugh and make some quip about how the suits were just for her. But she’d changed her code already, several times, to make it so in case something happened to her, Rhodey could pilot them. Given the circumstances of her near Palladium poisoning, she wanted to make sure the world would be safe.

Just because she never told Rhodey that, didn’t mean he had any less access.

“Take Mark 21,” she told him carefully, “It’s most similar to your War Machine suit.”

“You know what, after AIM was responsible for the entire Iron Patriot rebranding, I think we’ll change the name back,” Rhodey grinned at her.

Together, the two of them shot up into the air, ready to take on whatever else was thrown their way.

“Miss, I’ve located Ms Potts,” JARVIS spoke in her ears.

“Thanks Baby,” she told him with a grin. “Let’s go get our girl, shall we?”

She landed carefully, inside the control room, as she looked around the fallen debris.

She went to lift it when Pepper started screaming, “Stop! Put it down. Put it down. Put it down.”
“Pep,” she said, lifting her face plate, “It’s me. I’m here. I’ll get you to safety, I promise.”

“Toni,” she let out a relieved sob, “I got your message, but I was so worried. Thank God you’re okay.”

“Let’s get you out of here,” she told Pepper gently, “Take my hand, Pep. I got you.”

Pepper reached out to her, and Toni strained, trying to take her hand in hers, as a hole made way in the floor. She felt a hot hand reach up and clench her arc reactor, and she let out a wince of pain as she fell on her back.

She watched as Aldrich Killian rose in the air, body burning up.

“Is she bothering you?” Killian asked, trying to be all smooth.

Oh she hated men like him.

“Don’t get up,” he moved quickly, until he was straddling her. “You know there was a point in my life when I wanted you on your back. And I wanted to give it to you hard for how you treated me that night. But now, having you here, I don’t see what all the fuss is about.”

“I could say the same thing,” she smirked, “You seem really keen on pushing these new powers of yours. Compensating for something?”

He glared at her, lighting his finger up as he placed it over her heart, “Ooh. Is it hot in there? Stuck? Do you feel a little stuck? Like a little turtle, cooking in her little turtle suit.”

“Oh, Toni,” Pepper groaned.

“She’s watching,” Killian grinned down at her, “How does it make you feel to know she’s going to watch you die? I think you should close your eyes. Close your eyes. Close your eyes, Baby. You don’t want to see this.”

She glared back up at him.

She didn’t listen to the countless other assholes trying to tell her how to live her life, why would she listen to him?

He grew angry at that, raising his arm to hit her down, and a long blade came out of her suit then, cutting his arm off cleanly.

He stumbled off of her, as she said, “Yeah, you take a minute.”

The severed arm burned a hole through the floor, and she saw Pepper fall then.

She stumbled out of her broken suit, as Pepper remained trapped in a moving contraption. She ran towards her, dodging the men that came her way.

“JARVIS, give me a suit right now!” she screamed as she jumped over two disconnected sections.

A suit hovered near her and she tried to jump into it, only for it to be blown to shreds.

“Oh, come on!” she screamed.

“I got eyes on the President,” Rhodey said over her comms. “I’m going to get him.”
“I might need some help with Pepper,” she said with a grunt.


She barrelled towards Pepper, dropping down onto a shipping container trying to get closer.

“The President is secure,” Rhodey’s told them. “I'm clearing the area.”

“Nice work old man,” Harry said in response.

“And I did it without a suit,” Rhodey said, pride in his voice.

“Yeah you did, Honey Bear,” she grinned.

She moved closer to Pepper, seeing her dangling in the air.

“Toni, I’m here,” Steve said, as he approached them.

“Nice to see you again, Captain,” she said, slightly tense. “Help me try and get her down.”

She leaned up, trying to get Pepper, but came short by a few feet, “Pep, I got you. Relax, I got you,” she said, as Pepper screamed, “Just look at me!”

“Miss Potts, you need to let go,” Steve said softly, as the mechanisms began to shift.

“Pepper, I can't reach any further and you can't stay there. All right? You've got to let go. You've got to let go! I'll catch you, I promise,” she told her friend.

It jolted then, and she watched in horror as Pepper began to fall, only for Steve to grab her at the last second.

“I have her,” Steve told Toni, as he pulled the woman up. “Miss Potts is secure.”

She let out a sigh of relief, “Thank you, Steve,” she said, as she pulled Pepper into her arms. “You’re safe, Pep,” she told her friend as Pepper sobbed into her arms, “But you need to get out of here, okay? You cannot stay here. Captain, can you get her clear of here until JARVIS can send a suit for her, please?”

“On it,” Steve told her with a nod, “What are you going to do?”

She gestured back towards Killian who was making his way towards her, “I have an appointment with an old friend.”

“Be careful,” Steve told her softly, “I’ll be back here as soon as Miss Potts has cleared the site.”

She nodded at them, as she turned her attention to the man approaching.

“It’s a shame. I would've caught her,” Killian told her with a shrug, “Guess you do need someone around to help you after all.”

She moved towards the man quickly, knowing she had no suit, and no powers.

She slid under him as he lunged in the air, and straight towards the suit that had landed towards her.

He hit her in the face, and she punched him straight in the stomach as her suit flared slightly. She grabbed his face, shoving it towards the metal railing and he ripped off a piece of her armour, as he
ran towards her and shoved her straight to the ground.

He landed on top of her again, trying to punch her in the face.

But she was done being on her back around him.

“Eject,” she said quickly, as she shot backwards, free falling again. But this time she knew she would be caught.

And sure enough, another suit enveloped her seconds later, as she flew straight up, picking up Killian, and slamming him straight to the ground.

She saw his shirt burn off from the heat radiating from his core and she aimed her thrusters at him, as he dodged her attacks and grabbed her hand, aiming it back at her.

The suit kept her afloat, as she tried to bring her down. He nearly sliced off her leg, as she ejected that portion quickly, as he hit her with her own armour and brought her to her knees.

She tried to punch him, as he grabbed her hand, crushing it in his.

“Well, here we are on the roof,” he said with a smirk. “Only took us decades to get here.”

“I never owed you anything,” she spat back at him. “You’re nothing more than an entitled nice guy, who thinks they’re owed the world. News flash, you aren’t owed shit.”

His hand reached back as he brought it down on her, slicing through her suit. She fell out of it, and onto the platform beneath them.

She heard a flight sound and looked up in shock as J spoke into her ear, “Mark 42, inbound.”

“I’ll be damned. The prodigal son returns,” she beamed up at her youngest child.

She lay our arm out, ready for the suit to attach itself to her, only for it to crash just feet away.

She sighed.

She’d need to work on that.

“Whatever,” she groaned.

“You really don’t deserve her, Toni,” Killian looked down on her. “She was nothing more than a glorified secretary for you, even after all this time. “It’s a pity. I was so close to having her perfect.”

He landed on her level and she stood firmly, meeting his gaze.

“You’re right that I don’t deserve her,” she told the man firmly, “But she is not a secretary. She is the most badass woman I know. She’s my COO, helps run several of my foundations, and beat me out as the most powerful woman in America last year. And she deserved that. But you’re wrong that she needs to change. She always perfect. She doesn’t need some serum to make her better.”

She lifted her hands then, directing the suit to attach itself to Killian. It restrained him, holding it back.

“JARVIS, do me a favour and blow Mark 42,” she said, throat clenching. The suit didn’t have any sentience, not of it’s own. Not like her bots or JARVIS. But it still hurt to watch.
She jumped away then as Killian screamed, the flames quickly overtaking the roof.

A faulty suit caught her as she crashed downwards, only to land on top of Steve Rogers. His arms tightened around her as she landed straight on his chest, and she wondered if she’d hurt him with the fall.

“I got you,” he said as he padded her fall. “I got you, Toni.”

She smiled up at him, “Thanks for breaking my fall.”

“Any time,” he grinned, as she stood carefully, as he helped her up.

The ground beneath them began to shift, “We should go,” she told him quickly. “Need a ride?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed,” he shrugged, as she held onto him tightly, trying to fly them both down to the ground in the few pieces of armour she had on.

She looked over at where Mark 42 lay in pieces, and she wondered if she’d made the right call.

“It’s over,” Steve told her carefully. “It wasn’t your fault Toni.”

“It was my call,” she reminded him. “I could have tried to save him.”

“He didn’t want to be saved,” he told her gently. “It was you or him. And for what it’s worth, I’m glad it was you.”

He brushed a strand of hair away from her face then, as she saw something emerge from the flames.

“Dear God,” Steve breathed as the burnt man made its way towards them.

Extremis was burning through him, and she could see fire pouring out of his body.

“No more false faces. You said you wanted the Mandarin. You’re looking right at him. It was always me, Toni. Right from the start. I am the Mandarin!” he shouted.

Steve raised his shield, ready to fight him, as Toni looked at the burning man. Her suit was too damaged to fight, and she didn’t know if another one could get to her in time.

Pepper came up from behind him then, hitting him with a large pole, as she pushed him to the side.

Her body was glowing orange and Toni let out a strangled breath.

“I’m not going to sit on the sidelines while you get hurt, Toni,” Pepper told her firmly, “I’m your family. That’s not how this works.”

A suit flew towards them then and she knew her order meant Pepper would be in danger.

“JARVIS, subject at my 12 o’clock is not a target, disengage!” she shouted, but unfortunately for her, her comms had flown out.

Pepper ran towards her, using her as leverage then, as she jumped into the air, and took Toni’s suit out with a single punch.

She threw Killian back as she kicked a missile at him and used the repulsors of the suit to light it up.

“That was incredible,” Clint said, as he came up behind them then, “Stark your girl is a badass.
Maybe I was sent in to seduce the wrong woman.”

Steve glared at him then and Toni laughed, “I doubt you could seduce Pepper if you tried. She’s too good for us all. A goddess among men and women alike.”

She looked carefully over at her friend, as Natasha looked ready to engage if Pepper lost control.

“Pep?” she said softly.

“Oh, my God. That was really violent,” Pepper said, looking stunned.

“You just scared the devil out of me,” Toni told her carefully, as she moved over to her. “I’m glad you came back, because honestly I don’t know if we could have handled him alone. Killian was kicking my ass.”

“Who’s the hot mess now?” Pepper let out a hysterical laugh.

“It's still debatable,” Toni shrugged, “You’ve read the articles about me. But right now, probably tipping your way a little bit. Why don't you dress like this at home? Hmm? Sport bra. The whole deal.”

Pepper threw her head back and laughed slightly, as Toni moved closer to her.

“You know, I think I understand why you don't want to give up the suits,” Pepper said, looking down at her body

She moved to hug Pepper, only for her to back away, “No, don't touch me. I'm gonna burn you.”

“No, you're not,” she told Pepper carefully, touching her arm, “Not hot, okay?”

“Just a little bit hot,” Clint leered quietly, and Steve hit him on the head.

“Am I gonna be okay?” Pepper asked her carefully.

“No,” Toni shrugged, “You work with me. And you’re my family. So everything will never be okay. But I think I can figure this out, yeah. I almost had this 20 years ago when I was drunk. I think I can get you better. That's what I do. I fix stuff. I was reminded recently that I’m somewhat of a mechanic. I think I can handle this.”

“And all your distractions?” Pepper asked her carefully. “I won’t ask you anymore to stop with the suits, Toni. As long as you don’t hide behind them. You need to face your problems head on and not go into life without sleeping.

“You’re right,” Toni sighed, “I’m going to work on that. Get some help, maybe. JARVIS. Hey. How are we doing on clean up?”

“We got all the soldiers,” Natasha told her with a nod. “And all the regular humans have been detained.”

“All wrapped up here, Miss. Will there be anything else?” JARVIS asked her as she paused for a minute.

“You know what to do,” she said. The suits were damaged and if anything, she learned she needed to take a step back and deal with her issues. More suits wouldn’t help her, not really.

“The Clean Slate Protocol, Miss?” JARVIS asked.
“Yes,” she nodded as she took a step back.

The rest of her group looked confused, except Rhodey who gave her a look of pride. He wrapped his arms around her, and the group looked off as her suits went off one by one, almost like fireworks.

“You really know how to put on a show,” Harry grinned at her.

“It’s beautiful,” Steve looked up in amazement, and she smiled over at the man.

It was finally over.

Well, not really.

The Vice President was apprehended with Rhodey there to oversee it. Trevor Slattery brought in, taking in all the fame that came with it. And the Extremis removed from Pepper.

But that wasn’t all.

She knew logically the reactor in her chest was a crutch. One that had to go. One that would continue to nearly kill her every day.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Rhodey asked as she lay in the hospital bed.

“There are other ways,” Ava told her as she held her hand in hers. “You don’t need to do this.”

“I know,” she told her family carefully. Happy was standing close to Pepper, as Harry looked worried about her. “But I do need to do this. I need it out of my chest, if I want any chance of having a normal life from here on out. Or as normal as it can be.”

“We’re here for you, Sweetheart,” Uncle Daniel said, giving him a smile. She’d told him he didn’t need to come all this way, not when Aunt Peggy would be alone if he did. But Aunt Peg had been having one of her good days during those calls and yelled at her for that, saying that she would be on the next plane over if given the chance.

“It’ll be okay,” Pepper said to her, “The doctors are the best available. You’ll be okay, Toni.”

“I know,” she smiled up at them.

“Miss Stark?” a nurse said, as she came into the room. “It’s time. If we could clear the room, we can get you ready for the operation.”

They say that change was progress is dangerous, but she’d bet none of those idiots ever had to live with a chest full of shrapnel. And now, neither would she.

When she woke up from the surgery, she knew she’d need to be better.

To do better.

She had PTSD, she knew that much. But she owed it to her family to get help.

She stood there, at the edge of the cliff where her house once lay, as she took the reactor out of her chest and threw it into the water.

She knew it was symbolic really. She could build more easily. Plus the element she’d discovered had been removed so no one could fish it out and use it in the future.
But it felt good to let it go.

To move on.

“We’ll rebuild,” Rhodey said, coming up from behind her. “Pepper’s already contacted the contractors.”

“Good,” Toni said with a smile, “But for now, I want to go back to New York. I have amends to make. And I want to be there for Peter. His family was right to keep me away, but if they’ll have me, I want to show them that I can be better. That I can do better.”

“You already are,” Rhodey kissed her head gently, “I’m so proud of you, Toni, and how far you’ve come. You’ve made us all so proud.”

“I love you too, Rhodey,” she grinned up at him.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked her, “The bots are getting restless.”

She grinned at him, “Of course my babies are. They must have been so worried.”

She walked back with him then, getting into her red sports car with an attachment so she could bring her bots back to New York with her.

At the end of the day, even without her money and toys, she knew she was enough.

She was Iron Woman.

And that’s all there was to it.

Which brought her back to the current moment. She opened her eyes then, looking around the room.

“Thanks for listening,” she said softly as she sat up on the couch. “To be able to share all my intimate thoughts and my experiences with someone, it just cuts the weight of it in half. You know, it’s like a snake swallowing its own tail. Everything comes full circle. And the fact that you’ve been able to help me process it all.

Bruce had been furious with her when she’d returned, and she knew that it was because he’d cared about her. And he’d been the only one not there to help her fight.

She stood by his reasons, and she knew she wouldn’t want him to do anything that made him uncomfortable.

“Toni,” Bruce told her softly, “You gave me a home when no one else could even look at me without fear in their eyes. I might not be a psychiatrist, but I’m always here to listen to you as your friend. That’s what friends are for, right?”

She grinned at him, “Right.”

Because no matter how she’d felt over these last few months, she knew she wasn’t alone. No matter what life threw her way, she’d have her family behind her.
Toni sighed as she looked around the renamed Avengers Tower. It was just as she left it all those months ago before she decided she needed to leave the city behind and move back to Malibu.

It seemed her home there had become somewhat of a sanctuary for her; every time things in the town she was raised in got too hard, she fled.

But now her home had burned down, and the tower was all she had left.

She knew it was being rebuilt, but it didn’t change the fact she still felt lost herself in the aftermath of it all.

Perhaps a part of her had been lost the moment she’d flown the nuke into the wormhole.

She was getting better, slowly, of that much she was sure. But it didn’t change the fact that she still had a long way to go either.

She looked around her workshop, her bots beeping around in the corner, freshly reconstructed. She might have given them new parts, but their programming was still the same. Just because she knew now how to make more complex artificial intelligence didn’t mean she should. Her babies all had their own personalities, and even if she could do better, it wasn’t right to change who they were.

“Toni?” she heard a voice say and she quickly spun around, dropping the wrench she’d been holding, as she came face to face with Steve Rogers.

He raised his hands quickly, “Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“What are you doing here, Cap?” she asked as picked up her tools. “Shouldn’t you be back on your American Freedom tour?”

“Is that what we’re calling it?” he raised a brow at her.

“That’s what the internet is calling it,” she shrugged. He looked a bit confused by that and she clarified, “Twitter’s taken to it. Whenever anyone sees you and posts a picture, they use that hashtag. It has quite a following. I’ve had JARVIS retweet a few for me.”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever understand this century,” he sighed. “Why is that even entertaining?”

“The internet has to find it’s amusement somewhere,” she answered. “And you’ve gathered quite a loyal fanbase. But I doubt you’re here to talk about your Twitter following. So what can I do for Captain?”

“I came to check in on you,” he told her, and she gave him a confused look. He sighed, “Toni, why didn’t you call?”
“What do you mean?” she asked him, confused.

“You called out a terrorist on national television,” he reminded her, “You went after the Mandarin on your own. Your house was bombed, Toni! The world thought you were dead. We all thought you were dead. And not once did you call any of us asking for help. Not even your own cousins. Why didn’t you call? We would have been there for you. We could have helped you.”

“You did,” she reminded him, “You showed up when I went after Killian. And I did call Harry; I asked SHIELD to help.”

“Not until the very end,” he said, unimpressed. “You could have called sooner. You could have reached out. We’re supposed to be a team, Toni. How can we be a team if you go off doing your own thing, and letting the rest of us to wonder if you’re alive or not?”

She blinked at him, “Were you worried about me?”

He barked out a laugh, “The entire world was worried about you. All the news could talk about was if you were alive or not. There was speculation about what would happen to your legacy. No one knew a damn thing about what happened to you. And you still don’t see why that’s a problem?”

“I couldn’t risk anyone knowing where I was,” she told him softly, “He’d already endangered Happy and nearly killed Pepper. The last thing I wanted was anyone else I cared about in danger. If I came back to New York that would have put Ava and Bruce in danger. And that was not a risk I was willing to take.”

“You could have at least let us know you were okay,” he pressed. “I know you think you’re alone, but you don’t know how wrong that is. You don’t know how many people care about you. Even if we’re not around all the time to let you know just how much you mean to us. Because you do, Toni. You mean the world to all of us, and I don’t think a single person would be fine if you were suddenly gone from their lives.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. For so long she’d felt so alone, with her only friends being Jarvis, Ana, and the Carter-Sousa family. And she’d accepted that. The kids at school tried to befriend her for her wealth or status, and she never did fit in anywhere, being younger than the other kids. In university, she’d met Rhodey. And then came Pepper and Happy, and suddenly she was surrounded by people she cared about. But she’d lost so many people over the years, and she had once again felt like everyone was leaving her.

“You’re not alone,” he repeated and moved closer to her. His eyes searched hers for a moment and when she didn’t back away, he pulled her into a hug gingerly. She relaxed slightly, as his arms enveloped her, and she felt the warmth of his body against her own.

He pulled away a few seconds later, looking a little sheepish but she smiled softly at him.

“I’ll call,” she told him after a moment. “Next time I decide to take on a terrorist. It’s just that you were all busy, and he made it personal when he went after Happy. I’ve been doing this on my own for so long, that I don’t always know how to let other people in. But you’re right. We are a team. And being on a team means letting other people in and letting them help when things get rough. I can’t promise it’ll be easy. I’m told I can be quite stubborn, but I’ll try, at the very least.”

“Good,” he nodded as he looked her over. “Now, when was the last time you ate anything?”

She paused for a moment, trying to think back, but her lack of answer had him shaking his head.

“Come on,” he nudged her slightly, “I’ll make you lunch.”
“But I still have a few projects I need to finish,” she said, waving her arms around to show all the work she hadn’t finished yet.

“And they’ll be there for you when you get back,” he said simply. “Come on, Stark. Take a break.”

She sighed as she looked into his expectant eyes, before reluctantly nodding, “Lead the way O Captain My Captain.”

He shot her an amused look as she followed him out of the room.

Steve didn’t leave after she ate. He didn’t leave later that day or even that week. And in all honestly, it surprised her.

It wasn’t like she was alone in the tower, rattling around without any purpose. But at the same time she wasn’t used to having so many people around again. Ava and Bruce were still around, and Harry had insisted on taking some time off to stay with her.

Maybe she ought to be offended by the fact that her family and friends didn’t trust her not to do anything stupid again, but really, were they wrong? She did call out a terrorist on national television.

So really, they were right she supposed to be a bit concerned.

And it was nice really, to have the people she cared about in her life once more.

She sighed to herself as she stared at her screen. She’d been looking at it for quite some time, trying to find the motivation to finish her latest project, but really, she didn’t want to. She was tired, whether she liked to admit it or not, and it had been over thirty hours since she’d slept last.

She was trying to get better, but it didn’t make the nightmares go away. It didn’t change the fact that she still saw the wormhole every time she closed her eyes.

But she’d gotten better at handling it. At trying breathing techniques or joining Bruce on the couch on nights when neither of them quite were able to get any sleep.

It was going to be a process; she wouldn’t get better overnight. Hell, she might never get better. She still hated being handed things from her childhood trauma. But she would learn to deal with it, just like she learnt to deal with everything else that had haunted her through her life.

“Miss,” JARVIS interrupted her thoughts, “You have a call from Ben Parker.”

She frowned at the name; she hadn’t talked to the Parkers since their decision for her to stop mentoring their nephew, and she was unsure why they would be calling.

She didn’t blame them, not when she had been a disaster. And if Peter had gotten hurt because of the Mandarin, she never would have forgiven herself.

She sighed, “Put him through,” she said, as she heard his voice fill her speakers.

“Toni?” Ben asked, “Do you have a few moments to talk? I hope I’m not calling at a bad time.”

“No, now is fine,” she said, unsure. “So, what’s up?”

“I wanted to check in on you,” he admitted, “We were worried when we saw the news coverage.
Peter didn’t sleep at all that night when he thought you had been killed.”

She shrugged, a bit uncomfortable, “Yeah, well I’m fine, as you can see. Nothing more than a few scrapes really. No need to worry about me.”

“Toni,” Ben let out a breath, “You know why we did what we did right?”

“Of course,” she sighed, “I’m a mess. That’s never been a secret; the media likes to talk about it all the time. I can’t blame you for thinking that your nephew needs better role models than me.”

“You know that wasn’t what we meant,” Ben said firmly, “You needed help Toni. What you were doing wasn’t healthy and we didn’t want Peter to see you like that. But you are not a bad role model. You were suffering from an illness. The same illness that so many other people suffer from on a regular basis. It is not your fault.”

“Why are you calling, Ben?” she asked him tiredly. “If you want to know if I’m suddenly all better, I’m not. I’m not as destructive as before but I’m not better. So I doubt you’d want me around Peter any time soon.”

“But you’re trying,” he told her, “I’ve talked to Ava and she told me that you’ve gotten better at talking about it, instead of letting it eat you away.”

He paused for a moment, and she didn’t say anything.

“Peter misses you, Toni. You were able to offer him something that May and I can’t; a connection and a chance to learn. He doesn’t get a lot of that at school, and he’s come out of his shell more since he started learning from you. I know you’re a busy person, so if you don’t have time to mentor Peter any more, we won’t hold it against you. But if you’re willing, we’d like to continue.”

Her throat tightened at that.

“I would,” she said softly, “He’s a good child, and being around him makes me want to be better.”

“Good,” Ben said, and she smiled lightly. “He has a science fair coming up. He built a version of your reactor to light up a model city. It’s nowhere near as powerful as your own obviously, but he’s very proud of it. I know he’d love to show it off to you if you can make it to the fair.”

“I can be there,” she said quickly, “Just tell me when. I would love to see his version of the reactor.”

“It’s tomorrow,” Ben said, and she had JARVIS make a quick note in her calendar.

“Perfect,” she nodded.

“Come over for dinner after,” Ben told her, “We all miss having you around.”

“Okay,” she nodded, “I’ll be there.”

“I’ll let you go now,” Ben said, “Thank you, Toni.”

“Thank you,” she told him, “For trusting me to mentor him.”

“You’re a good person, Stark,” Ben said gently, “Even if you don’t always agree.”

She didn’t say anything as he ended the call. Steve peered in then, wondering if she wanted to get a slice of pizza and she nodded as she grabbed her phone.
Perhaps it would be good for her to leave the lab more often.

“Remind me why we’re in Brooklyn?” Toni asked, as the rose-coloured sunglasses covered her eyes. It wasn’t the best disguise, and Steve hadn’t tried all that much harder to hide his appearance, shy of wearing a Dodgers baseball hat.

“To get pizza,” Steve said, as he led her into a place called Totonno’s, “And this is the best in the city.”

He placed the order the moment they sat down, and she looked up at him a bit surprised.

“I thought you didn’t know anything about the new century,” she commented.

“This place has been around since my time,” he explained to her softly, “Bucky and I would come in and get a slice each after saving our money to be able to afford it. Totonno’s is one of the few things from the forties that’s still around even after all this time.”

She gave him a gentle smile, “What was it like back then?” she asked him curiously.

“Not the greatest,” he admitted. “But it was all I knew. I was so sick before the serum that I couldn’t even get a proper job to help Ma around the house, and I know Bucky tried to help out when he could, but he had three younger sisters to look after as well. The Depression was rough, because some days we went without food altogether, but it was simpler times, you know? We weren’t as connected to the rest of the world as we are now, and we were happy at least.”

“I wish I could have met him,” Toni said. “Bucky, I mean. Aunt Peg used to tell me stories about the two of you. And not those fake stories that the corporations tried to sell with their comics and movies, but the real stuff.”

“There are movies?” he asked, a bit perplexed.

She laughed, “There’s an entire collection of things Captain America based. Maybe I’ll ask JARVIS to play one of the movies tonight. They’re not very good, but they have a decent cult following to it. Since you were thought to be dead, they got away with it; but I’m sure now that you’re back you can gain ownership over your image. Then you can collect the profits from it.”

“I don’t need the money,” he said simply, “Besides, it’s not like I did any of the work involved in the process.”

“So collect a portion of it then,” she shrugged, “You don’t need to keep it if you don’t want. All Iron Woman sale proceeds feeds directly into the Maria Stark foundation to help victims of the battles and various other charitable causes.”

“You do that?” he asked a bit surprised.

“I have more money than I know what to do with,” she said simply. “The least I can do is make sure some of it goes towards good causes. The Battle of New York caused a lot of damage and people lost their homes. If I can help alleviate that in any way, then why wouldn’t I?”

He gave her a gentle smile as their pizza came then, and she from just the smell of it, she understood why Steve had been insistent on coming here for lunch.
“It smells amazing,” she told him, as she reached for a slice of pizza.

“Wait til you taste it,” he said, with his Brooklyn accent filling his voice. She grinned up at him as she bit carefully into it.

She let out a soft moan and his eyes twinkled.

“Told you it was good,” he laughed, and she took another bite.

“We’re getting pizza from here more often,” she told him as he nodded in agreement.

“I’m glad there are still a few things that a little guy from Brooklyn can teach the great Toni Stark,” he teased her.

“Oh I’m sure there’s quite a few things you could teach me,” she purred as he blushed lightly.

She could see him bite back a retort as a young boy came to their table just then.

“Miss Iron Woman?” he asked him politely and she smiled at him.

“Hello,” she said, as she looked over at the boy, “What’s your name?”

“James,” he said a bit shyly.

“That’s a great name,” she said as he lit up a little bit at that, “That’s the name of my best friend, War Machine.”

“He’s so cool,” the boy beamed.

“And the name of Captain America’s best friend too,” Toni said as Steve watched them interact.

“I made you a picture,” the boy said, as he put it on their table, “I drew all the Avengers.”

“Is this for me?” she asked him, as she looked down at the drawings on the page. He nodded quickly and she grinned. “I love it, James. Thank you so much.”

He looked back over at where his parents were sitting, “I have to go now.”

He ran back over to where his family was, and she placed the picture gingerly in her bag.

“You’re good with kids,” Steve said as the boy left their table.

She smiled, “I meet a lot of kids, especially since becoming Iron Woman. A lot of them want to show me their artwork or just take a picture with me.”

“Does this kind of thing happen to you often?” Steve asked after a moment, a bit amused.

“Usually if I go out into public,” she nodded, “Sometimes it’s cute little kids with pictures. Other times it entitled adults who don’t understand that sometimes I just want to be somewhere without the commotion.”

“Must be hard,” he remarked, “To never get any privacy. Even on the road it was nice to meet people and hear their stories, but if I had to deal with it constantly, then I don’t know what I would have done.”

She shrugged, uncomfortable, “It’s just part of my life I guess,” she said, “Even before I became Iron
Woman it was for being a Stark. It’s just how the world works.”

“Doesn’t make it right,” he said with a shake of his head.

“I know,” she sighed, “But what can you do”

He didn’t say anything to that, and she used the opportunity to change the subject.

“So tell me more about your trip around America,” she said with a grin. “You must have quite a few stories to tell.”

He laughed at that, as he launched into a story.

She wore a better disguise as she slipped into the middle school. She had darker sunglasses on, as well a hat she’d borrowed from Steve. Anyone who looked at her closely enough would probably be able to tell who she was, but then again no one ever would suspect Toni Stark of being in a public school to see a science fair.

Today was about Peter and his project. The last thing she wanted was for today to become a media circus and to become about her.

That was not the point of all of this.

She walked through the halls towards the gymnasium and was immediately taken back by how many people were there.

She had partaken in her own share of science fairs over the years, but to see one as an adult was incredible. In the room there were so many young, brilliant minds. These kids were the future. They were the ones she was trying to shape the world into a better place for.

She walked down the aisle where Ben had said Peter was set up, and she held herself back for a few moments, as she watched him eagerly talk about his presentation to the judges. She couldn’t hear what the young boy was saying, but she could see the amount of excitement in his face as he happily talked about what it was that he’d created.

She hadn’t realized how much she missed mentoring the boy until she saw him up close again. She knew she had no right to feel protective towards him, not when he had his own family, but then again, her family was long since comprised of people who were unrelated to her in any way.

As the judges left his booth, she moved closer to see him. He didn’t spot her, going through his notes and she took the moment to say something.

“So how does this work?” she asked casually. Peter’s head shot up quickly as he saw her.

“Toni?” he asked in surprise, “What are you doing here?”

“I came to see you, Kid,” she said nonchalantly. “Isn’t it obvious? I heard you had a rather impressive science project and I wanted to come see it.”

“You came all the way here for me?” he asked, dazed.

“Yup,” she popped the ‘p’. “So why don’t you tell me about your contraption?”
He beamed, “I tried to make something like the arc reactor,” he said, “But of course I couldn’t use palladium. And your element isn’t easy to recreate without nuclear fusion and I could hardly build one in our apartment. So I changed it to nickel, given it being more easily accessible and part of the same group of elements on the periodic table. Of course it wouldn’t work to power anything as powerful as the one in your suit or any of the buildings, but it’s strong enough to act like a battery and power the little city in front of me.”

She looked down at the model city with lights, moving cars and other elements and smiled at him brightly.

“This is absolutely brilliant, Peter,” she said with a grin, “What you’ve created here is extremely advanced, and I wouldn’t be surprised if you won first place.”

He grinned, “Thanks! It means a lot to hear you say that.”

He paused for a moment, looking shy again and she didn’t say anything, wanting him to be comfortable enough to speak.

“I was worried,” he admitted to her quietly. “When I heard that you were dead. I had no idea what happened to you, and then the next thing the news was saying was that you’d saved the President and brought down The Mandarin.”

“I’m sorry you were worried,” she said gently, “But if they knew I was alive they would have kept hurting people I cared about. And I couldn’t let that happen.”

“Are you okay now?” he asked her in a young voice.

“Not fully,” she told him honestly, “But I’m getting better. I will be better. I promise you that much Peter. And if you want to come back to the lab and continue our mentorship, I will gladly pick it back up again. But I won’t think is best for you, then I’ll understand.”

“You still want to mentor me?” he asked surprised.

She nodded, “I got permission from your aunt and uncle to continue. But only if it’s what you want.”

“I do!” he said quickly as he hugged her. She tensed up at first, before relaxing and wrapping her arms around the boy. “Thank you, Toni.”

“Thank you,” she told him with a grin.

The judges got on stage then, and she took a step back as Peter eagerly listened to them announce the results. And she was unsurprised to see that he’d won first place in the fair.

She crossed her arms as she leaned back on the walls of the gymnasium. She’d meant what she’d said to Peter. She was trying to be better. For him, for her family, and for herself.
Chapter Summary

Steve visits Peggy, Toni makes a decision she hopes she won't regret, and Bruce needs advice

Steve walked through the halls of the nursing home with emotions racing through his head. He knew perhaps he ought to have come sooner. Perhaps he shouldn’t have waited as long as he did from getting thawed out of the ice to visit the former love of his life.

But he couldn’t bring himself to do it.

She was a reminder of everything he had lost; a reminder of the life he could have had. If only Bucky didn’t fall. If only he didn’t crash the plane. If only he’d been there for their date. If only, if only, if only.

But almost seventy years had passed since then. Life had gone on without him. Peggy had moved on, Howard had moved on, and the world kept spinning while he was stuck in the ice.

No matter how many times he dreamed of shutting his eyes, of waking up in a world long gone, it didn’t change the fact that he was in the new world.

Bucky would have loved it. He always did like technology and all those futuristic devices. In another life, perhaps he and Toni could have been the best of friends. In another life perhaps Bucky would have been like an uncle to her.

He paused for a moment.

In another life he could have been like an uncle to her.

He shuddered briefly, not wanting to dwell too much on those thoughts any longer.

Peggy Carter had once been the love of his life. But Peggy had also moved on since then. She’d fallen in love, gotten married, and had two children who were absolutely brilliant in their own right. Harry who he trusted to have his back in the field since the two of them fought the alien army together. Who was headstrong and reminded him so much of Peggy when it came to protecting those he loved and cared for. And Ava whose mind was so brilliant that sometimes it felt like when she and Toni worked together that they were leagues above the rest of them.

He sighed to himself, looking down at the bouquet of freesias in his hand as he stood outside her door.

He knocked carefully and heard a soft voice telling him to come in.

He knew she’d gotten older, but looking at her, he knew she was undeniably the same Peggy Carter he’d known another lifetime ago.

“I was wondering when you’d come,” she said, giving him a gentle smile as she sat up from the bed that she was stationed in. “They told me you had been found.”
“I’m sorry I’m late for our date,” he said, giving her a soft smile as he placed the flowers in an empty vase beside her bed.

“They’re lovely, Steven,” she said, “You’re here now, that’s all that matters.”

“I had to visit my best girl,” he told her, sitting down on a chair near her bed.

“All these years later and you’re still a charmer,” she laughed. He was quiet for a few minutes, and she glanced over at him. “What’s on your mind, Darling?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” he admitted. “At all. The world’s changed so much, Peg. How am I ever supposed to find out where I belong now?”

“Where you were always meant to be,” she told him gently, “Right at the front, taking charge, and making the world a better place, one step at a time.”

He let out a watery laugh, “You were always too clever for the rest of us,” he said, and she grinned.

“And don’t you forget it,” she said cheekily. “Now, I know the look of a man who has a lot weighting down on his chest. Don’t make an old woman pry it out of you.”

He forgot how easy she’d been to talk to.

“Toni Stark,” he admitted. “You know her, don’t you?”

Her eyes softened fondly, “She’s my goddaughter, so I’d say I know her.”

“She confuses me,” he told her. “She’s brash and bold and everything that embodies this century. She’s loud and in the face of everyone she meets, and absolutely unapologetic about the fact that she’s the smartest person in the room. But despite what the press says about her, she doesn’t let it faze her. She has no sense of self preservation and doesn’t seem to realize that when she throws herself into danger, she’s hurting the people who love her.”

“I thought you liked women who weren’t afraid of standing up for what they believed in,” Peggy said, raising a brow at him.

“She’s nothing like Howard,” Steve shot back, refusing to acknowledge what she’d just said.

Peggy grew silent for a moment, and he didn’t say anything, wanting to know what she was thinking. Toni had made it clear that Howard was a sensitive subject shouldn’t be enough for her to forget the kind of man he’d been. One who’d fight bravely for their country and one who’d help do what was necessary to protect those he’d cared about.”

“No, she isn’t,” Peggy said after a moment. “Toni’s had a hard life, Steve. A life filled strings attached at every turn, and a life of having to constantly fight to have a seat at every table. Don’t go looking for similarities between her and Howard Stark, you’re not going to find any. And you won’t find anything that you like.”

“Howard was a good man,” he told her firmly, “You were there in the war, Peg. You remember the things he did for this country. How can you even say anything like that when you know exactly the kind of man he was?”

“Was,” she said quietly. “Steve, you went down in that ship, but the war didn’t end the day you did. The war didn’t end for months after. Howard was involved in the Manhattan Project. It changed him; he grew harder to try and deal with the deaths. And he blamed himself for you crashing the ship.
When Toni was born, he decided she wasn’t worthy of being his legacy, because of the sole reason that she was a girl. He didn’t even hold her after she was born, instead he went for a drink. And he dedicated himself full time to making sure he found you. So that you would be what was left of the Stark Legacy. Not her.”

She let him take that in and he felt like a truck hit him.

Looking at the woman Antonia Stark had become it was hard to imagine what Peggy had just said. When she was so incredibly brilliant and capable.

“She made her first circuit board when she was three, did you know that?” Peggy asked him, “She didn’t know it at the time, but she solved an issue Howard had been facing for months and couldn’t fix. She made the company hundreds of thousands of dollars from her design before she could even realize what that meant. She went to MIT when she was thirteen, but Howard was too busy with work to take her, so Daniel and I drove down with her mother and Mr Jarvis.”

“Her AI?” Steve asked, a bit confused.

“No,” Peggy shook her head. “JARVIS, her AI, was based on her butler, Edwin Jarvis. That man was more of a father to her than Howard ever was. He was there for her every time Howard got too drunk and took out his anger on her. He was there for every birthday, for every Christmas when Howard was off looking for you. For every time she needed anyone there.”

“He wouldn’t hurt his own daughter,” Steve paled slightly.

She let out a sad laugh, “He did. My biggest regret was that I wasn’t able to take her away from that place. But Maria loved her daughter, despite her own faults. I hoped she’d be enough to keep her safe, but she wasn’t. I don’t think I even know the full scope of how badly he hurt her growing up. He lost himself to the bottle more nights than he stayed sober, and he was a mean and angry drunk. Toni dealt with that her entire life. She dealt with him telling her she wasn’t good enough.”

“Why did he give her the company then?” he asked, desperate to hold onto the image of the man he’d once known.

“She’d threatened him before, saying that his father said a Stark would always be given control of the company, so he couldn’t even hand it over to anyone else if he wanted to. But perhaps it was a last-minute moment of clarity. I don’t know. She could barely even grieve her parents in peace. I don’t remember a lot of what was happening around then,” she said sadly, and he remembered her illness once more.

“I never knew it was so bad,” Steve said softly.

“Many men didn’t return from that war the same way they went in,” Peggy told him gently. “It’s not an excuse. Not even close. But I want you to understand that the Howard you knew was not the same as the one she did. And I want you to remember that when you look at her, because she’s faced so much and the last thing that she needs is for you to tell her how things were back then. I know he was your friend. He was mine too. But that doesn’t make her pain any less valid.”

“How could he treat his own daughter like that?” he asked, painfully. Because suddenly so much made sense. How she tiptoed around the subject of her father. How she hated talking about it. Why there were pictures of everyone else in her home. Of her mother, cousins, and Peggy and her husband. Of the man who must have been Jarvis and his wife. And her friends.

But there were none of Howard Stark.
“You remind me a lot of her, you know,” Peggy said, breaking the silence. “The way you both fight for things like it’s you against the world.”

“I don’t know about that,” Steve said looking over at the woman, “Toni feels like this enormous person. She’s so much more than anything I am. She’s a CEO, a hero, and she’s loved by so many people in her life. I don’t know if I can ever live up to that.”

“She’s just a girl,” she told him, “Even under all her armour and masks. She’s the same little girl who called me Aunt Peggy and used to borrow my lipstick. You just need to get to know the real woman and not just the one the rest of the world sees.”

“I’ll try,” Steve promised the woman carefully, as she smiled back at him.

“Treat my little Ducky well,” Peggy told him, and when he looked confused at the name, she laughed as she told him the story of the eight-year-old girl in duck pyjamas who eagerly listened to stories about Captain America and Bucky Barnes. And he thought to himself then that he wanted to know more about the real Toni Stark. The one that her family knew so well and would do anything for.

He wanted to get to know the real her better, and not just the woman he thought she was when he got into an argument with her on the Helicarrier. Because if there was one thing he was slowly realizing, it was that he was very wrong in his first impression of her.

And if he had been that wrong, what else had he been wrong about?

Peggy looked tired then, and he took it as his cue to leave. He kissed her forehead gently, as he left the room, only to come face to face with an older gentleman.

“You must be Steve Rogers,” the man said, and he realized then that he was her husband.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr Carter-Sousa,” Steve said politely.

“I’m glad to see you’re doing well,” the man nodded at him. “Are you heading back to New York?”

“I am,” Steve nodded. “Fury wanted to discuss a few things, so I stopped by. But my visit’s coming to an end.”

“Good,” the man nodded, “Before you go, if I could ask you one thing?”

Was this where he would be asked to stay away from the woman he once loved? Surely Peg’s husband wasn’t worried that he’d be a threat to their marriage now.

“Take care of Toni,” Daniel told him, “She thinks of you as a friend. I know she doesn’t want to worry me about what’s going on in her life, but I still worry.”

“Of course,” Steve smiled. Toni might not need him to save her, she’d made that very clear. But he still wanted to be there for her. That much he was sure of, if nothing else in this new century.

Getting permission for a certain Harley Keener and his sister Abigail wasn’t all that difficult in the end. Not in the way she thought it would be. Mrs Keener was busy most days with work, and trying to make ends meet, so the woman didn’t mind her children being gone for a week or two during their March Break. She had insisted on meeting Toni first, but at the end of the day, she simply didn’t
have any qualms with it. Not the way Ben and May Parker had.

She supposed she ought to not be surprised. She knew not all kids grew up with parents who were there for them every day. Her own childhood and father was a testament to what it was like growing up with a parent who was busy with work. But Mrs Keener wasn’t busy because she cared more about work than her children. She was busy because she needed to prioritize work in order to make sure there would be food on the table.

If she thought that for even a moment that she was the kind of woman who would accept help, then Toni wouldn’t have hesitated. But Mrs Keener wouldn’t accept any handouts. That much was clear in their interaction.

So instead, she invited them up for the weekend, wanting Peter to meet the Keeners, as she had a feeling the two boys would get on well. Neither had many friends their own age, and as much as she wanted to be there for the both of them, it would be good if they made some friends as well.

“What if he doesn’t like me?” Peter asked in a small voice as they stood on the tarmac where her private jet was landing.

“He’ll like you,” Toni promised him, “The two of you are the smartest kids I know. I have a feeling the two of you will get on like a house on fire. As long as my house doesn’t actually end up on fire.”

“I didn’t start that fire,” Peter pouted, “That was DUM-E.”

In which he was referring to the incident a few months ago where she’d turned her back for one moment, and in that second, DUM-E accidentally crushed one of Peter’s resistors when his back was turned and the circuit he’d been working on burst into flames.

“Just don’t let it happen again,” she said in mock seriousness, knowing her oldest child was responsible for most of the incidents in her lab.

“I won’t,” Peter pouted again, and she laughed at him as her private jet’s doors opened. She’d sent Happy to pick the kids up and while the man grumbled about it he knew there was no one she trusted more to pick her kids up.

“Hi Toni,” Harley bounced out of her plane as his sister tailed shyly behind him. “I knew you’d be here. You know how?”

“Happy told you?” she asked him sarcastically.

“Because we’re connected,” he said solemnly, ignoring her.

“Whatever you say, Kid,” she shook her head with a laugh. “Hi Abby. How are you doing?”

“Good,” the girl said quietly, and Toni gave her an encouraging smile.

“Did the two of you have a good flight?” she asked, as she led them to the car.

“Yes,” Abby nodded, as she glanced over at Peter. “Who’s he?”

“This is my friend Peter,” Toni told them, and Peter blushed slightly. “I thought that the four of us could hang out this week while you’re on break. Is that okay?”

“What’s your favourite Law of Motion?” Harley asked him judgingly.

“The third law,” Peter said quickly, “I like the idea that everything has a balancing reaction.”
“Of course,” he snorted, “The first law is better. Think about the external force that you could enact on any situation. But third is cool too I guess.” He looked up at her then, “I approve, you can keep the kid.”

“Hey,” Peter squeaked.

“I knew this kid before I knew you,” Toni told him, unimpressed. “And I’m keeping all of you. It’s all a part of my plan for world domination really.

“If you plan on taking over the world with children then you better get started,” Harley told her as he took a seat in her car before her. “We have a lot of work to do.”

She laughed at that and Happy merely grumbled.

“I deserve a raise,” he told her as he pointed at Harley. “If I have to babysit that kid any more than I’ve already done then I deserve a bloody raise. You have no idea the things he’s planning on getting into. He shot me with a potato when I went to pick him up, Toni. A goddamn potato.”

“I thought you were going to murder me,” Harley said innocently.

“I told you he was coming,” Toni said, unimpressed as she took a seat in the driver’s seat, with Happy in the passenger’s side.

“You have a potato gun?” Peter said, eyes widening. “That’s so cool! Can you show me how you made it?”

“Oh no, no, no, no,” Toni wagged a finger at them, “You aren’t going to corrupt Peter with any weapons. The only science we will be doing will be the nonviolent kind. No guns of any sort, even potato in my workshop.”

“So we won’t get to see the Iron Woman suit?” Abby asked, looking a little saddened.

Her eyes softened at that, “I have one that is safe to be around kids,” she told the girl, “You can see that one, if you like.”

“Okay!” Abby said, smiling for the first time, as Toni started the car.

Why did she have a feeling that this was going to be one of the longest weeks of her life?

It was the longest week of her life. Despite her protests, Peter and Harley had made two matching potato guns and were currently aiming it at either each other or any stray avenger who got in their way.

Steve had taken to going on longer morning runs, so he could avoid them, Clint was hiding somewhere in her vents, Natasha was off on an “important mission”, and Bruce, poor Bruce, was answering every single science question that was thrown his way.

Turns out, the only thing more interesting to the two boys than the Hulk was Bruce Banner’s gamma radiation papers.

She sighed as she looked around her home. Peter had decided to take Harley and Abby on a tour of the city with May and Ben, and for the first time that week, she had a moment to breathe without having to be a responsible adult.
She was never going to become a parent, that much was certain. Too much responsibility for her to want to do. No, she’d be the fun aunt who always brought cool presents when she came to visit. All of the fun of mentoring kids yet none of the actual responsibility. Plus it seemed far more her speed than actually raising any kids.

She was not mother material, not to real humans anyways.

“Are they gone?” Bruce said, peeking into her lab.

“They’re gone,” she hummed, “For now anyways.”

“Your kids are great, Toni, but they’re a bit of a handful,” Bruce said as he entered her workshop.

“They really are, aren’t they,” she laughed, “They’re brilliant, but Hawking help the world if they ever decide that they want to plot world domination together.”

“I’m not sure the Avengers would even be enough to stop something like that,” he laughed as he patted U on the head.

“They’ll be back in a few hours,” she told him pointedly, “So if you want to work on anything, I’d make sure you get to it before then. Otherwise you’re not going to get any peace and quiet for the next few hours. Or you know, if you had something on your mind that you wanted to talk about before they got back, I’d do it now.”

He laughed, running his hand through his hair, “Am I that transparent?”

“Only to those who know you,” she grinned. “So what’s on your mind, Buttercup?”

“Ava,” he admitted, and she found herself grinning.

“I knew it!” she said triumphantly.

“You knew what?” Bruce said, looking at her confused, “I haven’t even said anything yet. What’s there to know?”

“You have feelings for my cousin,” Toni said knowingly, “And you want my help because you have no idea about what to do about said feelings.”

He shook a screwdriver at her.

“You’re far too smart for your own good, you know that Stark?” he said, looking bemused.

“I’m just smart enough,” she grinned at him, “The world wouldn’t be able to handle it if I were any smarter.”

“And the world would be a lot worse off if you weren’t as clever as you are,” he said with a softy smile. He sighed then and looked at her. “Well?”

“Well what?” she asked, raising a brow at him.

“Aren’t you going to tell me that it’s a horrible idea? I nearly killed the last woman I cared for. Are you really going to tell me that nothing could be wrong with the fact that I have feelings for your cousin?”

“So it’ll be a little rough,” she said with a shrug, “You have been of a problem. But in case you haven’t noticed, no one here judges you for it. I trust you around the kids, regardless of what you
might think. And I trust you not to hurt any of us intentionally. Every relationship takes work, but if there’s one thing I learned, it’s that people aren’t perfect, no matter how hard we try to be. We all have our flaws, and people who care about us love us in spite of it.”

“Do you think she’ll yes if I ask her to dinner?” Bruce asked, looking at her carefully.

“I can’t speak for my cousin,” Toni told him firmly, “She’s her own person and has the right to make her own decisions. But for what it’s worth, I think she’ll say yes. She’s always been the best of us, and I know she cares about you just as much as you care about her. If you’re serious about your feelings for her, then I think you should take the chance and take the risk.”

“And you’d be okay with that?” Bruce asked again, “If I dated her.”

She paused for a moment, “Are you asking for my permission to date her?” she asked, surprised, “She has an older brother you know, one who’ll want to have words with you. And a dozen other family members would be suitable if you wanted someone’s blessing.”

“You’re practically her older sister,” Bruce said firmly, “She looks up to you. Both Harry and Ava do. Besides, you’re my friend. I want your blessing as your friend and her sister to date Ava, if you are willing to give it.”

“You have it,” she grinned, “For what it’s worth, I think the two of you will be good together.”

“Like you and Steve?” he asked her, and she froze.

“We’re just friends,” she said quickly, “He barely tolerates me.”

“We both know that’s a lie, Toni,” Bruce gave her a look, as JARVIS stopped them both to know the kids were home. Bruce quickly left the lab then, knowing where the kids would stop first, and Toni was left alone with her thoughts, trying to make sense of what just happened.
Ava and Bruce have a spat, and Toni makes some notes

Toni Stark was used to chaos in her life.

It was how she thrived really, watching things come apart and people tried to keep up with the madness that was her life. It wasn’t a normal week if she got more than fifteen hours of sleep a night.

If anyone stumbled into her workshop in the middle of one of her work binges, they could find tools everywhere, wires hanging lose, and more than enough to cause any person less capable than herself to be at severe risk. But she wasn’t most regular people. She knew how to handle the mess and the chaos. How to navigate without injuring herself, too badly anyways.

But what she didn’t expect was to be involved in a chaotic mess when she had nothing to do with the situation.

No, today the chaos in her life involved one Ava Carter-Sousa and another Bruce Banner.

And Toni Stark was enjoying the show.

It started when Ava had accidentally seen some of Bruce’s messages to a former flame of his, but the name of Betty Ross, and unfortunately for Bruce, the message in question had been something along the lines of, “I’ll always love you, Bruce.”

And since then, Ava hadn’t been talking to the man. Not that she was ignoring him, but she’d grown far more distant in her responses, much to Bruce’s exasperation.

“Ava, can you at least let me explain?” Bruce said, following her cousin into the kitchen where Steve was making breakfast and Toni drinking her third cup of coffee that morning.

“What’s there to explain?” Ava said calmly, as she sat down beside Toni, “You and Betty are good for each other. She was there for you in a time before you knew the rest of us. I understand that you still have feelings for her, and honestly, I’m happy for you. You deserve to find someone like her that you want to spend the rest of your life with.”

“I’m not seeing her,” Bruce said quickly, trying to get a word in. “You’re misreading everything.

“I’m not,” Ava shrugged, “If you’re not with her now, then it’s only a matter of time before you get back together with her. She was the love of your life. You were engaged. I’m sure Toni can handle Thaddeus Ross, so there’s nothing stopping you from getting back together with her. She’d do that for you, Science Bros and all.”

“Do you think we should say something?” Steve asked, as he placed an omelet in front of her.

“I told you I wasn’t hungry,” she said, looking up at him in surprise.

“When was the last time you ate?” he said, unamused with her, as he waved the spatula at her, “Eat.
You need to keep your strength up for all those crazy hours you keep in your lab. One of these days I’m going to walk in there and see you passed out from hunger, just you watch.”

“Rude,” she pouted, “Are you at least going to make one for yourself? Or are you going to make a girl eat all by herself?”

“You seem to be doing fine on your own,” he grinned, “But if it makes you feel better, I’ll just finish up making my own and give you some company.”

She looked over at her cousin, as Bruce had a flash of green creep up his neck.

“They’re fine,” she told Steve after a moment, too quiet for either of them to hear. And they looked far too engrossed in their own conversation to even listen to what they were saying.

“Look, I don’t know how to prove to you that I’m not getting back together with Betty,” Bruce said, as he took a deep breath, the green fading away. She grinned to herself at the control the man was gaining more control over the Other Guy.

“You don’t need to prove anything to me, Bruce!” she said, unhappily, “That’s the point. It’s your life. You can do whatever you want. Why do I care if you get back with your ex? It’s your life. And it’s not like your relationship ended because of anything that either you or her could control. You broke up because her father wanted to kill you. I’m sure when he backs off the two of you will be very happy together.”

“I don’t want to date her,” he said, annoyed, “Look, can we at least get dinner together? Just the two of us?”

“We don’t need to do anything. You don’t need to convince me that you don’t care for her,” she said, taking a deep breath, “I’m your friend, Bruce. I want you to be happy. And she makes you happy.”

“For the last time, I don’t want to be with her,” Bruce raised his hands in the air, “I’m not asking you to dinner to talk about her. She’s moved on, and so have I. I’m asking you because I want to go on a date with you, Ava. Because I like you! Not her! And I don’t know how to make that anymore clear to you.”

“What?” Ava asked, a bit dumbfounded.

“I. Like. You. Ava Carter-Sousa,” Bruce enunciated each word clearly. “I’ve had feelings for you for quite some time now. I even asked Toni if she would give me her blessing to ask you out. But you are making that extremely difficult to do when you won’t even talk to me.”

“Okay,” she said, after a moment.

“Okay?” Bruce asked her, sounding shocked.

“I want to go on a date with you,” she confirmed. “Tomorrow at seven?”

“Seven,” he confirmed, a bit dazed, “Tomorrow.”

She stood then, looking a bit in shock, as she kissed him on the cheek and all but ran out of the room.

“What just happened?” Bruce asked, still looking bewildered.

“You just got a date with my cousin,” she grinned, as Steve gave him a wide smile, “Congrats
Bruce. Now I have a cousin to go talk to, as I have a feeling she’s just as rattled as you are.”

“Take your food with you!” Steve said quickly, as she stood to leave.

“Yeah, yeah,” she sighed, as she picked up the plate of food to take with her. And with that, she turned to leave the room, wanting to know what her cousin was thinking.

She wasn’t all that sure what to expect when she first entered her cousin’s lab, but Ava pacing around back and forth muttering to herself was not it. Carefully, she placed the omelet Steve had made for her off to the side,

“Ava?” she asked, looking at her cousin, “Are you doing okay, Sweetheart?”

“Of course I’m not doing okay!” Ava raised her hands in the air, “I just made a fool of myself. I’ve been avoiding him like a bitch for the last week and turns out he wasn’t even seeing Betty anymore. I’ve been starting fights with him. He had to ask me out by raising his voice to get me to even stop talking and listen to him because I wasn’t letting him get a word in otherwise. And when I finally did listen to him, I kissed him! Do you know what he’s going to think of me? He’s going to think he asked out a crazy person! What if he takes it back? What if he doesn’t want to go out with me anymore?”

“Ava,” Toni said soothingly as she walked over to the girl and wrapped an arm around her shoulder before leading her to the couch. “Breathe. Just take a moment and breathe okay? Everything’s going to be fine. You’re overthinking things. I thought that conversation went well, all things considering.”

Ava looked at her as if she had suddenly grown a second head and she laughed softly, “Okay maybe it didn’t go as smoothly as it could have. But you’re overthinking how bad it went. Both you and Bruce are still in once piece. And if anything, it shows how much he likes you. The fact that it bothered him so much that you thought he wasn’t into you that he wanted you to know the truth shows that much. If he wasn’t serious about you, he would have given up at the first sign of difficulty. Do you know how many guys give up when they realize I won’t go out with them simply if they buy me a drink? He’s liked you for a while now, and he wouldn’t have asked me to date you if he wasn’t.”

“I’m not property,” Ava said somewhat mulishly, “He shouldn’t have had to have asked you for permission.”

She gave the girl a look, “You and I both know he didn’t ask me because he thought he needed permission. He asked me to make sure you would be safe if you started dating the Hulk. And if I thought you would be in danger.”

“I’m not in danger!” she insisted, “Bruce would never hurt me. And I’ve met the other guy. He might be capable of some serious damage, but he’s a sweetheart.”

“I know that,” Toni said soothingly, “I’m right there beside you in saying the Hulk isn’t a danger to those he cares about. But Bruce doesn’t have as much confidence in himself as you have in him. So be gentle with him okay? He does genuinely have feelings for you, and I know you care about him too. You just need to take a leap of fate and let the cards fall as they choose to.”

She snorted, “I didn’t think you were one for believing in destiny,” she said, “What happened to making your own set of rules to live life by?”

“I stand by that,” Toni nodded, “If you like Bruce, then prove it. Fight for him too. And let him know how much you care about him. But no matter how much you try, there are always variables
out of your control. You just need to not let it influence your equation.”

“You’re a nerd,” she said, leaning into her, and Toni pulled her in tightly.

“Yes, but we both know you are just as much of a nerd as me,” she told her, “You’ll always be my girl in the chair, right?”

“Of course,” Ava said, offended. “Science Sisters for life.”

Toni laughed at that, and Ava let out a sigh.

“I just don’t want to mess this up,” she said, and Toni rubbed her back gently.

“I know,” she told her, “But all you can do is give it your best shot. You and Bruce are good for each other. You just need to trust yourselves.”

“Toni?” Ava said, after a moment. “I’m glad I have you in my life. I love Harry, but I couldn’t talk to him about stuff like this. And I love Mom more than anything, but things haven’t been the same with her recently. Not when she barely remembers who Harry and I are, half the time.”

“You’re my family,” she told the girl firmly, “Your family has been there through the roughest times in my life. And I’m here for all of you too, even if I get lost in my own head sometimes.”

“He went to see her,” Ava said, “Steve. Dad told me about it later.”

She stilled slightly, “Oh?” she said, not sure of what to say. She knew Steve was trying to separate the Peggy Carter he once loved with the woman she’d become, but he’d never talked to her about it. She wondered how he was doing. While Aunt Peggy had moved on, Steve had woken up without having the time to properly process what had happened in the years he was in the ice.

She wondered if the man would ever mention it to her. And if he did, what would she say about it?

“You should talk to him,” Ava said softly, “The two of you understand each other, despite how different you are. And I think now more than ever he could use some more friends in his life.”

“Okay,” she sighed to herself. “Just promise me you’ll tell me how your date with Bruce goes.”

“Of course,” Ava said solemnly, “You’ll be the first I tell.”

“Good,” Toni said, as she leaned back, “Now, do you want to watch something mind numbing, like The Bachelor? Rumour has it that Justin Hammer’s on it, trying to redeem his image after the whole Stark Expo disaster, and I want to see him make a fool of himself on national television.”

“I’m in,” Ava beamed, as JARVIS lowered began streaming the show.

As often as Clint Barton snuck into the Tower in the dead of the night, he snuck out of it too. And when he was gone, it would be weeks before any of them saw the man again.

It didn’t bother her, not really. Avenger or not, he was still a SHIELD agent and agents were often given missions that they were unable to talk to the rest of them about. If he vanished to go on those secret missions, then really, what could she do about it?

Except she knew the look of someone hiding things all too well. Half her life she’d hid things from
the world. She’d hid her feelings, certain inconvenient truths, or things she’d rather keep close to home for her own sanity. And if there was one thing she knew, it was that whatever Clint Barton was keeping from them, it wasn’t about any particular SHIELD mission.

“Hi Darling,” Clint called out as he slid next to her on the couch, “Missed me?”

He wrapped an arm around her as she shushed him carefully. They were just getting to Peter’s favourite part of Back to the Future, and she wouldn’t have the boy miss the part of the movie he liked. Not when he’d make them rewind too far back and watch it from that point again.

She could see Steve glance over at them tentatively and she tried not to make eye contact with him.

“Barton you smell,” she complained, without moving away from his hug.

“Awww, didn’t you miss me Sweetheart?” he asked her giving her a teasing look.

“Don’t let your wife hear you say that,” Toni warned him jokingly, “Or she might skin you alive.”

“My wife?” he asked her, trying his best to sound confused. But there was a slight hitch in his voice. A hitch that let her know that despite the cool demeanour he was wearing, there was more to it than that. And if there was one thing Toni knew all too well, it was the look of a person trying to keep something from her. It was the same look a few of the older board members had given her when she’d metaphorically caught their hands in the cookie jar of Stark Industries, as they tried to pretend that they weren’t embezzling from the company.

And she knew then in that moment, she’d caught him.

Wife.

“Why Natasha of course,” Toni said innocently, and Clint relaxed, “I don’t think she’d be too pleased to know you’re still trying to put the moves on me, even though we all know you failed the first time.”

“Well if at first you don’t succeed,” he said giving her a lazy smile. “Gotta keep trying right?”

“Pretty sure that’s harassment,” Rhodey said as he joined them on the couch. She grinned up at the man who had been given leave for a week and had decided to join her and the others in the tower.

“It is,” Toni nodded solemnly, as Rhodey offered her some of the popcorn he’d gotten. He passed around the other bowls to Peter, Ava, and Bruce, who were still intently trying to watch the movie, Steve, and kept one for them as she leaned over and popped a few kernels into her mouth.

“Hey what about me?” Clint asked, pouting.

“No popcorn for you,” she grinned as Rhodey shoved a handful into his mouth.

“You can share with me, Clint,” Steve rolled his eyes, and the archer quickly sat up as he moved over to where Steve was.

“This is why Steve is the best Avenger,” Clint stuck his tongue out at her and she flipped him off.

“Steve’s the best Avenger because he has a heart of gold and buns of steel,” she shot back, as Steve turned slightly red.

“Guys!” Peter whined as the Doc explained the consequences of Marty being erased from the future.
“Sorry Petey,” Toni grinned as she mock glared at the rest of the occupants in the room.

“Thank you,” Peter said, as he turned his focus back onto the movie in question.

She leaned into Rhodey as he protectively wrapped an arm around her.

“You doing okay Baby Girl?” he asked her gently.

“Just fine,” she said, “I’m glad you’re here Rhodey Bear.”

“Yeah well, Mama wasn’t too happy about it,” Rhodey sighed, “So I told her we’d spend Christmas down with her. She wants the entire family over, just you wait. It’s going to be an absolutely madhouse there.”

“The entire family?” Toni raised a brow.

She knew Mama Rhodes loved hosting family gatherings.

But surely he didn’t mean what she thought he was saying.

Rhodey waved his hand around the room, “Yep,” he laughed, and she groaned to herself lightly.

That would definitely be something else. The movie continued to play on the screen in front of them, and she tried to immerse herself into it, without looking over too often at Steve.

She noted the popcorn ran out shortly after, and she stood carefully, as she gathered the bowls. It would be a more than one movie kind of night, and it was early enough that she didn’t have to worry about Peter’s bedtime, so she went to the kitchen to make more popcorn.

“Let me help,” Steve said when she tried to take his.

“Ever the gentleman,” she teased, and he shot her a grin. They made their way over to her kitchen where the popcorn machine had been setup and she refilled the kernels as she turned it back on.

He leaned against her countertop and crossed his arms, and she was suddenly aware of how little space was between them.

She wondered then what her father would think to know that she was busy lusting over the man he’d wasted his entire life trying to find.

Her father would have hated it if he knew the truth, and part of her wanted to smile knowing at the end of the day the man who looked he over in favour of the man across from her would never get to know that Steve Rogers was alive, after all these years.

What would their relationship have been like in another life, if Steve was found back when her parents were still alive? Back before her world had gone to hell when Jarvis and her mother had passed away and the company thrown at her when she was far too young?

Would he have hated her, because her father could barely stand the sight of her?

“You’re thinking too hard,” he commented after a moment.

“I’m always thinking,” she shot back without a bite, “Genius remember.”

He moved closer to her slightly and she took a deep breath.
“You’re allowed to unwind too, Toni,” he said gently, “I know you think you’re responsible for everything, but you don’t need to be. the world won’t fall apart if Clint doesn’t have new arrows that explode, or if you make Nat’s suit tear proof. Take a break every now and then and then and eat a proper meal.”

“If I ate properly then who would you fuss over?” she teased as she turned carefully to turn on the stove so she could melt the butter.

“Clint sure gives you a run for your money,” Steve said, glancing back at the man who had taken over the entire section that the two of them had been sharing.

“Clint is something else,” she said fondly.

“I don’t know if I ever said thank you,” he said suddenly, and she found herself looking back over at the man in confusion.

“What for?” she asked as she looked up at him in surprise.

“All of this,” he waved his hand around. “You gave us a home, Toni, and even if all of us aren’t always around, we do appreciate all that you’ve done for us. I appreciate all that you’ve done for us.”

He took a deep breath then, “When I woke up and they told me decades had passed, I didn’t know how to keep living. I didn’t understand anything about this new world that I was in. I didn’t understand what had happened and how the world had gotten to this place. It was like I skipped quite a few chapters in a book and the story didn’t make sense to me anymore. I thought my life was over, or at least the way I knew it.”

She looked up at him and he continued, “Before the Avengers, I was living on a SHIELD base, eating meals on a military standard, and just trying to make the most out of a bad situation. But you gave me something else, Toni. Something that I thought I’d lost the chance to have when I woke up in the future. You have me a home. And you let me join the family you have here, with Bruce, the Carter-Sousas, Peter, and the others. And I can’t thank you enough for giving me something I never thought I’d be able to have again.”

“I know what it’s like to feel like you have no one,” she said, gently taking his hand. “Family doesn’t always have to just be the people who are related to you by blood. In our lives we come across people who can be those people for us. And I want to give you that. I know how much you lost and I want you to have a chance to have a life here. My father always said you were a good man, and I wanted him to be wrong about that. But he was right. You’re a good man Steve Rogers, and you deserve this much.”

He smiled back at her sadly and she wondered what it was that was going through his mind.

“I went to see Peg,” he said softly, and she gave him an encouraging look. It wasn’t a surprise to her, she’d already known from Ava that he had. But she hadn’t brought it up, unsure of what to say about the situation.

“Oh?” she asked, looking at him curiously.

“She’s still the same person I knew back then,” he said after a moment, “Older and wiser, yes, but the same fiery woman who never let anything stand in her way.”

“She always was an inspiration,” Toni grinned, “Mom once tried to make me wear a dress to a formal dinner with poofs and I hated the entire thing. Peggy snuck me a nice set of tailored pants before the party. Mom was furious but she saw how happy it made me and gave in eventually.”
“Sounds like something she’d do,” he said with a laugh as the popcorn finished popping.

“Steve?” she said after a moment, “You can talk to me too, you know. You carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, but you don’t have to. If you ever want to talk to me about what you’re going through, or how it was seeing Aunt Peggy, then you can. None of us might understand exactly what you’re going through, but we’re still here for you.”

He took a deep breathe, “Thanks Toni,” he told her softly, “There are some things Peggy said that I want to ask you about, but I think I need some time. If that’s okay with you.”

She gave his arm another squeeze, “Anytime you need me, I’m here.” She turned back to the popcorn, divvying it up between the bowls, before pouring the butter over it. She handed him two of the bowls as they made their way back to the room, just in time for the climax of the movie.
Discovering The Past

Chapter Summary

Steve has some questions for Toni, and the Avengers attend a gala

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took Steve exactly a week before she found him waiting outside of her workshop one afternoon, pacing back and forth, looking like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

“J, can you open the doors?” she said, glancing back over at him as she placed down the StarkPad she’d been holding that she had been drawing up plans for a new suit for Steve for stealth missions.

Steve looked surprised as the door opened, clearly not having expected her to have seen him. He met her gaze nervously and she swallowed. What was it that had the great Steve Rogers so shaken up?

He entered the room as she took in his anxious form.

“Are you okay, Steve?” she asked him as she sat him down on one of the chairs she had in the lab, standing over him. “Are you sick? Can you even get sick? J can you perform a quick body scan and tell me if all his vitals are okay?”

“I’m fine, Toni,” he told her, taking a deep breath, “I actually came here to talk to you about something.”

“Me?” she asked, surprised, “What about, Soldier?”

“You know how I went to visit Peggy?” he asked, although it wasn’t really a question as much as it was a statement. “Well the two of us talked about some things. She told me a bit about the life she had with her husband and her family. But she also told me a bit about you.”

“Oh?” she asked, not really sure what to say about that.

“She told me that she saw you grow up,” Steve told her softly, “You should have heard her talk about you, Toni. She was so proud, telling me stories of what you were like growing up. How you used to steal her lipstick and heels and wobble around even though they were way too big to fit you properly.”

She groaned slightly at that, “Of course she did. Aunt Peggy can’t even let me save face at this age.”

“She thinks of you as a daughter,” Steve told her, and while it wasn’t news to her, she still felt warmth fill through her.

“The Carter-Sousas have always been like a second family to me,” she smiled softly.

He smiled back at her at that, but she could tell the smile didn’t fully meet his eyes.

“What’s wrong?” she asked him gently, taking one of his hands in hers.
“She also said some other things,” he said, pausing, “About Howard.”

She pulled away slightly, wondering what it was that Aunt Peggy had told him. Because there was any number of things she could have said. Her family all knew the truth about her father and the kind of man he was. It was no secret to those who had seen her growing up; she could only do so much to hide the bruises he left behind.

“He hurt you,” Steve said, not really asking as much of stating. “That’s why you don’t talk about your father. Not because you refuse to see the man I knew once long ago. But because that man was long gone by the time he became your father.”

She let out a shaky laugh, “My father never wanted anything to do with me,” she said barely looking at him. “He might have been some great man when you knew him. Someone who helped you win the war and was honourable. But he wasn’t that man when he raised me. He drank a lot, trying to handle the failures he was facing by being unable to find you. Do you know Stark Industries nearly went bankrupt a few years after I was born because he spent so much resources trying to find you and not enough in his own company? I saved the company at three years old, because I just wanted to make something and I made something which changed the future of the computing world. I saved our company. And do you know what he gave me for it? A cut lip and broken rips. That was my great reward. Because he wanted me to know my place was always beneath him.”

He paled at that, and she felt a bit bad for him. It wasn’t the man’s fault that her father had been an asshole.

“I just wanted him to be proud of me,” she told him softly, “Growing up, I just wanted his approval. But somewhere along the line, I realized I’d never get it. So eventually I gave up. I realized I had a family around me outside of him. I had my mother who loved me more than anything. I had Jarvis and Ana. I had Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel. And Ava and Harry. I didn’t need his love, and I felt free after I accepted that. He could say whatever he wanted and hurt me physically as much as he wanted, but at the end of the day, I didn’t need his love or acceptance. Not when I had others around me who loved me for me. Whom I was good enough for.”

“How could he hurt his own daughter?” Steve choked out slightly, and she rubbed the back of his hand with hers gently.

“Because he never wanted me,” she said with a shrug, “My mother had many miscarriages before me and after me. He wanted a son and he was stuck with a daughter in a man’s world. A daughter whose best hope for his company would have been to marry someone smart and hand the company over. But I’ve never been one to roll over and accept the rolls that life tries to thrust on me.”

“That wasn’t the only time he hurt you, though,” Steve said, not really asking.

“No,” she said with a shrug, “J, pull up all my medical incidents before the age of twenty pertaining to my father.”

“You had medical incidents not related to your father?” he asked her, narrowing his eyes at the specific parameters she’d given her AI.

“I got kidnapped a few times as a kid,” she said, trying to shrug it off. “They thought they’d get a good payout from my father for kidnapping the Stark Heir. I think the only reason my father ever did anything about it was more about saving face about the Stark name than any actual concern over me. Or if he did care, he never said so afterwards. But Peggy always came for me. Always saved me, even during the times where I was in so much pain that I thought I was going to die. She always came, and she always saved me.”
“Toni,” he breathed, and she shrugged him off.

“When I was five, I broke my leg. I told people at school that it was because I fell out of a tree, but really it was because I was pushed down the stairs while my father shoved me to the side because he thought I would damage some of his prototypes. And the angle I landed on was not ideal,” she told him as all the incidents floated around them.

“He used to make me hold hot tools without the proper protections because I was a Stark,” she said softly, “And Starks are made of Iron. I should have been able to take it. But instead I’d end up with burnt hands. I can’t be handed things now. I’m sure you’ve heard people say it’s one of my ridiculous eccentricities. But really, it terrifies me still. As ridiculous as that might be.”

He looked over every report, and the story that had gone with it as the doctors were often bribed to look the other way after treating her. And she could see his eyes begin to harden as he moved through them.

“When I was ten, I got into a fight at school,” she said softly, “It wasn’t really a fight as much as it was them attacking me. And when I finally fought back, breaking one of their noses with a move Aunt Peggy showed me, it was enough to land me a suspension. I was sent home from boarding school for the week for fighting. Howard wasn’t pleased as he got the call during an Investor’s meeting and they had to take a break long enough for him to call Jarvis and tell him to deal with me. That night he took his belt out,” she said, cutting off before she could say what was done.

Steve stood then and pulled her tightly into a hug, “I’m so sorry,” he told her softly as his arms held her. “My father died young, from tuberculosis, and I never told anyone this, but my mother and I were happier when he was gone. He used to get so angry some nights, and my Ma did all she could to keep me safe. But I would still hear her cries when she thought I was asleep. Any man who hurts his family is not worthy of being called a man.”

She didn’t say anything, and he rubbed her back gently.

“I’m sorry too,” he said to her, “For the part I played in your childhood. When I went down in that ship, I went down because I didn’t know how to fight any more. I lost my best friend, and it felt easier than trying to find a way to keep everyone safe and survive. I told myself I was doing it for them, but I was doing it because I didn’t see a way out. But I never once wanted anyone to try and find me. I never would have wanted Howard to put me over his own family. Not when he had a wife and daughter who were alive and healthy and for all he knew, I was gone. He never should have put his family second, not for me. Not when he had a wife and daughter who were alive and healthy and for all he knew, I was gone. He never should have put his family second, not for me. And if I could go back and smack some sense into your father I would have.”

“It wasn’t your fault either,” she told him gently, “My father made the decisions he did, knowing fully well that it would cost him his family. He threw away his chance at a relationship with me time and time again not because he didn’t care enough about it, but because he didn’t want it.”

“I wish you could have known the same man I knew back in the war,” he said softly, “He was a good man. And I accept that he was not the same as the man you knew. But that man, as ridiculous and outgoing as he was, cared about others. He never would have hurt another person. And if he had raised you, then maybe you would have gone through the pain you did.”

“We can’t change the past,” she told him gently, “What’s done is done. My father is gone now, he’s been gone for years. Howard Stark never was meant to be my father, but that’s okay. Because I still had a family who loved me. I still had others who cared about me. It might not have been the most orthodox of families, but it was a family nonetheless. And I wouldn’t trade them for anything. Not for a chance to have a relationship with Howard.”
He nodded at that, pulling away from her softly. “Thank you,” he told her gently, “You didn’t need to share any of this with me. And I am sorry. For assuming you needed to have a good relationship with your father. Not when I didn’t know him anywhere near as well as you did. People change. Times change. And you’ve done so much for me. So much that you didn’t need to do, but you did anyways. And I’m grateful to you for everything you’ve done.”

She smiled back at him, “You deserve a chance at a new life, Steve. Just because your old life is gone doesn’t mean you can’t have a new life here. We all want you to be happy and find a place to call your home. And if I can offer you that, then I want to.”

She stood at the bar, a glass of whiskey in her hand as she watched over the crowded room. She hated these events, she really did. Even if she usually supported the cause involved.

But if there was one thing Toni Stark was trained to do, it was put on a smile and pretend there was nowhere else she’d rather be, as she danced in the arms of Senators and other billionaires who were more than happy to open their wallets once she was done with them.

It had been a hassle and a half getting the other Avengers ready for the event. Bruce hadn’t wanted to go, but Ava had promised him that they’d leave if he even remotely felt uncomfortable. And seeing the two of them dance closely on the floor, she smiled. Ava had had her share of relationships, but none of them had ever felt as right to her, not the way she and Bruce just clicked together.

Getting Clint into a suit had been a nightmare. He hadn’t wanted to, insisting that they wanted him there as an Avenger, and he felt more comfortable in his gear. She’d been at his wits end, trying to convince him, before finally throwing her arms up and asking him to think of it as an undercover mission. He couldn’t blend in if he stood out so obviously. And now Clint Barton was roaming around the hall, having the time of his life as he acted out some role he had concocted in his head.

And Natasha. Oh Natasha was smart. Despite her low-cut black dress with the high leg slit, Toni knew the woman had more weapons on her than the entire room combined. And if any man got a bit too feely with her, Nat wouldn’t hesitate to cut off an appendage or two.

“Can I have this dance?” she heard a voice say and she stilled slightly. She looked up, wearing her uncaring mask as she looked up at Tiberius Stone smirking down at her.

“Don’t you have other women to go harass?” she asked, without putting down her drink, “Last I heard you were dating some model. Was she not up to coming tonight?”

“Oh I broke up with her ages ago,” he waved his hand, “You know how it is for people like us. They just want to sleep with a billionaire, and I enjoyed the easy lay.”

“Classy,” she raised a brow at him.

“You are the host here today,” he reminded her, “The classy thing to do is ask you to at least dance with me.”

“Or to stay away, given our history,” she reminded him. Because he had tried to drug her years ago. Because he’d made comments to the press about how she was a good time, even though they’d never been together. Because he had constantly put her career down in front of others.

“Come on, Toni,” he said moving closer. “Let bygones be bygones. You can’t hold onto grudges forever. Besides, do you really want to make a scene, with all these people watching?”
She placed her drink down as he extended her hand. She could do this. There was going to be a story about this the next day in the press. But at least if the story was positive then she could keep the attention on their cause, families who were left homeless after the Chitauri attack. If the story was spun negatively then it would be about how she caused a scene and the cause forgotten.

“Fine, one dance,” she said, as she slipped her hand through his. She’d already danced with many other men tonight, what was one more?

He held her close as they got onto the dance floor, and she tried to concentrate on the music.

“You know, the two of us were always meant to end up together,” he said, and she pulled back slightly to look at him incredulously.

“You’re delusional,” she told him.

He laughed at that, “Toni, that’s just how the world works. At the end of the day, people like you and me are the only ones who understand each other. We know how this game works, we’ve been trained to play it all our lives. Trained to put on a mask and let the rest of the world see what we want them to see. Do you think you’ll be happy with this new group that you seem to have found yourself with? They don’t understand you. Not like I do.”

“You don’t understand me either,” she reminded him, “You tried to rape me.”

“Please, don’t pretend you didn’t want it that night,” he scoffed. “You would have been begging for it. You would have liked it. Besides, who do you think it was who suggested I slip you something?”

She went pale then, realizing. Who had the most to gain if she was too intoxicated to make the Board meeting the next morning? Who had the most to gain if they could convince the Board that she was not ready? Who had forced her to go to that party in the first place? But instead, Rhodey had saved her that night. And she’d shown up and kicked ass.

How did she not know?

How did she not see it so much sooner?

“Obie,” she whispered. “He told you to rape me?”

“He told me to show you a good time,” he shrugged, “Give you a little something to help you forget the pain you were in. Not my fault your boy thought you needed to be saved. I had bruises for weeks after he broke my nose.”

His hand dipped dangerously low and she glowered at him.

“He wanted us to get together, you know that?” Stone told her. “Thought you needed a good, firm man to keep you in your place. Personally, I still think you do, given how ridiculous you’ve been acting over the past few decades.”

“Go to hell, Stone,” she said, trying to pull away from him.

The song ended then and he held her firmly, “We’re not done talking yet, Stark,” he told her.

“I have a repulsors in my bracelet,” she said, showing him the piece on her wrist. “All I have to do is think about it, and it will activate. And the rest of the suit won’t be far behind that.”

“But think of the scene you’ll cause,” he laughed. “You don’t want to do that.”
“Excuse me,” she heard a voice say then, “I haven’t had a chance to dance with Ms Stark all night, and if you don’t mind, may I cut in and steal her for the next dance?”

She looked over as Steve stood there, jaw clenched. She’d seen him in his suit earlier, having chosen it for him but she took a moment to admire it.

“Of course,” Stone said, not really wanting to get into a fight with Captain America. Not that she blamed him, she wouldn’t either.

Stone backed away quickly as Steve offered her a hand. She placed one in his and the other on his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asked her gently as they moved with the music.

“I’m fine,” she said, giving him a smile. Steve gave her a look and she sighed, “Stone and I don’t have the best history. I don’t want to get too much into it tonight.”

“Okay,” he nodded, accepting that she didn’t really want to delve into it. And what could she really say that would make any of this better. Obie had wanted to ruin her for years. He’d hated her more than her own father. And she had been too stupid to see the truth.

“You know, being here tonight, it reminds me of before,” he told her, trying to take her mind off what had happened. “I used to dress up in my costume and put on a show to motivate the soldiers. To convince them to buy bonds. And I hated every part of it.”

She laughed lightly, “I suppose this is the modern equivalent,” she said, as he spun her around. “To tell you the truth, I hate it too. The entire façade of it all. We put on nice outfits and socialize, all while we mingle with people who pretend they care about whatever cause we’re supporting, and they donate money to get tax write offs and good press. None of them would have given a dime if it weren’t for the benefits that they get out of it. And yet every penny helps, so we don’t complain.”

“You’re a natural at this,” he told her softly, “The way you blend in and mingle with everyone. I don’t know how you do it.”

“I’ve been doing this since I was old enough to not embarrass my parents at these things,” she said simply. “It was good for the Stark image to present a united front.”

“Doesn’t make it any less true,” he said, “I also wanted to tell you that you look lovely tonight.”

His eyes twinkled at that, and she felt herself blush lightly. She was wearing a red off shoulder mermaid gown that clung to her curves in just the right places. And truthfully, she was glad he noticed. Given that she had barely been able to take her eyes off of how the suit he was wearing fit him just right.

“So do you,” she smiled, “You certainly clean up nicely.”

“Please,” he grinned, “We both know that you did all the work by choosing this suit out for me.”

“Maybe I like complimenting myself,” she laughed.

He pulled her in close after a spin and she found herself staring at his lips. He was close enough that if she leaned up slightly, she could reach his lips. And knowing he was so close, she wanted nothing more than to pull him in and kiss him.

For a brief moment, as his eyes met hers, she wondered if he would make the move himself
She swallowed then as the song ended, and the moment passed.

“Thank you for the dance,” she said softly, “I appreciate you cutting in and saving me.”

“Happy to help,” he said, slightly strained and she turned her back to make her way back to the bar.

For the briefest second, she wondered if he would reach out and stop her.

But he never did.

She sighed to herself as she ordered another drink from the bartender, gulping it down, trying to push the thoughts she was having out of her head. Steve was her friend, and she refused to let her feelings get in the way of what they had.

“You should have taken the risk, you know,” someone said from behind her and she nearly jumped as Natasha slid into the barstool beside her.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said as she ordered another drink.

“Don’t dodge the question, Stark,” Nat said. “We both know you have feelings for the Captain. Everyone with two eyes can see you have feelings for him. And yet you did nothing. Are you just going to keep pining away for him for the end of time? What’s your goal here? From what I heard, Starks take what they want.”

“Well then you really don’t know me at all, do you?” she shrugged, “Some spy you are.”

“Maybe some of us just want to see you happy,” Natasha said, and Toni looked at her sharply. It wasn’t that she didn’t like the other woman on their team. But the two never had been as close as she’d felt with the others.”

“Why?” Toni asked softly.

“Because you gave us a family when all of us lost ours. And for some of us, for the first time ever,” Nat said gently. “For what it’s worth, I think you should take the risk with Steve. You might find your feelings aren’t as one-sided as you think.”

She slipped away then, leaving her with her drink and her thoughts, as Toni Stark tried to figure out what to do next.

Chapter End Notes

Steve and Toni are getting closer!!! I wonder who will snap first, or will they continue to literally and metaphorically dance around each other forever.
Conversations with (Aunt) Peggy

Chapter Summary

Steve and Toni both have a lot on their chests as they pine away

Toni Stark had a problem. A big problem who handled a shield all too well and wore outfits that clung way too tight to his body. A problem, which if she didn’t resolve, she was certain would be the death of her.

She sighed to herself as she walked down the long corridor of the nursing home, wondering if she was really making the right decision to come here today. Was bringing this up only inviting more problems for herself? Was it something she should even broach the subject on? How appropriate was it really to discuss one’s love life with the man one was pining over’s ex-girlfriend, if said ex also happened to be their aunt and in their nineties?

They really needed to make a What to Expect When You’re In Love With Your Aunt’s Ex-Boyfriend But Said Man Is Younger Than You Because He Was Frozen So It’s Not Completely Weird.

Maybe that in itself was too much of a mouthful, but really, was it that odd of a scenario that she found herself in?

Why couldn’t she just have fallen for a normal man instead of one that made her question every single fibre of her being.

She hated this, hated how vulnerable all of this was making her feel. Hated that everyone seemed to see right thought her and there was not a goddamn thing she could do in the world to stop them. Hated that they were right, because really, who was she fooling?

She was a goner.

Just the memory of dancing with Steve Rogers, wrapped up in his arms as they moved through the dance floor made her feel all warm and happy inside like she was some sort of lovesick teenager.

She really hated everything about the scenario in question.

She took a deep breath as she knocked on the door. She’d already told the staff she was planning on visiting, but it was good manners to knock before entering another person’s room. And Jarvis would have been disappointed in her if she forgot to extend the same courtesy she had often been given as a child in her own home.

“Come in,” she heard a soft voice say. She entered the room carefully. She’d already been told it was a good day before when she’d called. She loved her aunt, but the bad days were rough. She knew she looked a lot like her father, and enough so that her aunt would get confused when she couldn’t immediately place Toni. And today, more than anything, she really needed the Aunt who had been like a second mother to her.

“Hi Aunt Peggy,” Toni greeted, as her aunt’s face lit up at the sight of her.
“Ducky,” she beamed back at her, “It’s been too long since you’ve visited last. Have you been eating? You look far too thin. What’s the point in you living in that nice fancy tower of yours if you don’t even get proper meals?”

“I eat,” she assured her aunt quickly, and her aunt gave her a look. She raised her hands up, “I try, I really do. I forget sometimes, but that’s not really my fault. Ava and Steve remind me if it’s been far too long since my last meal. I swear the two of them together make it nearly impossible for me to even forget to eat. They’d never let me get away with it.

“Good,” Peggy nodded, “I’m glad you have somebody in your life to make sure you’re not wasting away. I wouldn’t be surprised if one of these days you came in and you were nothing but skin and bones, with the way you treat your body.”

“Never gonna happen,” Toni grinned, “I have too much of a sweet tooth. Whatever I don’t eat through proper meals, I make up for with coffee and donuts.”

“Not a healthy diet, Antonia,” Peggy chided lightly. “I swear, Harry eats better than you and he eats like a college kid, living on those instant noodle packets and fast food.”

“They make it so easy,” Toni said solemnly. How many days had she eaten fast food herself because she was too hungry to function and needed something quick as she had more work to get done? It was something she understood all too well.

“But you didn’t come here for that, did you?” Peggy said, sitting up to take a closer look at her goddaughter. “I know that face. That’s the look of someone who wants to talk about something weighing on their soul.”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Toni confessed, and Peggy tapped on her bed.

“Come take a seat, Darling,” Peggy told her gently, “And tell me exactly what’s wrong.”

She sighed as she sat down on the bed.

“I have no idea how to even talk to you about this,” she told her aunt. “It seems strange to me. I know you said you’re happy and you had an entire life without Steve, but a part of you loved him once. How are you okay with the fact that he’s living here still, young and healthy, just as he was the day you thought you lost him?”

“I wasn’t okay,” Peggy said to her softly, “Not for the longest time. He was the first man I truly loved and I felt like a part of me went down with him. But I couldn’t sit around all day and pine after a man long gone. I needed to move on. So I did. I found work that suited my interests. I found a place where I truly belonged with the SSR. And I learned how to be whole again. I had an entire life without him. And while I might always wonder what could have been, I’m happy with the life I had. The life where I was your godmother. Where I had two beautiful, brilliant children, with a husband I love more than anything in the world. I’m glad he’s alive because he’s a good man, and the world could use more of those.”

She felt herself grow immediately guilty. Her aunt had loved Steve, and she knew Steve loved her too, if not more recently for him than for Peggy. The two of them had a love story that had gone down in history. If it had taken her aunt a while to get over enough to move on and have a life of her own, would Steve ever be ready? Was it something he was even considering?

She was selfish, she knew that. More than enough people had accused her of it in her life time. She didn’t think of others, and she more often than not put her feelings above those people around her.
And she had once again, without even thinking if Steve could even remotely feel the same way about her, put her own thoughts above what would be best for him.

She wondered if she should just put on her best press smile and catch up with her aunt for a while before turning around and leaving the room. What did she even say could make the scenario in play any better?

“Toni, Darling,” Peggy took her hand, “You’re thinking too hard again. What’s on your mind?”

She started to open her mouth to say that everything was fine when her aunt cut her off.

Peggy narrowed her eyes, “Don’t you even think about lying to me. I know you well, Antonia. I’ve known you since you were a young girl. I know the face you make when you’re about to tell a lie. Tell me the truth.”

“I have feelings for him,” she confessed, “And I know how unideal the situation is. He probably still loves you; he hasn’t had the same number of years awake to process everything and I know I’m supposed to be his friend and help him come to terms with this new century or whatever but I can’t help but have feelings for him. Everything about him is just so good. He’s so kind hearted and caring, and I can see why you loved him. But it’s not my place and I know that I should probably just back away and give him some time to acclimate to everything. I don’t even know what I thought coming here would accomplish—”

“Toni,” Peggy interrupted her, squeezing her hand. “You’re rambling, Love.”

“Sorry,” she said, taking a deep breath, as she calmed herself down.

“You’re allowed to have feelings for him,” Peggy told her gently. “I meant what I said when I told you I was okay with him being back. Yes, it is hard when you get lost in the what-ifs, but I have no regrets with how my life turned out. Daniel is the love of my life. Without him I wouldn’t have my children or have had anywhere as wonderful of a life as I did have. I wouldn’t change any part of it, not even if Steve had come back then. I’m not mad or angry that you find him as great as you do. He’s a good man, and quite frankly, he’s the kind of man I’ve always hoped you’d find yourself with, if you ever did settle down with a man.”

Peggy paused, “Truthfully, I didn’t tell you this at the time, but I asked you to watch over him for a reason. Steve isn’t as strong as he likes to pretend that he is. Despite his super strength, he’s still emotionally vulnerable. He’s too gentle for the world he was raised in, let alone the world we live in now. I think the two of you balance each other out. You’ve seen some of the harsher truths of the world. You know that for all the good in it, there are just as many people looking to do harm. You’re inquisitive, while he’s more likely to take things at face value.”

She thought back to how SHIELD had been making weapons with the Tesseract and how she’d questioned it while Steve wasn’t as willing to believe it.

“And more than anything, I think the two of you could make each other happy,” Peggy told her. “If you came here to ask for my blessing, then you have it, Darling. You’re my daughter, even if not by birth. And all I want is for you to be happy. Steve would be good for you. I know the situation is unideal, but the truth is, I’m not as heartbroken as you all seem to think I should be. I’m more than happy with the cards I was dealt. I’m happy to have seen you grow up to become a beautiful young woman. And if Steve makes you happy, then I don’t want you to throw that away out of fear of my feelings. This is me telling you that I want you to ask him out. Because he will dance all around the subject before he actually gets to the point. Sometimes it’s good for that man to be told exactly what it is that you want him to do, or he won’t figure it out on his own.”
She laughed softly at that.

“He’s a good man,” she told Peggy softly, “He takes care of me, even when I forget to take care of myself. He doesn’t try to control the fact that I work for hours on end but reminds me to take breaks every now and then. I want a future with him. More than I ever thought I could want anyone else.”

“Then go get him, Darling,” Peggy said with a smile, “And for my sake, do it soon. If I have to listen to Ava go on about how frustrated she is that the two of you keep dancing around each other, I may lose my mind.”

She smiled sheepishly at that, “I guess that’s my fault,” she told her aunt. “Okay, I’ll think about it. I’ve never been good at doing things that are good for me. But maybe I can start now. It’s never too late to teach an old dog new tricks, right?”

“With your brain?” Peggy raised a brow, “I’d be surprised if you didn’t continue to change how the world worked until the day you died.”

She laughed lightly at that, as she stood. She pressed a kiss to Peggy’s forehead.

“I’ll visit soon, I promise,” she told Peggy and her aunt grinned.

“Next weekend?” Peggy confirmed, as Toni had made a habit of trying to see her aunt on a weekly basis if her schedule permitted.

“Next weekend,” Toni grinned. She stood, and exited the room, not once noticing the man who had been standing in the shadows.

Steve Rogers was at a loss.

He knew it was rude to eavesdrop, and if Peggy had any inclination that he’d heard her entire conversation with her goddaughter, then she may slap him to set him straight. His Ma had raised him better than that. But he hadn’t meant to. It wasn’t as if he had gone into the situation and tried to overhear everything. He just happened to have super hearing. And if he’d heard his name while about to knock, he couldn’t be fully to blame for the parts of the conversation that he did hear.

Namely Toni Stark admitting she had feelings for him.

Something he wasn’t all that sure how he wanted to react to.

It was true that he cared for her. She’d given him everything, even when he’d woken up in this strange new world with nothing but the clothes on his back. She’d given him a place to stay, food to eat, clothes to wear. She’d even gotten him caught up on everything that had happened over the past several decades when he was under. Something SHIELD had neglected to do in the entire time he’d been in their care.

She’d given him a home.

She was a bit of a disaster, if he was entirely honest with himself. She had no sense of self preservation, always throwing herself into danger. She never ate and would forget to sleep. And anytime he saw her, she almost always had a cup of coffee in her hand, to the point where he was certain there was more caffeine in her system than water. How she managed to survive so long, he had no idea.
But despite everything, he couldn’t help but feel fond of her. His lips twitched up when he thought of her, and maybe the sketchbook he used was filled with far too many pictures of her.

She was beautiful.

That much he could fully admit.

She was so much more than what the world saw, and it frustrated him sometimes. It frustrated him that despite everything at the gala, that some man had drunkenly stumbled, falling all over her, and the next day there had been a story about how she couldn’t keep her hands off a new mystery man.

How Justin Hammer constantly gave statements about her to the press, like he even remotely compared to what she was capable of. Because if there was one thing he knew too well, it was that HammerTech did not even come close to what Stark Industries was capable of achieving.

How she would simply smile at her phone in public, and the press would be all over her for some new love affair she was hiding.

Or how they were capable to praising Iron Woman in one article and tearing down Toni Stark in the next. Like the two were completely different people.

He hated it.

He hated it because he knew how wrong all of them were. How she was worth so much more than the few callous words they tossed on the page. How they could barely even see the woman underneath, who tried so hard and gave so much to those she loved. Who mentored children in private because she wanted to protect them from the spotlight. Who loved her bots like they were her own children. Who would do anything for her cousins. And anything for the rest of them, even when she had barely known them.

The public didn’t see that side of her.

They didn’t see the side of her that he was falling for.

Which perhaps was the reason he found himself in the same nursing home as she had. The same reason he’d wanted to find solace and seek help from the same source she had. Because Peggy Carter was a constant to both of them. Someone they both respected and cared for. Someone who they both looked up and trusted their opinion of.

He had made friends since waking up, but no one he thought he could talk to.

Toni Stark was his go-to for most of his problems, but he could hardly talk about how he felt about her to her, now could he?

He sighed to himself. Was this really the right thing to do? Was he making a mistake?

It was wrong, he knew, to have listened in on their conversation. Because now he had an upper hand. Now he knew exactly how she felt about him, but she had no conceivable idea of how much he cared about her. How much he admired her. How much he looked up to her. How much he liked her.

And that in itself was an issue.

But that was why he was here, wasn’t it? To talk to the only link that he had left with the life he’d once lived? Everyone else from his past was long gone.
He missed Bucky. Bucky would have known exactly what he should do in this situation. Bucky would have told him to take the risk, consequences be damned. Bucky would have already made a move on her, perhaps the same way Clint flirted with her from time to time, seamlessly and without a care in the world.

But Steve Rogers never was as good with the ladies as Bucky Barnes.

He took a deep breath then, opening the door to Peggy’s room after a careful moment of consideration. He wondered if it was better just to turn around and leave all together and pretend that he hadn’t heard any of the conversation that he just did.

But he was lost. He had been lost since his plane fell into the Arctic.

And he was done feeling like with every step of the way he was out of place. He was done being the man out of time.

This was his life now, and he was tired of running away from what he wanted, trying to do what he thought was right.

“Steve,” Peggy said, not sounding at all surprised that he was there, “I was wondering when you’d come in.”

“Come in?” he asked, furrowing his brows.

“Did you think I wouldn’t know that you’ve been lurking out in the halls?” she questioned, “I know a thing or two about when there are people hiding in the shadows, Steve. I founded SHIELD after all.”

He let out a shaky laugh at that, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lurked I suppose. I should have left when I realized you had company.”

“But instead you overheard my conversation with my goddaughter,” Peggy said, not sounding upset or surprised.

“I did,” he admitted, “And I guess now I’m more confused about what to do than I was before.”

“Because you know your feelings are reciprocated?” she asked, “Why would that make you any less sure of what you want?”

“I’m so used to just existing,” he confessed, “Before the serum, I never thought I’d live to see twenty. No one did. My mother tried hard to keep me healthy, but there was so much wrong with me. and I never was one to be smooth with the ladies. You know that all too well. I’m so used to trying to be better, trying to do better. Just trying to be worthy of this extended lease on life that I never would have had if not for Erskine. Because without him I would have died long ago. And it feels like this new life I have doesn’t quite belong to me. I wasn’t meant to be in this time. To have a life here. And yet,” his voice trailed off.

“And yet you want to,” Peggy surmised.

“Yes,” he sighed.

“There’s nothing wrong with that, Steve,” she said, taking his hand in hers. “We were all given the chance to live the lives we were meant to. But your life was stolen from you when your ship went down. You lost your chance to live and see the world change, and instead were dropped into this new future world. It’s not fair, and it doesn’t make any sense. But that doesn’t mean you have to stop
living. That doesn’t mean that you need to give up what makes you happy.”

“She makes me happy,” Steve confessed heavily.

“Then tell her,” Peggy urged him. “Don’t let her slip out of your fingers, Steve. I’ve known that girl a long time, and if she thinks that for even a moment you could do better than her, she’d sacrifice her own feelings for what you wanted. But once Toni Stark trusts and cares for you, then she’ll dedicate her all to making you happy. If you feel the same way for her as she does for you, then take the chance. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“She deserves better,” Steve sighed. “A man less damaged and out of place. A man who can keep up with her brilliant mind, and isn’t constantly trying to catch up to the new times we live in. She deserves a man who can take away her pain and show her love. A man better and less broken than I am.”

“What makes you think that your imperfections aren’t exactly why she cares for you?” Peggy questioned him. “Toni Stark is many things, but she’s known pain all her life. She knows what it’s like to feel like you don’t belong. She knows your pain and she understands it all too well. And maybe that’s why she’d be just as good for you as you would be for her.”

“A part of me died,” he told Peggy, “When the ship came down. And no matter how hard I try, I don’t know if I’ll ever belong in this world. And what if that hurts her in the long run? What if I end up causing her more pain?”

“That’s a risk you’re going to have to take,” Peggy told him gently, “You’ll never know what could be if you don’t take the chance. You’re Steven Rogers. The bravest man I’ve ever known, who would rush off into battle to protect those he loves. Are you telling me one woman has you so terrified you’re willing to run away than try and win?”

“She’s a hell of a woman,” Steve said dryly.

“That she is,” Peggy laughed, “She’s brilliant. And I’m glad I got to watch her grow up. I love you Steve, but she’s my little Ducky. And if you hurt her then don’t think for a moment that I won’t get out of this bed and hunt you down. I don’t think Daniel would be able to stop me if I tried. Just promise me, you’ll at least think about taking a chance. Because I think the two of you belong together. Maybe you went down on that ship for a reason. Maybe you always were meant to find your way to each other.”

He swallowed then, as he thought about the brilliant woman he came to have feelings for. She deserved the world. Deserved far more than he’d ever be able to give her. And he just hoped that he would be enough to make her happy.

But Peggy was right, if he didn’t take the chance, would he ever truly know?

“Go get her,” Peggy told him with a smile. “But before you leave, fill me in on the exciting adventures you’ve been having. This room is dreadfully dull.”

He laughed at that, starting to tell her about his latest missions, as Peggy listened enthralled.
Toni Stark wondered if she ever would get a single day off since she came out as Iron Woman, or if her life was destined to be filled with chaos. In fact, days like this, where she was in the lab and simply wanted to do some science especially stood out to her. All she wanted was to get the new StarkPhone prototype finished so she could have Pepper take it to the Board and get their approval while she finished rolling out all the other upgrades she had been falling behind on.

It wasn’t that Iron Woman was taking up all her time, or that her life wasn’t busy before. But somehow, it felt like all the crazy came out of the woodwork when she announced she was now a superhero and even science itself no longer made sense.

“Miss?” JARVIS called out to her. She looked up at a camera, without putting down her screwdriver.

“Yes, J?” She asked, as Peter held the motherboard steady.

“There have been some strange reports coming from London, England,” JARVIS informed her. “One Darcy Lewis and Dr Jane Foster have reported strange readings coming from an abandoned factory.

She looked up at the monitor in which JARVIS projected the readings onto.

“I’m not an Astrophysicist, JARVIS,” she reminded him. “Catch me up to speed. What does this mean?”

“Miss, my current research suggests that such findings should be impossible,” JARVIS told her, “The readings presented do not match up what is possible with the laws of physics itself. Dr Foster has also sent note of portals opening up in which materials that are dropped into present itself in another location all together.”

“JARVIS call Ava and Bruce into my lab,” she said sharply, “Tell them I need to speak to them immediately. Are any of the other Avengers present in the tower currently?”

“Just Mr Rogers, Ma’am,” he told her.

“Call him up here too. Inform all other Avengers that there may be a need to mobilize and to be on standby for further instructions.”

“Is this an Avengers related incident?” Peter asked excitedly, “Are you going to go out as Iron Woman and save people?”

“I don’t know yet,” she said, giving him a gentle look. “We need more information.”
“Is everything okay?” Steve said, as he rushed into the lab, followed by Ava and Bruce.

“Something’s up,” Toni told them, “Take a look at these readings.”

She knew it wouldn’t mean very much to Steve, but Bruce and Ava walked over to the screen and took a look at what she was pointing at.

“That’s not possible,” Bruce breathed.

“Dr Foster sent a video,” Toni told them.

“Thor’s Dr Foster?” Steve asked, and Toni nodded.

“Yes,” she agreed, “She’s the top scientist in her field. That’s how she ended up meeting Thor in the first place. She was down in New Mexico getting some readings when he arrived on Earth.”

She played the video of Ms Lewis dropping a bottle from a stairwell in the factory, only for it to disappear then fall back out of a portal from above.

“The readings match when Thor visited Earth,” Ava said, comparing the data they were sent.

“So Thor is coming back for a visit?” Steve raised a brow.

“Or someone else is coming,” Toni said grimly. “We can’t confirm similar readings mean the same visitor. Not when we don’t even properly know why the readings occurred in the first place. It would be great if Thor came back to visit, but we should be ready just in case it’s someone else.”

“Especially if we don’t know their intentions,” Bruce nodded, “We don’t want another New York to happen.”

“That is not the concerning part,” Toni said, looking over Darcy Lewis’ message. “It seems while exploring the factory, Dr Foster mysteriously vanished.”

“Was she sucked into one of these portals?” Steve asked, leaning over and looking at her.

“Ms Lewis seems to believe so,” Toni nodded. “It currently has been five hours since she vanished and she is hoping that we might be able to contact Thor. She believes that this may be something he has knowledge of.”

“Except we can’t,” Bruce reminded her, “He didn’t exactly leave a calling card when he went off planet. He just said he’ll return shortly.”

“We should go,” Steve told her, “We might not be able to contact Thor but we can still help. We’re the Avengers. If aliens start coming out of these portals, we’re going to want to be there to put a stop to it.”

“I agree,” Ava nodded, “Load up the quinjet. I’ll look over the data some more and see if I can find anything which might give us more insight as to what this is.”

“I’ll stay,” Bruce agreed, “Unless you explicitly think the Hulk needs to be there, I think I might be more use as myself for this.”

“Miss there is an immediate convergence on the Tower,” JARVIS said, cutting them off, “It seems that the readings are coming directly to the landing pad.”

“Time to Assemble,” she said, glancing at Steve. He nodded at her, and she flicked her wrists, as her
“That’s so cool,” Peter grinned as he watched.

“You’ve seen it before,” she reminded him.

“Doesn’t change how awesome it is,” he beamed, “Harley is going to be so jealous that I got to see a real Avengers mission up close.”

“Well you might not want to use those words,” she said, “Because you are going to go to the safe room with Ava until we know what’s coming.”

He pouted at her, but Ava led him away as her and Steve made their way up to the roof.

“Whatever this is, we’ll face this together,” Steve said, as the two of them road up the elevator.

“Together,” she smiled back. He took her hand in his, squeezing it gently.

The door opened then, and she definitely was not expecting to see Loki and Thor, who was holding a very unconscious Jane Foster.

“Stark,” Thor said, “I need to get her inside and confirm she’s stable enough to be moved to Asgard.”

“What happened?” she asked, “JARVIS as Bruce to bring a gurney up here immediately. Make sure he knows it’s an emergency.”

“She vanished from Hemidall’s all-seeing vision,” Thor told her, “She went into one of the convergence points. Something must have happened to her while she was in there. She needs to be brought back to Asgard immediately.”

“You do not know what it is that possesses her,” Loki argued, “What if the movement back to our planet reacts with the power and kills us all?”

“I would never hurt her!” Thor said firmly, “It is what’s best for her.”

“Let us take a look at her, okay Big Guy?” she asked pacifyingly. “Asgard might be able to heal her, but she still is a human. We need to check on her vital functions to make sure she’ll be able to handle the trip. The last thing any of us wants is for her to get hurt.”

“Okay,” Thor relented as Bruce appeared with a gurney in hand, as Thor laid her down on it and brushed aside her hair.

“Let’s get her to the lab,” Toni said, “JARVIS can you scan her vital functions? Make sure she’s stable. Make sure Peter and Ava know it’s safe but ask Happy to take Peter home. I don’t want him here in case there’s a…reaction of sorts. Let Peter know we’ll continue working on the phone later on.”

“Yes Miss,” JARVIS responded, as Loki interestedly looked up at the ceiling. The elevator ride down was slightly cramped, and she found herself leaning against Steve. He shot her a reassuring smile and she took in his scent as the warmth of his body radiated off of him.

She wondered what it would be like in that moment, if he wrapped his arms around her and reassured her that everything was going to be okay.

The doors opened and Ava stood there in the lab, already looking at the readings from Dr Foster as
Bruce walked over to take a look.

“How does she fair?” Thor asked, anxiously.

“Her readings are growing normal,” Bruce said, frowning slightly, “As if it’s dormant inside her. But based on the initial readings from when JARVIS first started scanning, it seems as if she’s stabilizing slowly.”

“What does that mean?” Steve asked, crossing his arms.

“That she’s a time bomb,” Toni said, taking a deep breath, “She’s fine, til she’s not.”

“What will set her off?” Ava wondered.

“Not particularly no,” Ava said, glancing down at the woman.

“Can I bring her back to Asgard?” Thor asked, wanting to know.

“Give us a little bit of time,” Toni said firmly, “I want her readings to grow a bit more normal before we move her. I don’t know too much about how space travel works, but I cannot imagine it would be a very stable ride. If in an hour she’s stable, then you can take her with you.”

Thor nodded, “Alright,” he sighed, as he stood by her side, not taking his eyes off her.

“Perhaps I might use the chance to have a private word with you then, Lady Stark,” Loki said, as he looked at her steadily. Steve stepped forward, somewhat protectively, but she placed a pacifying hand on him as Loki smirked at the man.

“Of course. Let me know if anything changes,” she told Bruce, as she led the Trickster God out of the lab and to a conference room that she had on the floor for the Avengers to use for briefings. She closed the door and gestured to him to proceed.

He took a deep breath, “I owe you my gratitude, Lady Stark,” he said softly, “If it were not for your deductions that I had not carried out the attacks out of my own violation, then I would be rotting in a cell on Asgard.”

“You did not attack Earth out of your own free will,” she reminded him.

“Some do not see it that way,” he shrugged. “Even with the evidence that you provided Thor with, it was hard to convince the Asgardian courts of my innocence.”

“You were controlled,” she said sharply.

“And before I tried to take the throne while my father asleep and Thor on earth,” he told her.

“If your father was unavailable and Thor banished then you would have been next in line,” she told him, knowing a little about the situation from Thor. “Your people needed a leader and you were one to them.”

“I’m adopted,” he told her softly, “I’m not of Asgard. I come from a different race of people. One Asgardians see as monsters. My father will never trust me, not fully. If it were not for Thor and my mother, I don’t think the evidence would have been enough to convince him.”

She placed a hand on his arm, “I’m sorry then,” she told him gently. “I know a thing or two of what
it’s like to have a father who always sees the worst in you.”

He looked at her expectantly, and she sighed.

“My father never wanted a daughter,” she told him softly, “He wanted a son. And nothing I ever did was enough to gain his approval. And the press on this planet have a way of spinning stories in their favour to make more profit. It didn’t matter what happened in a situation. He was always willing to believe their lies over his own daughter. Always ready to see me as a fuck up and not someone he could have been proud of. So I can relate to that. I know all too well what it’s like trying to live up to something unattainable.”

“I am saddened that we can relate in such a manner,” Loki told her softly. “My father was never willing to see past my flaws. Never able to see that I was unlike Thor. That I did not match his brawn. But I preferred my mother’s magical talents. My mother is the only reason I grew up knowing love. Thor, he tries, but we’ve never been all that close. He’s too stuck in his ways, as am I.”

“If there’s one thing I learned, it’s that family is who we make it,” she told him gently. “It’s those who care about you and love you regardless. We don’t get to choose our biological families. We can’t choose whether they love us or want us. But we can choose who we fill our lives with. Thor does care about you, that being said. Even if he doesn’t express it as often as he could. I see the way he glances at you, filled with sadness and regret. Of course, it is up to you if you wish to have a relationship with your brother, biological or not, but I think you’ll find that if it is something you want, he would be just as willing.”

“You are wise despite your young age,” he mused, and she barked out a laugh.

“I hate to break it to you, Rudolph, but on Earth, I’m no spring hen. I’m rather up in my years,” she said, “Not all of us can live for hundreds of years.”

“No, I suppose not,” his lips curved. “But I digress. Your Captain will grow anxious if the two of us remain here alone for much longer. For all he knows, I’m thoroughly ruining you.”

“You couldn’t ruin me if you tried,” she winked at him. “The Captain knows he has nothing to worry about. Besides, it’s not as if I wouldn’t be allowed to have some fun on my own. I am an unattached woman.”

He raised a brow at her, and she sighed.

“Fine,” she surrendered. “Unattached by technicality. It’s not as if the good Captain and I have talked about any of this yet. I’m not even sure how he feels about me.”

“What a shame,” he smirked at her, “Perhaps if the two of you do not work out then. I must confess, I did not see the appeal of Midgardian women when Thor fell for his, until I met you. But you are far different than all the woman on this planet. A true queen amongst them.”

“We don’t exactly have royalty on this planet anymore,” she reminded him, blushing slightly.

“And yet, the world knows your name. They bow to you and respect you,” he told her softly, “You may not have a title, but you are far more important to this world than you give yourself credit for.”

“As are you,” she told him gently, “You do have people in your corner Loki. Even if you do not feel like it. And you always will have a place here on Earth, if you find yourself feeling like you do not belong anywhere else. I can have a room prepared for you, and you are always welcome to stay here without any strings attached. All you have to do is ask.”
“I appreciate the offer,” he said a small smile filling his face.

“Sorry to interrupt, Miss,” JARVIS cut in just then, “Dr Foster is fully stable. Mr Odinson seems quite eager to move her back to Asgard and requested your presence.”

She nodded, “Let them know we’ll be right there,” she said.

“I suppose it’s time to return home for me then,” he said, and she squeezed his hand gently, “Just remember what I said, Loki. You are welcome here any time. You need only ask.

“Thank you, Lady Stark,” he said with a nod.

“Toni,” she corrected him. “You need not use such formalities with me. We’re friends, are we not?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, “Friends.

“Good,” she said, leading them back to the lab, “Now, let’s check in on Doctor Foster and verify that she’s actually up to making this trip or see if she needs to stay for a little while longer.”

“I do not believe my brother would be pleased if she needed to stay,” Loki said simply.

She shrugged, “Your brother is not in charge here. If Bruce, Ava, and I all say she’s good to go, then and only then, is she going to leave.”

“Thank you,” he said softly.

She pushed the doors open to the lab and saw Thor pacing. Steve looked relieved to see her, and Ava and Bruce were still looking over the doctor.

She looked over the unconscious Doctor, before taking a step back and looking over the vitals.

“She should be good to move,” Toni said, as Bruce nodded. “However you need to be careful, Thor. I suspect her feeling like she was in danger triggered the explosion out of her. Keep her calm and feeling safe. Do not do anything to stun her. When she awakes on a new planet ensure her that she is safe and unharmed.”

“I will,” Thor nodded.

“If you need us, let us know,” Steve told the man firmly, “The Avengers are only a call away. We’re a team, and that means fighting with you if you need us to.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Thor told him gratefully. “I will keep you appraised of the situation. But for now, we must go. My father will know what to do.”

Loki looked distrustful of that, but he didn’t say a thing. She gave him a reassuring smile as Thor looked at the man carefully.

“She will be safe,” Loki told Thor after a moment. “Even if Father does not know what this is, Mother will. I will work with her to ensure your Lady Jane is returned to you without this power.”

“Thank you, Loki,” Thor said, looking genuinely touched by his brother’s kindness. “It means more to me than you know that you are here with me.”

“Of course,” Loki said, “We are family after all.”

Thor beamed at him, and she gave them both soft smiles.
Thor moved to scoop Jane up carefully in his arms and she followed them out onto the roof.

“Thank you, for all you’ve done,” Thor told them. “We must go, but I shall return to you soon.”

Loki nodded at them, and the three of them were beamed up into the air, Star Trek style.

Peter would have been upset to have missed this, she mused. Perhaps next time.

“There has been an incident in Greenwich,” JARVIS reported to her as she was lounging on the couch with Ava, watching Justin Hammer make a fool of himself on the final episode of the Bachelor. It was clear to both of them that he was going to choose the tall blonde model over the school teacher, and yet they watched it anyways.

Nothing really could help the man’s rating after the disaster that was his attack on the Stark Expo. Even the best lawyers might have gotten him out of jail time, but the world still knew what it was that he had done. And the world was nowhere near ready to forget the fact that innocent lives had been put at stake because he broke a man out of prison with a vendetta.

“What sort of incident?” she asked JARVIS, sitting up quickly.

“Aliens,” JARVIS told her. She quickly sat up, as clips of a T shaped ship in Greenwich appeared on the screen. She saw a portal open in the sky and her breathing stopped as she began to shake.

“Toni,” Steve said, running into the room. He saw her on the ground as he came over and threw an arm around her. “You’re safe. You’re in the tower.”

“They’re back,” she said, as she pointed to the screen.

“It’s over, Toni,” Steve told her gently. “The entire attack lasted ten minutes. There was no way we could have gotten there in time. Thor took the Aether, the power in Dr Foster, back off world. It’s over.”

She leaned into him, as he wrapped his arms around her and helped her up from the ground.

“You’re safe,” he said softly, holding her tightly as she gasped for air slightly, trying to calm herself down, “You’re here in the tower and you’re safe. It’s over, Toni.”

“That it is,” a voice said, and she looked up in shock to see Loki standing there, looking tired and defeated.

“What happened?” she demanded to know.

“Malekith, a Dark Elf who was defeated last when my grandfather took the Aether from him. When Lady Foster found it, she awoke him. He wanted to use it to conquer the nine realms and let them fall to darkness. He killed my mother to get to it,” he said, sounding sorrowful.

“I’m so sorry,” she breathed out, as he looked down.

“She was the only one who ever truly loved me, and now she’s gone,” he said, “It’s my fault. I should have been with her, protecting Lady Foster. Instead I was drawn away by a distraction. If I had only stayed with them—”

“Then you may be dead too,” she told him firmly, “It wasn’t your fault that she was killed, Loki.
You did your best to protect her. From what you’ve told me, your mother loved you very much. She wouldn’t want you to blame yourself for her death. Does Thor?”

“No,” Loki shook his head firmly. “But the loss of our mother has deeply wounded him as well. She meant a lot to the both of us. Odin was unable to bear the loss of his wife and has fallen back into Odinsleep to try and recover from the pain.”

“So your brother is going to take the throne?” she asked, wondering what this would mean for the kingdom.

“No,” he said, sounding a bit shocked still. “He brought the nine realms back together when he ended the war. He ended all the fighting that I caused. But he did not want the throne, despite that. He said he wants to protect the kingdoms, but he doesn’t understand the ruling and the politics of it all. He asked me—”

“Asked you what?” Steve prompted him gently.

“He said that I would be a great king,” Loki said, a bit in disbelief. “He asked me to sit on the throne and rule our people while he protects it with his dying breath. That it was what he wanted and what he was meant to do.”

“And he was right,” Toni told him softly, “You are a wise man, Loki. You see what is to come and think rationally over with your emotions. You will make a great king of Asgard.”

“Thank you, Toni,” he said, using her given name. “I know there is a lot of trust I need to build back up with my people, but it is my hope that I am able to do so. And bring Asgard into a new era.”

“I hope we can continue to have a good relationship as well,” Toni said softly, “Between the people of Earth and Asgard. If there is a greater threat that is to come, then we need to be ready. And an alliance between our people will help ensure that we will be prepared.”

“You shall have it,” Loki offered her. “You have done much for me in the past, Toni. I meant what I said when you are the best this world has to offer. And I will be here for you and your people. You can count on our support for whatever is to come. Whether it be today, tomorrow, or years from now. Asgard will fight with you.”

“Thank you,” she said, giving him a soft nod. “Go be with your people, Loki. But remember my offer will always stand. King or not, you always have a home here. No matter what.”

He gave her a nod as he disappeared then into thin air, as if he were never there.

“I never thought he would be made king,” Steve commented, stepping away from her, realizing that the two of them were still quite close.

“Me neither,” she confessed, “But he will do well at it. I know he will.”

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully you guys enjoyed this take on Thor: Dark World. As the majority of the story took place off Earth, it didn't make sense that the Avengers would have been present. However, given the fact Toni suspected someone else was behind New York over Loki, I wanted to explore what that would mean for his character, and in particular his
relationship with Thor.
A news story breaks out, Toni gets an unexpected visitor, and Steve has some things to say.

The day the story broke she’d been in the middle of working on finishing some reports for the next Board meeting, trying to write up how the latest software updates would resolve new issues that hadn’t even been realized by the markets.

“Miss, you might want to see this,” JARVIS warned, and she sighed to herself as she looked up from the screen.

Please let there not be more aliens. She didn’t think she could take it if yet another story broke about aliens attacking Earth.

Hell, she’d had a meltdown when they attacked England, and she wasn’t even needed on the scene.

Honestly, she knew it was a longshot to hope that the aliens never came back, but she’d be relieved if she didn’t have to deal with it for at least a few more years. Or at least deal with any aliens that weren’t Thor or Loki.

**Toni Stark two timing The Hulk with Thor: Two Avengers face-off In This Epic Battle For Her Love.**

Is Toni Stark cheating on her current beau with the Asgardian Heir? Our sources say she recently has been spotted in an intimate encounter with the Norse God of Thunder.
She scoffed, as she slowly started looking through the article. There had been quite a few pictures of her with both men, and shots of her that had been visibly photoshopped to make it look like she was engaging in romantic behaviour with both of them.

“Several news stations and publications have picked up on the story,” JARVIS told her, “It seems as if it’s spreading faster than wild fire. You’re trending on Twitter.”

Great, so the world was probably busy calling her a whore again. Because Darwin forbid she had male friends and co-workers who she wasn’t romantically involved in. Of course, that was unreasonable to hope for.

“Have a press release prepared,” she told JARVIS, “Shut down the story immediately.”

Not only was it disrespectful to both of the men involved, it was disrespectful to Ava. Ava who was in a serious relationship with Bruce.

She knew the two of them valued their privacy, but the last thing she wanted was for her cousin to have to read the malicious comments online about her boyfriend being involved with her cousin and see pictures of the two of them that were far from the truth.

It was ridiculous, the fact that such tales were still spun about her. As if the media had nothing better to talk about. As if there weren’t bigger stories that demanded more attention, like the fact that Thaddeus Ross was still running around after all he’d done to Bruce. Or that Justin Hammer had tried to release a version of a phone that was eerily like her own line.

“Toni?” Ava said, as she knocked carefully on the door. She could see Steve standing behind her looking a bit worried as they both checked in on her.

“I’m so sorry,” she said in a quick voice, “I’m having a statement put out. Pepper’s going to file defamation suits if they don’t redact the story immediately. It’s unfair for them to write these things when it is none of their business and it hurts you.”

“I’m not mad at you,” Ava told her gently, “I’m furious at the companies, but I don’t believe in the slightest that you’re to fault for this.”

“Still,” Toni sighed, “It’s unfair to you. Even if you and Bruce come out as dating, they’re going to spin some tale about how either he’s cheating on me with you, left me for you, or that I’m the other woman. Just because you both are associated with me.”

“We knew something like this could happen,” Ava said, “The people who matter all know the truth. Who cares about what the rest of the world thinks?”

“Is Bruce okay?” she asked carefully, wanting to know if the man who tried so hard to keep his heart beat at a certain level was handling the situation alright.

“He’s as expected,” her cousin said, “He’s not pleased by the news, but he’s not mad at you either. None of us think this is your fault. You hardly asked for them to write this. It’s not on you.”

“I’m sorry,” Toni told her softly, “I’ll let you know once the situation has been handled. I still can’t believe they made fake pictures to try and implicate us. As if they didn’t see that there was anything wrong with that.”

“They wanted a quick payday,” Ava said with a sigh, “I stand by what I said, Toni. Don’t beat yourself up too much over this. It’s not your fault.”
“I know,” Toni said, unhappily. “I should get back to work. Make sure the company doesn’t take too many hits over this.”

Ava nodded, and left the room, leaving her alone with Steve. She wondered if the man would be unhappy with the situation.

Even if he did have feelings for her, she wondered if this would change anything. He’d never have a normal life, not if the two of them got together. She knew he hated the attention whenever they went out, and there was no way for the spotlight not to be on him if he was linked to her. His entire life would change.

He deserved better than to be caught up in the nightmare that was her relationship with the press.

He deserved better than her.

It was as simple as that. He deserved to be with someone that would let him have the life he deserved. Not hers that was constantly swept up in scandal and limelight. Not hers that was constantly under scrutiny and criticism.

“Are you okay?” she asked him, wanting to gage his reaction carefully. He had been uncharacteristically quiet throughout the exchange and she had no idea how he was feeling about any of it.

“Am I okay?” he asked incredulously. “Are you? You’re the one they wrote the story about. The things they wrote about you in that article! How are you okay with any of that? They basically made you out to be some sort of, of, of hussy!”

His face flushed slightly, as he spat out the words.

“And your biggest concern is everyone else,” he ranted, “It’s like you don’t even care what they said about you. How does none of it bother you? Why are you more concerned about how it will affect everyone else, and not at all that it involves you too? They called you a Play Girl who enjoys going through men like they’re dispensable. That it’s no surprise that you’re incapable of relationships and monogamy given your wild youth. How do they have the nerve to say that? That all you care about is money and the fast life? Like you didn’t take in all the Avengers and give them a home? Like you don’t donate to charities and care more about everyone else than you do about yourself? How do you not care that they got you pegged so incorrectly?”

“I stopped caring a long time ago what they say about me, Captain,” she said gently. “The world will always see what they want to see. They don’t want the version of Toni Stark who has PTSD from being kidnapped or from the portal. They don’t want the one who had an arc reactor because she would have died otherwise. They don’t want to see the woman who had to take over the company in the wake of her father’s death. The one who changed the direction of her company and still made it more profitable than ever before. The one who has several doctorates. The woman who designed Iron Woman and donates billions of dollars each year. That woman doesn’t sell as many stories.”

She took a deep breath, “They want a whore, a woman who has no morals and is a mess. They want a trainwreck. So they create one. They create the woman who will fit into their narratives and bring in as much money as possible. And it’s far more profitable to print their lies than the truth. So somewhere along the line, I stopped caring. They’re never going to see me. Not who I truly am. And nothing I say is going to change that. What’s the point in trying to change their point of view?”

“That’s not fair,” he said, sounding furious. “They don’t get to decide who you are. They don’t have that right to tell you that you have to be the person they want to see. That’s not right.”
“The world doesn’t run on what’s right and wrong, Steve,” she said. “It runs on money and on public opinion. I’ve accepted a long time ago that the world will always see me as that woman, regardless of what I really am. I could shout it from the roof that am not the person they want me to be. Doesn’t mean anyone would listen. It’s hard for them to accept a strong woman in a position of power. They choose to ignore that and write about more interesting stories.”

“You deserve better,” he told her gently. “You deserve someone who sees who you are. Not just who they want you to be.”

“Sounds nice,” she said with a smile. “Maybe I’ll have that one day, if I’m lucky.”

“Hopefully,” he said, giving her a soft smile. “I have to go. There are some things I need to take care of.”

“Okay,” she said, a bit confused, but she didn’t push it. She couldn’t expect him to spend all his free time with her after all.

He kissed her gently on the cheek before turning and leaving the room. She stared after him speechlessly, as she touched the spot his lips had met her skin, and she felt in that moment, truly untouchable.

If there was one thing Toni Stark was not expecting when she went down to her lab, it was the person she came face to face in contact with.

Someone who was very much supposed to be dead.

She raised her hand as her armour attached itself to her body, as she pointed her repulsor straight at whoever it was that was impersonating Phil Coulson.

She had to give it to them, whatever technology they were using to make sure they looked just like the dead man.

Hell, even the mannerisms in which he had his arms crossed and looked at her unimpressed mimicked the way Coulson used to look at her back when he was still alive.

She had to give it to them.

They had guts.

What to break into a building crawling with Avengers, and not only that, but be waiting for her in her laboratory?

The nerve.

“I don’t know who you are or what you want, but you better start talking now,” she said coldly.

“You know me, Stark,” he said, raising his arms in surrender.

“The Phil Coulson I know is dead,” she reminded him, “So either no one gave you the memo, or you’re dumber that I thought.”

“I did die,” he said softly. “I died when Loki stabbed me. Then suddenly I’m awake and Fury is telling me that I was taken to Tahiti and revived.”
“Bullshit,” she said, but felt a bit unsure.

Because she hadn’t seen the body. She’d just heard Fury telling her that Coulson was down. And then he’d thrown the Captain America trading cards on the table, covered in his blood, and she’d taken his word for it.

Why lie about such a thing? Who would claim someone was dead if they weren’t?

Nick Fury, that’s who. He was the spy. Of course he’d lied to them. Because the Avengers weren’t working. Not until Coulson’s death. They needed a cause. Someone to avenge.

And Fury had delivered Coulson’s death to them on a silver platter.

They had gone to his funeral. She hadn’t cried, but she’d barely been able to cry at her own parents’ funeral. But with the close casket, she wouldn’t have been surprised if there wasn’t even a body inside.

“You know I’m telling the truth, Stark,” he told her softly.

“JARVIS?” she asked her AI. Because even if he looked and sounded like Coulson she needed to be sure.

“Agent Coulson matches all identifiable markers. Additionally, there is no presence of altering technology present on his person. I can confirm with 99.98% probability that the man in your workshop is Agent Phil Coulson,” JARVIS told her.

She drew a deep breath.

“Why now?” she asked him suddenly. “Why are you here now? Did Fury send you? What do you want?”

“I need your help,” he told her. “I need the help of someone who won’t run back to SHIELD and tell them what I’m going to ask you.”

“Are you distrustful of your own spy organization?” she asked, raising her brows. That was interesting indeed.”

“You know how SHIELD is,” he rolled his eyes at her. “They did something to me. I can tell. I remember dying. And then all I remember is relaxing in Tahiti. But I feel different. I feel like something’s changed. I feel like something is wrong. And I need you to help me figure out what they’ve done to me. Fury won’t give me a straight answer. And if I ask my team they’ll be forced to report it back to him. But you? You’ve told Fury off more times than I can count. I should know, it was often me you were telling him off through. If there’s anyone who won’t report this back to him, it’s you.”

“You know I’m not a biologist right? Or even a chemist? If there’s anything off about how you were brought back, I might not be able to figure it out,” she warned him.

He snorted, “You’re Toni Stark. Just because you’re not well versed in how biochemistry works doesn’t mean you won’t be able to figure it out. And I assume if you bring in Dr Banner, the two of you will be able to crack it in no time.”

“Are you giving me permission to bring in the other Avengers?” she raised a brow at him.

“Not Natasha or Clint,” he told her. “I trust them as SHIELD spies, but I can’t be certain they won’t
inform Fury that I’m asking you to look into this. But you and Dr Banner? Neither of you are all that trusting of SHIELD.”

“And Steve?” she questioned.

He hesitated, and she could see him contemplate just how he wanted to proceed with the matter at hand.

“Do you trust him?” he asked her.

“I do,” she nodded. “Steve likes to see the best in people, but he also understands the need for privacy. If you ask him not to tell anyone, then he’ll keep this close. You can trust him.”

“Okay,” he exhaled.

“Fair warning, we might not actually know what’s wrong with you for a while,” she said. “Resurrection is hardly common. You might not get the answers that you’re looking for right away. Can you handle that?”

“Yes,” he said, sounding certain.

“Okay,” she said, “JARVIS, can you call Steve and Bruce down to the labs? Ava too, if she’s free. Tell them only that I have a new project to work on with them.”

She turned to face him.

“Are you ready to get started, Agent?” she asked, and he nodded grimly.

He nodded firmly, “Just do it, Stark. Find out what they did to me.”

“Miss the press conference is about to begin,” JARVIS said, snapping her out of her reverie. The problem of how Agent Coulson came back had been weighing on her all week, and despite the initial tests, she had nothing.

“What press conference?” She asked, narrowing her eyes. She didn’t have anything for Stark Industries coming up, Pepper would have reminded her if she had forgotten. Nor were there any Avengers related matters that she had them for.

“Captain Rogers asked to put together a press conference,” JARVIS told her.

“Why was I not informed of this?” She asked, grabbing her StarkPhone and quickly typing out a message. “Does he even have any experience speaking to the media? He can’t just go out there and speak to them without thinking carefully of what he’s going to say. Everything can be misconstrued.”

“It did not go against the instructions you provided me to ensure they had everything they needed, nor did it go against my primary objective of keeping you safe,” JARVIS spoke.

And her heart stopped.

Was Steve going to speak to the press about her?

Oh Bloody Levi-Montalcini.

What was he about to do?
She raced out of her lab, passing through the common areas of her floor. She needed to get to the elevator. She needed to stop him. To change the press conference to anything else other than what he was about to say or do.

He wasn’t trained, not like she was. The media hated her, yes, but she had been trained to be a public figure since she was a child. She knew how to handle them. She knew what to say and what to do when she wanted stories covered a certain way. She knew how to play them like a piano if she needed to.

This was going to be an absolute disaster and she needed to put a stop to it before it was too late.

The screen in the room lit up as Steve’s face filled it, standing at a podium in front of her building, with what must have been dozens of reporters from different news organizations and papers.

“Good morning,” he said with a polite smile. “I know I haven’t taken the opportunity to introduce myself properly to the public, but my name is Steve Rogers, or Captain America. While this conference is not about me, I will address a few of the questions I’ve seen floating around the internet for quite some time. However, I do ask that you hold any and all questions until I’ve said all that it is that I have to say.”

“It is true that I was born in 1918 and served in World War II. However, in 1945, my plane went down in the Arctic Ocean on a mission. My body was found, and it was discovered I was alive. I did not call this conference however to talk about how it was that I was found or what this means for my future,” he said taking a deep breath, as the elevator chimed, having hit the ground floor. “Why I did call this conference was to speak about a matter close to my heart. One that has been bothering me for quite some time. Perhaps this is the generation gap between when I was raised to what the world has become. But I have called this press conference to speak about Toni Stark, and the outlandish tales the world has been spinning about her in order to make a quick buck.”

She tried to press the buttons quickly, attempting to summon the elevator, trying to get outside to stop Steve from saying something which would make things worse. She knew he had good intentions. But the press were vultures. And she didn’t want them to write the same things about him as they more than often did about her.

“Toni Stark is the kindest woman I know,” he said, as the doors opened, and Pepper stepped out.

She tried to push past her, needing to get down to the main floor.

“Toni, wait!” Pepper said, stopping her from getting any further.

“Did you know about this?” she demanded.

Pepper nodded and she felt herself shake.

“Why didn’t you stop it?” Toni asked. “Pepper you know what they’re going to say about him. Why did you let him go out there?”

“I saw his speech before hand, Toni,” Pepper told her gently, “Let him speak okay? He can do this. Just let him give this speech.”

She looked at Pepper carefully, wanting to know if she could trust her friend with this. But Pepper had never let her down before.

“Okay,” Toni said, letting out an exhale.
“She gave me a home,” Steve continued, “She gave all the Avengers a place to live, when we had nothing. She gives so much of herself to everything she does. Without a question of what is best for herself. She fights constantly, for what is right and for what she believes in.”

She swallowed, as she listened to him speak about her.

“She is the smartest person I know, and hearing some of the things she has done, it’s incredible,” Steve let out a small laugh. “She has more degrees than anyone cares enough to remember. She built the Iron Woman suit in a cave while being held hostage, with nothing but the spare parts around her. She changed the entire direction of her company to undo the damages done behind her back and made it more profitable. She funds several charities per year, and mentors youth solely because she wants to help them reach their full potential. And she does it all without expecting anyone to notice. Because she knows that no matter what she does, no matter how much she achieves it won’t be enough.”

“Not because she’s not good enough, but because you are all vultures,” he said, and the room went silent.

“Your coverage of Toni Stark in the brief time I’ve known her has been absolutely ridiculous. If she walks into a room and a man asks her for a dance, and she says no, you’ll print that she’s an Ice Queen. But if she says yes, you make her out to be some sort of lose woman with no morals. If she drinks in public, she’s an alcoholic, and if not, she must be pregnant. If she signs some autographs, she has a god complex, but you’ll use the same words if she refuses. Whatever she does, you find a way to distort it for your favour. And I’m here to tell you no more. No more writing her out to be a villain in order to make a profit. All I’m asking is that you print the truth about her.”

He took a deep breath, “Because Toni is a brilliant woman. She’s the best of us, when it comes down to it. I was told once that she is the picture of the current modern society, and I first thought that meant she’s everything that’s wrong with this new world. But I’ve come to see that I was the one who is wrong. She is the best of everything this world has to offer. And she deserves so much better than for you to twist words for you favour. Someone should have stood up for her long ago, but as that never happened, I’m standing up for her now. Enough is enough.”

He looked directly into the cameras at that point, “And I know me telling the press isn’t the best solution. What when you can edit this footage however you like. To twist my words around to change my message for one that suits your purposes. I wouldn’t be surprised if you were already deciding how to word the stories for your benefit. Don’t waste your time. I’ve had this entire conference recorded by our own people and streamed to the internet as I speak. So this time, you cannot change the narrative. Not this time. This time, I’m speaking directly to the entire world, telling them exactly the kind of person Toni Stark is.”

“Miss, you should check Twitter,” JARVIS told he, and she quickly pulled out her phone to check.

Conner Hansen 🐱 @MoonMoon29 · 3m
just got chills watching @CaptainAmerica defend @ToniStark on national television telling the press to fuck off. What a pure cinnamon roll. #CaptainAmerica4President

3000  500  1000
“Fuck,” she swore herself as she read a few of the tweets. She scrolled through quickly, as more filled her feed by the instant. And she knew then, that as wonderful as it was for Steve to stand up for her, the world was going to run with a whole other story now.

The elevator door opened then as Steve had ended the conference while she read the tweets on her phone.

“Steve,” she breathed as she saw him. “Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?”

“I told them the truth,” he said, looking a little sheepish, “I might have gotten a bit carried away in my wording, but I meant everything I said. You deserve better than to listen to them tear you apart day after day, when you are nothing like they claim you to be. and I would gladly stand up for you today and any other day if it means never having to listen to their garbage ever again.”

“They’re going to twist this around,” she swallowed, “Do you know how many people have already began sending me tweets about this? They’re going to make this out to sound like you’re in love with me, and nothing else is going to matter. They’ll spin this in their favour like they do with everything else.”

“Is that really so bad?” he asked her softly, “If they know I care about you? If they knew I had feelings for you? Would that be so bad? Because I do, Toni. I like you. I’ve liked you for quite some time. I might not love you, not yet. But I could see myself loving you. I could see myself having an entire life with you. You’re loud and rash, and intelligent beyond words could begin to explain. You’re compassionate, and you never hesitate to put others first. You are the kindest person I know, and I like you, Toni Stark.”

She didn’t say anything, simply looking in his eyes searchingly. Looking for anything which indicated he was less than honest with his words. Anything which would suggest that he was like all the people in her past who used and abused her.

But she didn’t find it.

Not in him.

She took a step forward then, pressing her lips against his as she caught him off guard. But he didn’t move away from her. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her waist, drawing her in close as his lips moved against hers.

She ran her hands through his hair, and finally, it felt like she could breathe.

She was safe, she was home.
She pulled away from him, a moment later, and his eyes searched hers, looking for regret or anything which would suggest she hadn’t been as into it as he was.

“I like you too, Steve,” she told him softly, and his eyes lit up brightly, before he pulled her back into a deep kiss.

She knew in that moment, that she’d made the right choice. And that nothing else mattered. So she let herself get lost in the kiss, throwing aside all thoughts of what the world would say or do.

Chapter End Notes

They finally got together!!! I really wanted to play with the idea of Steve setting the record straight and them getting together afterwards, and thirty our chapters later I’ve done it. It also took me far too long to create the code for the tweets and the photoshopped images in this chapter but I'm quite happy with how they ended up turning out.

Also a reader asked a few chapters back if I had an actress in mind for who would play Toni Stark, and I always pictured her as Katie McGrath. What about you guys?
December 16th was always a hard day for Toni Stark. In the years since her mother’s death, she’d grown to hate it. Grown to hate the fact that the last conversation she’d had with her parents had been a fight with her father in which her mother had gone with him anyways.

Over the years she’d had different coping strategies, from drinking the day away, to spending it crying as her Aunt Peggy comforted her, to pretending that everything was fine and trying to go about her day, and just locking herself away in her lab, coming up with invention after invention which would mean that she wouldn’t have to think about what the day meant to her.

But this year was different.

This year, Steve was around, and while she didn’t spend every waking moment of her life with her new boyfriend, he’d certainly notice if she went off the grid for a day.

Still, it didn’t stop her from staying in her lab all night long and refusing to go up for meals.

Instead, she just blasted AC/DC as loud as she could and lost herself in the science of her latest inventions, wondering if truly there could be a way to keep the planet safe with a security net of sorts. A way to stop the aliens from coming. A first response system.

It was enough of a novel idea that she didn’t have to think about the day. That she wouldn’t have to think about what it meant to her, and that she simply could go about existing, and not pretend that she didn’t want to break down crying at any moment.

Really, it had been over two decade since they had passed away, she should be over this by now.

“Toni?” she heard a gentle knock on the door, as JARVIS turned down the music automatically.

She glared upwards at the camera.

“Miss, I do believe you should let the Captain in,” her AI told her softly. “He has been worried about you all morning long.”

“And if I don’t want to?” she scoffed. “What if I just want to be alone.”
“That is not healthy behaviour, Miss,” JARVIS reprimanded her lightly. “You do not need to be alone on this day. Not when you have all your children who love you dearly, and Captain Rogers who cares about you a great deal.”

She sighed to herself, knowing he was right. She wanted nothing more than to push everyone away. But in the end, would that really help anyone?

“Let him in, J,” she said with a sigh, as she turned off the screen she’d been working on.

“Toni,” Steve said, entering the lab carefully, “Are you okay?”

She nearly laughed. Did she look okay? Her hair was a frazzled mess, she hadn’t slept in nearly two days, and Jemison help her, when was the last time she ever even showered?

But the earnest look on his face stopped her. The look that showed that he really did care about her and did want to see how she was doing.

“You know what today is, right?” she asked him, and he simply shook his head.

Right, she forgot the Captain had only been awake for a few years. A day significant to her like this meant nothing to him.

“Today is the anniversary of my parent’s death,” she said softly, and his face immediately dropped, as the realization washed across his face.

“Toni,” he said, immediately taking a seat on the chair closest to her. “I’m so sorry. I had no idea. I should have checked the date and remembered it.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said softly, “I wouldn’t expect most people to know. It was so long ago, really.”

“They were your parents,” he reminded her. “It makes a difference in your life, and I should have known about it.”

He took her hands in his and she looked down, “I don’t cope well with this day. I should have warned you instead of just running away. I’ve never really had a real relationship before. Nothing like this anyways.”

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked her gently, “If you don’t, that’s fine too. We can do whatever you need to feel better.”

She was silent for a few moments. It had been years since she’d told anyone about her parents, or what had happened that day. Her family knew or knew bits and pieces. But she never talked about it with people. How could she?

“I talked to them that day,” she whispered, and he sat up straight. “My parents. I was visiting them for the holidays, and they were going on a trip, just the two of them. My dad and I had a fight; he always liked to believe the worst of me, and I gave up correcting him early on. And that was the last conversation I ever had with him. One where he mocked me for thinking I was too busy sleeping my way through PhD. And he had a few drinks. I knew he had a problem with his alcohol but none of us ever said anything. But maybe if I had he wouldn’t have been driving that day.”

He looked a bit surprised about the drunk driving, and Toni knew why. It wasn’t common knowledge that the former CEO and owner of Stark Industries not only killed himself, but also his wife by driving under the influence. Such a thing certainly would not be good for the general
reputation of the company. So instead, Obie swept it under the rug, like everything else unpleasant that their company did.

She wanted to hate him for it. Hate that Obie hid the truth of the matter from the public. Her father was a monster, and the world needed to know.

“He took my mother from me,” she said, voice cracking slightly, “My father hated me, but my mother loved me. She might not have always been around, but she taught me how to shield myself from the world. How to not let their words get to me. She loved me even when he couldn’t. and my father took her from me.”

“I never knew,” he said softly, wrapping an arm around her, “I’m so sorry, Toni. I can’t even begin to imagine what that must have been like for you. You were so young.”

“I don’t know what I would have done if the Carter-Sousas weren’t there for me,” she told him, “I lost Jarvis a few years ago, and if Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel didn’t take care of me then, then who knows what would have happened. I think I would have lost myself in it all and would have been unable to get to where I am today.”

“Our true family are the ones we surround ourselves with,” he said, repeating her words from long ago back to her. “Thank you for talking to me about this. I know we haven’t exactly been seeing each other for long, but the fact that you let me into your life means a lot to me.”

She leaned over and pressed a kiss on his lips, “You mean a lot to me, Steve,” she told him. “You’re family now, even if we haven’t been together long.”

He held her in his arms, not saying anything for a bit as she leaned into him. It was nice, having someone in her life that she could trust like she trusted him.

She wondered if the two of them would last, or if they would be doomed to fall apart and break, like most other things in her life.

But she was happy with him. And she wasn’t about to let anyone take it from her.

“Toni you have to help me!” Peter said, barrelling onto her floor, looking out of shape and miserable all around.

“What happened?” she asked, putting down the cup of coffee as Steve pushed a plate of food towards her. “Did you forget about an assignment again? It happens to the best of us. I can make you an AI to help you keep track of all your work, like JARVIS helps me keep track of everything.”

“And where would you be without me?” JARVIS asked, sounding smug.

She grinned, looking at one of the cameras. “You know it, Baby boy.”

“What?” Peter said, a bit confused, “No that wasn’t what I needed help with. It’s much worse! It’s not even science related! Or math! And it’s so stupid because I shouldn’t have to do this. Why does anyone care about it anyways? It’s not like the people making the rules are the ones who have to do this test.”

“Slow down,” she said, trying to get the bouncing pre-teen to sit, “What’s this about? I can’t help you if you don’t tell me what’s wrong.”
“I have to climb up a rope,” he said, pouting at her, “In gym class. I’ve never climbed up anything in my life. I like science! I can calculate how long it would take the average climber to get to the top if you gave me the proper variables. But why do I need to be to climb to the top of the rope? The test is so irrelevant anyways. It makes no difference to anyone if I’m able to get to the top of this rope or not. And yet, it’s what I have to be able to do apparently. Have you ever seen me climb anything? I get tired climbing up a flight of steps. How am I going to get to the top of a rope?”

“We can get you a note,” she said immediately, “I can call some doctors and get you a note that’ll get you out of this. No intern of mine should have to do physical activity if they don’t want to. I’ll start making some calls.”

“What?” Steve said, looking at her in surprise, “Toni, no! You can’t just get him a note to get him out of gym class! What happens next time when he has to do the next test? You can’t give him notes every time!”

“We can write a program,” Peter said, solemnly. “I support this idea. That way it can auto-generate notes based on the use case and I can just print them out and give it to my teachers as the issues come up. Think about the applications we can get out of it! It’ll be brilliant.”

“Perfect!” she said, clapping her hands, “Let’s get to work, my prodigy.”

“Toni!” Steve scolded her, light heartedly. “There is another solution to all of this. One that doesn’t involve cheating the system and one which will have high rewards for you.”

“You don’t mean-” Peter said looking up at him in horror.

“Captain, say it isn’t so,” Toni said, stunned.

“You can practise,” Steve said in his good Samaritan voice. “A little hard work goes a long way. Just think about the satisfaction you’ll feel once you finally get to the top of that rope using your own merits and skill.”

“I tried, Peter,” she said, looking down, “I tried to get you out of this, but the Good Captain is too noble and pure for us to exploit. If he says you have to do it, then I guess you have no choice but to learn how to climb up the top of the rope.”

“Not just Peter,” Steve said, glancing over at her.

“What?” she asked, nearly dropping her mug of coffee, “You want me to climb to the top? Why?”

“You’re a superhero,” he told her sternly, “You could use a little training. What if your suit malfunctions and you need to climb up to safety? Do you really want to just accept injury, or worse, death, simply because you don’t know how to climb up?”

“I can always fix my suit!” she argued. “I’m an engineer! It’s what I do! I fix things.”

“And if you have no materials?” he asked her, “What if you’re stranded in the middle of the ocean?”

“Then what do I need to climb?” she threw her arms in the air.

“A rope?” he questioned her. “One that could pull you up to safety.”

“I think you’re reaching, Steve,” she pouted. “Please don’t make me climb the rope.”

“It’ll be good for you to at least try,” he said, gesturing at Peter, “What kind of example do you want
to set for him?"

“That science is always the answer,” she said, trying to convince him.

“Both of you go change,” Steve shook his head, “And meet me in the gym in ten. We’re going to have a lot of work to do.”

He pressed a kiss on her pouting face as he made his way down to the gym.

“I’m already sore,” Peter said, looking at her with a pout. “Are you sure we can’t just make a program?”

She shook her head, “I wish. But Cap won’t be pleased if we do. Time to buck up, my little genius. Looks like we’re gonna climb a rope.”

And with that, she found herself changed and ready in the gym, scowling at the tall rope that Steve had somehow managed to prep in the time it took her to get down there.

“This is still my building,” she reminded him, “I feel like your rule book of politeness should have something in there about not forcing a person against their will to get into shape.”

“It’s cause I care about you,” he deadpanned. “My mistake really. I guess I’ll just leave you and the kid to suffer being out of shape.”

“You’re not allowed to be sarcastic,” she gasped at him, “Captain America is supposed to be polite all the time! It’s like the most important rule! What next? Are you not going to walk old ladies across the street? Going to use a curse word? What is the world even getting to?”

“It’s falling apart,” Peter said with a nod, “Really, we’re all just descending into chaos and anarchy.”

Steve shook his head at the two of them, before pressing a kiss on her lips.

“You don’t have to do this if you don’t want to,” he told her in a soft tone. “I just thought it would be good moral support to have you learn as well for Peter.”

She smiled up at him, “I know, Darling,” she said, intertwining her fingers with his. “I may not be the best at all this exercise stuff, but you’re right. I can’t get Peter out of this forever. It’s better that he learns how to do this in case he ever is in a situation where he needs upper body strength. Curie forbid he decides to become a superhero or something one day.”

“I don’t know if I could handle that,” Steve laughed, as they watched Peter walk over to the rope and look hard at it. She wondered what kinds of calculations he was running in that brain of his, and she laughed, practically seeing the math floating over his head.

“It’s not about the math or physics, Peter,” Steve said, walking over to him, “It’s about focusing your strength. Here, watch as I lock my arms on the rope and look at the technique I’m using to pull myself up. Then we’ll walk you through it slowly.”

She watched in amazement as he gripped the rope, pulling himself into the air as he made his way up.

She grinned to herself at the sight, cause damn her man was hot. She might not have admitted it to herself earlier when she was avoiding her feelings for him, but there was no denying the fact that she was attracted to him as he pulled himself up carefully.
He lowered himself down a few moments later, as Peter watched him in awe.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to do that,” he admitted to the older man, “I don’t think my body is built that way.”

“It’s about the practise,” Steve told him with a smile, “It doesn’t matter if you can’t get it right today or tomorrow, or even the next day. Keep practicing at it, and it’ll come. You just have to give it some time.”

Peter took a deep breath as he latched onto the rope, and she watched as Steve gave him pointers, talking him through how to pull himself up and balance his weight on the rope.

She smiled to herself, watching her boyfriend give the boy she’d come to think of as one of her own, tips on how to get himself up. And as Peter dropped down, time and time again, barely pulling himself up, Steve never stopped giving him encouragement to get back up and try again.

She swallowed.

He’d make a great parent someday, if he ever decided he wanted children. He was a natural at it, and just watching him and Peter interact, it was clear he cared about her mentee very much.

She wondered what that would mean for her and Steve in the future. Human children had never been something she’d thought about having for herself. She was hardly parent material, and really who would trust her with children? She could barely even remember to feed herself. And she was lucky that her bots didn’t require constant food, or who knew what would happen to them?

She cared about Steve. And if she was serious about the man, she knew it was a conversation they might one day have to have.

But for now, she was fine just watching him help Peter, as the boy slowly made his way a quarter of the way up the rope, before he fell back down again. She cheered for him loudly, knowing it was the furthest he’d made it up all day, and he beamed back at her.

“That’s enough for today, Peter,” Steve grinned at the boy. “You’ve made incredible progress. Why don’t you go take a break while we get Toni up here and see how far she gets.”

She paled as Peter laughed at her.

The things she would do for her family.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asked, as she helped Steve carry up his suitcase to the apartment SHIELD had outfitted him with. “You can work out of New York, you know.”

“I know,” he told her gently, as he stopped outside what must have been the unit he’d been set up with. “But I want to do this. I need to help people, Sweetheart. You know that. And as much as I adore spending my time with you every day, I can’t help people from New York.”

“I could get SHIELD to set up a branch in New York,” she offered half-heartedly.

In reality, her chest wanted to constrict. She knew he wasn’t leaving her, nowhere near close. He was just spending a few weeks doing some operations work for SHIELD. But it didn’t change the fact that he wouldn’t be in the tower with her every day, and that she’d have to settle for phone calls
He dropped his box and kissed her gently, “I’ll come back and visit you,” he promised her, as he pushed a strand of hair out of her face. “Every moment of free time I get. The Jet flew us here quickly, so think about how long it would take for me to get to you. Plus, Iron Woman is always welcome to fly here and visit me as well.”

She wrapped her arms around his waist, “I will,” she agreed easily. He dipped his head back down again, pulling her into another kiss. She sighed as she leaned into him. He held her tightly for a moment, and she never grew tired of the feeling of his arms around hers as she buried her face in his chest. He pulled away after a second, and she felt herself missing his warmth already.

“We should get inside,” he said, regretfully after a moment. “I’m supposed to be undercover. And I don’t think I’ll stay that way if I continue to kiss the most intelligent woman in the world. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but you’re rather well knowing.”

She laughed, as she watched him fiddle with the keys. As he opened the door, she followed him in, dropping off his suitcase as she took a look around the small apartment.

SHIELD really didn’t spare that many expenses for him, did they?

She wondered if she’d be allowed to spruce it up a little. Undercover or not, her boyfriend deserved a place to come home to. A home away from home. Even if it was far away from her. He should have at least this much.

Instead of this apartment which felt cramped and like it was stuck in the nineties. Yes, Steve might not be the most familiar with technology, but didn’t he deserve at least a decent wifi speed?

“It’s quite large,” he breathed, and she turned around at him, raising a brow in surprise. “I was raised through the Depression, remember? This is far more than I ever had growing up. It’s nothing like the home you set me up with, but this is more than I imagined.”

“I suppose,” she sighed, and he gave her a knowing look.

“Promise me if I say you can upgrade a few things, you won’t go overboard trying to make this place as amazing as the tower?” He sighed, giving in to what she was asking for. She nearly let out a cheer of excitement as ideas began running through her head of just what she could do to the place to make it more livable.

“Me go overboard?” she gasped, in mock surprise. “Never. It’s like you don’t even know me.”

He shook his head at her, amused, “A few things, Sweetheart. I’m going to be travelling for the most part anyways. And I hope if I have free weekends, I can use it to visit you. I really don’t need too much here.”

“Fine,” she said, in mock acceptance, “I’ll only upgrade the bare minimum. You’ll still be living like a heathen; I give you my word.”

“And that’s all I can ask for,” he nodded, as she began pulling out her phone and writing down the things that she needed to upgrade his apartment and make it livable. She knew not everyone enjoyed having technology all through their homes as she did, but at least she could give him a few more things to make his time here more comfortable.

There was a knock on the door then, and she let Steve go answer it as she began to unpack his suitcases carefully. He had packed the bare minimum amount of clothing, and she hoped it meant
that he wasn’t planning on making his stay in DC permanent.

But she still worried. What if he decided he liked working with SHIELD far more than he liked seeing her?

What if he decided he didn’t want to make the effort any longer? What if he decided she wasn’t worth making the effort for, and decided to leave her for someone else who was?

“You must be my new neighbour,” she heard a female voice say, “I didn’t expect you to be so good looking. Welcome to the building. My name is Kate.”

“Nice to meet you, Kate,” he said, with a nod. “My name is-”

Toni’s eyes narrowed, recognizing the voice of Kate far too well, even without seeing the woman who was currently flirting with her boyfriend’s face.

“Hello, Sharon,” Toni said, walking to the door as she came face to face with one very surprised looking Sharon Carter. “Funny running into you here.”

Sharon’s eyes widened, as Steve gave her a confused look. And just like that, she supposed she broke the cover of a woman meant to spy on Steve.
Toni adjusts to Steve's absence

Steve took a step back from the door as he turned to face her, confused over the difference in the name she’d used.

“Sharon?” Steve inquired, looking back and forth and both women.

Sharon scowled when she saw her, and Toni shot her an unimpressed look. She’d never been close with Aunt Peggy’s extended family, but there had been a few Christmases they’d spend together once her parents had passed. And at every single one of them, Sharon Carter had always looked at her in disdain. Whether it was the jealousy over her relationship with her cousins, or the stigma of her name, Toni didn’t know.

But Sharon Carter pretending to be Kate definitely was not a coincidence. And neither was the fact that she was apparently living beside Steve Rogers.

“Sharon Carter,” Toni said, not taking her eyes off the woman across from her.

“Carter?” Steve said, glancing back at Sharon. “As in?”

“Peggy’s niece,” Toni confirmed. “SHIELD operative.”

“Fury’s not going to be happy with you blowing my cover,” Sharon warned her. “Speaking of which, why are you here, Stark? Last I heard you were off making a menace in New York. A little far from home, wouldn’t you say?”

“Why I’m here is my own business,” Toni snapped. She didn’t expect SHIELD not to figure out that she and Steve were together. Not after that press conference where he all but told the world he had feelings for her. But that being said, she most certainly did not appreciate SHIELD constantly sticking its nose where it didn’t belong. “What’s wrong, did Harry have too much of a conscious to give Fury updates on Steve? Is that why he sent you in? If he was smart, he would have sent someone in that neither Steve nor I knew. But I guess not everyone can be the genius Carter, can they?”

“Fury wanted to spy on me?” Steve asked, sounding unimpressed. “What’s so important he needed to plant someone in my life for?”

“Most likely, he wanted to see how easy you’d be to manipulate,” Toni filled in. “A super soldier who doesn’t asked questions and is easy to mold is far more beneficial than one that SHIELD can’t control. And I’m guessing they probably went to Harry first, asking him for updates since he’s the closes SHIELD agent in our lives. But my cousin wouldn’t rat us out so easily. Not when he has a conscious.”

“I was making sure he was adjusting!” Sharon argued, “We’re not trying to manipulate him. Not everything is some conspiracy where the government is trying to control your every move. Captain Rogers woke up decades in the future, outside of his time. SHIELD isn’t unreasonable in its concern
that he might not be adapting well to the future. And given some of his current actions, there was concern about the people in his life introducing him to the modern world."

“You mean me,” Toni said flatly. “You’re concerned that I’m a bad influence in Steve’s life because of the press conference. Because according to you, I’m some media whore who feels the need to be in the news any chance she gets. That’s what you said at Christmas in ‘03 right? That I’d do anything it took to stay in the spotlight and stay relevant?”

“Was I wrong?” Sharon shot back at her, “Iron Woman? Like you didn’t have enough going on in your life, you needed to up and be some sort of hero? And any chance SHIELD takes to try and get you into their fold, to be one team you spit it back in their faces. What’s the reward for saving the world if the world didn’t know you did anything, right?”

“Ma’am, you are out of line,” Steve interjected, “I might know your history with Toni, but you certainly do not know anything about her if you think that’s the reason for her need to wear the suit. I appreciate all SHIELD has done for me, from finding me and giving me a purpose, however I do not need them spying on my every move. Fury and I have a deal already where I report to him. If they want me to have some sort of intermediary handler, then Harry can be mine as well, as he is for Toni.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing, Captain,” Sharon warned him, “You have no idea what Stark is capable of. You haven’t seen her through the years as the rest of the world has. You have no idea what you’re getting yourself into, and SHIELD is right to be concerned. They don’t want the two of you together, and for good reason.”

“They don’t want us together because I see through SHIELD’s bullshit and they disapprove of that,” Toni deadpanned, “Steve can’t be controlled if I’m here to call you out regularly. Don’t think I don’t know what this is about. Plant a beautiful blonde, one who looks like Peggy Carter enough to be Steve’s ‘type’ but not one who looks enough like her that he’d recognize. And let Steve get closer to her. All the time she’s passing back information to them about his missions and everything he’s doing. What he’s thinking, how he’s feeling, and so on. You think I’m bad for him? You would be so much worse.”

“At least he wouldn’t be making a fool of himself on national television,” Sharon shot back.

“I called that press conference because I wanted to,” Steve said, wrapping an arm around her waist, “And I have no regrets about it or the outcome. Now if you do not mind, we have a lot of unpacking to get to. Let Fury know I’ll see him at 0900 hours tomorrow, and no sooner. If he wants you to stay here that’s fine, but don’t think you’ll be able to get anything out of me if that’s what you’re hoping to report back about.”

Sharon scowled at them, as she headed out the door. Steve closed it after her before turning to face her.

“Sharon Carter?” he asked, raising a brow at her, “I take it the two of you don’t exactly have a good relationship.”

“It’s complicated,” Toni sighed. “The Carter-Sousa’s were always a secondary family to me. Aunt Peggy didn’t find out about her brother being alive until I was already half way through high school, and in that time I’d become something of family to them. And when Sharon was born, Aunt Peggy was already the Director of SHIELD and Uncle Daniel was high up in the organization as well. I was seventeen when she was born and her first actual memories of me were around the time my parents passed. I wasn’t in a good place then. I’m sure you’ve seen the articles from the time. It didn’t help that her father and mine barely got along; Howard didn’t get along with that many people
later on in life. And Sharon always thought I liked being in the limelight and went out of my way to be in it. I don’t hate her, but she’s also never had a flattering opinion of me.”

“Sounds tough,” Steve said, as he led her to the couch.

“It was at times,” Toni sighed, “I don’t know what SHIELD was trying to pull by spying on you. I guess they thought with Harry away on missions all the time, and me and Ava in New York, you wouldn’t learn the truth about Sharon.”

“She was sent in to seduce me,” Steve pointed out, “Given the press conference I gave, it was hardly a smart move on their part.”

She snorted indelicately, “Nothing SHIELD does is smart. I never told you how exactly I met Clint, did I?”

“He was sent in to spy on you,” Steve said, nodding at the bits and pieces he picked up.

“He was sent in to spy on me after I announced that I was Iron Woman,” Toni confirmed, “Which he tried to do by trying to seduce me, given my public image. He flirted and did everything that would have appealed to the kind of person SHIELD thought I was. And SHIELD knew at the time that the Arc Reactor was poisoning me slowly.”

“You were dying?” he narrowed his eyes as he glanced at her.

“I was,” she said, before squeezing his hand, “I’m fine now. But the original core I used to power the reactor was killing me. And they waited ‘til I was alone and desperate before they offered me my father’s notes. Notes that saved my life in the end. They only offered it to me when they knew I had no other choice. When I’d already accepted I was dying and let my family know.”

“If they had something which could have saved you, they should have given it to you sooner!” Steve said, angrily, “How could they have kept something like that from you?”

“Honestly, I think they only budged because Harry demanded they do anything they could. He already knew they were up to something. And Harry all but told me Clint was a SHIELD plant from the start. But we wanted to know what they were up to, so we didn’t do anything about it. Not until we had some sort of clue.”

“And they’re supposed to be the good guys,” Steve exhaled.

“They’re not exactly the bad guys either,” she told him gently, “They’re grey. They don’t operate within good or evil. They world doesn’t work that way, Darling. They operate outside the lines, but generally they do what’s best for the world. That’s why Harry stays with them. Because he wants to make a difference like his mother. Because he thinks he can make that difference with them. They just don’t always follow the same moral compasses that the rest of us do. Certainly not the moral compass that you do.”

“I don’t know if I can work for an organization like that,” Steve said, looking over at her. “How can I trust that we’re doing what’s right if I don’t always agree with their methods?”

“You don’t need to agree with them,” She said, “Fight back, Steve. If something isn’t sitting right with you, then you raise a stink about it. That’s what makes you such a good man. You know what’s right and what’s wrong, and you don’t settle for anything less. So don’t settle now either. If they want you to do something which you think goes against your being, then don’t do it. You have the right to say no, and they can’t exactly force you into a situation where you’re uncomfortable. That’s not how it works.”
She looked over at his earnest face, and she thought back to the words her Aunt had told her so many years before.

“Aunt Peggy once told me that the world will always tell you who they want you to be,” she paraphrased. “It’s your job to tell them no. To plant yourself like a tree and stand firmly against them. And tell them that this is who you are. You are not some SHIELD assassin, Steve. You’re Captain America. Steve Rogers. The most honourable man I know. And if they want you to be anything else well then bully for them. Because the man I know. The man I care about, doesn’t need to be anything other than himself. The person you are is more than enough.”

He leaned forward then, pulling her into a desperate kiss. She relaxed into him as her fingers threaded through his hair. His arms snaked around her then, pulling her on top of him, and she kissed him, full of need.

“I’m going to miss you,” he said, in a rough voice as she pulled away for air. “How am I going to last without seeing you every day?”

“You’re telling me?” she said, breathlessly. “I’ve grown so accustomed to you around the tower. I don’t know what I’m going to do to pass the time.”

“I guess I just have to make the best of the time I have left with you,” he said, looking at her with need and she let out a small sigh as she dipped her head back in for another kiss.

She really was going to miss this.

“You’re moping,” Ava said, as she glanced at her cousin.

“I’m not moping,” Toni argued, as she tried to stare at the screen with the calculations for her new suit.

“You’re moping,” Harley agreed, and she glared at him.

“I’m not moping,” Toni shot back at the boy who was visiting her over the remainder of his winter break.

“Definitely moping,” Peter confirmed, and she glared at him.

“You’re supposed to be the good kid!” she wagged a finger at him. “You used to respect me! You’ve been corrupted! I demand to know who corrupted my kid.”

“It was a summer project,” Harley grinned at her, and she threw a crumpled-up piece of notepaper at him.

“You’re not allowed to corrupt Peter,” she told Harley firmly, “He’s the good kid here. If anything, he’s supposed to be a good influence on you! Not the other way around. Don’t ruin my kid, Keener.”

Peter blushed at that and Harley grinned widely.

“I thought I was your kid?” Harley asked her, “We’re connected, remember?”

“Connected my ass,” she grumbled. “All of you are being major pains. Makes me wonder why I even agreed to let you all into my lab.”
“Because otherwise you’re just going to be moping over your boyfriend again,” Ava said knowingly, “And Pepper wanted to get plans for the new StarkPad by the end of the week. Can’t get those done if you’re busy being sad that your boyfriend’s across the country.”

“I’m not dependant on him or anything,” she sighed. “I’m capable of being a perfectly functioning adult. Even if he’s not here. I don’t exactly need him here with me all the time.”

“You’re allowed to miss him, Toni,” Ava said gently, “It doesn’t make you weak for missing the people in your life. I miss Bruce when he’s away. You care about him. You’re allowed to miss him, especially when the two of you are used to seeing each other every day.”

“He needs this,” she said, “He needs a purpose in this new world, and SHIELD is giving him one. I’m happy that he’s getting accustomed to this new time. I am. But it doesn’t mean that I don’t miss him as much as I do. I just wish he could have a purpose that is based out of New York and not Washington DC. It doesn’t help that all his missions are secrets and he can’t tell me what he’s doing.”

“Don’t pretend that you didn’t hack SHIELD,” Ava said with a knowing grin, “I know you’ve had a backdoor since Harry started to make sure he was safe. You very much are aware of what he’s doing at any given time, even if he can’t explicitly tell you what it is that he’s doing.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Toni said, giving her cousin an innocent smile. And really, it wasn’t her fault that SHIELD made it far too easy to hack at times. If the organization had better skills then really they would have caught her sooner and blocked her access.

But SHIELD was no her when it came to creating tech, and everyone knew it. She was sure Fury had an idea that she had an in at the organization, but he never called her out on it, nor did he try to take it away from her. And as long as she used it only to check in on Harry and Steve, she was sure it would stay that way.

“Miss, you have an incoming call from Captain Rogers,” JARVIS said then, as her StarkPhone lit up.

“Toni your boyfriend’s calling,” Harley teased, causing Peter to start giggling once more.

“Hush you,” she winked at the kids. She picked up her phone and left the lab carefully, as she began heading back to her private quarters to take the call.

“Hello?” she said, anxious to see his face on the other end of the video call.

“Hi Sweetheart,” Steve breathed, “It’s good to see you.”

“It’s good to hear yours too,” she admitted to him, “You have no idea just how much I’ve missed you.”

“I thought you’d be busy with the science family,” he teased her, “No one to make you eat at normal times and sleep a decent amount in the day. Living it up in the city.”

She laughed, “Ava tries at times, but she’s no you. It’s hard taking orders about eating from the girl who used to throw her food onto other people when she was a baby. Kind of takes away all the authority she has, really.”

“Sounds like she must have been an entertaining kid,” Steve grinned over the phone.

“Harry was worse,” she shook her head, “He’d go through months where he’d only eat certain
coloured food. At one point he chose brown because he was sure it meant that he’d eat chocolate for every meal. Jokes on him though because Uncle Daniel went out of his way to find brown coloured vegetables. I’m pretty sure he must have looked for hours for some of them. But in the end, Harry kept to his word and would eat whatever as long as it was the colour, he claimed he was eating at the time.”

“Sounds like it must have been entertaining to watch,” Steve commented, and she felt her heart ache at the distance between them.

“How are you doing, Darling?” she asked him carefully, wanting to know all about how he was settling into the new city he was living in.

“Good,” Steve said with a smile, “Natasha, Harry and I have been on a few missions so far. Actually, we have another one in a few days. And I made a new friend.”

“Oh?” she asked him curiously. She hoped it wasn’t Sharon. While the woman was decent by her own merits, she didn’t trust the younger girl not to continue to try and worm her way into Steve’s life to deliver reports to Fury still. Just because she’d been caught didn’t mean her mission scope had changed.

“His name is Sam,” Steve told her, “Sam Wilson. He’s ex-Army and now works as a counsellor for the VA. I went to one of his talks and it was nice, listening to him try and help bring others home mentally, when so much of themselves still feels like it’s been left behind.”

“Steve,” she said gently.

“I’m sorry,” he said, suddenly, guilt filling his face, “I know how that comes off. I’m glad to be here, Toni. I’m so glad I met you and glad that I’m learning how to navigate the new century. I finally have a place that feels like home with you in the tower. I didn’t mean to sound insensitive to everything you’ve done for me to help me out.”

“Steve,” she said again, “You don’t sound ungrateful. You fought in a war. The worst war that ever happened. You fought against HYDRA, bringing down the terror cells. And then you went under. No one ever expected this to be easy for you. No one ever thought it should be. You went through something indescribable. It’s okay for you not to be okay. I’m glad you found someone to talk to. War isn’t easy. It takes a lot out of a person, no matter where they fight, what they do, what they see. It’s one of the toughest things a person can do. It doesn’t mean you’re not happy to be back. But it doesn’t change the fact either that you were taken out of your time and dumped in the future. It doesn’t change that you missed all those years and all the things that happened in them.”

“Thank you,” he said, in a soft voice. “It was nice, hearing them talk. I know you’ve always been there to listen to me, but it was nice hearing someone else describe the things I was feeling. That the guilt I carry over losing Bucky is normal, and that it happens to others. I still have nightmares from time to time. Nightmares of what would have happened if I caught him. Nightmares of losing him. Of him blaming me. And I know it’s all in my head. But it was nice just getting to be there.”

“I’m glad,” she told him with a smile, “Maybe next time I’m there, you can introduce me to this Sam? I’d love to meet some of your friends.”

“Most of my friends you already know,” he laughed, “I spend most of my time with your cousin and Natasha anyways.”

“But you made a friend on your own,” she teased him, “And I’m proud of you for that. Did you
compliment his shoes? Apparently, people tend to like it if you compliment them."

“No, I just lapped him a few times while jogging in the morning,” he laughed.

“Jogging,” she deadpanned, “You lapped him while jogging.”

“Just because you don’t appreciate working out doesn’t mean the rest of us don’t enjoy it,” he grinned, knowing how much she hated exercising.

“I’m sure he enjoyed you overtaking him,” she shook her head at him. “Getting shown up by an old man. Must be embarrassing for him. Give him my condolences.”

“What’s it with all of you guys poking fun of my age,” he said, with a fake hurt expression on his face. “It does things to a man to hear the woman he cares about treat him like an ancient fossil.”

“Darling, we both know you have the body of a god,” she said, shaking his head, “Maybe not Thor, but you know, it’s at least better than Loki’s.”

“Rude,” he shot back at her, with an incredulous look on his face, so she simply stuck her tongue out at him.

“You know I’m right,” she said with a laugh. “But for what it’s worth, I’m glad you’re doing well, Steve. You deserve a chance to live your life. To try and find a place where you belong in this world. And SHIELD is giving you a purpose. A chance to make the world a better place. That’s what Aunt Peggy and my father wanted it to be about. That’s why Harry joined, and why Sharon followed. It’s why even if I don’t fully trust them, I help them out. I want you to find that purpose, to find what it is that gives you joy. And to make friends and gain experiences. You had your life stolen from you when you went down in the ice. You deserve a chance to try and get some of it back. And to have a chance to live.”

“I have a pretty good life already,” he told her with a soft smile, “I like the life I have with you. I like watching you work and listening to you explain random tidbits of knowledge when we watch Star Wars. I like the life I have with you. Just because I’m with SHIELD and making friends of my own doesn’t mean I don’t enjoy what we have and don’t look forward to coming home and being back with you.”

Coming Home.

He’d called her tower home.

She knew he thought of it as one. But to hear him say that her tower was his home, that she was his home, melted her heart.

“I can’t wait for you to come home either,” she said with a grin. “The bots miss you. I swear DUM-E gets disappointed every time I enter the lab and you’re not beside me.”

“I’ll visit them soon,” he promised, “Let them know I miss them too.”

“I’ll have J play back that soundbyte for them,” she promised.

“I’ll talk to you soon,” he said.

“Bye, Steve,” she said, ending the call as she felt lighter than she had in a while.
Compromised

Chapter Summary

Steve tries to figure out what's going on

Steve Rogers knew something was wrong the minute he got to his front door and there was music playing though the walls.

Normally, he’d suspect Toni of having hacked his system, to play him something she called “The Music of the Gods” in order to help his musical education. He’d come home often enough to her surprises, and it never failed to put a smile on his face, knowing that even hundreds of miles apart, she was still thinking of him.

But the music was classical; recognizable to even him, who had been out of it for the better part of the last century. The kind of music Toni said her mother loved but the kind she also never listened to herself.

Whoever this was, it wasn’t Toni.

He turned around, walking back outside as he looked up at his apartment window. If this was an attack, they’d be expecting him to go through the front door. So he couldn’t do that. No, instead, he carefully scaled up the fire escape, popping his window open, as he silently climbed into his apartment. It was during times like these, he knew that the training he did every day paid off. It was why he’d been so insistent that Toni learned how to climb up the rope with Peter. Because she never knew when she’d have to rely on her own strength and not that of the armour.

The music stopped then, changing to something from the 40s. The kind of music one would suspect he listened to, even if they were far off. The kind of music SHIELD had left in his apartment, trying to help him feel at home.

He carefully moved around the corner, before dropping his fists when he saw Nick Fury sitting on his armchair, clearly injured.

“I don’t remember giving you a key,” he commented

“You really think I’d need one?” he said, leaning forward, “My wife kicked me out.”

He frowned at that. Clearly something was off about the statement.

“Didn't know you were married,” he said, moving closer to the man.

“A lot of things you don’t about me,” Fury said, and Steve could have laughed.

“I know, Nick. That’s the problem,” Steve sighed, as he turned on the light. He winced looking at the man’s injuries, as they looked far worse in the light. He started to say something, but Fury raised a hand to silence him. He reached up with his good arm, turning off the light, before writing down on his phone.

“Ears everywhere,” he scribbled, and Steve looked around the apartment.
“I’m sorry to have to do this, but I had no place else to crash,” Fury said, as he continued to type. "SHIELD compromised"

“Who else knows about your wife?” he asked, raising a brow.

“You and me”, Fury wrote, before saying, “Just, my friends.”

“Does Toni know?” he asked, needing to know if the man had bothered bringing his girlfriend into the loop or if he was keeping this all under the radar.

“She’s never taken too strongly to me,” Fury said, shaking his head, “The less people who know about her the better, you know? I don’t want to bring too many people into the loop when it would paint a target on all of their backs.”

“If there’s anyone you could trust, it’d be her,” Steve typed in argument. If there was anyone who was capable of navigating through the complex situation that Fury was bringing him into it would be Toni Stark. Who else had the technology and genius of handling such a thing?

“The less people who know, the better,” Fury typed out again. “You’d be bringing her into danger if you told her the truth. She’s safe where she is. We cannot bring too many people into this mess without having all the facts of who is trustworthy and who isn’t. And until we have all those facts, the less people who know about this, the better.”

“You can trust her,” he wrote back. Because of course they could. She was hardly compromised. Sure, she and SHIELD may never see eye to eye on certain matters, but she was hardly going to tear down the entire agency. Not when it was her Aunt’s legacy. Not when it meant everything to her family.

“So just your closest friends then,” Steve sighed, feeling a headache coming on. He was far too old for all of this. “Is that what we are?”

“That’s up to you,” Fury told him carefully, before out of nowhere the wall exploded, as bullets rained through it, hitting Fury in the back. He ran to the man, dragging him aside and out of range of the window.

Fury pressed a flash drive into his hand, gasping for air, as he said, “Don’t...trust anyone.”

Fury gasped again, before passing out, and Steve reached down, trying to feel for his pulse, feeling one faintly. He was alive, but just barely.

“Captain Rogers?” he heard a voice call out, as Sharon stood in his apartment, raising a gun as she broke in.

“Still here I see,” he commented, as he tried to begin CPR.

“I’m assigned to protect you,” she said, without flinching. “That’s not going to change just because your girlfriend blew my cover. I need you to trust me, Captain. Trust me and let me get help for him.”

He wanted to weigh his options out, but he really didn’t have the time to argue. He may not have liked that SHIELD was spying on him and sent in an agent trying to seduce him, but clearly that was their MO. And right now, Fury was down, and the man needed all the help he could get.

“Okay,” he said, finally. “Do it. Call for help. But if I find out you’re lying to me, then I’ll make sure you regret it.”
She nodded curtly, as she pulled out a radio, “Foxtrot is down, he's unresponsive. I need EMTs.”

“Do you have a twenty on the shooter?” the voice over the radio called out. Steve looked out the window then, and saw the shooter moving through the rooftops.

“Tell him I’m in pursuit,” Steve said, as he smashed his window and ran after the man on the roof. He jumped across the street, crashing into the building across from him, as he stood up, running after the man visible through the glass ceiling.

He used his shield as a battering ram, breaking down doors and glass windows as he burst through the office. He saw the man jump to the next roof and he threw himself over it with his full body weight, before throwing the shield at the man.

Only for him to catch it with what looked to be a metallic arm.

He stared in shock, making eye contact with the shooter, as the man in question threw the shield back at him with the same force Steve had thrown it.

He caught it before it hit his stomach, and when he looked up, the man was gone.

It was as if he’d never been there

Steve Rogers had no idea what was happening, but he knew that whatever it was, it couldn’t be good.

And now he needed to decide if he wanted to bring Toni into this mess, or let her remain safely on the outside, just as Fury had asked him to do.

Whatever he decided, he knew he’d need to make his mind up soon, as the Director of SHIELD continued to bleed out on his apartment floor.

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Steve stood in the observatory of the hospital operation room, as Natasha burst in, followed closely behind by Agent Hill.

“Is he gonna make it?” Natasha asked, sounding worried.

“I don't know,” Steve told her honestly.

“Tell me about the shooter,” she said, trying to keep her voice level.

“He's fast and strong. Had a metal arm,” Steve said, describing the man.

The room opened again, as Hill and Harry came into the room.

“Ballistics?” Natasha asked,

“Three slugs, no rifling. Completely untraceable,” Harry said, slipping his phone back into his pocket. He glanced at the man, wanting to know who it was that he’d just called.

“Soviet-made,” Natasha said, not really asking a question.

“Yeah,” Hill confirmed.

The operation room began to grow urgent then, and he watched, worriedly as the doctors spoke.
“He’s in V-tach!” One of the nurses said quickly.

“Crash cart coming in,” A female nurse said as she brought over a machine.

“Nurse, help me with the drape,” The doctor ordered.

“BP is dropping,” The first nurse said again.

“Defibrillator!” The doctor ordered, and his heart began to race. “I want you to charge him at one hundred.”

“Don’t do this to me, Nick,” Natash murmured.

“Come on, Fury,” Harry muttered to himself.

“Stand back! Three, two, one. Clear!” The doctor said, as they shocked Fury’s body. “Pulse?”

“No pulse,” the second nurse said.

“Okay. 200, please. Stand back! Three, two, one. Clear!” The doctor said again as they gave him another shock “Give me epinephrine! Pulse?”

“Negative,” the first nurse said.

“Don’t do this to me, Nick. Don’t do this to me,” Natasha chanted.

The doctors continued to try to revive him, but Steve knew the truth. He looked away then, as the doctors pulled away from Fury.

“What’s the time?” The doctor said finally, as they stood back from the body.

“1:03, Doctor,” the second nurse said.

“Time of death, 1:03 a.m.,” The doctor declared. He looked down at the flash drive in his hand, wondering what it was that was so important that Fury gave it to him before he died.

“I need to call Toni,” Harry said, taking a step back.

He spun around then, looking at the oldest Carter-Sousa sibling.

“I can’t let you do that,” he said firmly.

“Oh yeah?” Harry said, not backing down, “And who are you to stop me, Rogers?”

“Fury didn’t want to bring her in,” Steve told him carefully, “We have to respect his wishes. If he didn’t want her to know, then he was doing it to keep her safe. Do you really want to bring her into whatever the hell this is? We don’t even know what we’re up against!”

“That’s exactly why we need to bring her in!” Harry argued. “SHIELD is compromised. The only people I fully trust are in this room and Cousin Sharon. If SHIELD is truly as compromised as Fury suggested, then we can’t go to them with any of them. That means no tech, no resources, no manpower, nothing. It also means that we need to fight against whoever this is on our own. And I don’t know what kind of relationship you have with my older sister, but I’ve known her my entire life. I trust her with my entire life. If we want to have any chance at going up against this, we need her. So I don’t care what you think, Captain. I’m calling Toni and I am telling her exactly what the hell is going on.”
He took a step back, feeling as if he’d been slapped in the face.

It wasn’t a matter of trusting Toni. Because of course it wasn’t. He’d fought with Fury on that very front.

It didn’t stop him from wanting to keep her safe any less. She wasn’t tangled up in this mess. And honestly, if he’d have to go through another scare of her near-death experiences, he wasn’t sure his heart could take it.

But he knew the man was right to bring her in. Because in reality, he had no idea what it was that they were going up against. He had no idea who was behind the shooting or Fury’s death. Or who the man with the metal arm even was. But what he did know was that they needed help.

And according to Harry Carter-Sousa, that entailed bringing in the woman he loved to fight alongside them.

Steve stood looking over where Fury’s body was laid out, feeling a heavy weight in his stomach. How did it get to this? Fury wasn’t supposed to die. He was, in Toni’s words, the spy. The person who had all the secrets.

And yet he was laying there on the hospital cart, looking as cold as ice.

“I need to take him,” Hill said, to him, obviously devastated. He looked over at Natasha, seeing tears streaming down her face.

“Natasha,” Steve said softly, and she didn’t respond to him. Instead, she tenderly touched Fury’s head, before turning out of the room. “Natasha!”

“Why was Fury in your apartment?” Natasha asked him suddenly.

“I don’t know,” he answered, as her eyes searched his face.

“You’re a terrible liar,” she said, seeing right through him.

He shook his head at her, not wanting to get into it there. Not out in the open when anyone could hear.

Before she could ask him anything further, his phone rang. He pulled it out in surprise and saw Toni on the other end of it.

Natasha watched him as he answered the call.

“Hello?” he asked, unsure of what she’d heard so far.

“Are you somewhere alone?” she asked him.

“No,” he said, “I’m with Natasha. They just took Fury’s body away.”

“Go to a room and close the door,” she instructed, “The call’s been encrypted so no one will be able to tap into your phone and hear what we’re saying.”

“Give me a second,” he said, before nodding at Natasha. She looked unhappy at him as he turned and walked into an empty room. “Okay I’m alone now.”

“Were you ever going to tell me?” she asked him suddenly. “Were you going to tell me that
SHIELD was compromised? Because Harry didn’t seem too sure that you’d ever get around to it. Why did I have to listen to my cousin telling me about all of this, then tell me that my own boyfriend wanted to keep be in the dark about all of this because he didn’t want me to know?”

“It’s not like that,” he protested, and he heard her scoff.

“Please, it’s exactly like that. I get that you can’t tell me about all the super-secret missions you go on, but I thought you at least trusted me enough to bring me in for something like this. But I guess I was wrong, wasn’t I?”

“I was trying to keep you safe! If I told you the truth, then I would be painting a target on your back. You would have been in danger, and we’re not even sure what it is that’s happening,” he protested, and she laughed.

“Please, I’ve had a target on my back for years,” she scoffed at him. “Do you know how many times I was kidnapped before the age of ten? Howard always refused to pay the ransom, and I learned the hard way of how it felt to feel pain and any hope of being saved by him drained of me. I’ve been shot at, stabbed, thrown out of windows, you name it. Do you really think I wouldn’t have been able to take whatever it is that is thrown my way? I don’t need you to keep me safe, Steve. I’m more than capable of handling myself.”

“I know you are,” he told her, gently. “That doesn’t mean I want you to get hurt either. But I see where you’re coming from, and you’re right. If there’s anyone capable of handling this and helping out it would be you. I was wrong to try and leave you out of this.”

“Good,” she said softly, “So what do you know?”

“He was assassinated,” Steve told her, before looking out the window of the room he was in to make sure no one was nearby. “By a man with a metal arm. He took a shot from the nearby roof and he hit his target with precision. The man’s enhanced. He’s as strong as me, if not stronger. I didn’t get a good look at his face, but whoever he is, he’s dangerous. Fury was saying SHIELD’s compromised, which means whoever sent the man works for SHIELD. It could have been anyone, and I have no way of knowing.”

“Okay,” she nodded, “That’s something. I’ll have JARVIS sweep the web and any available databases for mentions of a man with a metal arm. I can’t imagine that there’s too many of them around, so that should help us. Give me a bit of time, and I’ll get back to you with anything I find. I’ll also get JARVIS to sweep the SHIELD servers to see if we can track down where this infestation started and figure out how to contain it.”

“Contain?” Steve questioned.

“SHIELD is still Aunt Peggy’s legacy,” Toni said softly, “I don’t give a rat’s ass that my father worked there as well. If we can save it in anyway, I’d like to try for her. Purge SHIELD and try and return it in a working state. But that does depend on the damage of course.”

He looked down at the drive in his hand, “There’s something else,” he said softly, “Fury left me something. A USB. And SHIELD can’t get its hands on it. I think they suspect I know more than I’m letting on, so I can’t bring it back when I go in for my debriefing.”

“Pass it to Harry,” Toni said immediately. “Or as much as I hate to say this, Sharon Carter. They know that me and her don’t have the best relationship, so I’d assume they’d think the same for the two of you. I’m sure she’s reported her cover being blown. But I still trust her, and she’ll make sure it gets back to me.”
“Okay,” Steve nodded his head. He looked out the window again to see Rumlow approaching the room. “Someone’s coming this way.”

There was a knock on the door then, as Rumlow looked over at him. He nodded at the man, as he opened the door.

“I miss you too, Sweetheart,” he said, covering the purpose of the call. “I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Be safe, Steve,” she told him in a quiet voice.

“I’ll talk to you later,” he responded, as he hung up the phone.

“Women,” Rumlow smirked at him, “Good to know that even Toni Stark can be as needy as the rest of them. Man with that demeanour she puts on, I’d have thought she’d be a cold bitch.”

It took everything in his power to not punch the man.

He shrugged instead, “It is what it is,” he said, not wanting to engage any more in the conversation.

“They want you back at SHIELD,” Rumlow said, knowingly. “Now.”

“Okay,” he said as he followed him out of the room. He noticed Sharon over in the corner, talking on the phone. “Just let me quickly thank Sharon for the rescue.”

Rumlow gave him a look which made him feel dirty, but he shrugged it off as he headed over to where the woman was standing.

“I wanted to thank you,” he said to her as he approached her, “For the rescue. But it really wasn’t necessary. I had it under control.”

“Did you now,” she said, neutrally. “And what was your plan for handling the situation?”

“Catching the man responsible,” he said, as he carefully slipped her the drive. “Pass my regards onto your cousins if you see them.”

“Will do, Captain,” she nodded, pocketing the item.

He turned then, as Rumlow met him at the door.

“Let’s go,” Steve said, knowing fully well that he was walking into the belly of the beast.

“We may need to get to Washington,” Toni said, as she typed on the terminal in front of her. “I’m not sure how much we can accomplish from here. Especially if SHIELD is onto Steve. They’re going to need all the help they can get with the situation.

“I don’t like this,” Ava said, pacing back and front in front of the computer. “Harry and Sharon have worked for SHIELD for years, and never once have they suspected that something could be wrong. And if they had no idea, how are we going to be able to find anything?”

“They didn’t think anything was wrong,” Toni reminded her, “So they didn’t read between the lines. And neither of them have our hacking capabilities. If there’s anything on SHIELD’s servers which suggest they’ve been compromised then we’ll find it. And we’ll expose it to the world.”
She paused for a moment, as an incoming memo came in, addressing all SHIELD agents. Her eyes skimmed it carefully and she let out a startled gasp.

“Well shit,” she swore as Ava read it as well.

Captain America had just been labelled a terrorist by SHIELD. Accused of attacking fellow SHIELD agents and withholding information regarding Director Fury’s death. Alongside Natasha Romanoff and Harry Carter-Sousa, the three of them had an issue out for their immediate apprehension and arrest.

“What are we going to do?” Ava asked worriedly as she looked at the screen. Toni pulled out her phone then, and immediately began sending messages to the three of them, wanting to know that they were safe.

She began typing to Steve.

"Are you safe?" she typed.

A few seconds later he responded, "Got out with Natasha and Harry. Have the drive. Will plug it in. Natasha says to connect to it and find out what’s going on."

She read over what he said, before typing back "I’m ready when you are. Let me know if you need anything; secret accounts, false identities, anything. Be careful, Steve"

Her phone buzzed again, "I will; I’ll talk to you soon, Sweetheart."

Ava was watching her carefully and Toni nodded at her cousin.

“They’re safe. They’re going to plug in whatever was on that drive as soon as they can and when they do we’re going to get to work. We’re going to uncover every last secret that SHIELD is keeping from us and find out exactly what’s going on, one way or another,” Toni promised her. “We’ll bring them home safe.”

“Why couldn’t any of you have chosen safe careers,” Ava sighed to herself. “I can’t handle all of this, knowing that everyone I care about is constantly in danger. If you at least were still just CEO of SI then that would be one thing. But you fly around in the suit. Harry’s constantly on undercover missions, and Bruce is more often than not involved in Avengers business.

“I know, Darling,” Toni soothed her carefully. “I know. But I know you also understand why we do this. Why we have to do this. It’s the same reason you help me out with Avengers business, whether it’s being my girl in the chair, or helping with upgrades. Because you have to do it too. Because you’re in a position to help, and you can’t sit back and watch innocent people get hurt when you know you can do something to help. That’s exactly how we all feel, and why we have to do this.”

“I’m just worried,” she said, shaking slightly. “That one day one of you won’t come home. I don’t think I can handle that. I’m not strong enough. If I lost any of you, it would destroy me. You’re my family, and I can’t imagine a world without any of you.”

“I can’t promise we’ll always be safe,” Toni warned her, “But I can promise that we’ll always do our best to come home.”

“Okay,” Ava sighed softly. “Okay. Just be careful, please? Don’t put yourself in unnecessary danger if you can help it?”
“I will,” Toni told her firmly. “Now, let’s see what else SHIELD is hiding from us, shall we?”

“Wait in the car,” Harry instructed Steve as they parked at the shopping complex.

“I can come,” Steve insisted, and Harry rolled his eyes.

“You’re Captain America,” Harry told him, “One of the most recognizable faces in America. You cannot come into the shopping mall with us. Not if we want any chance of finding out the truth of what’s happening here.”

He wanted to roll his eyes at the righteous look in Steve’s eyes. The naivety that things weren’t as black and white as he wanted them to be. Life didn’t work that way. It was filled with ups and downs and no one was ever explicitly good or evil.

“Steve, you need to stay here,” Natasha reaffirmed his statement. “Keep an eye out for the STRIKE team. But you’d stick out too much if you come with us.”

“Fine,” Steve threw his arms up, “But I don’t like it.”

“You don’t need to,” Harry shrugged. “We’ll connect the drive and let Toni access it. See what she can dig up.”

“We won’t have long,” Natasha warned them. She and Harry carefully got out of the car, and slipped into the mall.

“Go slowly,” Natasha told him as he moved towards the Apple store. “We’re trying not to get caught.”

He gave her an unimpressed look, “I’ve been a spy my entire life. I think I know how to keep a low profile.”

“Low enough that SHIELD barely knew about your connection to Toni Stark,” Natasha said, without giving away anything.

“Family secret,” he said with a shrug. “It’s was more important not to disclose it. Mom wanted her out of SHIELD affairs. Howard wanted her out of SHIELD affairs. But then Fury went and dragged her into this mess.”

“She dragged herself into it with that suit of hers,” Natasha said, as they approached one of the free computers. “We would have left her alone if she didn’t insist on suiting up and trying to save the entire world.”

“She’s doing what she thinks is right,” Harry defended his cousin, “How much time to we have?”

“Call Toni now,” Natasha informed him, before plugging in the device. “We have exactly nine minutes.”

He pulled out his phone, dialing his cousin.

“Is it in?” She asked, as Natasha changed the settings on the computer to allow Toni easy access into it.

“It’s in,” Harry confirmed, as he watched Toni take over control of the system.
“The drive is protected,” Toni said, a bit strained, as she typed away, “Looks like some sort of AI. Not JARVIS advanced, but advanced enough that it keeps rewriting itself to counter my commands. JARVIS, take over, counter-override any of their commands before they even make it.”

“STRIKE is here,” Steve said, over their comms. “They just pulled in and are loaded. Get out of there.”

“Need more time, Cap,” Toni told them all. “I’m going to trace where the signal is coming from in the meantime. At least then we’ll know where to look for the source.”

“Can I help you guys with anything?” an employee came up to them then.

“Oh no,” Harry watched as Natasha put on a sweet voice, “My fiancé was just helping me with some honeymoon destinations.”

She wrapped her arm around his waist then and Harry gave her a fake soft smile, “We’re getting married.”

“Congratulations. Where do you guys thinking about going?” the employee asked, and Harry looked down at the screen as Toni’s trace completed.

“New Jersey,” Harry said, a bit surprised.

“Oh?” The employee asked, looking a bit confused.

“I copied the program to a confined local server,” Toni informed them, “I’ll keep trying to crack it. Get out of there now.”

“My family has a beautiful country home there,” Natasha said, as Harry carefully pulled out the drive. “Gorgeous property. Besides, we don’t plan on leaving the house much, if you know what I mean.”

The employee blushed as Natasha slipped her arm through his.

“We really should be going,” Harry gave the man a nod, “We have dinner plans.”

“Have fun!” the employee said, backing off then.

“Looks like our nine minutes are up,” Harry said, gesturing to the men searching the mall for them.

“Wheaton, NJ,” Toni told them as they made their way out of the mall.

“I know where it’s coming from,” Steve said over the comms.

“We’re on our way back,” Harry said, Standard tac-team. Two behind, to across, two coming straight at us. If they make us, I’ll engage, you hit the south escalator to the metro.”

She simply rolled her eyes at him. “Shut up and put your arm around me, laugh at something I said.”

“What?” he asked in surprise, as she began laughing. He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, laughing as the agents approaching walked right by them. They got onto the elevator, and he spotted Rumlow coming down it.

They were going to get made.

“Kiss me,” Natasha said firmly. “Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable.”
He pulled her in for a kiss then, as she wrapped her arms around his waist. They passed by Rumlow, who looked away from them, giving them the chance to get away.

“If you wanted to kiss me, all you had to do was ask,” Harry smirked at her.

“In your dreams, Carter-Sousa,” Natasha rolled her eyes at him. They quickly ducked out of the mall, and back into the car.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I’d happily kiss you again anytime in the future,” Harry said with a grin, “With or without the threat of apprehension hanging over us.”

“You know we’re all still on the line right,” Ava said then. “I definitely do not want to listen to my brother trying to pick up a girl.

He flushed then as Natasha shot him a smirk. As they approached the car, Steve shook his head at the both of them, but didn’t say anything about it. Good, because even if it was a necessity to kiss the Black Widow, it didn’t make it any less enjoyable.

“You have the coordinates?” Steve asked him then, deciding to spare him any embarrassment. He nodded, as he programmed them into his StarkPhone.

Looks like they were going to New Jersey.
The Winter Soldier

Chapter Summary

Steve uncovers some things

“This is where Toni said the file came from,” Harry commented as they pulled up to an abandoned military based.

“So did I,” Steve said, distantly. He looked around the base where he’d trained, having finally been accepted into the army. It was where he became Captain America. Where he met Peggy and Howard. Where his life had changed forever. “This camp is where I was trained.”

“Changed much?” Natasha asked him as they walked through the base.

“A little,” he admitted as he walked through the ghost town. It was so strange to see the place so empty, abandoned, when it had been brimming with so much action a few decades prior. He could practically see himself running drills, struggling to keep up.

“This is a dead end,” Natasha said looking down at her screen, “No heat signatures, waves, or radio. Whoever wrote this must have used a router to throw off the signal.”

“Toni said it came from here,” Harry shook his head, “If a router was used, she would have been able to have cracked it. Whatever it is, it’s here.”

He paused as he looked at a building. One that had not been there when he’d attended the camp.

It was new. And it was wrong.

“What is it?” Natasha asked, as she followed behind him.

“Army regulations forbid storing ammunition within five hundred yards of the barracks. This building is in the wrong place,” he told them both, as he used his shield to break open the lock on the door.

They went down the flight of stairs, before they reached the main room, with an old logo plastered on the back.

“This is SHIELD,” Harry breathed, “Where it must have started.”

They walked into an old records room, with three portraits on the wall.

“There’s Stark’s father,” Natasha commented, as Steve nodded.

“Howard.”

“Who’s the girl?” she asked, gesturing to the lady beside her.

“Mom,” Harry said, as he reached up and touched her picture. “She looks so young.”

Steve swallowed, the memories of his life flooding him, and he took a step back, needing a break.
He kept walking, until he felt a draft coming from the bookcase. He frowned at it, as he took a closer look. “If you’re already working in a secret office,” he asked, pushing the shelf aside to reveal an elevator, “Why do you need to hide the elevator?”

The key pad on the elevator lit up, and Harry held up his device to crack the combination. He pressed the numbers on it as they appeared on his screen, and the door opened for them.

They took the elevator down in pure silence, until Harry broke it.

“Mom never talked about her work in SHIELD, not the details. She talked about the struggles she faced, and the legacy she wanted to leave behind. But there were days when she’d come home, with the weight of the world on her shoulders, and she’d bury it. I don’t think Dad even knew what she did half the time,” Harry said, finally.

“She did what she had to in order to keep you safe,” Natasha told him gently.

“But it doesn’t change the fact that there’s so much about her that I don’t know,” Harry said a bit bitterly, “So much I may never know now.”

He didn’t say anything, as the doors opened then. They stepped out into the room, cloaked by darkness, with nothing but the light of an old computer at the far end of the room. The lights flickered to life slowly as they moved through the room.

“This can’t be the data-point, this technology is ancient,” Natasha said, as she looked down and noticed a flash drive port.

“Wait,” Harry said, placing a hand on hers, before quickly pulling it away, “You don’t know what it’ll do.”

“Do you have any better ideas?” she raised a brow, and when he didn’t offer any, she stuck it in. The machines around them hummed to life, and the screen in front of them lit up?

“Initiate system?” the computer asked, both verbally and through text.

“YES,” Natasha typed as she verbally said the same. “Shall we play a game? It’s from a movie-”

“I know, Toni showed me,” he cut off, not in the mood for jokes. Not when they were so close to having answers.


“It's some kind of a recording,” the Natasha said in surprise.

“I am not a recording, Fräulein. I may not be the man I was when the Captain took me prisoner in 1945, but I am,” the computer laughed, filling with an image of Zola.

No.

He stopped breathing as he looked at the screen in horror.

It was impossible.

There was no way, was there?
“Do you know this thing?” Natasha asked, looking over at him.

“Zola,” Harry breathed in shock.

“Arnim Zola was a German scientist who worked for the Red Skull. He's been dead for years,” Steve said in a cold voice.

“First correction, I am Swiss. Second, look around you. I have never been more alive. In 1972 I received a terminal diagnosis. Science could not save my body, my mind, however, that was worth saving on two hundred thousand feet of data banks. You are standing in my brain,” the computer said creepily.

“How did you get here?” he questioned.

“Invited,” the computer all but shrugged.

“It was Operation Paperclip after World War II. SHIELD recruited German scientists with strategic value,” Harry said, in realization.

“They thought I could help their cause. I also helped my own,” the computer said gleefully.

“HYDRA died with the Red Skull,” Steve said firmly.

“Cut off one head, two more shall take its place,” the computer responded.

“Prove it,” he demanded.

“Accessing archive,” the computer said, as the screen filled with an image of HYDRA, “HYDRA was founded on the belief that humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom. What we did not realize, was that if you try to take that freedom, they resist. The war taught us much. Humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly. After the war, SHIELD was founded, and I was recruited. The new HYDRA grew. A beautiful parasite inside SHIELD. For seventy years HYDRA has been secretly feeding crisis, reaping war. And when history did not cooperate, history was changed.”

Images throughout history flickered the on the screen, war, weapons, crisis after crisis. War after war.

“That's impossible, SHIELD would have stopped you,” Harry insisted.

“Accidents will happen,” Zola said, as the news article about Howard and Maria’s car crash filled the screen. A copy of the autopsy as signed off by Peggy. Fury’s death filled the screen. “HYDRA created a world so chaotic that humanity is finally ready to sacrifice its freedom to gain its security. Once the purification process is complete, HYDRA's new world order will arise. We won, Captain. Your death amounts to the same as your Life; a zero sum.”

He punched the screen in anger, but the computer kept talking.

“What's on this drive?” he cut it off.

“Project Insight requires insight. So I wrote an algorithm,” Zola told them.


“The answer to your question is fascinating. Unfortunately, you shall be too dead to hear it,” Zola laughed. The doors began to close then, and Steve threw his shield at it, trying to jam it, but he was too late.
“Steve, we got a bogey. Short range ballistic. 30 seconds tops,” Harry said, looking down at his phone.

“Who fired it?” he demanded.

“SHIELD,” Natasha confirmed, she pulled the drive out of the port.

“I am afraid I have been stalling, Captain. Admit it, it's better this way. We're both of us, out of time,” he laughed.

He noticed a small opening on the ground then, and he the grate aside, as he threw Harry and Natasha into the hole first, following after them. He held his shield up, protecting them from the blast as the missile hit the.

When the rubble set, Steve looked around and saw Natasha unconscious.

“I got her,” Steve told Harry, as he lifted her up. “Can you walk?”

“Yes,” Harry said, as they noticed choppers approaching. “We need to get out of here now.”

Steve nodded, as they began to move quickly, trying to get to safety.

Toni paced back and forth as she looked down at the computer screen in front of her, unable to believe what she’d just found.

“Holy fuck,” she swore to herself, unable to believe what was in front of her.

Because holy fuck indeed.

HYDRA was still active.

After all these years.

Because dear old Dad and Aunt Peggy had invited Armin Zola into their homes. Into SHIELD, and now the organization meant to fight the bad guys was reaming with them.

The drive’s contents had taken several hours to crack, and she had spent the better part of the last twenty minutes going through it, only to find a list.

With her name right on the top.

Followed by Steve, Bruce, Thaddeus Freaking Ross.

And several other names she didn’t recognize.

But there were also other names she did know, such as one Doctor Strange, a neurosurgeon in the city.

She frowned. What did any of them have in common enough to all be on a list together.

None of it made any sense.

But one thing was for sure. They were all targets for HYDRA.
Her phone rang then, and she picked it up instantly, knowing it was Steve on the other end.

“What happened?” she asked him, “Are you okay? First I hear that SHIELD issued a warrant, now there’s some sort of manhunt out for you guys. Are you at least safe?”

“We’re fine,” Steve promised her over the call. She could see bruises on his face, and she wondered how long it had been since they happened. Even with his healing abilities, it still had to have hurt.

“We’re lying low at a friend’s house. Sam Wilson.”

“You running friend,” Toni said with a nod. “Do you trust him?”

“More than half of SHIELD at the moment,” he said with a sigh. “He’s giving us a place to lay low.”

“Good,” she said softly, “I’m about to fly over there, you hear me? Just stay safe until then.”

“Toni,” he tried to stop her, “It’s not safe here. If you come, you’re only putting yourself in more danger.”

She laughed, “Steve my name is on the top of the list for Project Insight. I’m in danger where ever I am. Do you really think me hiding out in New York will make any difference? They’re coming for all of us. So if you think that for even a second that I’d consider leaving you to face any of this alone, then you have another thing coming.”

“Okay,” he said after a moment. “I don’t like it, but okay. Just, promise me you’ll be careful, okay?”

“I’ll try,” she promised. “I’ll see you soon, Sweetheart.”

“See you soon,” he said with a nod.

She hung up the phone as she held her arms out, beckoning her suit to her. It was time to kick some HYDRA ass.

Steve was in the car with Sitwell when they felt the man land on the car, punching a hole in the window and throwing Sitwell in front of a truck.

He began shooting through the roof, as Natasha crawled out of the line of fire and into Harry’s lap.

Steve pulled the hand break then, and the man flew off the car and onto the highway in front of them.

It was him. The man with the metal arm.

He scratched the ground with his metal palm, slowing himself, as he stood and faced them. Natasha lifted her gun to shoot, only to drop it as they were rear ended by another car, pushing them straight towards the man.

The metal armed man jumped on top of the car as Sam Wilson attempted to drive, as the assassin punched a hole through the windshield and pulled the steering wheel through it.

“Shit!” Sam swore, as Natasha and Harry began shooting at him. The man jumped on the car behind them, and as their car was pushed into the rail.

“Hang on!” Steve screamed as he held onto them and the crashed out of the car and onto his shield.
The assassin shot at them, and Steve pushed Harry aside as he took the full blast with his shield, throwing him backwards.

He scampered back onto his feet, using the cars to jump back onto the overpass where the attack was taking place.

A man began firing at him, and he jumped on top of the car, charging at him with his shield as he rammed straight into him, and threw him backwards. He could see Sam taking care of the agents shooting at him, as the man called out to him.

“Go! I got this!” Sam yelled, and he took off running.

He approached and saw the assassin pointing the gun straight at Harry and Natasha and he charged at him. The man moved to punch him, and he blocked it with his shield, only to be kicked backwards instead.

The assassin began shooting at him once more, and he ducked, running behind a car, as the man ran out of ammunition. He took the chance then to jump over the car and kick the gun away, going in for a punch as the man pulled out another gun instead.

The soldier punched him straight in the face, as he staggered backwards, using his shield to hit the assassin. The man grabbed onto it, spinning Steve, and he used the momentum to go in for a kangaroo kick.

The assassin took his shield from him then, throwing him backwards.

Steve charged at him, as the man threw the shield at him. He ducked, watching it total the car behind him. The soldier pulled out a set of knives, and he maneuvered to block it, as he landed a punch and a roundhouse kick on the man, sending him flying.

He threw the man over his shoulder and onto the ground, only for him to stand up and start choking him.

The man tossed Steve backwards, as he moved to punch Steve in the face, missing only to crumble the ground beside him with the force of the punch.

Steve struggled to stand, grabbing his shield from the car, as he used it to cut into the man’s arm, grabbing his mask and throwing the assassin to the ground.

The assassin stood, and for the first time, Steve clearly saw his face.

He froze, unable to process what it was that he was seeing.

Because there was no way.

It wasn’t possible,

And yet the man stood in front of him, as clear as day, and he was unable to deny the truth of it.

His childhood best friend was standing in front of him. His childhood best friend was trying to kill him.

His brother.

His family.
The man who’d fallen off the train.

Who he’d been unable to save all those years ago. Who’s death he’d blamed himself over for years.

But there was no denying it. Even with the long hair and lost eyes, it was him.

“Bucky?” Steve asked in disbelief, unable to fully process what was happening. Because how was this even happening?

“Who the hell is Bucky?” The man asked gruffly, with a confused expression.

He raised his arm to shoot then, as Sam flew in with his wings, knocking him over, as Harry and Natasha came in, guns raised.

Natasha shot behind him with the grenade launcher Bucky had used earlier, and when the smoke cleared, the man was gone, leaving nothing but sirens in his wake. They were surrounded then, as SHIELD agents filled around them from all sides.

And just like that, Steve was left with far more questions than he had any answers for. Just like that, his childhood best friend was once again gone. Leaving him with nothing but emptiness.

“Drop the shield, Cap! On your knees! Get on your knees! Now! Get down! Get down!” Rumlow said, as he pointed a gun at him. He raised his hands as Rumlow kicked down his leg, “Get on your knees! Down! Don't move.”

It was over.

A helicopter approached from overhead, and Steve wondered for a moment if this was how it would end. Shot in an empty street, with Toni hundreds of miles away, and a flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, some part of him from before he went into the ice had survived.

Rollins pointed a gun at him, but Rumlow shook his head “Put the gun down. Not here. Not here!”

They were loaded up into the truck then, and Steve knew one thing for sure. If they didn’t escape before they reached their destination, there would be no coming back.

She landed at the base coordinates that Steve had sent her, having barely escaped capture. It had terrified her, learning that SHIELD had taken them hostage and she had been ready to go in guns blazing, plotting a rescue, until Steve had messaged her on an encrypted line saying they were free.

A part of her didn’t believe it was him; what if it was a trap and they were trying to bait her into coming to them willingly.

Then Harry had taken over and texted her the key phrase Aunt Peggy had set for them as children. One no one else knew about and one that only they would know.

*We’ll go to Coney Island on Thursday.*

A phrase so obscure that it wouldn’t be guessed, but one she’d recognize anywhere.

“Fancy seeing you lot here,” she said as Maria ushered her inside.

Only for her to come face to face with a supposedly dead Fury.
“I guess no one who dies at SHIELD stays dead, do they?” she asked him, raising a brow.

“Good to see that you weren’t heartbroken over my demise,” Fury deadpanned.

She shot him a smile as Steve entered the room then, followed by Harry, Natasha, and a fourth person whom she did not know.

“Steve,” she breathed as she pulled him into a tight hug. His face was bruised and battered, and he winced slightly upon the contact. But he did not hesitate to hold her tightly, as if he were afraid of losing her.

“I missed you,” he whispered, and she pulled away enough to cup his face.

“I’m here now,” she told him, looking into his eyes. She could see Natasha with a bandage wrapped around her shoulder and Harry was leaning heavily on his right leg.

“Well don’t you all look worse for the wear,” she commented lightly, as her eyes landed on the unknown man. “And you must be Sam Wilson, Steve’s new friend.”

“Miss Stark,” the man nodded, “Pleasure to finally meet you. Steve’s told me a lot about you. Won’t shut up, really.”

Steve punched the man lightly and Wilson simply laughed.

“Get her up to speed, Captain,” Fury said, as he looked at the two of them, “We have a lot of work to do.”

Harry nodded, lingering as the others left the room. Steve nodded at him, and she looked at the two of them, slightly confused, wondering what it was that they were keeping between the two of them.

“How are you doing?” she asked him, as he led her over to a set of chairs in the room. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I’m fine,” he told her softly, “A few bruises, but nothing that won’t heal in a few hours.”

“What happened?” she asked, unable to hold herself back any longer. She knew something must have, or he wouldn’t look as sullen as he did.

“HYDRA is still active,” he said, and she nodded along, knowing that much from cracking the drive. “I went into the ice, trying to bring them down, but all this time, they were active, hiding in the shadows. It’s like nothing I did even made a difference, not in the end. Because they survived. They infiltrated SHIELD and controlled the world from the shadows. My entire attempt to bring them down meant nothing in the end.”

“You still forced them into hiding,” she told him gently, “Imagine how much chaos they would have wreaked if they were allowed to run wild. You put a stop to them. You slowed them down. Even if you didn’t stop them for good, you still crippled them Steve.”

“That’s not all,” He said softly, as he looked at her gently, “They implied something, Toni. And part of me doesn’t want to tell you, because it’s going to hurt you. But I can’t keep this from you. Not when I know the truth. You deserve to know.”

“What is it?” she asked, a sense of dread filling her. Whatever it was had to be bad because with the way Steve was looking at her, it couldn’t be anything else.
“They implied that they did whatever it took to stay hidden, including causing accidents. That SHIELD couldn’t stop them because they always got to them first. That your father was nearly onto them.”

Her world began to spin as the words Steve was saying started to blur.

Because it wasn’t possible.

It couldn’t be.

“HYDRA caused your parents accident,” Steve said carefully, looking over at her to see how she would react to it.

“No,” she trembled. “My father was drinking that day. He caused the accident because he had too much whiskey.”

“It was HYDRA,” Steve told her gently.

It wasn’t possible. She would have known. All this time had passed, and she’d blamed her father for the entire thing. If HYDRA was responsible for the death of her parents, wouldn’t she have known?

Because the coroner’s report had ruled it as an accident.

And she’d never pushed past that.

It had been Obadiah and Peggy who had identified the body. She’d been too much of a mess. What with trying to take over the company and keep herself steady. With the drinking and the scandals.

Wouldn’t Peggy have known if it wasn’t an accident?

If the car was tampered with, it would have been in the reports. If their bodies didn’t have injuries consistent with a car crash, it would have been in the reports.

Reports she’d never bothered to read, because what point was there? Her parents were dead. Her father had killed her mother.

What else was there to it?

But she knew there was more to it than that. That something was wrong. Something had always been wrong. But she hadn’t pushed, not when she didn’t want to know. Couldn’t know. She knew that deep down in her gut that it was true. That what Steve said made sense, even if it tore through every fiber of her beliefs apart.

“They killed my mother,” she let out a sob, and Steve wrapped his arms around her. “She was innocent in all of this. She didn’t know anything about SHIELD. Dad kept her out of the loop. But they killed her anyways.”

“We’ll find out what happened,” Steve promised her, “We’ll stop HYDRA. I promise you, Toni. They won’t get away with this. They won’t get away with any of this. Not if I can help it. We will find the people responsible.”

She let out a sob, as she held onto him tightly. HYDRA was going to regret going after for her family.

Someone had been responsible for the death of her parents, and she intended to find out the truth.
And nothing would be able to stop her.
She didn’t sleep well that night, and the SHIELD faculty had nothing to do with that fact.

How could she sleep when it turned out that she’d been lied to her entire life? That her parents had been murdered, because Howard had come too close to finding out that SHIELD had been infiltrated with HYDRA. And that they had probably taken her mother out as well in the odd chance that he had shared his suspicions with her.

Not that it was likely. Her father didn’t share very much about his work, not with her and definitely not with her mother. He might bring his work home with him, but that didn’t mean he cared enough to share it with them.

He never cared enough to share any of it with them.

And yet her mother still had to die.

Her sweet, innocent mother, who had been nothing but loving to her entire life. Who had supported her; who had cared about her, and who had been there every time her father had kicked her down.

For decades she’d blamed Howard. Blamed him for taking her mother from her. How could she reconciled the fact that it wasn’t his fault? Not directly. Because he wasn’t responsible for this. She knew that.

But her mother had been murdered.

And she couldn’t forgive that.

“Miss, you have a call from Colonel Rhodes,” JARVIS told her quietly as she continued to stare at the ceiling, hoping sleep would come for her. Steve was fast asleep beside her and she sighed to herself, getting up from the bed, and grabbing her phone as she tried to leave the room, making as little noise as possible.

“Toni?” Rhodey said as she picked up. “Are you okay?”

“You know,” she said, not really as a question. She could hear the concern in his voice. Concern that he often held as the anniversary of her parents’ deaths came around and she would lock herself up in her lab.

“Yes,” he said simply, “Harry called me. He said they found some disturbing information when digging into HYDRA at the old SHIELD base. I’m so sorry Toni.”

“It’s fine,” she lied. “I’m over it. The old man went digging and got himself killed. I guess, despite his alcoholism, he didn’t crash the car that day. But I’m fine. You don’t need to worry about me, Pop Tart.”
“Toni,” he sighed, “I was there, remember? I’m the one who came and saw you after you received the news. You came and stayed with my family, remember? I was there for you when they passed. And I’m here for you now. It’s okay if you’re not okay. You don’t need to be strong all the time. Even if you’re a superhero, CEO, mentor, and so much more. You’re allowed to be upset. You’re allowed to be upset. You’re allowed to mourn them again. You’re allowed to be mad, and furious, and it’s perfectly fine.”

“She didn’t have to die,” Toni choked out softly after a moment, because this was Rhodey. This was Rhodey who had been there for her since she was a teenager at MIT. Rhodey who had picked her up every time she was down. Who had been her first real friend. “She didn’t have to die. Howard didn’t either, but she was innocent in all of this. They could have spared her. They should have spared her.”

“I know,” he told her softly, “We’ll get the people responsible, Toni. I promise you. We will drag them out of the shadows and into the light for everyone to see. The world will know the truth, I promise you that. Your parents will get the justice they deserve. We won’t let HYDRA get away with this, I promise you Baby Girl. You and me against the world.”

“I love you,” she told him softly, “I don’t know if I ever thanked you for being there for me and for being my friend. I don’t know how I would have gotten through life if I didn’t have you by my side. I know it hasn’t always been the easiest thing in the world.”

“Toni you befriended a black kid in the eighties on a campus where all the students kept trying to tear us both down,” he said. “You gave me so much with your friendship at a time when no one else wanted anything to do with me. And I don’t know what I would have done without you in my life. I don’t care if being friends with you isn’t easy, and that more often than not it means I get shot at. I wouldn’t trade it for the world.”

She felt her throat close up slightly, and she nodded, knowing that he wouldn’t be able to see her anyways.

“Say the word, Baby Girl, and I’ll be there in a heartbeat,” he said, giving her a moment. “If you want me there with you, taking them down, I’ll be there. War Machine and Iron Woman against the world.”

“War Machine again, is it?” she laughed, watery.

“We both know it was the better name,” he conceded.

“Thank you,” she said. “I know you’re on a mission, Rhodey Bear,” she told him softly. “What you’re doing is important. But I promise I’ll keep you in the loop. If I need you, I promise I’ll call.”

“Good,” he said firmly. “And I promise you, the moment I’m back States side, I’ll swing by the tower. We’ll binge the Star Wars movies, the ones Peter calls old, and quote lines at each other.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she smiled. “I’ll talk to you soon, Rhodey.”

“Bye, Toni,” he said, “Try and get some sleep okay?”

She hung up the phone as she went back to the room she had been staying in as she crawled into the bed.

“Are you okay?” Steve said, rousing from his sleep to look at her carefully.

“No,” she admitted, “But I will be.”
He opened his arms and she nestled herself against his chest as he held her tightly. She closed her eyes, trying to get some sleep, as she knew when morning came, nothing would be the same.

“Do we all know the plan?” Natasha asked, Toni adjusted Steve’s uniform. She took a step back, grinning at how he looked in the same suit he’d worn the first time he’d gone after HYDRA.

“Those Helicarriers cannot launch,” Toni said firmly, “I have SHIELD the original designs for it before HYDRA modified them, and I will hack into them to make sure they never go up. It’s going to be your job to make sure I have the time to get into them.”

“So leaving the easy stuff to us then,” Wilson said dryly and she shot him a smirk. She was liking this new friend of Steve’s.

“Always,” she said, as she stuck her hands out and the suit attached itself to her carefully.

“That is so cool,” Sam said under his breath.

“I’m sure I could arrange for a similar upgrade for you,” she said with a shrug. “I designed your wings after all.”

He gaped at her and she laughed, “It doesn’t have to be as invasive as mine, but I can still find a way to make it happen.”

“I’m sure you can,” he said.

“Okay,” Steve nodded, “It’s time.”

They marched towards the SHIELD headquarters in silence, and she felt the anticipation filling her with every step they took.

“We need a back way in,” Natasha said, “I can send a signal to scramble to earpieces of the agents guarding the side way in.”

“I don’t know if I should be impressed or terrified,” Toni said, thinking about it for a moment. Impressed, definitely impressed.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to collect her as a part of your nerd group,” Harry groaned. “You already have Ava. You don’t need her too.”

“I like having badass women around me,” she shrugged. “And Romanoff is definitely a badass.”

“Does this mean we’re going to start painting each other’s nails and braid our hair?” Natasha smirked.

“Only if we can do it on Thor,” she laughed.

“I can work with that,” Natasha said, beginning to send the scrambling signal on her phone. “Done. Let’s move now.”

She walked through the door first, raising her repulse at the scared looking tech, who most likely had no idea of what was about to happen. She wouldn’t fire at him lethally, probably just stunning him if forced to. But he didn’t need to know that.
“We need to let them know what’s happening,” Steve said, looking past the guy. “Not all of them are HYDRA. We need to warn them of what’s happening.”

“Ohkay,” Toni nodded. “I’ll set up a secure channel so they can’t trace where it’s coming from.”

She moved towards the command panel in the room, while the others held weapons up in case anyone entered the room. She opened up a new terminal session, masking her login access and using a VPN to bounce the signal off several other locations including Japan.

“Ohkay, you’re good to go,” she told him, and Steve took a deep breath.

“Attention, all SHIELD agents. This is Steve Rogers.” He started, and she gave him a reassuring look. “You’ve heard a lot about me over the last few days, some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it’s time you know the truth. SHIELD is not what we thought it was, it’s been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don’t know how many more, but I know they’re in the building. They could be standing right next to you. They almost have what they want: absolute control. They shot Nick Fury and it won’t end there. If you launch those Helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way, unless we stop them. I know I’m asking a lot, but the price of freedom is high, it always has been, and it’s a price I’m willing to pay. And if I’m the only one, then so be it. But I’m willing to bet I’m not.”

She grinned at him, proud of everything he’d done. She squeezed his hand softly as Sam gave him a look.

“Did you write that down first, or was it off the top of your head?” Sam teased.

“He was practicing it front of the mirror this morning,” she said teasingly as well.

“I regret introducing the two of you,” Steve groaned, as Maria watched the screens.

“I doubt you do,” she kissed him softly.

“I hate to break up this touching moment, but they’re preparing to launch the carriers,” Maria said, looking down at the monitors.

Sam, Harry, and Steve looked at each other, “We need to stop them,” Steve said, nodding at her. “Will you guys be okay?”

“We got this,” Toni said, “Go kick some ass.”

“We will,” Harry winked at them, and Natasha rolled her eyes.

“Is he always that annoying?” she asked, and Toni laughed.

“He grows on you,” Toni said. “But I think he’s putting on a bit of a show for you. He has a thing for badass women who can kick his ass.”

She looked pensive at that, before brushing it aside. “We’re going to need to access the source directly if we’re going to want to stop them from launching those carriers. If you’re going to bring them down like you claim you can, you’ll need all the backup you can get.”

“You’ll need access to override it,” Fury told them, “You may be good, Stark, but you can’t hack biometric encryptions. Or at least not with the amount of time we have left.”
“Go,” Maria nodded at the three of them, “I’ll coordinate from here.”

“Okay,” Toni nodded, knowing they were going into the belly of the beast. She left her armour on, as they moved towards where Alexander Pierce was.

“I’m going in first,” Natasha said to them, pulling up a face masking device, as she transformed into one of the World Security Council Members, Hawley to be precise. “Come in when I say it’s clear.”

“Okay,” Toni said, as she watched the spy sneak in.

“Man she is cool,” Ava said over the comms, as her cousin temporarily switched them to a private channel. “I wish I was that smooth.”

“Don’t we all?” Toni laughed as she listened to Pierce over the lines.

“Let me ask you a question. What if Pakistan marched into Mumbai tomorrow, and you knew that they were gonna drag your daughters into a soccer stadium for execution?” she heard Pierce say through Natasha’s comms. “And you could just stop it with a flick of the switch. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t you all?”

“Not if it was your switch,” Singh said, as she heard glass crash, before she heard fighting sounds from the other end.

“I’m sorry. Did I step on your moment?” Natasha said smoothly and Toni readied herself to go in.

“Too cool for Harry,” Ava said solemnly, and Toni laughed lightly.

“What have we here?” Toni asked, slinking into the room as she saw Natasha pointing a gun at Pierce.

“Such a shame they got you involved with this, Stark,” Pierce glowered. “You could have been useful to us. We had big plans for you. For all of you. But then you had to go and interfere.”

“Like my father did?” she asked coldly, as she moved towards the computer.

“Your father was working on something big. Something that could have been useful to us,” Pierce shrugged. “But he got in the way. He refused to share his formula with us. He was starting not to trust us. The same organization he helped to build. And so he needed to be taken care of. It’s a shame that it didn’t end there, and that your godmother couldn’t keep her nose out of it for once.”

“What did you do to Peggy?” she asked, growing cold. Ava let out a gasp on the other end of the line, as Harry made a startled noise.

“She’s hardly a threat, is she?” Pierce mocked, “Once she was the top spy in the game. The Head of SHIELD. And now? She’s locked up in an old age home, barely even having control over what station is playing on television. She was nearly onto us back then. But we solved that problem didn’t we.”

“Falcon, status?” Maria asked over the comms.
“Engaging,” Sam grunted, as shots rang out through the comms. “Alright, Cap, I'm in. Wait, shit!”

“Eight minutes,” Maria reminded them all.

“Working on it,” Steve responded back.

She gained access to the system then, as millions of millions of files appeared in front of her. Pertaining to everything from their work in the wars, government attacks, alien encounters, and so on.

She needed a way to sort through it all. An algorithm to identify which files were related to what. And she was running out of time.

“What are you doing?” Rockwell asked her, as she pulled up a shell and began issuing commands to sort the files based on certain criteria. If she could just find the perfect set of parameters to isolate the HYDRA files, then she wouldn’t have to leak it all on the internet.

Because that was the plan that they’d come up with.

Dump the files on the internet for everyone to see. It was time to bring HYDRA out into the light.

“She's disabling security protocols and dumping all the secrets onto the Internet,” Pierce said, clearly understanding their plan.

“Including HYDRA's,” Natasha said, coolly.

“And SHIELD's,” Pierce said, turning to her. “If you do this, none of your past is gonna remain hidden. Are you sure you're ready for the world to see you as you really are?”

Natasha froze then, and Toni knew that it was something Natasha would have to come to terms with. For so long, she’d lived in the shadows. Hiding her face, her name, and anything that could identify her. She blended in wherever she went, and it was how she was so effective. But if all the files were out there, then none of it would be hidden.

“Just HYDRA’s,” Toni corrected then. “I’ve narrowed it down enough to almost safely release all the HYDRA files alone onto the internet. I just need a bit more time.”

“We don’t have time,” Natasha told her firmly, “Just release it all.”

She turned then at the other woman, looking at her incredulously.

“I’m all for transparency but I don’t think you have any idea what that means,” she stated. “Any agent on an undercover mission would be instantly compromised. Thousands of agents will be at risk and could be killed. Most of them have family or people they care about, and it would be endangering them as well. What about the alien technology that we have here? If that gets out to the public and they get their hands on it, do you have any idea the sort of damage they could do? It could topple governments, and lead to mass chaos. HYDRA might have gotten into SHIELD and corrupted it, but they still did do a lot of good too. We cannot just let everything get out there.”

Natasha was silent for a bit, and she knew it had been rough on the spy who had given everything to this organization after escaping the KGB.

She wondered too, if Natasha knew people who would be personally affected if all the files got out there.

“Alpha locked,” Steve’s voice came through the comms.

“Falcon, where are you now?” Hill questioned.

“I had to take a detour! Oh, yeah! I'm in. Bravo locked,” Sam all but cheered.

“Two down, one to go,” Hill told them all.

“You know, you may be smart Stark, but even you cannot disable the encryption. It's an executive order, meaning it takes two Alpha Level members,” Pierce said in an unworried voice.

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Romanoff said. “Company’s coming.”

They heard a helicopter land on that level, as Fury stepped out of it. Pierce looked surprised, but quickly covered it up.

“Did you get my flowers?” Pierce asked as Fury entered the room. Fury gave him a cold look then and he continued on, “I'm glad you're here, Nick.”

“Really? Cause I thought you had me killed,” Fury retorted.

“You know how the game works,” Pierce shrugged.

“So why make me head of SHIELD?” Fury questioned, “After Director Carter-Sousa retired.”

“Cause you were the best and the most ruthless person I ever met,” Pierce said, and Fury nearly growled.

“I did what I did to protect people,” Fury defended.

“Our enemies are your enemies, Nick,” Pierce told him patiently. “Disorder, war. It's just a matter of time before a dirty bomb goes off in Moscow, or an EMP fries Chicago. Diplomacy? Holding action, a band-aid. And you know where I learned that; Bogota. You didn't ask, you just did what had to be done. I can bring order to the lives of seven billion people by sacrificing twenty million. It's the next step, Nick, if you have the courage to take it.”

“No, I have the courage not to,” Fury said firmly, as he grabbed Pierce and dragged him over to the retinal scanner. Toni typed out a few commands, the last thing she needed was the override before she could fully break the encryption on the files.

“Retinal scanner active,” The computer said.

Pierce laughed, “You don't you think we wiped your clearance from the system?”

“Oh I know you erased my password, probably deleted my retinal scan, but if you want to stay ahead of me, Mr. Secretary,” Fury said then, a glint in his eyes, as he removed his eyepatch. She stared at the dead eye under the patch, scars left from scratches on his face. “You need to keep both eyes open.”

“Alpha Level confirmed. Encryption code accepted. Safeguards removed,” The computer said firmly.

“Are you ready?” Natasha asked her as she finished typing in the final commands, before hitting the ‘Enter’ key.
“Done,” she said with a smirk at the room. “And it’s already trending.”

Natasha took a look at the screen then.

James Henley @jHens · 1m
I can’t believe #HYDRA has been here all this time. I thought @CaptainAmerica brought them down in the 40s? I have a feeling these files are going to contain secrets we’re going to wish we didn’t know. #IStandWithCap

CNN @CNN · 1m
#BreakingNews: @CaptainAmerica unmasks #HYDRA influence over secret Government Agency. More updates to follow. #CaptainAmerica cnn.it/3284n9

Harry Cheng @ChengH · 1m
Was releasing secret government documents the best thing to do? I get that Stark is all about transparency and all, but I can’t help but wonder if there was a better way to handle this. #IStandWithCap #NoMoreHydraHeads

She turned to smirk at them only to see Pierce press a button on his phone, as the other council members began to drop to the ground, smoke coming from the badges they’d received earlier. Natasha turned at him, raising her gun.

“Unless you want two-inch hole in your sternum, I’d put that gun down,” Pierce said, gesturing to the pin she was wearing as well. She didn’t drop her gun, and Pierce shrugged. “That was armed the moment you pinned it on.”

“I’m on it,” Ava said over the comms, “I’ll unarm it. Just give me a few moments.”

Fury and Natasha dropped their guns as Pierce simply shrugged at them.

“Lieutenant, how much longer?” Pierce questioned.

A man responded from the radio, “Sixty-five seconds to satellite link. Targeting grid engaged. Lowering weapons array now.”

“One minute,” Hill told them all, and she felt her breath catch. Where was Steve? Had he put in the final chip necessary to disable the Helicarriers? “Thirty seconds, Cap!”

“Stand by. Charlie-” He started, before she heard shots, and Steve didn’t make another sound.

“Steve!” she said frantically, not caring if Pierce saw her expression. He didn’t respond, and she could hear Hill try and get him to confirm his location.

“We’ve reached three thousand feet. Sat link coming online now,” The voice over the radio said.

“Deploy algorithm,” Another voice said out.

“Algorithm deployed,” The first man confirmed.
“We are a go to targets,” Pierce said, “Washington, the White house, the Pentagon, Stark Tower.”

“That’s nearly 700,000 people,” Hill said breathlessly.

No.

She felt panic fill her chest. Bruce and Ava were at the Tower. She had thousands of employees at her tower.

And they just wanted to fire at it, bringing it down, with all of them inside.

“Ava get out of there now!” Harry screamed, “Trigger the emergency systems. Evacuate the building.”

“I just need a little longer,” Ava said, “I nearly disabled the pins.”

“Forget the pins!” Harry snapped, “Get out of there now. Natasha can handle herself. Get everyone out of there.”

“Target saturation reached. All targets assigned,” The tech said again.

“Fire when ready,” The second voice ordered.

“Firing in, three, two, one.” The tech said, and she held her breath, panic filling her.

“Charlie locked,” she heard Steve say and she nearly let out a cry of relief as she saw the targets go offline on the screen.

“Where are the targets? Where are the targets?” The second voice demanded.

“Okay, Cap, get out of there,” Hill ordered.

“Fire now,” Steve commanded, and she felt the panic return. Had he even cleared the Helicarrier? Where was he?

“But, Steve-” Hill began to protest.

“Do it! Do it now!” Steve demanded, and she turned out the window to watch as the Helicarriers began firing at each other, with Steve still inside.

“What a waste,” Pierce muttered.

“Are you still on the fence about Rogers’ chances?” Romanoff said, and she wondered if that was more for them than him.

“Time to go, Councilwoman,” Pierce said, holding his phone up to Natasha. “This way, come on. You’re gonna fly me out of here.”

“You know, there was a time I would have taken a bullet for you,” Fury said, not turning around.

“Pin temporarily disabled,” Ava said over the comms. And Toni held back the urge to smile.

“You already did. You will again when it’s useful,” Pierce said, as Natasha threw off the pin from her body before throwing it onto Pierce just as he tried to activate it. His body began to burn up as Fury shot Pierce twice, causing him to drop to the ground.
“You did good kid,” Fury said to Ava and Toni looked out the windows in time to see the Helicarriers begin to drop.

“Hail HYDRA,” Pierce murmured, as he grew still, and she felt no sympathy for the man on the ground. The one who’d caused her family so much pain, time and time again.

“Sam, where are you?” Toni asked, as she felt dread.

“41st floor, north-west corner!” Sam said as Natasha began to tell him that they were on their way.

“Hill, where’s Steve?” She demanded, just as she saw the helicarriers fall to the ground. “Please tell me he wasn’t in there.”

“He hasn’t responded to any of our messages,” Hill said, and despite her calm tone, she knew Hill was worried.

“Get a team on the ground,” Fury commanded, “Find Rogers. He has to be there somewhere.”

She moved out of the building quickly, flying through one of the windows and directly for the ground. If her boyfriend was down there, she’d find him.

But it didn’t stop the sense of worriedness from filling her as she looked.

She sat in the hospital room as she watched Steve lying there, wires and tubes over his body as he slept.

She’d found him on the banks of the river where the Helicarrier had fallen, and she’d wondered how he’d gotten himself there.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Steve murmured as she watched his eyes flutter as he slowly awakened.

“I’m always thinking too hard,” she retorted. “But if you didn’t constantly put yourself in danger, maybe I’d be able to take a step back and breathe.”

“I’m sorry I worried you,” he told her gently, “But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t fight him.”

“What happened?” she questioned him gently, “How did you get off the carrier?”

“I fell,” he said, “I remember being in the water, falling down deeper and deeper. Then I remember seeing a metal arm reach for me. I think Bucky saved me.”

“Did you break through his conditioning?” she asked him gently, as she moved to sit on the bed, gently stroking his face, careful not to hurt him.

“I don’t think it’ll be that easy,” he sighed. “He knows who I am. He recognizes me. But not enough that the HYDRA programming didn’t still come out.”

“You’re going to go after him,” Toni said, realization filling through her.

“I have to,” Steve said softly, “He’s all I have left from back then. He was my family, Toni. I can’t leave him to the wolves.”

“Okay,” she exhaled. “But we have to do this right, Steve. He’s a known assassin. Regardless of the conditioning, he’s still an assassin. He may not have had a choice in his actions, but his victims still deserve justice. We need to bring him in and make it public knowledge. If he’s going to gain his
innocence, then the world needs to know the truth.”

“Won’t he be in danger?” Steve asked, after a moment. “The government will try and kill him.”

“We won’t let them,” she promised. “SHIELD may be compromised now, vulnerable from everything that’s happened, but Stark Industries is consolidating them. We have the resources, the money, and the technology to keep this going. We’ll bring him home, Steve. I promise.”

“Okay,” he said softly, “I trust you.”

“There’s something else,” she told him gently. “Pierce implied HYDRA is the reason for Aunt Peggy stepping down from SHIELD. And if there’s any truth in that, I need to know what happened. Her husband and children deserve to know the truth.”

His eyes darkened at that and he held her hand tightly.

“We’re going to make sure they never hurt another person again,” Steve told her firmly. “Even if I have to personally go after every last HYDRA agent myself.”

“You won’t be alone,” she agreed. “You have us with you, every step of the way. But I have a feeling that this is just the beginning. Now that we know the truth, I feel like there’s going to be many, many more secrets to uncover.”

“Then we’ll do it together,” Steve promised. “You and me, against the world.”

She smiled at that, as his eyes began to close again from the medication.

“Sleep,” she told him gently, kissing his forehead. “I’ll be here when you get up.”

He closed his eyes, as the exhaustion took over, and she stayed with him the entire time. Just as she said she would.

She knew there was still so much she didn’t know. Like how her parents died. Or what had happened to Peggy. Was Obadiah HYDRA, or did he just benefit from their actions. Did anyone else in her life know the truth, and were they keeping it from her?

She wasn’t sure she would like whatever answers she found, but she knew she knew she had to try. She couldn’t drop it, not when there was a truth to find out.

She just hoped that from here on out there wouldn’t be any more secrets that would be lifechanging.
Chapter Summary

The fall of HYDRA leaves a lot of loose ends to unravel

Toni surprised she really shouldn’t have been surprised to have seen Nick Fury and Maria Hill in her office at Stark Industries as she entered to prepare for the day. After all, the pair had a way of popping up in her life after every major event over the course of the last few years.

So it stood to reason that they would be there hours after Natasha Romanoff told the Senate to fuck off when they tried to claim her a traitor for releasing government secrets. Especially given that one, it had been Toni who had done the releasing, and two, the files that had been released were all HYDRA files, releasing the terrible things that they’d done over the course of the past few decades.

Of course it probably hadn’t helped that while releasing the files, they’d exposed several High Level HYDRA operatives contained within the US Government, such as Fischer, and her favourite, Stern.

The man who’d been a pain in her ass for years and had tried to take her suit from her had been HYDRA all this time.

She’d been particularly gleeful watching his takedown live on television as several members of various agencies marched him out of his office with the world watching.

“Fury,” Toni said, as she marched straight past where the two of them were standing and sat in her chair. “Hill. What can I do he for two of you today?”

“We need to talk, Stark,” Fury told her firmly, and she gestured to the seats across from her, beckoning for them to sit.

“So talk,” she said simply, “There’s quite a few things going on today, and I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I have quite a full schedule to get through today, what with my sudden new responsibilities of housing misplaced SHIELD agents and their operations.”

“That’s why we’re here,” he said, sounding unimpressed. “We have much to go over in that regard.”

“Such as?” she asked coolly, as if she didn’t have some idea of it all herself.

“Such as the fact that that effective immediately, I am stepping down as the director of SHIELD,” he said, and she paused for a moment, as she looked up at him in shock.

“I’m sorry, you’re doing what now?” she asked, trying to see if she understood him properly. “Why would you step down now? We won, in case you didn’t notice. SHIELD, for the most part, is unscathed, and HYDRA has been exposed to the world. Captain America brought down the helicarriers and the damage was minimal. There were few casualties, and we won. If anything, SHIELD needs you more than ever, now over anything.”

“Which is why it needs to be led by someone who’s capable of taking care of all of this,” Fury said firmly, “Someone I trust more than anyone to be able to make the right decisions. Someone who would be able to hold the fort down when I’m gone.”
She raised her hands firmly, “I don’t know what you’re hoping for, but that person isn’t me. I have more than enough responsibilities in my life, what with still being the CEO of Stark Industries and Iron Woman. I don’t have time to be the new director of SHIELD as well.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Stark,” he scoffed, “I wasn’t talking about you. Of course I’m not making you the new Director of SHIELD. Do you think I’ve lost my goddamn mind to put you in charge?”

She bristled at that, “Wow, tell me how you really feel, Fury.”

“SHIELD is hurting,” he said in a gentle voice. “We might have come up on top, but we still suffered losses and we still suffered losing trust. Fellow agents who were like family members to other agents turned on one another. Alliances were broken, and we suffered, one way or another, we suffered. What SHIELD needs right now is someone who can help put it back together. Someone who will make sure every single check box is marked off, and every ‘i’ is dotted. Someone who cares about the rules.”

“You’re putting Coulson in charge,” she said, understanding dawning upon her.

“You knew,” he said, sounding slightly shocked.

“I thought you were in the business of knowing everybody’s secrets,” she rose a brow at him.

“Shut up, Stark,” he snarked back at her and she grinned.

“It makes sense,” she said nodding solemnly, “He’s all for following all the rules and he’d be good for SHIELD. I always did think he’d be the one to run things one day.”

“Maria will be here with you in the meantime,” Fury told her, trying to get things back on track, “Helping take care of the day to day operations of SHIELD, taking care of the agents and making sure everything is on track.”

“And the Avengers Initiative?” she asked, wanting to know what would happen to their division.

“Harry has agreed to be the liaison for the entire team instead of just for you,” Fury told her. “He’ll be the one providing you aid and ground support. He’ll still have his own missions and tasks, but he’ll be the one who handles your team.”

“What about you?” she asked him after a moment. “What are you going to do? I hardly think you’re the type to sit back and retire as the world goes on without you.”

“What, don’t think I can sit around and relax on a beach, drinking margaritas?” he asked her sarcastically.

“We both know you’re not the type,” she grinned.

“I’m going to go after them,” he told her after a moment. “After the higher-level HYDRA operatives who got away. HYDRA did all of this under my nose. Without me even noticing they were getting up to all of this. I should have seen it coming. I should have known they were there. But I failed and all of this happened. So I’m going to track down every single one of those bastards and bring them down.”

“Okay,” she told him. “Just let me know if there’s anything we can do at any point. If you want us there, fighting by your side, just let us know and we’ll be there.”

“Thank you, Stark,” he said, and she nodded. And with that, he turned and left the room, leaving her
“So, I was thinking we use the floors 50-60 for SHIELD operations,” she told Hill. “I was going to set up more office space, but I think it might be smarter to just open up another building. I talked to Pepper, and we can create a new office in Seattle, which in turn, would create a few thousand jobs. And this way the Avengers Initiative and SHIELD can be based out of the same city.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Hill said, giving her a rare smile.

Things would be different now, but somehow, Toni did not find that she minded.

Besides, it meant Steve would be based out of her tower, and she found it hard to find fault in that.

Steve entered her lab as she stared at the screen. Despite JARVIS’ high computing powers, HYDRA had a lot of files under several layers of encryption and protection to stop the outside world from finding out anything they didn’t want them to know.

She’d been combing through the files for a few days already, trying to find out anything related to her parents’ murder. But it seemed like no matter how many resources she applied to the search, she really had no choice but to just wait and see what happened, whether she liked it or not.

“Toni,” Steve said, as he brought her a sandwich, “You need to take a break. JARVIS promised to alert you the minute he found anything out, regardless of the time or day. You’re going to drive yourself insane just staring at the screen, hoping to find out what happened.”

“I need to know,” she said softly, “I need to know what they did to my parents. My mind is just filled with all the different scenarios of what could have happened. What if they cut the breaks and my dad couldn’t stop in time? Or added drugs to my father’s system? Maybe my mother wasn’t even supposed to be there and it was just bad timing. I have no idea what happened, and I can’t go on like this, Steve. I need to know what they did. Too much of my life has been a lie, and I cannot continue on like this, not knowing the truth. I need to know the truth.”

He walked over to her, gathering her up in his arms and holding her tightly, “We’ll find out what happened,” he promised her, “And we’ll make them pay. They took your family. And they did something to Peggy. They turned Bucky into a shell of a man. So whatever it was that they did, we’ll find out and make sure the world knows the truth. They won’t get away with any of this. I promise you, Toni.”

“I love you,” she told him softly, and he froze. She pulled away slightly, knowing that perhaps it wasn’t the best time to tell him those words for the first time, but she couldn’t keep it to herself any more. “I love you, Steve Rogers. And you don’t need to say the words back to me, not if you don’t feel the same way yet. But I need you to know how I feel about you. I need you to know that I love you. You’re amazing, and so kind. You’re so good. But more importantly, I love how I feel when I’m with you. Like the two of us could handle whatever the world throw at us. You mean so much to me, Steve, and I love you.”

He stroked her face tenderly with his index finger, as one arm remained around her waist.

“I love you too, Toni. I want you to know that,” he said gently. “I told you this before, but I thought my world was ending when Fury told me I’d woken up in the future. I knew nothing of this no world and no one in it. But you gave me a home. You gave me a family. You gave me so much, selflessly. And I know we started off on a bad foot. I take full blame for that. I was unable to see
behind all the masks and media personality. But you, Toni Stark, are so much more than all of that. You’re a brilliant woman, and you handle everything that life throws at you so well, without even a hint of a struggle. Don’t think for even a moment that I don’t feel the same way about you, because I do. I love you so much.”

She leaned in and captured his lips in a tender kiss as she wrapped her arms around his neck. He held her carefully, and when they broke apart, he kept her in close.

“No matter what happens, we’ll face it together,” he promised her. “Whatever HYDRA did, they won’t be able to keep the truth hidden for long. We’ll find out what happened, and we’ll bring them to justice. Together, as a team, and as a family.”

“Together,” she echoed, and allowed Steve to lead her out of the room. Because he was right; she was driving herself insane staring at the screen for hours in end, trying to figure out just what had happened with HYDRA, and trying to figure out what it was that they’d been keeping from her. She needed to know the truth. But she also needed a break. He was right about that much.

She really shouldn’t have been surprised when a few days later Coulson was standing in her common room, with a young lady by his side. He must have known that she’d been alone that day, what with Steve trying to trace down a lead about Bucky with Wilson, and Natasha and Harry off tracking some HYDRA agents.

Ava and Bruce were off at a genetics conference and really, while she had wanted to go with them, she’d chosen not to due to having other standing obligations with trying to help SHIELD get rerunning as smoothly as possible.

Hello Director,” she said smoothly, “Can I offer you anything to drink? I must say, I’m a little offended by how easily SHIELD seems to break into my home time and time again. What with me providing tech oversight and advisement for your agency.”

“Give yourself a break,” Coulson rolled his eyes, “We both know that this time I didn’t break in. Maria let me in.”

“Wow that’s much better,” she said a bit sarcastically. “I guess that’s what I should expect now, that I’ve taken SHIELD into my home and basically given them the key. Unexpected visits at all time of the day.”

“No need to be so dramatic,” Coulson grinned, “We both know if you didn’t want me to get in here, I wouldn’t have been able to have gotten in.”

“True,” she shrugged, “So what can I do for the two of you. I take it this isn’t just a social call.”

“When you said we were going to Stark Towers I didn’t think we were going to meet the actual Toni Stark,” the woman said then, a bit awestruck. “Miss Stark, I’m a huge fan of your work. It’s actually because of you that I first started hacking and getting into tech.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you too, Skye,” she said, knowing exactly who she’d been meeting with

“You know who I am?” she breathed, a bit surprised, and Toni gave her a kind look.

“I make it my business to know things like who Phil Coulson had run off and started a new team with,” she said with a simple shrug, “Figured it would come in handy one day. I guess I was right.
So what is it that I can do for you."

“I have a name for you to look into,” he said firmly, “About how I was brought back to life. 
GH.325. It’s a drug meant to heal people, and I believe it was used on me. I know it was synthesized 
using Kree corpses. But I don’t know what was done to me. I need to know the truth, Stark. If I’m 
going to lead SHIELD I need to know why I didn’t die when Loki stabbed me.”

“We mourned you,” she told him softly, “I know you and I never actually had a good relationship, 
but I did mourn you. Your loss shook us to our core, and as much as I hate Fury for using it to bring 
us together, it gave us something to fight for. We fought for you. For human kind, and for a chance 
to save innocent lives. Hearing Fury say that you were down, it shook all of us. I just want you to 
know that.”

“I do,” he said with a nod. “I wish my resurrection didn’t have to remain a secret until now.”

“I’ll see what I can find,” she nodded to him gently, “I already have JARVIS querying the 
SHIELDRA database to find out some other things which we’ve learned HYDRA had a hand in. 
But I’ll put a few processors on searching for anything related to Project TAHITI and see what we 
can dig up.”

“Thank you,” he said, his voice a bit thick with emotion.

She smiled at him as she looked over at Skye, wanting to change the subject to not make him feel 
uncomfortable, “I hear congratulations are in order for becoming a SHIELD agent. From what I’ve 
heard, it’s a bit of a grueling process.”

“If there even is a SHIELD anymore,” Skye said, sounding a bit upset by the notion.”

She gave her a look, “You’re currently standing in the new SHIELD headquarters. Did you not brief 
your agent before you brought her here?”

Coulson looked a bit sheepish, “I was getting around to it. Our team suffered a personal betrayal 
when HYDRA fell, and one of our members was injured.”

“I’m sorry,” she told them softly, “I was there when it happened, and if there was any way we could 
have done it different, so no one would have gotten hurt we would have. Perhaps your teammate can 
swing by the tower? I can ask Helen Cho to take a look at them and see if there’s anything she can 
do to help.”

“I’ll ask him if he’s interested in it,” Coulson said with a nod.

“Miss, I found something in my search of Project TAHITI,” JARVIS said then, “There was a single 
video file on the subject, and I believe it is relevant based on the search parameters.”

The report appeared on the screen and she saw the words **Classified Level 10 Communication: 
T.A.H.I.T.I Project Supervisor to Director Fury, Final Report.**

“If you’d like I can step out,” Toni offered, “If you’d like to view it in private.”

“No,” Coulson shook his head, “Stay. I asked you to find out the truth and you deserve to know 
what happened.”

“Play the video,” Toni said with a nod.

Coulson let out a breath as his face appeared on the screen.
“Good morning, Director Fury,” The onscreen Coulson said, “I regret to inform you that I’m handing in my resignation. I know you brought me into Project TAHITI because you trusted my judgement. And it’s that judgement that’s telling me that I can no longer, in good conscious, let the testing continue. I understand that you started the project to save a mortally injured Avenger. But the side effects are too extreme. We had initial success with the regenerative cells of the guest host tissue. But after initial physical recovery, the subjects began to deteriorate mentally, displaying hypergraphia, dysplasia, aphasia, catatonia, or complete psychosis. We don’t know if it’s the biology in play, or the awareness of what was done. But the only course of action that showed any promise of stemming the side effects was memory erasing. Erasing the memories of what they’d been through, but even those results were varying. To be clear, I’m recommending the termination of Project TAHITI. Under no circumstances should this project or drugs be given to anyone, ever. The cost is far too great. Thank you, Sir.”

What had Fury done?

She started at the screen, in slight horror, and she knew Coulson was rattled by the information he’d just received.

“I need to go,” Coulson said, turning to leave.

“Coulson,” she called out to him. “I know I have no idea what it is that you’re going through. I couldn’t even begin to understand. But if you ever need anything, a place to stay, a friend to talk to, anything, just know that you have a place here.”

“Thank you,” he said grimly, and he quickly left the room with Skye tailing after him.

Going to visit Uncle Daniel in D.C. after finding out that HYDRA had done something to Aunt Peggy was rough. She had no idea what they’d done, but she knew he wouldn’t be happy.

And then there was the fact that Aunt Peggy must have known something about her parent’s death. Regardless of how it was that they were murdered, it would have been hard for HYDRA to have covered it up without her aunt being suspicious.

She’d gone with Ava and Harry, knowing that it was their family more than hers, and whatever had happened, they deserved to know the truth as well. Steve had come with her for moral support, and for that she was grateful. She didn’t know how to start this conversation and wasn’t sure she wanted to have it either.

“What brings you all to my neck of the woods?” Uncle Daniel asked, looking at his children, Steve and Natasha Romanoff, who’d come for a reason unknown to her. “I doubt this is a social call.”

He gestured for them to all come into the apartment she’d set her uncle up with when he decided to move to where his wife’s nursing home was, and they sat down in his living room.

“You heard about the HYDRA infestation, right?” Harry asked his father.

“I did,” he grimaced, “Horrible stuff really. Your mother was furious when she’d heard the news. Half of her wanted to march straight into SHIELD Headquarters and ask what they thought they were doing, invading the organization she and Howard had started and built up.”

“That’s why we’re here, Dad,” Ava said softly, “Toni found something out.”
“They killed my parents,” she said, and Steve took her hand in his. “Howard must have been getting close to finding out that HYDRA had infested SHIELD and they killed him and Mom for it.”

“Toni,” Uncle Daniel’s eyes softened, “I’m so sorry. How are you holding up?”

“I’m furious at them,” she said softly, “They took my parents from me. All this time I thought it was an accident. And I had no idea that it didn’t need to happen. That they didn’t need to have died. But someone took them from me, and I need to know what happened.”

“I still have some contacts from my SHIELD days,” Uncle Daniel said firmly, “We’ll get to the bottom of what happened.”

“There’s something else, Dad,” Harry said. “There’s no way Mom wouldn’t have suspected something happened to Uncle Howard. Not if she had an inclination that something was wrong. You and I both know that much. And Pierce all but implied they were responsible for her being forced out of SHIELD. Even though we both know she stepped down because her Alzheimer’s was progressing.”

He closed his eyes then, and Toni felt a sense of worry fill her as she wondered if he knew something the rest of them didn’t.

“It first started around the time your parents passed away,” Daniel said after a moment. “She started forgetting small things, and I didn’t think much of it at first. Like where she put the keys, buying eggs when we’d just got some the day before, and so on. But we had a conversation a few months after they died, where she forgot your parents had an accident. She thought they were still on vacation. I had to remind her that something horrible had happened.”

She stilled at that.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Toni said softly, “She would have known that something happened. She identified the bodies and filed the final report. If something had been amiss, she would have known.

“At first I thought it was stress, but it became clear that something was wrong with Peg. We didn’t want to worry you kids at first, not until we knew more about what was happening,” Daniel said. “If Peggy knew something more about what happened to your parents, then there is a chance she never did anything about it because of her disease.”

“It’s too convenient,” Ava said suddenly.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked her, narrowing his eyes.

“Mom suddenly starts to get sick right after Uncle Howard and Aunt Maria pass away?” Ava asked him, “Tell me it doesn’t sound suspicious to you. She began to lose her memory right after the accident. She knew what happened and they took care of her.”

“We don’t have any proof of that,” Natasha cut in.

“JARVIS?” she asked raising her phone up, “Narrow search parameters on the Aunt Peggy search to include anything involving memory modification or erasing.”

She turned to the room, “If they did something to Aunt Peggy we’ll find out the truth.”

Harry stood then, and Ava called out to him, trying to stop him from leaving.

“Where are you going? You can’t just leave! We don’t even know what happened!” she said
quickly.

“What’s there to know?” he demanded. “Who cares how they did it? They did something to Mom! They hurt her, and I can’t just sit here waiting to find out what happened, when they hurt her! I need some air.”

He furiously left the room, and Natasha nodded at her, as she chased after him.

“I want to know,” Daniel told her, a steel-edged tone to his voice. “If someone hurt Peggy, I need to know, Toni. Promise me you won’t keep whatever you find from me. Because I need to know the truth. If someone hurt my wife. If someone stole her health and robbed us of her for all these years then I want to know. And I’m going to make them pay for that.”

She shivered at his tone. Uncle Daniel had always been the calmer one in the family. Growing up, whenever her aunt or cousins would get worked up over something, he’d be the one to reign them back in, even if he was upset as well. He’d be the rational one. The one who would do anything to protect his family, but who would do so without violence.

“I will,” she promised him. “They’re not going to get away with any of this, I promise.”

“Good,” Daniel said firmly.

“We’re going to find out what happened,” Steve said, speaking up for the first time since arriving, wanting to give them space. “I promise you, Daniel.”

She was a Stark.

She was made of Iron.

She would not break.

Nor would she bend.

Even if her entire world had shattered with all of the new revelations the revealing of HYDRA had uncovered.

HYDRA had taken so much from them, even if she had no idea how yet. And she refused to let them take anything or anyone else.
Toni had known something was wrong the minute she picked up the phone and heard a sob on the
other end.

“Peter?” she asked him carefully, unsure of what had happened, “Peter, what’s wrong?”

“It’s Aunt May,” he said tearfully over the phone, “She collapsed and now we’re in the hospital and
no one will tell me what’s going on, Toni. I have no idea if she’s even going to be okay.”

It had been a few days since she’d gotten back from Washington after visiting her uncle. She’d
gotten JARVIS to increase the search parameters on the HYDRA files to pull up anything she could
find pertaining to her Aunt Peggy in addition to her father and mother’s murders, and she just hoped
he would find something soon. The stress of waiting was killing her softly, and she needed answers.

She was ashamed to say it had been a few weeks since she’d checked in with Peter, given everything
that had happened with HYDRA. She’d asked JARVIS and Ava to make sure that Peter wasn’t on
their radar given her mentorship of him, but when it hadn’t yielded any results, she’d put any
thoughts aside concerning him until things had calmed down slightly.

And now she’d found herself getting Happy to drive her to the hospital, knowing that while flying
may have been the quickest way to get there, it would raise more questions than she’d felt like
answering in her current state.

It was why less than an hour later she’d found herself in a hospital in Queens, walking towards the
waiting room, where she saw her mentee pacing back and forth agitatedly.

“Peter,” she said softly as she approached him, and his head snapped up so fast she was worried he’d
hurt himself.

“I’m sorry,” he said tearfully, “I didn’t know who else to call. I know you’re busy being Iron
Woman and running Stark Industries, but I was scared. They’ve been running tests on her for hours
and Uncle Ben is with her, but none of the nurses will tell me anything about what’s happening. I
don’t know what to do.”

“Hey,” she told him firmly, “You don’t need to apologise for calling me. You’re important to me,
Peter.”

He wrapped his arms around her quickly, and despite being caught off guard she held him tightly,
rubbing his back as she tried to soothe the young boy.

“I can’t promise you it’s going to be okay, Peter,” she told him gently, “But I can promise that you
won’t be alone for any of this.”

“I can’t lose her,” he sobbed softly, “She just fell, in the middle of trying to make dinner. Uncle Ben
was teasing her about something, and she was joking back, but she spun around too quickly, and it
all happened so fast. Before we knew what had happened, she was passed out on the ground. She was so pale. I thought, I thought she was going to die. I can't lose her too, Toni. I already lost my parents, and I can't lose her or Uncle Ben. I don't have anyone else.”

“You have me,” she told him firmly, “I know I’m not always the greatest at expressing my emotions or my feelings, but Peter, you’ve become like family to me over the last few years. The last thing I’d ever let happen is for anything to happen to you or your family. I promise, if there’s anything that I could ever do to help, I’ll do it, okay? You won’t have to go through any of this alone. I know how scared you must be, but you have me, and you have Ava and Harry, you have Rhodey and Steve. None of us would ever let anything happen to you, okay?”

“Okay,” he said, trying to calm his breathing, and she kept rubbing his back.

“I’m going to go speak to a nurse,” she told him after he finally pulled away from her. “See if I can get some information for you, okay? Let’s see if there’s anything they can tell us about what’s happening.”

“I want to know,” Peter said in a small voice, “Even if she’s dying, I want to know. I don’t want to be left in the dark because I’m a child. I deserve to know the truth.”

“I know, Darling,” she said to him, “And I would never dream of keeping it from you, okay? Let me just go see if I can find out anything.”

He nodded, before slumping down into one of the chairs as she walked up to the nurses’ station. If they were surprised to see her there, they didn’t say anything about it.

“Hi, I would like to inquire about one of your patients,” she said in a polite tone.

“Are you a family member?” the nurse asked, looking up at her curiously.

“I’m not,” she shook her head, “But see that boy over there? He’s the patient’s nephew. And he’s been out here for a few hours and hasn’t heard a thing. Surely you can understand how difficult this must be for him. Even if you can’t tell him any specific details yet, would you at least be able to provide him some information of what kind of tests is being done for his aunt? He has an inquisitive mind, and it might help him feel at ease if he at least knows what’s happening and what the tests are for.”

The nurse hesitated slightly, but one look at Peter was enough to change her mind. So she nodded and stood up as she followed Toni back to where Peter was as she began to explain the different tests that May was going through, with everything from a blood test to MRI and CT scans to see if they could figure out what had happened to his Aunt.

Peter looked agitated but as the nurses began explaining some of the procedures to him and what the tests meant, she could see him beginning to calm slightly, the knowledge giving him some sort of reprieve as he no longer felt left in the dark.

“Thank you,” she told the nurse softly, one she’d finished, as she walked her back to the nurses’ station. “I know you are all busy people, and it means a lot that you took some time to explain things to him. He’s a smart boy, and not knowing what’s happening was killing him.”

“He’s lucky to have someone like you in his corner,” The nurse told her. “But you don’t need to worry about May. She’s one of the kindest nurses around here and everyone loves her. She’s in good hands.”
“Good,” Toni nodded, “This is going to be a trying time for her family, and I don’t want them to have to worry about any of this, financially speaking. Send her hospital bill to Stark Industries, we’ll cover it. Get her a private ward, the best doctors, anything she needs.”

“We’ll have to clear it with the family,” The nurse warned her.

“I know,” Toni said softly, “I’ll talk to them. Just make sure she gets the best. She deserves that much.”

“Of course, Ms Stark,” The nurse said, leaving her to get back to Peter.

It was a few hours later before Ben came back into the waiting room. Peter had fallen asleep on her shoulder, and she’d been careful not to wake him as she had spent the time researching possible reasons why May would have been in the hospital and what it would have meant.

“Thank you for coming,” Ben said tiredly, when he saw her. “I didn’t want Peter to be alone here, but I didn’t want him to see May going through all those tests. It terrified me, and I wanted to protect him from that. I know you must have been busy. But I was hoping that you’d be able to send Ava or someone else if you were.”

“I’m never too busy for Peter,” she said simply. “Or any of you.”

“It’s a brain aneurysm,” Ben said, slumping down in the chair across from her and her heart sank, knowing it was one of the possibilities. “They don’t think they can operate safely at this time, but they’re going to put her on some calcium channel blockers to reduce the growth of the aneurysm so they can hopefully operate at a later time.”

“I’m sorry,” she said tightly, “What are you going to tell Peter?”

“I have no idea,” he said, exhaustedly. “He needs to know the truth. If something happens to her, he’ll want to be able to say his goodbyes. But he’s so young, Toni. How can I tell him that there’s a chance she may not make it?”

His voice broke at the end of his statement and she squeezed his hand.

“You need to prepare him for all possibilities,” she told him gently. “I lost someone I cared about when I was younger, and I visited him in the hospital. I was there when he passed. And it broke me to see him that way. But it would have devastated me even more if I wasn’t there. If I had found out about it later, and thought he was fine all along. Peter is so smart, Ben. He knows something is wrong already. And no matter how badly you want to shield him from the truth, he deserves to know.”

“I can’t lose her,” Ben choked out, “I already lost my brother and his wife. I can’t lose my wife. She’s everything to me. What if something happens to her?”

“Let me help,” she told him gently, “I have access to some of the best surgeons and doctors in the world. And I found a doctor who could help. A Dr Strange who is one of the best neurosurgeons in the world. He’s located at Metro-General. I can book a consultation with him for her. If anyone can help her, it would be him.”

“We might not be able to afford his fees,” he shook his head, “I’m already don’t know how we’re going to pay for any of this. A cop and a nurse might make enough to raise a family but not to pay the bill payments for something like that.”

“Let me take care of it,” she said, and Ben immediately began to protest. “I know it’s not easy to
accept money for things like this, but something like this won’t hurt me financially, Ben. I can pay for her and still have money to spend for days. But losing May would hurt Peter. And it would hurt you. It would hurt me. You’ve all become like family to me over the last few years, and if there’s anything I can do to help, I want to do it. Please, let me take care of this.”

“I don’t even know how we’d begin to repay you if we did accept it,” Ben shook his head.

“You don’t need to repay me,” she said gently, “That’s what family does for one another, Ben. We help each other out. this is my way of helping you.”

“Okay,” Ben said after a moment. “But only because I can’t lose her.”

“Of course,” she told him gently, “I wouldn’t assume you were doing it for any other reasons.”

“He trusts you,” Ben said, gesturing to his nephew sleeping peacefully on her still. “I didn’t think when you first showed up at our door all those years ago that you would take him in as you did. But you’ve treated him with nothing but kindness and respect. And I’m so grateful for everything you’ve done for our family.”

She swallowed, “He’s important to me. You all are.”

“It’s just made me think about how fragile all of us are,” Ben said after a moment. “I’m a cop so I always knew there’s a chance when I go to work, I won’t come home. But I always thought May would be there for him. I never thought that there could be a chance that she’d be the one who’d be at risk. If something happens to both of us, I don’t even know what would happen to Peter.”

“Nothing,” she said firmly, “I’d make sure he was taken care of. And if I wasn’t allowed to take care of him, I’d make sure someone who I trusted was given custody. He’d be taken care of. But either way, you can’t think that way, Ben. He needs you. He needs both of you.”

He didn’t say anything, looking pensive instead, and she let him have a few moments to himself, as she simply held Peter tightly, letting the boy get some sleep for a few hours before his world changed forever when he learned the news of his Aunt’s illness.

Steve paced back and forth as he looked down at his phone, wondering if Toni would send him any more updates on May Parker’s condition. She’d left in the middle of the night, asking JARVIS to let him know when he’d gotten up that she’d left the tower.

She hadn’t come to bed that night, but that wasn’t most different than most nights these days. Ever since she’d found out about HYDRA, she’d thrown herself at the problem, trying to find out what had happened to her parents.

That wasn’t to say he didn’t have his own suspicions what had happened. Howard and Peggy had gotten too close to finding out the truth, and they’d been taken care of. And while he had no idea what had happened to Peggy, he had a bad feeling of what had happened to Howard.

He hadn’t said anything to Toni, not yet. Not until he knew the truth of what happened. Because all he had were theories and those were no good to her. She needed facts. She needed the truth of what had happened to her parents. To her mother whom he knew she had loved more than anything.

And all he had was a horrible feeling.
He couldn’t tell that to her, not until he knew more. It had been one of the reasons he’d been so desperate to try and find Bucky. Because he owed it to his friend who he’d let down to find out the truth and save him. Because if he’d just been able to have caught Bucky then maybe none of this would have happened. Maybe he would have lived a normal life. Found a wife and had kids. Maybe Toni would still have her mother. Maybe she never would have been kidnapped in Afghanistan. Maybe everything would have been so much different. Maybe even better.

His heart clenched and the selfish part of him was glad it didn’t work out that way. Because as horrible as everything they’d gone through was, his best friend, his brother, was still alive. And he had an amazing girlfriend, who he didn’t know what he’d do without.

As horrible as it all was, he didn’t know what he’d have done without either of them in his life.

“Toni’s rubbing off on you,” Rhodes said as he walked into the common kitchen to grab a snack. “She gets that same expression when she’s thinking about something but doesn’t quite know what to do.”

“I don’t know how to help her,” he sighed, frustratedly. “Her parents and godmother were targeted by HYDRA and one way or another, they took her family from her. And there’s nothing I can do to help. Ava and Toni are busy scanning the databases, trying to crack the files. And I’ve gone on a few missions, but I’m no closer to finding out the truth of what happened to them. I feel so useless. I need to be able to do something. I have to help. But instead, I’m just sitting here waiting for them to find out anything.”

“I know how you feel,” Rhodes said, as he sat across from him at the table. “I was there when Toni was taken. I tried to convince her to ride with me, but she wanted to bond with the soldiers she’d been meeting with. She knew I had some stuff to discuss with the Generals about whether they were going to buy her bombs or not. The same ones that had gotten her kidnapped. And I know that realistically there’s nothing I could have done. But I couldn’t help but think that if I had just been there, I could have stopped all of it from happening. I searched for her the entire time, and there was a point where the Military threatened to strip me of my titles if I didn’t stop. And I just told them that if they didn’t let me look for her, I’d resign. And if they really thought they would have any contracts left with Stark Industries after letting her die, they were solely mistaken.”

He let out an angry sigh, and Steve knew that despite it being years since Toni was taken, he was still rattled by it.

“It’s the worst feeling in the world, feeling powerless and unable to do something to help when your loved ones are going through something painful,” Rhodey told him. “If I could go back and have protected Toni from all of it, I would have. I never liked Stane, and after the truth got out, I couldn’t help but think what if. What if I said something? What if I made it clear I didn’t trust him? What if I listened to my instinct and just looked for the truth? Because there was an abundance of it when we got down to checking. But none of us ever did. We always trusted. And that’s something that will weigh on me for the rest of my life.”

He let those words mull over, and he looked at the man in respect. He knew Toni loved the man as family, and that he’d been there for her for decades. She told him stories of their time together at MIT, and how his family considered her their own. But hearing Rhodes talk about his feelings as such, it was very evident that he loved her, just as Steve loved Bucky. And that there was nothing he wouldn’t do for her.

“Sirs,” JARVIS called out then, and he wondered if Toni had sent any updates on Peter’s Aunt’s condition.
“Yes, J?” Rhodes asked, and Steve looked at one of the hidden cameras where Toni had once explained to him was.

“I found something,” he said simply, “And I think it is better I show the two of you first before I show it to Ms Stark. The contents are rather…graphic. And I think it would be wise for the two of you to be present when she watches the video.”

“Video?” Steve asked, narrowing his eyes carefully as a sinking feeling filled his gut.

“I found a video of the accident,” JARVIS answered, and Rhodes let out a breath. “It was heavily encrypted, and I’ve already pulled it off the internet so no one else will stumble upon it. It took several hours to crack the file itself, but I viewed the contents, and it is my belief that she should not be alone while viewing the clip, given the contents.”

“Please play the clip, J,” Rhodes said, as they moved over to the living room, and it began playing on the television.

He watched in horror, as he saw the car the Starks were in driving down the road, as a man on a motorcycle came up from behind and punched a hole in the window. The car swerved then, hitting a tree.

And the rest of it, the rest of it was completely indescribable. The brutal violence as Howard Stark was murdered, and his wife Maria followed.

The thing that haunted him the most was that Howard recognized the man with the metal arm before his death. And that Bucky seemed not to recognize him back.

“Oh God,” Steve said in horror as the clip finished playing. “Howard, Maria. I can’t.”

“That’s your friend?” Rhodes turned to him, a calm in his tone, despite Steve hearing the anger bubbling underneath the surface. “Did you know it was him?”

“I had a terrible feeling,” Steve sunk to the ground, “But I wanted to wait until we had more information. I didn’t want to tell Toni until we knew for sure. I didn’t want to hurt her like that.”

“And now?” the man asked him carefully. “Are you going to tell her now?”

“How can I?” he snapped, “You saw that video, Rhodes. Do you really want her to have to watch that? It was horrible. How can I ask her to sit through and watch that video? Knowing what happens on it, and how it’s going to hurt her. I can’t ask that of her. It would destroy her to see that happen to her mother.”

“So what, you’re just going to hide this from her?” Rhodey narrowed his eyes, “Bury it and pretend it didn’t happen? Because JARVIS answers to Toni. He’ll tell her even if you don’t. And even if he didn’t, I sure as hell wouldn’t keep that from her. Not when you’re trying to protect your best friend from your girlfriend.”

“Do you think that little of me?” he asked the man, slightly hurt. “It wasn’t Bucky’s fault. You know that, and I know that. He was brain washed for years, tortured and put on ice. But that man was once my brother and I know he’s still there somewhere. I know you feel the same way and would do anything to help protect Toni if that was her. But it doesn’t change the fact that I love her. Me not wanting her to know has everything to do with the fact that this would destroy her. Not because I don’t trust her. If that was my mother I saw on that screen, it would devastate me. How can you ask me to make her watch this? Knowing what’s on the clip. She shouldn’t have to see this. I’ll tell her what happened, but I can’t make her watch this.”
He closed his eyes, sinking down on the couch, and Rhodes came over to sit next to him. The man didn’t say anything to him for a few minutes, simply letting him come to terms with the video and what it would mean for Toni.

“She’s stronger than all of us,” Rhodes told him gently. “The best of us. You’re right. Watching this is going to break her. But she never stays broken for long. She always puts herself back together, stronger than before. And if you really think we can get her to agree not to watch the clip and tell her the contents, you’re sorely mistaken. She needs all the facts. She’s a woman of science. She’ll need to see the evidence herself. And I know it’s going to hurt her, but it’ll hurt her more if she thinks we don’t trust her enough to let her see it. The most we can do is be there for her when she watches the video and let her know that we’re here for her no matter what. She’s strong enough to get through this, I promise.”

“I never thought we’d find anything like this,” Steve said heavily, “I thought it would be a file or something. Or a mission report. Not the actual video. But I guess HYDRA did their due diligence in making sure Howard never made it to the Pentagon.”

“We’ll tell her together,” Rhody told him firmly. “When she gets back from visiting May in the hospital. We’ll be there for her and make sure she knows that she’s not alone through any of this. That she has us in her life.”


He just prayed that Toni would be okay after seeing the clip.
Toni knew something was wrong the minute she came home and saw Rhodey and Steve looking grimly at her.

“What happened?” she asked heart sinking. She’d already gotten enough bad news about May Parker. She really didn’t need to get anymore.

And even with May, she had no idea what to do. It was the same thing when her Aunt had gotten sick. She’d thrown money at a bunch of research facilities, hoping they’d be able to do something to help, but the progress they made was nowhere near a cure.

With May, there wasn’t much they could do. They were going to put her on medication until they thought they could operate. But there was nothing saying things couldn’t go sideways before thing.

Her heart had broken, seeing Peter receive the news. His face had crumpled up and Ben had pulled him into a tight hug, and she knew both of them had started crying. She’d left before they were allowed to sit with May as they kept her overnight for observation, but she’d had a horrible feeling in her stomach the entire time. If it weren’t for Happy driving, she wasn’t entirely sure she would have made it home in one piece.

“What happened?” she repeated, when neither of them quite responded to her. “Please don’t tell me it’s more bad news.”

“Do you want to tell her?” Rhodey asked Steve, almost challengingly, and she wondered if she should step in. While Rhodey had certainly been protective of her as she got into a new relationship, he’d never outright stopped her from dating him, or claimed she should stay away from him.

“I’ll tell her,” he said, heavily. “Toni, take a seat, please.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked again, as no one seemed to be answering her questions. But she followed his instructions, as she carefully took a seat next to him as he took his hands in hers.

“JARVIS found something,” Steve said softly, “While you were in the hospital with Peter. And he showed it to Rhodes and I. It’s about your parents.”

“Did he find out what happened?” she asked, sitting straightly, “J, I told you to let me know as soon as you knew. Why didn’t you say anything sooner? What does the file contain? Do you know what happened to them?”

“It’s a video,” Steve cut in, not allowing her AI to answer her.

“I believed the contents would be better suited if you watched it with people whom you cared about
around,” JARVIS answered afterwards, “The nature of the video is rather distressing, Miss, and I didn’t want you to watch it on your own. I’m sorry if I disobeyed your order, however it went against my primary directive of keeping you safe.”

Her heart sunk.

What was on this video that they thought she’d be a danger to herself.

“I need to see it,” she whispered.

“Toni,” Steve said again. “It’s graphic. It contains your parent’s actual murder. You don’t need to see it. It’ll only hurt you if you watch it. Please, I promise I’ll tell you everything on it, and Rhodes will verify if I’m telling you the truth or not. But please, don’t watch it. You don’t need to see that happen to your parents.”

His voice sounding pleading, and while she knew he was only trying to look out for her, it didn’t change anything. Not really.

“I want to watch it,” she said firmly, “I don’t care if it kills me to watch it. I need to know what happened to my parents. You can’t ask me to know that such a tape exists but not know what it contains. I’ll spend the rest of my life wondering what was on it. And I’ll imagine all the worst possible cases. Which is even worse than just watching the actual clip. Steve. I need to do this.”

He looked down and she took his hand back in hers.

She looked over at Rhodey, who had been silent throughout the entire exchange.

“Do you think I shouldn’t watch it?” she asked, needing to know his stance on the matter.

“I think it’ll kill you not to,” Rhodey said finally. “I see where he’s coming from, because Toni, it’s brutal. And I don’t want you to have to see it. But I know you. I’ve known you for decades. I know what it’ll do to you if you don’t know what happened. So I’m not going to tell you what to do, one way or another. I’m going to let you make the decision on that matter. But I do want you to know that I’m here for you. I’ll be with you while you watch it, and I’ll be here for you after you do. You won’t have to deal with any of this on your own, I promise you that much. We’ll be with you every step of the way.”

She looked back at Steve, squeezing his hand, “I can’t promise you I’ll be fine,” she told him gently, “But I need to watch this, Steve. Please understand. And no matter what it contains, I will always love you for looking out for me. Just know that. This isn’t going to change anything between us.”

“You haven’t seen it,” he said, hoarsely. “I won’t stop you if you want to watch it, Toni. I have no intention of keeping the contents a lie from you. But that doesn’t stop me from wanting to protect you. I just-I don’t want to see you get hurt. You know that right?”

“I know, Darling,” she said to him. “Of course I know. You would never hurt me intentionally. And I’m grateful to you for trying to protect me. But this is something I need to do. You understand, that right?”

“JARVIS, play the clip,” Rhodey said, as he sat on the other side of her. Steve was still holding her hand tightly as Rhodey placed a hand on her leg.

She took a deep breath as the video started play, and she immediately recognized where it was shot. How could she not when she’d memorized that spot? When she’d gone there so many times after her father had crashed the car and stared at the spot her mother was taken from her. At the place that had
set up a small shrine for her father and all his achievements to the world.

At the place she’d become an orphan.

“I know that road,” she said, a sinking feeling in her chest. Because if it was a clip of the road and HYDRA was involved, it meant their involvement had been far more than simply cutting the breaks on her parents’ car.

They’d been there when her parents had died.

The clip was grainy, but it didn’t take away from her seeing a man on a motorcycle pull up beside her parents’ car. Her breath hitched, and Steve had squeezed her hand tighter as he saw her reaction. She squeezed back, wanting him to know that she was still doing alright, even though she had a good idea of what was to come.

She saw her father stumble out of the car, dragging himself on the ground. He looked disheveled, and she could see why the story had stuck about him being drunk. But it wasn’t from the alcohol.

“He help my wife,” she heard her father say, “Please, help my wife.”

She felt her heart sink.

She’d hated her father for decades. For thinking he’d crashed the car while drunk and took her mother from her. That it was all his fault that she was dead. But there, in the moments before she knew he died, he was thinking about her. Not himself. He was more worried that she was injured. Had been trying to get to her to check on her.

She’d hated him for something that hadn’t even been his fault.

She saw the man with them lift her fathers’ head up, and the realization on her father’s face as he recognized the man.

The one whom she hadn’t been paying all that much attention to until that point. But with him on the screen, staring back at her, it was hard not to.

The man with the metal arm. The man whom Steve was currently chasing down across the world. Who had almost brought down SHIELD and killed her boyfriend.

The man who murdered her parents.

The man who Steve promised to go to the end of the line for.

“Sargent Barnes?” Her father said, looking confused, as he recognized the man from their time together in the war. She wondered if he thought he was delusional; a result of the accident having caused him to be out of it. Or if in that moment he was lucid and knew the truth of what was going to happen to him. What it meant for the man who had fallen into a ravine after HYDRA had experimented on him to have been there then. She wondered if he knew what was going to happen to him before it had.

She looked over at Steve, and his face was white. He’d already seen the clip, already had known what happened to her parents. But what he didn’t know was how she’d react to seeing them like that. How she’d react to finding out the truth.

“Howard,” she heard her mother say, and in that moment her heart broke. She felt a few tears escape her, as she heard her mother’s voice. Something she hadn’t heard for years outside of old videos
from when she was younger. But she never heard her other like that. Sounding so afraid and hurt. Sounding unsure of what was going to happen next.

She wanted to get up and shut it off. She couldn’t watch anymore. Couldn’t see the scene that was about to play out in front of her. Not when she knew the result. Not when she knew what would happen. But her eyes remained glued to the screen. She owed it to her parents to know the truth. They deserved that much.

Her father might have been an abusive alcoholic.

But he hadn’t been the reason her mother was dead.

And despite the hatred she still felt for him, she owed it to her mother to know the truth of her death.

She saw Barnes slam his metal fist into Howard’s face, with the strength of a super soldier. And she saw him slam it in again.

She shuddered, as she saw his eyes close, knowing that in that moment he’d passed. That it wasn’t the result of the accident at all.

Her mother cried out for her father once more, as Barnes dropped her father’s lifeless body onto the ground.

The man who shaped the last millennia. Dead on the ground like he wasn’t worth a dime.

Barnes dragged his body back, placing it in the driver’s seat. And she knew from the position he’d placed her father in, that had been the way he’d been found.

She knew, because she had studied those photos so many times. Photos of the crime scene, wanting to know what had happened to her parents. Needing to know how her mother had died. And she’d seen the shot of him, with his head on the wheel, so many times it hurt. Especially now when she knew the truth. That he’d been placed like that for the world to find. And led to believe his death hadn’t been a murder.

She could see her mother’s terrified face on the screen. Her mother who had always been so put together for the world to see, and she let out a sob as she saw Barnes round the car. Why wasn’t it enough for them that her father was dead? Why did they have to take her mother from her too?

It should have been enough.

If only her father hadn’t dragged her mother to the Pentagon with him. Then maybe she’d still be in Toni’s life.

Instead, they were both dead and gone. And she was left alone.

Her face crumpled as she saw the Winter Soldier make his way around the car to where her mother had been sitting, knowing what would come next.

She sobbed as Barnes’ hand made it’s way to her mother’s throat, and Steve grasped her hand tighter. She saw the expressionless look on his face as he took her mother’s life. Like he didn’t even care. Like it meant nothing to him that he just took the life of the only biological parent who’d ever loved her.

She had always been a failure to Howard.
Had always let him down from the moment she’d been born in this man’s world.

She’d been a disappointment, and no matter what she’d done, she was never able to prove she was worth it to him. Had never been good enough. No matter what she invented.

Hell, he’d beaten her for making a circuit board that was compact. Something which he’d failed to do for months. And he’d beaten her for being better than him.

She had known long ago that she was never going to win his approval. That she was always going to be a failure to him.

But her mother had loved her. Her mother had always been the one who’d cared, even when her father didn’t. She’d sat with her through every broken bone, through every fight she’d had with her father. She came to all of Toni’s science fairs and to every award she’d ever gotten.

“You will bring the world down to its knees and show them all in time that you do not fall down to their expectations.” Her mother had told her years ago.

And she had. She’d proved the world wrong, time and time again. Even when they told her no. Even when they told her it hadn’t been possible. She’d proved them wrong each time.

Her mother had been the first person to believe that she could be more than just a housewife. That she could achieve her own dreams, even if no one else thought she could. Her mother had loved her for years, and she was just another casualty of HYDRA, simply because she was a witness.

She wished all those years ago she had begged her mother to stay with her. To not get in the car with her father. Faked a cold, or just pleaded that she didn’t leave her. She wished she could have done something differently. Anything differently.

But she hadn’t.

She’d let her mother go with her father, even though it meant she would spend the holidays alone that year. And as a result, for every year afterwards.

She could have stopped it, and she would have, if only she’d known. Because there was nothing she wouldn’t do if there was a chance she could have saved her mother.

But there was nothing she could do. There was no going back and fixing it. Her mother was gone. Had been gone for decades.

But seeing her mother struggle to breathe on the screen brought back the pain she’d felt all those years ago. It felt like it was happening all over again. The pain she’d first felt when Peggy had come to her home and told her what had happened.

She couldn’t stop the tears anymore, and she wasn’t sure she wanted to.

Her mother was dead.

And HYDRA had killed her.

Barnes had killed her.

She saw him face the camera after, like a confirmation to his handlers that the deed was done. The Starks were dead, and any knowledge of HYDRA with them.

If there was any argument that it could have been someone else, it was gone. She saw his face on the
screen. James Buchanan Barnes had stolen her mother from her. Had snapped her neck without a second thought.

Simply because she’d been in the car.

He shot the camera then, and the video ended.

“Toni,” Rhody called her gently, “Talk to us, Sweetheart."

“My mom,” she cried, “Did you see what they did to her? They killed her like it was nothing. Like she meant nothing. She was nothing more than a witness who needed to be killed, and they did it without a second thought. Like no one would miss her if she was gone. They killed my mom.”

“We’re going to find them,” Rhody promised her, as he tried to wrap an arm around her, “We’re going to find every last HYDRA operative and hold them responsible. The world will know the truth of what happened to your parents. They’ll get the justice they deserve.”

She moved away from him, not really wanting his comfort at the moment. Not when the pain she was feeling was so raw. Coursing through her.

She had no idea what to do. But she refused to be placated like a small child.

“Toni,” Steve said gently. “Please, just let us help you. Let us be there for you. You just watched a clip which was horrifying. At least let us know how you’re feeling.”

“What do you want me to say?” she looked at him, “HYDRA murdered my parents. And they used your best friend to do it. You saw Howard’s face. He knew who it was who murdered him. He recognized your best friend in the moments before his death. And he knew the truth. That didn’t stop Barnes from killing him like it was nothing. He barely even flinched when he killed Dad. And he didn’t hesitate to murder Mom.”

“It wasn’t him, Toni,” he said gently, “I'm not saying what happened to your parents wasn’t horrible. It was, and HYDRA is going to pay for what they did. But it wasn’t his fault either.”

“I know that,” she snapped, “I know it wasn’t him who killed them. That HYDRA brainwashed him into doing it. But that doesn’t change the fact that he was the last face they saw. That he was the face I saw murder my parents. I know it wasn’t him logically, but that doesn’t make me feel any better. And you can’t ask me to just accept this given what I just watched.”

“Of course,” he said softly, reaching out for her. But just like with Rhody, she pulled away. What was the point? Nothing they did or said would make her parents any less dead. They couldn’t change what HYDRA had done to them. So why were they even trying to make her feel better.

Her mother had been dead for decades.

And the entire time, instead of doing something to help, she’d blamed her father. She could have brought down the entire organization in that time. But instead she was left in the dark, none the wiser to what had happened. All because her father had come too close to finding out the truth. All because her father was on to them.

She’d lost her mother because of the same villain Steve supposedly defeated in the 40s.

“I need some space,” she said, standing quickly, and Steve tried to do the same.

“You shouldn’t be alone right now,” he tried, “You just learned something horrific. Please, Toni, let
us be there for you. Let us help you.”

“What can you do?” she scoffed, “My parents are dead. My parents have been dead for decades because your brainwashed best friend was sent to kill them. What’s left to do? Nothing you do or say will change anything.”

He flinched but didn’t waver. “You’re hurting right now. I know that, Sweetheart. But it doesn’t change the fact that you shouldn’t be alone. Please, just let us be there for you. Let us help you. You shouldn’t be alone right now.”

She shook her head, “You don’t own me, Steve. I survived just fine for decades without you, and I’ll be fine on my own now. I don’t need you in my life to be able to survive. You can’t control me just because my pain is inconvenient to you.”

He looked hurt at that, and a part of her felt bad for lashing out. but it didn’t stop the fact that she didn’t want them with her right now, and they refused to accept that.

“I never thought that,” he said gently. “But you need us right now, Darling. Please don’t push us away.”

“I don’t need anyone,” she scoffed. But she was done arguing with them. She was done with all of this. All she wanted was to be alone and to process everything she’d just learnt. And they were currently stopping her from doing just that.

Her mother had been murdered.

And she’d seen it in front of her, on the screen, choked to death as the life was squeezed out of her. Like it was nothing. Like she was nothing. Like she wasn’t the only person in Toni’s life who had loved her unconditionally. Like she didn’t matter.

Because she was nothing more than a witness who was in the way.

Who needed to die because her father needed to die.

She wondered blandly if she too would be dead if she’d gone with them on that trip.

What would it have meant for her, if she’d been with them?

She hadn’t been Iron Woman then. And regardless of what training Peggy had given her, she definitely wouldn’t have been able to have taken on the Winter Soldier.

She would have been dead too.

Because her father was onto HYDRA.

She turned and left the room, unable to bear it anymore. She could hear Steve call out for her, but Rhodey stopped him. She felt a small wave of gratitude towards her best friend for knowing her so well. For knowing that she just needed to be alone.

She all but ran to her lab, and closed the door behind her.

“JARVIS, please enable lockdown mode,” she asked her AI. “No one into the lab. And no communication.”

“Done, Miss,” JARVIS said, hesitating slightly.
“What is it, J?” she asked him, not wanting her own pain to hurt her children.

“Was I wrong?” he asked her, unsure, “I didn’t want you have seen that on your own. Was I wrong?”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, “You were right, Darling. I just need to be alone for a bit. I don’t want to see anyone or talk about what I’m feeling. That’s not on you, J.”

“Okay,” JARVIS said, sounding like he didn’t quite believe her.

She felt guilt begin to seep in, but she pushed it aside as DUM-E, U, and Butterfingers rolled over to her, all seeming distressed. She wondered idly if JARVIS had asked them to come over and check in on her.

She remembered how it was when she first got the news of her parent’s death. Before Pepper or Happy were in her life, and while Rhodey was in the military. When Peggy was busy with SHIELD and her cousins off doing their own things.

She’d survived once, on her own, with no one in her life but her bots. Her family she’d built herself.

She’d survive this too.

She knew that much. But it wouldn’t be easy. And she knew she’d eventually have to face Steve and Rhodey. She’d have to apologize for treating them the way she had.

She’d have to face Barnes too. Because she knew Steve, and she loved him. And he’d want to do anything possible to save his best friend. The same best friend that had been brain washed into murdering her parents.

And she knew she would help him bring Barnes home.

But it didn’t make it any easier.

It didn’t help knowing that the man had still killed her parents.

Even if he wasn’t directly responsible.

She would be okay eventually, but for now she would grieve on her own and come to terms with the video she’d just seen.

She just needed some time.

Chapter End Notes

This turned out a lot angstier than I intended it to, but I wanted to properly convey the pain Toni must have felt dredging up all the pain she’d buried. Hopefully you guys liked it, and for all my fellow Canadians, Happy Thanksgiving! See you all next week.
Discovery

Chapter Summary

Toni has some important conversations and learns some truths

She knew she was being unreasonable. But still, she couldn’t bring herself to leave her lab. Not when she’d just seen her mother brutally murdered in front of her.

It was only when Ava and Harry came down to visit, and JARVIS reminded her that after forty-eight hours she was supposed to reset the lockdown protocol after Pepper made her add that particular condition in after she locked herself in the lab for a solid week once without letting anyone in or out.

She scowled at one of her AI’s cameras but sighed anyways, knowing she shouldn’t avoid her cousins.

She shouldn’t avoid Steve either, not when all he’d done was show her the truth.

But she nodded in spite of herself, agreeing to let her cousins into the lab.

Ava barrelled in, throwing her arms around Toni, while Harry held himself back.

“Are you okay?” Ava asked her, holding her tightly, “We saw the video. I’m so sorry Toni. I can’t even imagine what it must have been like to have to see that.”

“Ava!” Harry scolded her. “Be more sensitive.”

Ava pulled away from her, looking shaken, and Toni had to remind herself again how young her cousin truly was. How different of lives they’d lived. Despite knowing her through her entire life.

Her cousin wasn’t as damaged as she was.

“I’m sorry,” Ava said softly. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s not your fault,” she said to her. “It’s not anyone’s fault. Except HYDRA’s. they’re the ones who did this, when it comes down to it. They were the ones who killed my parents, and who did something to your mom.”

“But to have to see that video,” Ava shook her head, “I want to suit up and go after them myself. Give them a piece of my mind. Your mother was always so sweet to me and Harry. It’s horrible knowing that they didn’t die because of an accident. But because they knew too much.”

“You could have been with them,” Harry said after a moment. “I heard a conversation, between your father and Mom. She was trying to convince your dad to take you with you. That it would be a nice way for the two of you to reconnect, what with you going to join the company soon. She thought it would be nice if you went away together. But he was adamant that you wouldn’t want to come. He thought you would be much happier if you got to spend the holidays without him. You could have been in the car, Toni. If he changed his mind and wanted to bring you with him. We could have lost you too.”
Ava gasped loudly, and she closed her eyes.

All this time she’d thought her father hadn’t wanted her. That he’d left her home out of his hate for her and his need to ignore her presence. And that when he crashed the car it was never a question of her having been an option. It never even crossed her mind that she would have died if she’d been with them. Because never in a million years had she considered that her father would have wanted her there.

But all this time, he didn’t invite her for her own sake. Because he thought she needed her own space.

Her father wasn’t a good person.

He’d never been kind to her. He’d hurt her, emotionally, physically, and mentally.

But maybe, in his own twisted way, he’d cared about her too.

She wanted to cry again. Cry for what could have been. If in another life he’d been able to have accepted having a daughter instead of a son. A daughter who was just as brilliant as him, if not more.

Her life would have been so much different.

But that wasn’t the life she lived. She’d wasted so many of her years wondering. What would life have been like if? What if she was a man? What if her father didn’t hate her? What if? What it? What if?

But it didn’t change anything.

Her father and mother were dead.

And she was still here.

“I’m glad,” Ava said finally. “I couldn’t bear it if I lost you, Toni. You’re my older sister, even if we’re not biologically related. I don’t know where I would be if I didn’t have you in my life. I love my family, but it was you who taught me to question life. To seek answers to questions no one is asking. To build. You’re my family too. And as selfish as this is, I’m glad you didn’t get in that car.”

“Me too,” Harry said firmly. “I may not be as expressive with you about my feelings, but I couldn’t imagine my life without you in it, Toni. We may have grown up on stories of Captain America, but I never believed in heroes until you became Iron Woman. You showed the world that anyone is capable of greatness if they have the heart. They don’t need some serum or super powers. They just need the willpower.”

She swallowed.

“I don’t know where I’d be, without you guys,” she said softly, “After Jarvis and Ana passed away, and I lost my mom, you guys were all I had. I don’t know what I would have done without you in my life.”

“You’ll never have to find out,” Harry said resolutely. “We’re always going to be here.”

“I’m going to find out what happened to your mom,” she told them after a minute. “I may have lost my mother to HYDRA, but I won’t let you lose yours. Even if there’s nothing I can do to help her, we’ll at least know the truth. And we’ll get justice for what was done to her.”
“They’ve caused so much pain,” Ava said, blinking back tears. “For what? The power? Things could have been so much different. Mom could have been there for so many more things in our lives. Instead, we lost her. She may still be alive, but we lost her the minute they decided she was a threat.”

She wrapped her arms around her cousin tightly, wishing there was anything she could do to take away the pain but there wasn’t. HYDRA had taken their families from them, and they hadn’t even known, let alone been able to have done anything to stop it.

Harry sighed, “Where are we on finding out what was done to Mom?”

“I have the file in question,” JARVIS said, “I am working on breaking the encryption on the file now.”

“Dedicate all nonessential processors to it, Baby,” she told her AI. “I want to know exactly what HYDRA did to Aunt Peggy as soon as possible. If we’re going to go after them, I want to know what they’ve done to my family.”

“Adding more processing power now, Miss,” JARVIS confirmed.

“You should talk to Steve,” Harry told her gently. “He’s been worried sick this entire time. And while no one faults you for needing some time apart to handle everything, you should let him know that you’re doing okay.”

“I know,” she sighed, “JARVIS end lockdown protocol. I’ll go talk to him.”

“Very well, Miss,” JARVIS said, and she knew he approved of her decision.

Steve was waiting for her when she got out of the elevator on her private floor. She’d given him unrestricted access to it months ago, and she wasn’t all that surprised to see him there.

He didn’t stand from the couch he was sitting on, as to not crowd her, and she slowly made her way over to him.

She’d said some horrible things in the need to get away from it all.

Would he hate her for it?

“I’m sorry,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady as she took a seat beside him. “You were only trying to be there for me, and I lashed out at you. I shouldn’t have said any of those things to you. It wasn’t fair of me when you hadn’t done anything wrong. You’re not responsible for HYDRA murdering my parents. You just were there when I saw the video. And I know it couldn’t have been easy for you, given the ramifications on Barnes.”

He took her hands gently in his.

“Are you okay?” he asked her carefully. “I don’t blame you for any of the things you said. You’d just watched that horrifying video. To expect you to be able to have handled it any differently would be unfair. You’re entitled to grieve any way you need to. So, I don’t fault you for that, Love. But I’m concerned about you. How are you doing?”

“It hurts,” she admitted to him. “This entire time, I’d been blaming my father for driving drunk and murdering my mother. But it wasn’t on him. And I don’t know how to handle that, when I spent the better part of the last two decades hating him for it. Instead, he just was getting too close to knowing the truth. And my mother was nothing more that collateral damage. And I can’t help but wonder what would have happened if she hadn’t been there. Would they have found another way to take her
out? Or would she have been spared?"

She swallowed, “It doesn’t help that it was Barnes on the screen either,” she said, and Steve stiffened slightly. “I know you want to help him, Steve. I looked into the files pertaining to what was done to him, and it’s not pleasant. The man you get back might not be the same as the one you lost. And I can’t make you any promises on my feelings about him.”

He didn’t say anything, and she allowed herself to continue, “I want to help him. He’s another victim of HYDRA. Perhaps one of the worst ones, given the long-lasting nature. But every time I look at him, I’m going to see his hand around my mother’s neck. I need some time to be able to process it all properly. I know it wasn’t him, I know that much. I saw that video, he didn’t even recognize my father. There was no way he was the one in control. But that doesn’t make it any easier knowing that he was the weapon who carried out the hit. I just, I need some time to be able to help you find him.”

“Of course,” Steve promised her gently, “I’d never ask you to do anything which would hurt you further.”

He sighed, “No part of this is easy. I’m furious that all of this is happening. I don’t regret meeting you Toni. It’s probably the best thing that’s happened to me since waking up in this century. But I crashed the plane into the ice hoping it would bring down HYDRA forever. And instead I only allowed them to grow. They took the life of my best friends in different ways, and all that time I was asleep. I couldn’t do anything to help. And now that I’m awake, they keep hurting the people I love. It’s infuriating. I gave my life to defeating them, and I didn’t even make a dent.”

She leaned into him, and he wrapped his arms around her tightly.

“We’re going to bring them down, Darling,” she promised him firmly. “We’ll hit every HYDRA base necessary and bring them down for what they’ve done to us. They won’t be allowed to get away with the things they’ve done to us. We won’t let them. I promise you; they will be brought to their knees.”

“I love you,” he told her. “I want you to know that, Toni. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. Not because of the fact that you gave me a home, or because you gave me a family, or because you’ve helped me find a place in this new world. I love all those things about you. But I love you because you’re you. And there’s nothing I’d do to change that fact. You’re the best thing that’s happened to me, and I don’t know how I got so lucky.”

“I love you too,” she told him softly, “And not just the Captain America side of you who has the serum coursing through his veins. That part of you is insanely hot, and I’ll never get tired of it. But I love Steve Rogers. The man who wanted nothing more than to be able to help people and had a pure heart of gold. The one who always wants to do right by others. I love you, and I want you to know that I’d still love you without the serum.”

“That man was very sick,” Steve said with a rough voice, and she wondered if she’d hit a nerve. “He wouldn’t have been good enough for you. He couldn’t stand his ground in a fight and had a million illnesses.”

“That’s the man I grew up hearing stories about,” she said, “The one who knew right from wrong and who wanted to do what was right. I love every part of you Steve,” she said looking up at him from where she was resting. “The serum might have given you strength and fixed your immune system, but inherently, you are still you. And yes, you have a body that I adore, but it’s you I love. Your kindness, your heart, and how you always try and do what’s right. You’re the one I want to spend my life with. If you lost the serum, I’d still be with you. Because I love you.”
“I love you,” he whispered to her, and she stroked his face gently, knowing that he wanted her in that moment. She nodded at him encouragingly, and she could see him snap as whatever was holding him back disappeared.

He pulled her in for a desperate kiss, and she allowed herself to get lost in it. She’d been in so much pain over the last couple of days and she wanted to feel loved. And Steve made her feel safe. He made her happy.

“I love you,” he said again, over and over, repeating it like it was a prayer, and she peppered kisses against him, wanting him to know how much she felt the same way

HYDRA had taken enough from her. But they wouldn’t take her happiness. Not anymore.

So she combed her hands through his hair as he laid her down on the couch and let herself get lost in the moment.

It had been a long couple of days since Toni had found out the truth about what happened to her parents.

She was processing it, the best way she could. Which sometimes involved binging in her lab and working for hours on end as she attempted to distract herself from what had happened, to just letting Steve hold her as she took comfort in him. Honestly, she had no idea how she was supposed to react to any of this. Because she was so angry still, that it had taken her this long to find out the truth. And she was upset with herself because maybe if she had done something differently, it would have ended on a better note. Maybe her mom would still have been alive.

Steve had shut down that line of thinking quickly, telling her that there’s nothing she could have done to have prevented this. And while it hurt to think about, she knew he was right. There wasn’t much she could have done different. Not at that point in her life.

“Miss,” JARVIS said, interrupting her thoughts, “I believe I found out something in regard to Ms Carter-Sousa.”

She put down her tools that she was using and looked up, “Where are Steve, Harry, and Ava?” she asked, “We all should be here to hear what happened.”

“Mr Rogers and Mr Carter-Sousa are training in the gym,” JARVIS responded, “Miss Carter-Sousa is with Mr Banner in the common room. Should I gather them?”

“Please tell Harry and Steve to join us in the common room,” she said, as she stood. “I’ll join them there.”

“Very well, Ms Stark,” JARVIS responded, and she sighed.

She was glad J had finally cracked the encryption on the files, but she had no idea if she truly was ready to hear whatever it was that was in those files. She knew HYDRA had messed with Aunt Peggy, but whatever they did had lasting effects on her. It had changed her entire relationship with her family. Would they even be able to come back from this?

She sighed as the elevator dinged when she arrived on the floor and saw the others waiting there for her. Steve wrapped an arm around her carefully, and she knew the rest of them were just as anxious about hearing what JARVIS had found as she was.
“What did you find, JARVIS?” Harry asked finally, and she saw him hold onto his sister carefully. Ava was shaking, but she stilled slightly, as her brother held her.

“It seems as though Mr Stark had been working on a sort of memory erasing serum before his death,” JARVIS spoke, “A sort of thing they could give to people to make them forget things they were not meant to see or things SHIELD wished for them to forget. It never got past testing stages as the serum proved to be far too potent, even at the lowest possible dose, and the project was ultimately scrapped. One of the side effects reported at the lower doses was forgetting things such as what had happened over the course of the last year to forgetting things such as important life events. Mr Stark and Ms Carter-Sousa determined that while it could be worth looking how to reduce the effects, ultimately, the consequences were far too dire to continue on with the project.”

She knew what was coming before JARVIS even uttered the words.

“I found a file which reported that Alexander Pierce had personally injected Ms Carter-Sousa with a rather alarming amount of the serum. At the time no long-term testing had been done to determine the consequences. It seems as if Ms Carter-Sousa was aware that Mr and Mrs Stark’s deaths had not been in fact an accident, and that there had been a leak at SHIELD. I believe she had been close to uncovering the truth and that had been why she was injected with the serum. There was a subsequent note on her file that mentioned monitoring her while she was in the care facility however an amendment that was added to show that any knowledge that Ms Carter-Sousa had about HYDRA had long since been removed.”

“Fuck,” Harry swore loudly, and Ava looked upset at that, “Sorry. I just—she knew. She knew that something had happened to Uncle Howard and Aunt Maria. Mom knew. But if she’d told Dad or anyone else, maybe she would have been safe. They wouldn’t have been able to get to her if she’d told someone else.”

“Or Dad could have died,” Ava said, shakenly. “Look what they did to Aunt Maria because she was in the car with Uncle Howard. They could have killed him to make sure he didn’t do anything about it.”

“Hey, stop that,” Toni cut them both off. “Look if there’s one thing I’ve learned over the last week it’s that we can’t allow ourselves to get lost in the ‘what ifs’. It’s not conductive to anything, and all it does is lead to more heartache and suffering. Uncle Daniel is still alive. And we know the truth about what happened to your mother now. We don’t know if we can change anything about it, but there’s nothing we could have done differently to make sure this didn’t happen. We need to remember that this wasn’t our faults. We were young. Ava you were fourteen when all of this happened, and your mother was attacked. Harry you just turned sixteen. What could any of us have done, realistically?”

“She’s right,” Steve told them both. “I know I don’t share the same pain the three of you do. But there was nothing any of you could have done. Not then. All that matters is where we go from here and what this means from here on out.”

“JARVIS do you have anything on the makeup of the serum?” Bruce asked, speaking for the first time since the news had been revealed about Peggy Carter.

“What are you thinking?” Ava asked him, looking over at her boyfriend curiously.

“I’m thinking about how we could reproduce the serum,” Bruce told them. “I doubt SHIELD has any copies of it left. But if there’s anything in the notes as to how Howard Stark made it in the first place, we might be able to replicate the serum so we have a working copy of it.”

“Is that really the best idea?” Steve said, frowning at him. “Look what it did to Peggy. Should we
even attempt to recreate a serum like that, without any knowledge of what it could do? What happens if HYDRA manages to get their hands on it again?”

“Steve, they have the same notes as we do,” Toni said gently, “If they wanted to create the same serum, they probably already have all the resources they need to be able to do so.”

“Besides,” Ava interjected, “It’s not about recreating the serum so we have the ability to erase people’s minds. That’s not what we want to recreate it for.”

“Then why do you even want it?” Steve said, frowning as he didn’t make the same connections that the three of them had made.

“Because if we can make the serum, we may be able to find a way to reverse the process of what it does,” Bruce explained to him, “Kind of like how vaccines are created to give immunity to diseases. If we know what was done to Peggy, we may be able to find out how to undo it, if you will.”

“So you can remove the disease,” Steve said, understanding filling her, “Can you really do that? Will it work?”

“We don’t know,” Ava said, not wanting any of them to get their hopes up before it was too soon. “It depends what the serum did to her. Is it some sort of blocking thing, where it’s preventing her from remembering? Or is it causing damage to her actual brain that she won’t be able to recover from? It depends completely on what this serum has done to her.”

“The worst-case scenario we won’t be able to do anything about it,” Toni said, making sure he understood. “Because as terrible as this is, we might not be able to make a difference. The serum has been in her for over twenty years, and she won’t be the same person even if we found a way to completely remove it from her system.”

“But there is a chance it could be undone,” Harry said softly, “We could have Mom back if it worked. She would be fine again.”

She squeezed Harry’s arm gently, “She could be fine again. We shouldn’t get our hopes too high, because we still need a better understanding of how it worked in the first place. But if Howard worked on something to erase memories and he knew it had such adverse effects; chances are he also has some notes on how to undo it. JARVIS, can you search on all available servers if Howard was working on anything to undo the effects as well?”

“Searching,” JARVIS confirmed, “I have also pulled up notes on how the serum was made and have begun synthesizing it for you in the lab.”

“Thanks Baby,” she smiled at one of his cameras.

“I’m going to go call Dad,” Harry told them, “He needs to know about this.”

“I’m going to head down to the lab,” she told them all. “Bruce, Ava, you have far more chemical engineering knowledge than I do, so if you want to join that would be great.”

“Of course,” Bruce nodded,

Steve kissed her temple softly, and she gave him a hopeful smile before she turned and walked back to the elevator. She had work to do.
She knew what she had to do even before she mentioned it to Steve. There was no reason for her to get his hopes up if she hadn’t even come up with anything that could help.

She’d been avoiding it, she knew that much. It had been a few days since they found out about Aunt Peggy and Ava and Bruce had been down in the lab every moment of each day trying to come up with a way to reverse what had been done to Peggy.

Toni Stark knew she was a genius. There was nothing more she loved to do than to create, to build, or to make. She loved the feeling of holding tools and watching her ideas come to life in front of her. She loved having an idea in her head with no actual method of implementing it, but just going for it to see what would happen. She loved everything about the magic that was engineering.

Chemistry and biology on the other hand were subjects that were not her forte. And while she may still be better than the average person at those subjects, she would in no way describe herself as a genius in it.

So while she was able to help them from time to time, she was in no way going to be the reason they solved the mystery. She offered her labs, JARVIS’ processing power to calculate difference synthetic make ups, and her brains from time to time, but she had faith in the two of them. If there were any scientists capable of undoing what had been done to Aunt Peg, it would be Ava and Bruce.

In the meanwhile, however, she knew she had to do something she really didn’t want to do. Something she had been going back and forth on since seeing the video of her parents dying at the hand of the Winter Soldier.

She knew she would have to help bring him home. Because while Steve and Natasha had started looking already, with Natasha scoping out any leads she could find, it wouldn’t be enough. Even with the combined resources of the new SHIELD, it wouldn’t be enough.

SHIELD had known of the Winter Solider for years. Even with the HYDRA infestation, they had known he existed. Through whispers and ghost stories. But none of them were ever able to get more than a rumour of his even existence. Even with JARVIS cracking the files on what had been done to Barnes, there was still very little to offer on his current mental state and if James Buchanan Barnes was even alive anymore, or if he’d long since been replaced with the Winter Soldier.

One thing was for sure; she knew she had to try no matter what. There was still a man behind the mask. A man who served with Steve, Aunt Peggy, and her father in the war. A good man, who’d fallen to his death in a way that had haunted Steve for years, and who’s legacy deserved to be that of a war hero. Not of an assassin.
He’d killed her parents, but was it even him?

She wanted justice for her mother. She wanted the people responsible to pay for what had been done to her. But James Barnes wasn’t the one she needed to go after. He wasn’t the one who’d hurt her or had killed her mother. He was just the weapon involved.

She knew what she had to do. Knew she needed to help Steve out in trying to find the Winter Soldier and bring him home. To help remove HYDRA’s influence from his brain. Because at the end of the day, he was still the man she’d grown up hearing stories about. He was still the man who’d fought by her boyfriend’s side in the war. Still the man who’d gotten Steve out of trouble more times than he’d probably be able to count. And he deserved better than what was done to him.

If anything, he really was the longest prisoner of war that the United States of America had ever seen.

And he deserved better than what was done to him. Even if he had been the weapon that had killed her mother. He deserved better than what was done to him.

And she hated having to even think about this. Her parents had died decades ago and she wished more than anything, that it could have been that. That they could have been left in the past.

But her father, even with how much he hated her, deserved justice. The truths of their deaths needed to be told to the world. Because even if the official cause of death was ruled an accident, everyone knew it was because Howard had been driving drunk. And that wasn’t the truth. Not by a longshot.

He was guilty of many things. But killing her mother was not one of them.

“Hey JARVIS?” she said, looking over at one of her AI’s cameras.

“Yes Miss?” J asked her curiously.

“I want you to begin a world-wide search,” she said, “Anyone resembling a 95% match to James Barnes, I want you to alert me over. He’s a master spy; he’d have learned how to cover his tracks by now. Scan his pictures from the war and see if you can get any CCTV shots of him from his fight with Steve. Search everywhere you can; he could be hiding in plain sight or even in a country with little surveillance.”

“Are you sure Miss?” JARVIS said, with hesitation in his voice, “Is this really the course of action you wish to pursue.”

“What’s wrong, J?” she asked her bot softly.

“He hurt you,” JARVIS said to her, “Not directly maybe, but he did. And you want to help him. You do not owe him or Mr Rogers anything. Just because he has become your partner does not give him the right to determine how you’re allowed to feel. I do not believe the best course of action is to find Mr Barnes. Not when he and HYDRA have hurt our family so.”

DUM-E came over to her then, and conveyed a similar feeling, and she stroked his arm tenderly.

She forgot, that when it came down to it, they were all just children really. Children who had a black and white look of the world. And they were learning. It was her job, as their mother, to teach them that there were shades of grey in the world. That sometimes things were far more complicated than it appeared.

She smiled softly at one of his sensors, “Baby, I know you just want to protect me. You’ve been
there with me since the beginning. Both of you have. But it’s not that simple. It’s not even fully about me. This man has been torn away from his entire life. Torn away from everything he cares about. Deprived of the chance to live the life that he was meant to live. And he deserves better than that.”

“Okay,” JARVIS said after a moment. “But if he hurts you in anyway, then I’m going to allow Butterfingers, U, and DUM-E to have at him without me holding him back.”

She laughed softly as DUM-E perked up.

“I’ll allow it,” she promised them.

“I’ll begin the search,” JARVIS said, and she sighed as she sat down. It really had been a long few weeks.

Toni paced back and forth in the hallways as she waited for Uncle Daniel and Aunt Peggy to arrive at the tower.

It had been nearly a month since they’d found out what HYDRA had done to her surrogate mother, and in that entire time Bruce and Ava had worked relentlessly, trying to find a solution to what had been done via the serum that her father had created and abandoned all those years ago.

Months of testing, of sampling, of trying to find out first what had been done to her Aunt and then how to reverse it.

It was a week before they realized that the serum was inhibiting hippocampus from recalling memories. Because the serum was meant to not erase the memory but inhibit them from being recalled. Which of course was ridiculous as there was no way to actually enforce which memories were inhibited and which ones weren’t. No wonder her father scrapped the project. She couldn’t see any way based on how the serum worked for it to function accurately and reliably.

It also explained the abnormal brain activities that the doctors had seen when they were trying to determine what had happened to Aunt Peggy all those years ago. And why Aunt Peggy was slowly losing the ability to recall events from her life as the serum stayed in her system for as long as it did.

After Ava had determined that, it was a matter of figuring out how to remove the serum from her system. Which was something Bruce had a lot of experience studying from when he’d attempted to undo the effects of the radiation on his body after he’d been turned into the Hulk.

There were a lot of late nights, take out, and failed attempts.

A lot of frustration as Ava broke down in tears and Harry cheered her up by reminding her that what she was doing what incredible. That even if they weren’t able to undo the serum, she had done everything she would have been able to do.

Toni had reminded her of her own failures when she had been younger. Because science never went smoothly. There were always unexpected results. Always things that would go wrong without any of them wanting it to. And all they could do was change the parameters and try again.

After a month and a half, they found a potential cure. And after a few weeks of testing, they were almost confident that it would work.
Uncle Daniel had been harder to convince, but Toni had asked him to trust her. They all wanted what was best for Aunt Peggy. They all loved her, and none of them wanted anything bad to happen to her.

So he agreed. He’d signed her out of the nursing home she was in, and flew her in Toni’s plane to the Tower, where she’d set up the Med Bay to be prepped for any possible negative outcome. But she hoped it wouldn’t be any.

She hoped it would work.

As selfish as it was, she wanted her aunt back. She wanted her family to be whole.

Even if it was too late for Jarvis and Ana. For her mother, and even her father.

She wanted what was left of her family to be whole.

“Maria dear,” Aunt Peggy said as Uncle Daniel wheeled her into the Med Bay, “It’s been so long since I’ve seen you. How are you doing? How is Toni? She still sneaking into Howard’s lab when he’s not looking?”

Steve shot her a slightly amused look, and she let out a laugh at the memories of when she was younger, despite the panging feeling in her chest. If this worked then her Aunt would look at her and see her goddaughter, and not the ghost of Toni’s dead mother.

She really wanted this to work.

“She is,” Toni smiled, “Now Peg, I’m going to need you to lay down on this bed, okay?”

Harry and Steve moved to help her out of the seat, as they sat her down carefully on the bed they’d set up for her. Ava moved to connect some wires to her as Bruce took a look at the monitors to adjust the settings.

“Is all of this necessary?” Aunt Peggy looked over at Uncle Daniel, “I just bumped my head slightly on that last mission. Nothing that I need to get checked up over. All of you are making a fuss over nothing.

“We just need to administer a mild anesthetic,” Ava told her softly, “In case any of this causes you pain, we’d like to prevent that all together, if possible.”

Uncle Daniel nodded as he held her hand gently.

“It’s all going to be okay, Peggy,” Uncle Daniel told her softly. “Ava, Harry, Toni, can I talk to you quickly before we do this?”

“Dad,” Ava started, and Uncle Daniel shook his head in a non-negotiable way. Ava sighed as the three of them followed him to a corner of the room.

“I just want the three of you to know how proud I am of you,” he told them all. “Even if this doesn’t work, you’ve done so much for us, and you should know how proud I am of all that you’ve done. Peg and I had a great life together, and I love her more than anything in the world. And the selfish part of me wants her back in my life. The Peggy I feel in love with. But if this doesn’t work, it’s not any of your faults. You’ve done all you could, and I know your mother would be proud of the three of you if she knew all you’ve accomplished.”

“Dad,” Harry said, and Uncle Daniel pulled the three of them into a tight hug.
“I love you all so much,” Uncle Daniel told them firmly, “Nothing will change that. I promise you.”

“We’ll get her back, Dad,” Ava said, as they pulled away, and her father smiled at her softly.

Steve looked over at her when she came back to join him, “Are you okay?” Steve asked her softly, and she wiped a tear she hadn’t even known she’d shed away, as she nodded.

“Yes,” she said softly, “I just. I really miss her, Steve. She was everything to me growing up. She showed me that I don’t need to be a man to succeed in this world. She bought me my first lipstick, and she was by my side when my parents died. She taught me how to fight for myself, physically, mentally, and emotionally. And I’ve accepted I may never get the Aunt Peggy I knew back. But if there’s even a chance I can have her back in my life, then I need to take it. I need her back, in my life.”

“I know Sweetheart,” he said, as he wrapped his arms around her. “I know.”

“We’re ready,” Bruce said with a nod as he looked over at them all. “Whenever you are.”

Peggy looked up at all of them with a dazed look from the anesthetic and she moved to sit beside her aunt, Harry by her side. She carefully took Aunt Peggy’s hand in her own.

“Ducky,” Peggy said softly, “I need to give Toni her ducky that I brought back from my mission! I completely forgot.”

“You can give it to her after you get checked out Darling,” Uncle Daniel kissed her forehead, and Peggy closed her eyes lightly.

She loved her Aunt and Uncle. When she was younger, she used to look at the two of them, the love between the two of them, and crave something like that. She’d never had someone in her life who loved her that much at that point. And it was all she wanted. To be loved and supported through her life like how Uncle Daniel never tried to hold Aunt Peggy back. He let her flourish and he stood by her side fighting next to her.

She looked over at Steve, who gave her a gentle smile, and she knew she’d found that in him. She loved the man, and she knew he would be there with her through everything.

Ava held up the needle, filled with the serum they’d generated as she moved closer to her mother. She looked extremely nervous, but her hands were steady as she injected her mother, releasing the new serum into her system.

As she pulled the needle out, Toni found herself watching Peggy carefully. While they had been able to guess how long it would take the serum to kick in, they really had no way of knowing. No way of being able to tell just how long it took before the serum kicked in and either worked or didn’t.

She gasped, as she saw Peggy begin to shake, as Ava and Bruce scrambled to look at the monitors.

“What’s happening?” she demanded, looking at the readings herself, trying to figure out what was happening.

“The two serums are fighting each other,” Bruce explained to them, watching Aunt Peggy’s vitals on the screens. “The old one is trying to fight for dominance and the one we just injected her with is fighting, trying to overwrite it. It’s going to be a long road as they struggle against each other.”

“It’s hurting her,” Steve said, looking at Aunt Peggy, “Isn’t there anything we can do?”
“We gave her the anesthetic,” Ava said, with a shake of her head, “That was the maximum allowed as per our testing. Any more and it removes the potency of the serum. Mom just has to hold on and fight the pain as our serum takes over and tries to replace the other one. We can’t do anything but wait.”

“She can handle this,” Uncle Daniel told them confidently, as he stroked her face, “She’s always been a fighter. And she’ll do anything to fight for her family. She’ll come back to us. Just wait and see.”

Peggy stilled then, as if his touch was enough to placate her, and Harry stood as he took her hand in his.

“It’s okay Darling,” Uncle Daniel said as he stroked her hair, “Just rest, my love.”

“Daniel,” she said in a low voice as she opened her eyes carefully, “What happened?”

“What do you remember, Sweetheart?” he asked her, and she blinked awake.

“I—” she paused, looking around the room. “I remember talking to Pierce in my office. And I remember learning the truth. Where’s Toni, she needs to know!”

“I’m right here, Aunt Peggy,” Toni said coming forward, “It’s okay, Aunt Peggy. We know. We found out about HYDRA.”

Peggy’s eyes widened, looking at her, then at Ava and Harry.

“I’ve missed so much, haven’t I?” she said, and Ava let out a sob as she leaned in and hugged her mother.

“Do you remember none of it?” Harry asked, voice breaking slightly.

“I remember it in flashes,” Peggy said, as Daniel nodded encouragingly at her. “I remember some things better than others.”

“I missed you, Mom,” Ava said, as tears streamed down her face.

“I’m so sorry, Darling,” Aunt Peggy said, wiping away her tears. “I’ve missed so much of your lives. And I wish more than anything I could have that time back with you.”

“It’s not your fault,” Harry told her firmly, “You were trying to find out the truth and HYDRA took you from us.”

“I should have fought harder,” Peggy said, frustratedly, “I shouldn’t have let them get the jump on me. I could have told you Daniel, of what I suspected. But I wanted to get more proof first. I wanted to know if it was all in my mind or if there was any truth to all of it. And in doing so I lost so much time with my family. With my husband, my children, and my goddaughter.”

“We have you back now, Peggy,” Daniel said taking her hand in his. “It’s more than I ever could have dreamed of and I’m so grateful to all of you for everything you’ve done to bring her back to us. I—“ his throat closed up slightly, “I love you so much, Darling, and while I would stay by your side until the end of time, caring for you, I’m forever grateful to have you back in my life.”

“I missed you too,” she said, looking endearingly back up Daniel. “I want to know everything. Tell me everything I’ve missed. It’s not the same as being there with you through it all, but I want to hear about your lives. I want to know everything, in case the serum made me forget something.”
She looked at Ava first, “My Darling, you’ve grown so much,” she said, pushing a strand of hair away from her face, “You’ve become such a strong, beautiful woman. And clearly, very intelligent.”

“You don’t mind that I didn’t work for SHIELD?” Ava asked her Mom, slightly nervous, “You founded it and were one of the strongest women to ever work there in the entire history of the organization.”

“And you have become a brilliant scientist for Stark Industries,” Aunt Peggy said with a smile, “All I ever wanted was for the three of you to be able to pursue any endeavour you wanted without the struggles I faced when I was younger. I wanted you to all flourish and thrive. And you’ve all done just that.”

Ava smiled at her mother and Peggy squeezed her hand gently, “And I see you’ve found a nice young man for yourself.”

Bruce looked like a dear caught in headlights as Uncle Daniel gave him an appraising look.

“He’s a good man,” Ava said with a smile as she looked over at him. “Incredibly intelligent and has been there with me for some hard times. I love him.”

“I’m happy for you, Ava,” Aunt Peggy said. “And Harry?”

“Mom?” her cousin said, swallowing softly.

“Why did you choose to work for SHIELD?” she asked him curiously, “You could have done anything. At one point you wanted to be a famous race car driver.”

“I was seven,” Harry said drily. “You know I gave up on that dream long ago.”

She laughed, but let her son go on.

“I wanted to be like the two of you,” Harry said finally, “You both did so much to make this world a better place. You lead so many important missions, and I wanted to do something like that. I wanted to make the world a better place and keep it safe. I wanted Ava to live in a world without fear and I wanted to make sure that no one else I loved would ever be in danger ever again. Of course that all went out the window when Toni decided to fly around in a tin can. But I just wanted to be like you. And I think I found my place with SHIELD.”

“He’s done an amazing job,” Daniel said giving Harry a fond son. “I still have higher ups who used to report to us back in the day call me up and let me know how proud I should be of Harry for everything he’s doing. He’s an incredible agent, and I have no doubt he’s helped saved countless lives so far.”

“He has,” Toni said, smiling at him, “SHIELD is now a subsidiary of SI. It was the only way I could keep everyone else safe after the fallout of HYDRA, what with too many compromised agents revealed. I took a look at his file, and Aunt Peggy if you saw some of the things he’s done, you’d be so proud.”

“I’m glad,” she said, smiling at her eldest child. “I look forward to hearing more of your life, Harry.”

“I have so many things to tell you,” Harry said, swallowing.

“We have all the time in the world,” Aunt Peggy said, before turning to her.

“And you Toni,” she continued, “It seems like quite a bit has changed in your life since my
memories were removed. You became an amazing CEO, a superhero, met Captain America and fell in love with him. I always knew you would set the world ablaze.”

“I learned everything from you,” Toni said with a grin, “You taught me that I can do anything if I just put my mind to it. I learned it all from you, Aunt Peggy.”

“I’m so proud of you, Toni,” She smiled at her. “Of all three of you. And I can’t wait to hear everything that I’ve missed in this time.”

Daniel squeezed her hand, as Peggy closed her eyes, looking exhausted.

“Sleep, Peggy,” Uncle Daniel told her, “We don’t need to rush anything. Like you said. We have all the time in the world to catch up.”

She looked like she wanted to argue, but exhaustion began kicking in. Daniel kissed her on the forehead, and the group piled out.

For all HYDRA had taken from them, at least they’d managed to bring her aunt back.

Chapter End Notes

I always did intend for Peggy's memories to be brought back and after forty long chapters, it's been done. Hopefully you guys enjoyed this chapter and I can't wait to hear what you all think!
Chapter Summary

Peter has a lot on his mind, Toni gets a visitor, and her training is interrupted

Peter Parker was not doing well since he’d received the news of his Aunt’s illness. She could hear it in her young protegee’s voice every time she talked to him on the phone, trying to convince him to come to the lab for a few hours.

But each time his response stayed the same. He couldn’t leave his Aunt May alone.

She knew his fear over his aunt’s death wasn’t unwarranted. Since losing Jarvis, she’d grown terrified of losing those she cared about. It was why she build weapons for as long as she did. She didn’t want something to happen to Rhodey when he was overseas when she knew she had the power to help him out. And she hated making the weapons. But she also knew she would have hated herself more if something had happened to Rhodey and she hadn’t done anything to help him.

She’d always known it was unreasonable, but there really wasn’t anything she could do to stop it. One didn’t simply stop fearing death as a possibility because they knew better. Even minds like hers that were rational and knew better than to constantly expect death knew there wasn’t all that much she could really do to stop it from claiming the lives of her loved ones.

So she didn’t fault Peter for it. How could she when she’d feared the same thing through most of her life?

However, when Ben called her up and asked if she would mind if Peter came over for a few hours, she didn’t disagree. According to Peter’s uncle, the boy was getting more and more isolated, as he closed himself off from almost all but one friend. A certain Ned Leeds, whom Peter had been close with for most of his life. His grades were falling, and the boy wasn’t getting any sleep.

Despite it having been several months since May’s official diagnosis, she knew that none of it had been easy on the boy, and it was why she didn’t hesitate when to agree when Ben asked if he could come over for a few hours. She knew the man hoped that the two of them would be able to bond due to their connection, but she wondered if she’d have any more luck in convincing the boy to open up when he hadn’t talked with anyone yet about what he was feeling exactly.

Still, she knew she had to try, for his sake. The boy had already been through so much with losing his family, she really didn’t want him to have to experience any more pain.

“We’ll be back in a few hours, okay Peter?” May said as Peter hugged her tightly.

“Okay,” the boy whispered before pulling away. “Are you sure I can’t come on your errands with you?”

“No,” May said firmly, “It’s been a while since you and Toni have gotten together to build anything, and I know how eager you must be to get back into it. Have fun, Sweetheart. I promise, nothing bad is going to happen to me if you have fun for a bit.”

Peter bit his lip like he was holding something in, and Toni placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.
“Go have fun you two,” Toni said to them with a smile. “We’ll try not to dominate the world while you’re gone.”

“You mean Steve will make sure the two of you don’t dominate the world,” Ben said with a laugh as Toni grinned.

“Hey we all need someone to keep us in line from time to time,” she said with a shrug, “I’m not going to disagree with that.”

“See you in a bit,” Ben said with a laugh, as he and May headed back into the elevator.

“So what do you feel like building today?” she asked Peter as she turned to face him. “Personally, I want to upgrade the tower a bit. I’m tired of having to get up every time I feel like making popcorn while watching a movie, so I was thinking about making a snack compartment in the living room coffee table. Fully automated of course, so that all it takes is a simple request for the popcorn to start popping. We can add other stuff too, like a nacho cheese creator, and so on. Think about how much better movie nights would be if we had that.”

“Sounds okay I guess,” Peter said with a shrug.

“What, you think we could do something better?” she asked teasingly.

“I just don’t really feel like building anything right now,” he said, looking down at his feet. “I’m sorry Ms Stark, I know that you take a lot of time out of your schedule to spend it with me, and I should be grateful for it. And I am! I love working with you. I just don’t know how I can pretend everything is fine and go about my day to day life like there isn’t this big thing in my life that’s happening. And Uncle Ben and Aunt May try to be so positive about it all, but it doesn’t change the fact that she’s dying.”

“No it doesn’t,” she said softly. She led him over to the couches in the common room, knowing that a distraction wasn’t what Peter needed right then. No, he needed someone to talk to.

She wondered, not for the first time, if Peter had anyone to talk to since all of this had happened. Had he talked to his aunt and uncle about how he’d been feeling? Or did they have no idea?

“Talk to me, Peter,” she said gently, as Peter clutched a pillow close to his stomach for comfort.

“I’m scared,” Peter said softly. “I’m so scared that I’m going to wake up one day and find her passed out again but this time she won’t wake up. I-I found her, Toni. I’m the one who found her on the ground when it happened. And I don’t think I can ever go through something like that again. I was so scared that she was dead.”

“I’m so sorry Darling,” she said softly, taking his hand carefully. “You’ve gone through so much already, and it isn’t fair that this is happening to you. If there was anything I could do to help, I would, but there isn’t anything. There’s nothing either of us could do other than be there for your aunt.”

“I don’t want her to die,” he whispered. “I don’t really remember my mom and dad that much. I remember them leaving but not too much more beyond that. But Aunt May and Uncle Ben raised me. I know people don’t expect you to care as much about aunts and uncles, not as personally. But they’re basically my parents. I can’t lose them, Toni.”

“We don’t always get to control how life turns out,” she told him. “When I lost my mother, I was devastated. I didn’t leave the house until Rhodey came over and took me to his mom’s. I can’t tell you everything’s going to be okay with your aunt. Not when I don’t know. Because we don’t get to
know how life will turn out. We don’t get any control over things like that. And it sucks, I know it
sucks, but that’s just how life works.”

“I want to become a chemical biologist,” Peter said after a moment. “Or a neuroscientist. Maybe if I
study how the biological makeup of humans, I could prevent things like this from happening to
others in the future. Maybe I could even help May.”

“I think that’s a very noble thing to do,” Toni told him with a smile. Of course, she’d hoped he’d
want to work at Stark Industries one day, but she could open a research department. She’d turned a
weapons company into a tech giant, thriving in different fields. What was another one.”

“You’re not mad?” he asked her, sounding a bit unsure. “That I don’t want to build robots and
tech?”

“Of course not, Sweetheart!” she told him firmly, “It’s your life to do with as you please. I had a
feeling from the moment I met you that you would go on to do great things, and I know that it will
happen. Even if you don’t choose to follow my footsteps doesn’t mean I’d be disappointed. Ava and
Bruce are some of the top biologists in their fields. I’m sure that if you worked by their side you
could learn so many amazing things. And besides, that’s not to say that you won’t still work with me
in the future. Who what how tech and biology combined could achieve? If that’s what you want to
do, and it’s what makes you happy, then I’ll be with you every step of the way, supporting you and
cheering you on.”

“Okay,” Peter said with a small smile. “Thank you. For listening to me. Ned doesn’t really get it, he
hasn’t lost anyone before. And Aunt May and Uncle Ben are trying to be positive around me
and keep telling me everything’s going to be okay. And I feel horrible because I can’t help but always
if they can’t fight through this.”

“You’re allowed to wonder about it,” she said, “Our lives are always filled with curiosity and
wonder, and we tend to think about the worst-case scenario at any given time. It’s what makes you
human. But what’s more important is that you know that you’re not alone. I want you to know that
Peter. That no matter what happens, I’m always here for you. Steve’s always here for you. So are
Ava, and Harry, Bruce, and all of the other Avengers. We will always all be here for you. You’re
family Peter.”

“And family means no one gets left behind,” he said, giving her a soft grin.

“Ohana,” she confirmed.

“Ohana,” he repeated.

He was silent for a few moments, but then turned to Toni. “I actually want to try making that snack
table thing if you still have time. Think about how much better movie night could be if we just had
an endless amount of nacho cheese. We wouldn’t have to ever get up for anything!”

“That’s the spirit,” she laughed, as the two of them headed down to her workshop to build it.

It was later when May and Ben came to pick Peter up that she was able to talk to them. Peter and
Ava were off eating an unhealthy amount of nachos while Steve sighed at them, and she decided to
take the time to speak to the Parkers.

“How is he?” May asked, looking over at her nephew.

“Doing well, all things considered,” Toni said honestly, “He opened up and talked about how he
was feeling, which I think was the first time he’s been able to talk about any of this. He’s going to be okay, he just needs to be able to process everything that’s happening. But also, I think it would help him if you talked to him honestly about what’s happening. He knows you’re trying to keep things optimistic, but he knows there’s more going on. He’s growing up and you can’t protect him forever. Tell him the truth. The good, the bad, all of it. He needs to know.”

“We were trying to spare his feelings,” Ben sighed. “But you’re right. We’ll have a talk with him tonight.”

“We also wanted to talk to you about a few things,” May said after a moment.

“What kind of things?” she asked, feeling a bit apprehensive.

“All of this, it’s taught us that life is short,” Ben started, “I lost my brother and sister-in-law a few years ago. And we took in Peter without a second thought. Because he’s family. But everything that’s happened recently has taught us that we need to think about the bigger picture, no matter how hard it is. And May being sick, means we need to consider the possibility that both of us may not be there for Peter in the future.”

She swallowed, feeling a pit in her stomach as she didn’t want Peter to have to grow up without his family.

“We wanted to ask you if you’d consider being his guardian in case something happened to us. We know it’s a lot to ask, especially given who you are and how much you do. But Peter trusts you. We trust you. And there’s no one else we would trust to take care of Peter if something happened to us.”

She swallowed before nodding.

“Of course,” she agreed, “I can’t promise that I’d be any good at it. And I hope that it never comes to pass. But if anything, Curie forbid, does happen, I promise you I’ll be here for Peter.”

“Thank you,” May told her with a smile, as Peter came over to them. “Ready to go, Pete?”

“Ready,” he nodded.

She hugged Peter goodbye as she watched the family leave, thinking about what had just happened. She prayed nothing would ever happen to the family, because Peter loved and needed them. But she knew that if it did, she’d be here for him. They all would be.

She hadn’t expected Sharon Carter to show up on her doorstep. Which technically shouldn’t have been that surprising. Given that she’d taken over SHIELD and several of the floors in her tower were now dedicated towards the spy operation.

And yet, when she got the announcement that Sharon Carter was requesting access to the floor she’d set up Aunt Peggy and Uncle Daniel on, she found herself surprised.

She’d gotten Carter to come first to her floor, wanting to know what it was that the younger agent wanted before allowing her to see her aunt. Because while Aunt Peggy was doing better, it was going to be a while before she was fully recovered. Her nurses wanted to keep her under supervision for a while longer, and she was more than happy to oblige.

Given SHIELD was now based out of New York, that meant both the Carter-Sousa siblings now
lived in her tower, so Uncle Daniel and Aunt Peggy were more than happy to stay with her.

And she was doing well. Toni had spent more time with her aunt than she had in years and it was nice. It was nice being able to talk to her and not have her think she was her mother halfway through. It was nice for her to remember conversations they’d had they day before. And Aunt Peggy was truly elated seeing how far Toni had come in the last two decades.

As nice as it was for her, she knew it meant the world to Ava and Harry. Both of them had been so young when their mom was attacked by HYDRA. Ava hadn’t gotten to fully know her mother and have an adult relationship with her. And so much had changed for Harry since then.

Which was why she was so wary of what Sharon Carter wanted, given last time she’d seen the Carter cousin, she’d been attempting to seduce her boyfriend and spy on him on the behalf of SHIELD.

“Carter,” Toni said as the elevator doors opened.

“Stark,” she said, curtly, “I take it that you’re going to deny my request to see Aunt Peggy?”

She took a deep breath, “That depends. Why do you want to see her?”

“I don’t need to explain myself to you,” she snapped, before taking a deep breath. “I’m sorry that was uncalled for.”

She raised a brow at the younger woman.

“Are you here on the behalf of SHIELD again? Just because they’re operating under my tower doesn’t mean I’m in charge of them. I’m under no disillusions that they wouldn’t hesitate to poke their noses where it doesn’t belong if it was for their gain,” she told the girl. “So why are you here, Carter?”

“Look, I know the two of us didn’t always get along,” Carter said after a moment, “But growing up, I’m sure she told you the same stories she told me. Dad always wanted to shield me from the world, but Aunt Peggy would make sure I knew that I was just as capable of fighting as my brothers. I’ve looked up to her my entire life. It’s why I joined SHIELD. And now that she’s got her memories back, I was hoping I’d be able to see her and get to know her. I used to visit her before in the home, but it wasn’t the same. You know that as well as I do. I just want to talk to her.”

She nodded, “Okay,” she said to the girl. “I’m not her keeper. I just wanted to make sure you were here for the right reasons. Uncle Daniel has already said he has no issues with you going to see her. So if you just ask JARVIS to take you to the seventy-fifth level, you can visit with her for as long as you like, whenever you like. I’m not going to prevent you from seeing her, not when she means so much to all of us. I know what it’s like for her to come into your life and tell you can be meant for so much more than the rest of the world tells you that you can be.”

Sharon looked surprised at that, but she offered Toni a genuine smile.

“Thank you, Stark,” Carter said to her. “For everything. I know Ava and Dr Banner also helped but thank you for bringing her back for all of us. I know you did it for yourself as well, but it means the world to me that now I’m going to have a chance to get to know my aunt; a chance I wouldn’t have had without you.”

“Of course,” Toni smiled back at the younger woman.

She watched as Sharon Carter exited back into the elevator and headed towards Aunt Peggy’s floor.
She wasn’t sure the two of them would ever be friends, but they understood each other. And they both cared about the Carter-Sousas. So for now, that was enough.

She really hated training, as strange as that was to admit. She wished she could say she liked it more now that it had become a routine in her life, or that it was something she liked that helped her while being a superhero.

But the truth was simple; she hated it.

She hated getting knocked down on her ass, and how sore her body would be for days afterwards. She hated limping out of her and Steve’s bed as the pain the following morning settled in. She hated everything about working out.

Except when it was with Steve. But really that had more to do with the fact that more often than not they got distracted and training turned into other enjoyable activities. And after one too many times of Romanoff walking in on them, she’d decreed that the two of them weren’t allowed to train together anymore given that she wasn’t actually training.

Which was regrettable.

And she point-blank refused to train with the superspy given the woman had no qualms with landing Toni on her back on a regular basis.

Clint was a different story; he was a civilian with a weapon he fought with. Not like Natasha who was trained to be a weapon. Clint understood her; the two of them had a primary weapon that they fought with and only fought without their weapons if they were forced to. So he trained her accordingly.

That didn’t mean she didn’t still get flipped over onto her back. Because she did. Quite a bit. Just like now.

She groaned as Clint stood over her, smirking teasingly.

“You’re making this too easy, Stark,” he laughed, as he offered a hand to help her up.

“Can we just call it a day already?” she asked, tiredly. “Didn’t we train enough?”

“We’ve only been down here for twenty minutes,” he said with a grin, “You know as well as I do that if we go back up before a full hour has passed that Nat will be on both of our asses. We gotta stay and train for a bit longer. And as terrifying I find you, Nat’s way scarier.”

She grumbled to herself, as she braced herself to go again.

“I’m going to come at you from the top this time,” he said to her, “I won’t tell you the rest of my plays, but see if you can land in a few hits okay? Before you fall on your back again?”

She stuck her tongue out at him but quickly put it back as he came at her.

She ducked to the side, lightly punching his stomach, as he grabbed her wrist and threw her over his shoulder and back onto the ground again.

She sighed.
“Miss Stark, I hate to interrupt but I have located the Winter Soldier,” JARVIS said, and she quickly sat up, freezing.

“Where?” she asked, quickly getting to her feet and looking at the screen in the gym.

“Linz, Austria,” JARVIS responded. She looked at the screen and saw footage of the Winter Soldier exiting a small convenience store. His face was mostly covered, but there unmistakably was James Buchanan Barnes.

“I need to go to Austria,” she said, “I’m sorry to cut this short Clint, but you understand right?”

“Wait like you’re just going to go now?” Clint asked, “Aren’t you going to tell the team that you’re heading to Europe to bring back Barnes? Shouldn’t Steve at least go with you?”

She shook her head, “I don’t want to spook him. If too many of us go, he may think we’re attacking him and flee. And worse, we don’t know what state his mind is in so we don’t want to endanger anyone. It’s better if I go alone.”

“And Steve?” Clint asked her gently, “Aren’t you going to tell him that you found his best friend?”

“I can’t,” she shook her head, “I don’t want to get his hopes up. And I don’t want to force Barnes to come with us if he doesn’t want to. I love Steve but know he wouldn’t take no for an answer if Barnes didn’t want to come. I’ll just make it up to him when I get back.”

She turned to leave but he grabbed her arm, stopping her.

“You still can’t go alone, Toni,” Clint said firmly. “I’m coming with you. We have no idea what mindset the soldier’s in. You said that yourself. You cannot go alone into an unknown situation. I won’t tell Steve where we’re going, but I’m coming with you. That’s nonnegotiable. And if you attempt to leave without me, I’m telling Steve and you know he’ll come after you.”

She let out a frustrated sigh.

“I can’t put any of you in danger. And I’m just tracking a lead. For all I know, he’ll be long gone by time I get there,” she said, trying to dissuade him.

“Then we’ll have a fun weekend,” Clint shrugged, “We’ll buy some food, see some sights. No big deal. It’s been a while since I’ve been to Austria, and I’ve been meaning to go back for quite some time.”

She looked at his face, and she could tell that there was no way she was going to be able to talk him out of it. Not when he seemed so set in his ways.

“Fine,” she said with a sigh, “I’ll tell Steve I’m heading to Austria for some SI business and that you wanted to come as back up just in case. He has a mission to Panama so he can’t come even if he wanted to. But if you breathe a word of this to anyone, you’re a dead man, Brenton.”

“Yes Ma’am,” he mock-saluted.

She glowered at him but led the way as she prepared for her trip to Europe. They had a rogue soldier to find.
She sat on her quinjet, as JARVIS piloted her jet. Steve had been confused by her sudden departure, especially given that she usually told him her schedule way in advance so he’d know when she wouldn’t be there at night.

But he’d accepted her reasons easily enough as she packed a bag of essentials quickly. He’d kissed her goodbye, and she’d felt guilty at the time for lying to him about where she was going and what she was doing.

She still stood by her reasons, knowing that she didn’t want him to attend because she didn’t want to hurt him. She didn’t want to raise his hops in the case that Barnes was long gone by the time they reached Linz.

She knew it was a very likely conclusion. He was a master assassin whom the world didn’t even have confirmation existed until Steve saw him face to face. He would have known the cameras were there. And he was likely to know that Steve was tracking him down. Especially given that her boyfriend wasn’t all that subtle in his attempts to bring Barnes home.

But maybe that was the problem. The lack of subtly. The lack of choice. The forced decision. Especially when Barnes hadn’t had many choices in the last seventy years.

And didn’t he deserve the right to choose for himself what he wanted to do? Didn’t he deserve the chance to decide if he wanted to come home or if he’d rather live on the run?

Even if it wasn’t a life she’d wish on anyone; he deserved that much. He deserved a home. Everyone did. And she owed it to Steve to at least try. Because Barnes was Steve’s Rhodey. The man he’d go to the end of the line for. The one whom he’d do anything for.

And she understood that all too well.

Ava and Harry were her family; and while they loved her, they didn’t choose to know her. Pepper and Happy became her friends, but they were her employees before that.

Rhodey chose her. He friended her when no one else would, as she did with him. They were there for each other through so many ups and downs in their lives. When her parents passed away. When his father got sick. When she got taken in Afghanistan. They were always there for one another. Through thick and thin.

And that was what Barnes was to Steve. His Rhodey. The one who was always there, even when things got tough.

She could only imagine the guilt he must carry, thinking that if he’d just saved Barnes, then his best friend would have lived. To if he’d just held on tighter, his best friend wouldn’t have been tortured.

She understood it all too well. Understood the grief that would be associated with it. Understood that
there was pain and suffering involved. That Steve went under thinking that his best friend was dead and woke up to find out the truth.

And she loved him. She loved Steve more than she’d ever loved anyone else.

There really wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do, if she knew it would make him happy. Well maybe not murder. Depending on the person. If murdering Justin Hammer made him happy, then she’d probably do that. But that would also be for selfish reasons, cause it would also make her happy. Though that was very much beside the point. She wouldn’t commit most illegal activities, unless she had a very good reason.

“So what’s the game plan, Stark?” Clint asked her, looking up from his screen. They were just over an hour away, and she knew they’d begin their descent soon. “Go in guns blazing and demand he come with us?”

She snorted, “Do you really think we could take him? Not unless we both fully suited up, and even then, who knows how much damage would happen to the city. You saw that stretch of DC where Steve and Barnes fought. It looked like a war zone.”

“Then what?” he asked her incredulously, “We just go ask him nicely and hope he decides to come with us? ‘Oh hi Mr Assassin. If it’s not too much inconvenience for you, could you come back with us? My boyfriend really misses you and wants to have a playdate at his house.’”

“Very funny,” she said, looking at him unimpressed. “Of course not. But we at least offer him the chance. See what he wants to do. He deserves to make an informed decision. To know that he doesn’t need to be on the run if he doesn’t want to be.”

“Why?” he asked her carefully. “I get the whole mind control thing. But he still was the one who killed your parents. If anyone killed my family, it wouldn’t matter how it happened or why it happened. It wouldn’t matter if they didn’t have a say in it all. I would have put an arrow between their eyes. Why are you doing this for him? Even if Steve wasn’t your boyfriend, you don’t have any obligation to do this. So why help?”

“I know what it feels like to not have a choice,” she said simply, “To be tortured. To be manipulated. To be controlled. And I hated when that was done to me. I can only imagine what was done to him. You saw his face in that video. He didn’t recognize my father. Despite the aging, Howard hadn’t changed that much. He wasn’t the same man from Aunt Peggy’s stories. The smug assured man who was cracking jokes. The one with character. He was a different man. He wasn’t Steve’s Bucky. You would do the same, if it was Natasha who’d been tortured. I would have done the same for Rhodey. I need to do this. To bring home James Buchanan Barnes. But to also make sure the Winter Soldier won’t ever be used to hurt anyone again. Not like he hurt my mother.”

Clint looked pensive at that.

“I see your point,” he said softly.

“So we go in,” she said, answering his initial question about their strategy, “See what we’re dealing with. And offer him something he hasn’t had in a long time; a choice.”

They landed in a fairly remote part of Linz, not wanting to draw too much attention to themselves. She knew that all it took was one social media post talking about the Avengers being in the city to send Barnes fleeing. And it had taken months to get this lead from JARVIS; who knew how long it would be before they found anything else out.
It hadn’t taken long after to track down the convenience store that Barnes had been spotted at. And based on the numerous matches of facial recognition at the store, she knew the man frequented it. After all, all it took was one direct match to get other similar instances from the feed, as despite the lower initial accuracy, the match they received raised the probability of the prior occurrences.

So much so that they knew that almost every day Barnes went to the convenience store everyday between 2:30 – 2:45 pm. All because he looked at the camera once.

It was almost scary how precise the man was with his visits. The fact that they could tell where/when he was going to be due to what must have been the residual effects of his initial soldier regime. The last stable thing he’d had before he’d become the Winter Soldier. It made sense that he had a routine. Something to ground him and give him stability despite all the other chaos in his life.

The thing that had given him a sense of security was also going to be the cause of disruption from his daily life.

She stood on her spot, perched on a rooftop at 2:29, waiting patiently as she looked through her modified glasses, zoomed in on the store.

“Are you sure he’s going to show?” Clint asked, looking through his own StarkTech glasses.

“There’s a 90% chance he shows up right at 2:30,” she told him, “8% chance it’s closer to 2:35, 1.5% that it’s 2:40 and 0.5% chance of him showing up around 2:45.”

He whistled, “I’m a little terrified you have those numbers from JARVIS after a bit of surveillance on an assassin. Makes me wonder what kind of statistics you have on me.”

She laughed at that, “Oh Clint, you don’t even want to know the kind of information I could pull up on you if you wanted. I just choose to use that information wisely.”

He glanced over at her, “Not that I don’t trust you, but now you’ve got me curious.”

“I know that you prefer eating Chocolate Puffs throughout the week, but the first day of the month you try eating Raisin Bran before giving up again. It’s why we keep buying the Raisin Bran, but the smallest possible amount of it. And that you watch The Bachelorette when no one’s around, and reruns if there’s not a new season,” she said, trying to soothe him. “JARVIS collects data, but only that pertaining to how to make your stay in the Tower more comfortable. He doesn’t monitor calls or chats or anything too invasive. However, if you feel uncomfortable with it, I can always change his coding to stop.”

He relaxed slightly at that and she wondered, not for the first time, what kind of secrets the superspy was hiding from them. He was entitled to his own secrets, she wouldn’t begrudge him that. But curiosity more often than not got the better of her and she couldn’t help but wonder.

“No it’s fine,” he said softly, “I wondered about it. You always seemed to have exactly what we want without us even having to ask. Makes me feel bad sometimes. Like I should be paying rent or something.”

“I’m a billionaire,” she said with a shake of her head, “I don’t need your money.”

“Need, maybe not,” he agreed, “But you’re our friend. I know I don’t live in the tower full time but that doesn’t mean you owe us anything. You give us a home, give us gear, and took in SHIELD when it fell. You didn’t have to do any of that. It wasn’t your job. And yet you did anyways. And I just want you to know how much we appreciate that. It’s not much, but it’s why we try and help out around the tower with cleaning and such. It won’t come close to how much you do for us. But we
want you to know how much it means to us.”

She offered him a soft smile. She had made so many friends over the years who had the intentions of using her for her money that she’d grown to expect it. Rhodey was really the first one who didn’t want it. Who insisted she not buy him presents but instead take the day off from working and spend it with him. Pepper enjoyed the occasional pair of shoes, but she more often than not would give her unimpressed looks if she bought them ostentatious gifts.

The Avengers had been her co-workers before they were her friends. She housed them to give them a home that wasn’t a standard issued room. They deserved that much after all. But she never expected them to contribute anything. Not really. Not when there wasn’t much they could offer.

But the offer was very much appreciated. It meant that they cared enough about her that they didn’t want to use her for her wealth. And that itself meant the world to her.

She swallowed, not wanting to get too emotional. They still had a job to do, and the last thing she needed was for anything unnecessary to distract her from it. They’d come to Linz with a mission in mind. And they would be completing it. Even if she had no idea if it would even work.

“I have eyes on Barnes,” Clint said, and she followed his gaze as she saw him walk into the store precisely at 2:31, just as JARVIS predicted he would. And sure enough, fifteen minutes later he walked out with a bag full of groceries with what must have been enough food for the evening in his arms.

They followed him on rooftops till they reached the building he was residing in, and she used the thermal setting on her glasses to track which floor and apartment he went into.

“We got him,” she breathed in surprise. The Winter Soldier who had been so hard to track down over the last few years had finally been traced to a singular unit. They now knew where he was staying, and if they were careful, they would be able to reach him without him knowing they were even there.

She knew that was unlikely; an assassin such as himself would know he’s been made. However she just hoped they’d be able to convince him to listen to them without turning it into an international incident.

One could only hope.

“Are you ready?” Clint turned to her as they prepared to enter Barnes’ building.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she said with a nod. She had left the suit on the quinjet and knew it would be on her in a matter of minutes if she really needed it. She was just hoping she wouldn’t need it.

They walked through the apartment complex quietly, as to not arouse suspicion. She knew by the occasional curious glances they were getting that they were clearly out of place, but she hoped that they would at least be able to get to Barnes before anyone called them out on their presence.

“This is it,” Clint said as he gestured to the door. It was a third-floor apartment, and she wondered if he’d chosen it for a reason.

She felt torn for a moment as she wondered to herself what to do. On one hand, she could knock on the assassin’s door and instantly give away their position and let themselves get made. But on the other, if she just went in guns blazing then they were a threat.

She sighed, as she took a step forward and knocked, “Mr Barnes,” she called out, soft enough for
him to hear her with his enhanced hearing, but not enough for any neighbours to hear. “We would like to talk to you for just a moment. We’re unarmed and came alone. We’re not a threat. We’re just here to talk.”

“Do you really think that will work?” Clint asked, giving her an incredulous look.

She shrugged. Because no, in all honesty she wasn’t sure. But it was worth a shot. And really, she wasn’t all that certain herself.

They stood there in silence for a few minutes and she used her glasses to see the soldier just waiting to see what would happen. She took a deep breath.

“Steve doesn’t know we’re here. And if you choose not to open the door, we’ll turn around and go home,” she told him firmly, as Clint gave her a sharp look. “He won’t find out where you are.”

She counted silently in her head, giving him time to figure out what he wanted to do and if he wanted to trust her or not.

Curiosity must have gotten the best of him as he eventually opened the door and she exhaled.

There he was, in the flesh. The man who’d fought in the war with her dad, Aunt Peggy, and with Steve. The one who’d gotten her boyfriend out of many fights, and the one who she’d loved hearing about as she grew up. The one who she admired for relying on his own strength and values.

The one who’d strangled her bother.

“Stark,” he said, with a gruff voice. “What are you doing here?”

“Can we come in?” She asked, cocking her head to the interior of his apartment. “Don’t exactly want to have this conversation in the hallways.”

He gave her an untrusting look, but popped his door open to them. She wondered how quickly he could take them out if he really wanted to. Clearly he didn’t perceive either of them as a threat. Not like Steve who could have matched him with pure strength.

“What do you want?” he asked again, the minute the door closed.

“I want for you to come home,” she said simply.

“No,” he said firmly. “I’m safe here. I’m not a threat to anyone, and HYDRA hasn’t found me.”

“Is that your biggest fear?” She asked him curiously, “That you think you’re a threat to others?”

“Why didn’t you tell Rogers you were coming here?” he asked her instead, “I thought the two of you were…” his voice trailed off, as if he was unsure of how to finish that statement.

“We are,” she said firmly. “But I’m not just here for Steve. He misses you and wants you to come home. You two were friends, brothers really. He would do anything to have you back in his life once more. But as much as I love him, I want to do what’s best for you. And bringing him wouldn’t have been helpful for the discussion I want to have with you.”

“Do you even know who I am?” he asked her after a moment. “The things I’ve done? You wouldn’t be offering any of this to me if you knew the truth.”

“I know enough,” she told him carefully, “I know what HYDRA did to you and the things they made you do. I know that you weren’t in control, not really. That you were nothing more than the
weapon they turned you into. I know far more than you think I do.”

“Do you know what I did to your parents?” he challenged.

“Do you remember it?” she asked him curiously, and he shut his eyes firmly.

“I remember all of them,” he said, sounding pained.

“Did you want to do any of it?” she questioned further. “Did you enjoy it? Did you like killing all those people? Did you enjoy watching the life leave them? Did you enjoy seeing my father beg you to help my mother before you killed them both?”

He closed his eyes in pain, and she knew in that moment that there was no part of him that had any sympathy towards HYDRA. Because as badly as she wanted to trust him and bring him home for Steve she needed to know. He’d been with HYDRA, even if unwilling, for the better part of the last century. She needed to know if he believed in their cause.

And if there was one thing she’d gotten good at being able to tell was when someone was lying to her.

James Buchanan Barnes was not.

He was just a man who’d been taken by HYDRA and forced to do horrible things.

“That’s why I’m here,” she said firmly. “Because you didn’t choose to do any of those things, Barnes. It was horrible, what happened to you, and I’m here to give you options.”

“Why?” he asked, and Clint watched them interact.

“Because you deserve better,” she told him firmly. “You didn’t ask for any of these things to happen. And we’ve all done horrible things. Albeit on different levels for some of us. But I know what it’s like to have that guilt of feeling responsible for things that were done without your consent. Stark Industries used to make weapons. And I thought we were helping the ‘good guys’. But my business partner; my godfather, was double dealing to terrorists. The same lives I was trying to save were being hurt by my weapons. I know what it’s like to feel responsible for things out of your control and want to make it right. And I think you do too. I think you want to make it right for what was done to you and what you were forced to do. It’s why you’ve isolated yourself here in a form of penance for what you’ve done.”

“I’m a danger to be around,” he told her firmly. “I can’t always control the Winter Soldier. He’s a part of me, but not a part that I can keep down. Sometimes he comes back up and I can’t stop the damage he does.”

“I have PTSD,” she told him gently. “From everything that’s happened to me. And I’ve been working on a new form of technology to help with that. I think I can repurpose it to help you as well. I’m not a licensed therapist or anything, but I’ve been working with some to help. And that’s what I want to do; help you.”

“And if I don’t want that?” he asked her, sounding a bit unsure. “What if I just want to stay here, and hide out for the rest of my days here?”

“Then you can do that,” she told him firmly. “I’m not going to force you into anything. I just want you to know you have options, like I said before. I’m giving you a chance to come home and get treatment. To have what HYDRA did to you be exposed to the world and be cleared of any crimes as you’re an extreme case of a prisoner of war. I already have my lawyers working on the paperwork
to get you exonerated. You would be able to walk in the day without having to constantly look over your shoulder. You could have a life again, get a job if you wanted, fall in love. You don’t have to live your life in the shadows any longer. And if that’s what you wanted you could have it."

He didn’t say a word, so she continued talking, “But that’s if you want that. I’m not here to force you to do anything, James. If you want to come home, I want you to know it’s a possibility. But if you want to stay here, then you can do that. Clint and I will go home and Steve will never find out that we were even here in the first place. No one will. We’ll go home and it’ll be as if we were never here. You can continue on as you’ve been.”

“Why?” he asked her, “Why would you do all of this for me? I get that you care for Steve and that you now of me. But you don’t know me. and even if you claim you don’t blame me for your parent’s deaths, that’s always going to be there. I always will be the person who killed them. Why would you even want to do any of this for me?”

“I told you,” she said, “Because you deserve to have your life back. I don’t have any ulterior motives. I just want you to be happy. I’m not going to lie and say it wouldn’t make Steve extremely happy as well, and that’s not one of the things I’ve considered. But I want you to have the life you deserve.”

“I don’t have anything,” he said, “No money to my name. No belongings other than what I have in this apartment. No skills that aren’t related to what HYDRA trained me to do.”

“So we’ll reintegrate you into society,” she told him. “Once you’re fully recovered of course. Get you a job, find you a place to stay if you want something outside the tower. Whatever you want.”

He looked over at Clint, wanting to see what the man thought.

“She means it,” Clint offered, “Maybe it’s an eccentric billionaire thing, but she seems to have a thing for strays. Took me and Natasha in. And Steve all but moved in after SHIELD fell. Not sure I understand why either, but her offer is real. Besides, the Tower makes a nicer place to stay than any of the SHIELD rooms I’ve had.”

“So what do you say?” she asked him. “Will you come with us, or will we go home and pretend I was here for SI work.”

He closed his eyes as he deliberated what he wanted to do, and she watched with bated breath.

“Fine,” he said after a moment. “I’ll come back with you. But if at any point I think I’m putting any of you in danger then I’m leaving in the middle of the night and you’ll never be able to find me this easily again.”

“Fair enough,” she agreed. “It’s time to come home, James.”

He looked both relieved and terrified at that, and she smiled to herself knowing that it was going to be for the best.
The plane ride was silent as Clint piloted their way back. She sat near Barnes, looking over her tablet of the newest Stark Industries prototype for a suit that piloted itself with the help of JARVIS. If she could just get the suits to be self-autonomous then she’d have a real defense mechanism on her hands. Each suit JARVIS piloted took up a considerable amount of processing power, and she knew the best way to optimize it and have an amount of suits capable of making a decent difference would be way too much for JARVIS to handle on his own and still help her pilot the suit. JARVIS may be advanced, but it was too much to ask for just him.

But if she had more AIs, then perhaps it would help take some of the load off of JARVIS.

Besides, it had been a while since she created a new child, and really, she missed just being able to build. It seemed these days that she was so busy with everything else in her life and she didn’t have enough time to just build. She didn’t regret becoming Iron Woman; not when she knew how much of a difference it made.

But nothing came close to the feeling of engineering. Of creating something with her own two hands. And she didn’t think that anything would ever replace the joy she felt from that.

She glanced over at Barnes as they prepared for landing, and she could see him sitting stiffly. She’d offered him a spare tablet to entertain himself, but he’d turned the offer down, opting to stare at his hands instead for the entire ride. She wondered if he was nervous, as she knew she would be in the situation. Nervous of what was to come. Of seeing Steve again on better terms. Of the world learning the truth of his situation.

She stood up as Clint landed the plane and gave them the all clear.

“It’s going to be okay,” she told Barnes softly, “Steve misses you. He’s going to be happy to see you again.”

“I’m not the same man he remembers,” Barnes shook his head, “He wants his friend back. The one he knew in the forties. But that man is long gone. I’m not the one he wants.”

“You’ve changed,” she told him simply, “You may not be the same person you once were but you’re still you. Steve wants you back. All of you. You may not be who you were back then. But neither is Steve. A lot has happened in his life since the day you fell. And he’s carried that guilt with him for all these years. He’s going to be happy just to get you back.”

He didn’t look like he believed her, and she reached out and squeezed his arm. The doors opened then, and she walked out of the plane first, wanting to brace anyone who was out there to meet them.

Which of course just happened to be Steve.

“You’re back early,” he said, as he wrapped his arms around her. She sighed deeply as she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him gently on the lips.
“I missed you,” she murmured, and he moved to kiss her again, but she pulled back from him.

“Is everything okay?” He asked her, frowning slightly.

“I need to tell you something,” she let out a breath, and he looked at her expectantly. “I lied to you. I didn’t go to Linz for SI work. I went there for another reason. I just didn’t want to tell you about it.”

He looked confused at that, before his eyes widened as he looked at something behind her. Or more accurately, someone behind her.

“Bucky?” he asked, shocked. “What are you doing here?”

He glanced between the two of them as understanding dawned upon him.

“Why didn’t you tell me you found him?” he asked her, a bit upset, “I could have gone with you. It was dangerous for you to go alone.”

“I knew I wasn’t in danger,” she said with a shake of her head, “Besides I had Clint with me.”

“You still lied to me,” he said, crossing his arms. “I thought you trusted me, Toni.”

“I do,” she said, reaching out to take his hand. “I didn’t want to get your hopes up, Steve. What if he wasn’t there?”

“Then I would have looked for other leads,” he argued.

“And if he didn’t want to come back with me?” she raised a brow at him. “Because I gave Barnes his options. I told him he didn’t have to come back with me if he didn’t want to. Would you have given him that option?”

“He deserves to come home!” he said quickly, “Austria isn’t his home! Brooklyn is!”

“Steve,” she said gently, “He’s still a person. And I know this is going to be hard to hear, but he’s had so little choices of his own in his life. He deserved to make this choice himself. And he chose to come home. He chose to be here.”

Steve looked torn, and she wondered if he was angry with her. They hadn’t had any fights as a couple. Nothing beyond what to watch on tv or when he thought she needed to eat proper meals. She wondered if this would be their fight.

“You still shouldn’t have lied to me,” he said after a moment. “But I get why you did. I wouldn’t have listened to you, and you were right. Thank you, Sweetheart. For bringing him home.”

He kissed her gently on the cheek, before turning to look at Barnes tentatively.

“It’s good to see you, Bucky,” Steve said, as Barnes came closer to them. “For what it’s worth, I’m glad you chose to come back.”

Barnes looked uncomfortable but nodded, “I’m tired of living in the shadows,” he admitted. “And Stark offered me a chance to have more than that. Besides, if she puts up with a punk like you, she could probably handle anything.”

Steve grinned at that. “Not sure how she does it,” he said, looking at her fondly. “Every time I think I catch up with her brilliant plans, she comes out with a billion other things that surprise me.”

She grinned at him as he wrapped an arm around her.
“You must be tired,” Steve said suddenly, looking at all of them. “When was the last time any of you ate? Come inside, let me make you guys something to eat and then get some rest. You must have had a long several hours what with flying all the way there and back.”

“Food would be great,” Clint said tiredly. “Let’s go inside too. It’s getting a bit cold.”

She nodded, as she followed behind Steve. She could see Barnes trailing behind all of them, so she slowed her pace to keep up with him.

“How are you doing with all of this?” she asked him carefully. “I know all of this can seem a bit intimidating.”

“I’m fine,” he said shortly. She didn’t push him, and he glanced over at her. “I still don’t understand why you’re doing this. I get that it makes Steve happy and that you’re doing this for me. But why are you doing this? What are you getting out of this?”

She was silent for a few moments, not really sure how she wanted to respond, “I blamed my father for that car accident for decades. I thought he was driving drunk and killed her. But all this time HYDRA had been responsible. They’d used you to kill both of them. They turned you into a weapon and killed my parents. And if I give you your free will back, if I destroy the weapon that they used, then I can give them the justice they deserve. I may have hated my father but I loved my mother.”

She paused for a second, “I also don’t talk a lot about it, but when I was in Afghanistan I was tortured. And quite honestly, I didn’t always know if I’d crack or not. Part of me fears if I didn’t get out when I did and I was kept a hostage longer, then I may have given in. As much as I would have hated myself, I was in so much pain. And what if I’d made the weapons for them? They held you as a prisoner for seventy years. I was held for three months. And what we went through doesn’t even come close to being comparable. So I want to help you. The two of us saved ourselves in the end. We got ourselves unkidnapped. But that doesn’t mean we need to be the only ones fighting for us. I don’t know where I would have been without the people in my life. And you still have people who care about you. Steve still talked about you all the time.”

He glanced at her, and she continued, “I want to help you, not just because it was the right thing to do, but because you deserve it. But that doesn’t mean any of this is going to be smooth sailing. So if you ever feel overwhelmed or like you need to take a step back, just let me know. And if you don’t want to talk to me, just ask JARVIS to enable black out protocol. Then no one will bother you until you turn it off.”

“Jarvis?” he asked, sounding a bit confused.

“My AI,” she explained to him, “He won’t invade your privacy or anything, but generally, J watches over the entire tower. He helps me manage my life, runs all high-powered operations for me, helps me pilot the suit, and basically is the reason my life isn’t in complete disarray. J, say hi to our new occupant.”

“Hello Mr Barnes,” JARVIS said through one of the speakers in the hall. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Please do not hesitate to reach out if there is anything that I can do to make your time here more comfortable or if you have any inquiries.”

“You made him?” Barnes breathed, and she remembered a story Steve had told her months ago about how Steve and Barnes had attended her father’s Stark Expo years ago before they’d gone off to the war. That Barnes was something of a sci fi buff himself.
“If you ever want to see any tech feel free to come down to the lab,” she offered him as they approached the kitchen. “I have a lot of prototypes I’m working on, both for the Avengers Initiative and for Stark Industries. But also, I was hoping you’d come down sooner rather than later anyways. I want to outfit you with a new arm.”

“Why?” he asked her, sounding a bit surprised, “This one works well.”

“It’s HYDRA tech,” she deadpanned. “It’s got nothing on Stark tech. I may not know too much about biological limbs, but I’ve been meaning to reach out to some scientists in the field to see if we could combine something or the other to create artificial bodies for AIs. I’m sure we could apply a similar logic to create an arm for you. Plus, if I look at yours, I could reverse engineer it easily enough. It might be functional but tell me honestly. Does it work like a regular arm? Or are there lags that you’ve just accounted for? You lean heavily towards your left side, which implies to me that the arm is heavy, and you’re just used to accounting for the weight. Are you in pain from the arm? Or does it feel like a regular limb?”

“It’s functional,” he repeated.

“Functional isn’t good enough,” she said, as Steve gestured for the two of them to sit down. He’d started preparing some dinner for them, and her mouth watered as she smelled the food cooking. He must have started when they’d radioed in saying, they were close. Honestly, if he didn’t already know she loved him, she probably would tell him now just for cooking for them.

“Functional isn’t good enough,” Ava said as she came into the room, “Plus functional has never satisfied Toni. Try telling her one of her products are good enough and she’ll go away and come back with an itemized list of things she can improve on it.”

“Good enough is the downfall of tech companies,” her nose wrinkled. “Hammer Industries tech is technically ‘good enough’. That doesn’t mean it’s any good. Good enough just means that there are still things to improve on. So let me give you a better arm. I’m sure whatever I come up with would be a billion times better than what HYDRA gave you.”

Barnes looked at Steve for help, but her boyfriend just shrugged. “I’ve learned that the best way to make her happy is to not limit her in the lab,” Steve said, “Unless she’s in there an unhealthy amount. But otherwise, it makes her happy to let her do things like this. I’m sure she’ll find other uses for the tech beyond just you, if you’re worried about her wasting her time. She made me an art tablet that felt like using a real sketchbook and pencil. Then sold it to the markets once she was happy with it.”

“Think about the benefits,” Harry said. He’d been in the room already, doing prep work for Steve as he chopped up some herbs and such. “She could release a line of prosthetics out to the masses. It would completely change the game, give what’s currently out there.”

She nodded in agreement, “I could also do some military contracts to fit vets with prosthetics who were injured in the line of duty. And have several ranges, based on what people can afford. And maybe set up a charity to try and outfit as many people with the prosthetics as well. It would be great for SI, but also could make a difference in people’s lives.”

Steve gave her a fond look and she grinned back at him.

“You’re being disgusting again,” Clint said, throwing a tomato at her and she stuck her tongue out at him.

“Let me show you where you’re staying,” Ava interjected, “Before this turns into some sort of food fight. I’d like to actually be able to eat dinner tonight, instead of finding it all over the walls.”
“One time!” Clint argued, “It happened one time and now everyone blames me for it.”

“One time too many,” Steve said with a sigh, “I worked hard on that lasagne.”

“I definitely cannot be blamed for this,” Toni said solemnly, “I was in the lab when all of this went down. This is just Clint’s fault.”

“Nice guys,” he pouted at them all, “I barely even did anything.”

“Make sure you give him the grand tour,” Toni called out as Ava and Barnes walked away from them.

“I’m going to go get Nat,” Harry said, nodding at them both. She grinned after her cousin, not saying a thing, as she, Steve, and Clint were left together in the room.

“I’m just going to leave,” Clint told them, “I’m not even going to come up with an excuse. Just don’t want to be here when the two of you start flirting with each other.”

“We’re not that bad,” she protested, and Clint snorted.

“Please I walked in on the two of you making out here last week. I had to wear a suit to sanitize the area to make sure it was completely clean.”

“We didn’t even do anything!” she protested as Steve blushed. “Just made out.”

“In a common area,” Clint winced. “Just have J summon me whenever dinner is ready. Before that, I’ll just assume that it’s not safe for me to come down here.”

Which left her alone with Steve.

“Are you mad?” she asked, a little unsure. She didn’t regret what she did, but she knew that it was probably better to make sure.

He came around from where the sauce was cooking and wrapped his arms around her waist.

“I’m not happy that you lied to me about where you were going,” Steve said gently, “But you explained why you did it. And you had a good reason for it. You’re right, I would have tried to convince Bucky to come home with me and wouldn’t have listened to him, not really. Because this is his home and I want him here with me.”

“He’s not the same man you once knew,” Toni warned him. “A lot’s happened to him since the time you were friends. And you might never get the ‘Bucky’ you once knew as a friend back. Can you accept that?”

He looked pained at that, “Part of me hates that fact, because it means I’ve let him down. If only I’d been quicker or stronger, I could have held onto him. He wouldn’t have gone through any of the things he went through. And the fact that he’s not the same person, it feels a bit like my fault. Like I’m the reason all of this happened to him. But if I could just get him to remember who he once was then maybe it would make this a little bit better.”

He exhaled, as she let him continue to speak, “But you’re right. It’s not fair to him to expect him to be the same person. Not after everything he’s gone through. That’s a disservice to him because it downplays the torture and pain he’s gone through. And He deserves better than that. So as much as it kills me, I can accept it.”
“Good,” she said, and he pulled her tighter.

“I also don’t want you to feel like you have to lie to me because you think I’ll react poorly,” he said, as she cupped his face. “Tell me the truth and then call me out on it if you disagree with my reaction. But I want us to be open with each other.”

She nodded, “Okay,” she said with a small smile. “I can do that.”

He pulled her in for a kiss and she beamed as she moved against his lips, forgetting about everything around her.

“My eyes!” Harry said loudly, as he walked back into the room. “Spare my innocent eyes.”

She heard a snorting sound as she pulled away from Steve.

“You’re anything but innocent, Carter-Sousa,” Natasha said giving him a sly grin and she stared between the two of them questioningly.

Was there something she’d missed?

Harry gave her an oblivious look when she glanced at him and he simply gave her a nonchalant shrug.

She definitely would be questioning him more about that at a later time, for now she was very curious about what it was that was going on between her cousin and the superspy.

“Dinner’s ready,” Steve told them, and she tried to sneak over and steal a bite before Steve brought it over to the table and he shook his head at her. “You know the rules, wait until it’s on the table and everyone’s down for dinner.”

“You won’t even let me break the rules this once?” she pouted at him as she helped carry the food over. “I thought you loved me.”

“I do but I also know that if I let everyone get into the food before it’s on the table we’ll never have a proper sit down meal,” Steve gave her an amused look.

“The Steve I knew was never this domestic,” she heard a teasing voice as Ava and Barnes returned to the room, “He’d always just grab whatever dinner that day was and run out. Always on the move, that one.”

“Someone had to keep your scrawny ass out of trouble,” Steve shot back, and Barnes let out a deep laugh.

“I’m sorry, I think you’re misremembering our entire relationship,” Barnes said. “I was the one often getting you out of fights.”

“It’s true,” Ava said solemnly, “Mom used to tell us about it.

Steve scowled at them, “Now you’re all just taking sides against me. this isn’t fair. And after I spent all day making dinner.”

“You spent like an hour,” Harry deadpanned, “And half of that was asking JARVIS every ten minutes how far out Toni was still. Face it, you might have cooked this for us, but it was very much because Toni was coming home, and you were excited about that fact.”

She squeezed his hand over the table as Bruce came down to join them, sitting beside Ava before
giving her a quick peck on the lips. Harry looked away after making a big show of it, but Barnes had a surprised look on his face as he glanced over at Ava.

Interesting.

All of this was proving to be very interesting indeed.

“Now you can eat,” Steve said, and she grinned at him as he plated some spaghetti for her, then getting her some garlic bread and vegetables.

“I love you,” she said, and Harry groaned at her.

“I’m trying to eat,” her cousin said. “Can the two of you please stop flirting for more than a few minutes so that I can manage to get some food down?”

“But it’s my civic duty as your older cousin to make your life as miserable as possible,” she teased him, and she could see Ava roll her eyes as Bruce offered her a slice of garlic bread.

“So where’s Peggy and Daniel today?” Steve asked Ava, “I haven’t seen them in a little bit.”

“They wanted to go away for a few days,” Ava told them, “I think they wanted to make up for some of the time that the two of them lost, what with everything that happened. I got them to promise to call if they needed anything, but I think they’ll be fine. Mom’s been doing a lot better recently, and Dad’s always been fine, health wise.”

“Good,” she said, “I’m glad they’re making time for the things that are important. Uncle Daniel asked if I could give him the keys for the Colorado house, but I doubt the two of them will do any skiing or anything. Aunt Peggy always said there were far more enjoyable ways of getting her thrills than tying two boards to her feet and launching herself down a hill.”

“Instead she’d rather take on several enemies at once,” Harry grinned.

“Sounds like she was quite the dame,” Bucky noted, for the first time since sitting down. “She always was so energetic when we were younger. I think half the men in the unit were terrified of her and the other half were in love with her.”

“Which half were you?” Ava asked him and he grinned.

“Oh definitely terrified of her,” Barnes said without hesitation. “I saw what she did to the men in training. I’m not embarrassed to admit that she terrified me. And with good reason. Your mother was one of the best soldiers in the entire unit.”

“She was amazing,” Steve said fondly, as she squeezed his hand, “Still is. Everything with HYDRA put her through, she still managed to turn her life around and come back from it all. She’s always been a fighter.”

She was about to say something, as a loud crack of thunder sounded in the sky, followed by a shot of lighting.

She stood up in her chair quickly, knowing it meant that they had a guest. Someone whom they hadn’t seen since the last time the Avengers assembled.

Steve caught her gaze, as they walked out onto the landing pad on that level. And sure enough, there was Thor, standing with Loki beside him.
“I hope I am not interrupting anything,” Thor said as he looked at all of them.

“No,” Steve said with a shake of his head, “You’re just in time for dinner actually. Unless there is something urgent that the two of you need to discuss?”

Loki looked uncomfortable at being around them all, probably because the last time he was with the Avengers, they were busy fighting him. Even if he was under the influence of the mind stone.

“No, nothing that cannot wait,” Thor shook his head, “I was visiting with Jane and brought Loki along. He’s been working too hard as of late, and he needs a break. At least for a few weeks.”

“I’m fine,” Loki said, sounding like a petulant child, and she wondered how many times they’d had this argument so far.

“Sounds great,” she said, cutting the two of them off from fighting, “Why don’t you both come inside and join us for dinner?”

“Very well, Lady of Iron,” Thor said with a beam, “Let us feast as we catch up with our brothers and sisters in arms.”

Loki gave an exasperated sigh as he followed them back into the tower.

Well, now the Avengers had all gathered under her roof, and she could only assume that things were about to get interesting.
Bringing home James Buchanan Barnes had been one of the harder parts of her plan. She knew that it was going to take a lot to be able to convince the man to come home after everything that had happened in his life. And she’d been right. It had taken ages to track him down and convincing him to come back with her had been an entire ordeal.

But that was only the first part of the plan.

The legal process had already started, what with her lawyers preparing a case for her. And she’d already reached out to the US Government to tell them she had the Winter Soldier in her custody. It had taken a while to convince them to let her be the one to look after him. But given that Barnes hadn’t made any moves to leave her tower, she supposed that certainly helped her case. Barnes was safe from the world, and the world was safe from the Winter Soldier.

She knew he’d probably have to have some sort of public inquiry, either a trial or a hearing or something to be able to fully clear his name. But the most important part so far was to mitigate the risk of the Winter Soldier surfacing again.

Which brought her to where she was now, sitting in the lab, looking over the scans she had of Barnes’ brain pulled up on the screen as Bruce and Ava studied them as well.

“So what’s the plan here, Toni?” Ava said, as she looked over the MRI she’d done of Barnes earlier. “There’s hardly any precedent of how to handle removing brain washing from victims that were prisoners of war.”

“I know,” she let out a sigh, “This isn’t going to be easy. I don’t expect either of you to be able to look at this and just know how to make it all better for Barnes. It’s going to take a lot of work to remove whatever conditioning HYDRA has done to him.”

“We can take a look, I just don’t want you to get your hopes up,” Bruce told her carefully, “This isn’t going to be a walk in the park. HYDRA had nearly seventy years to break Barnes and recreate him in their image. He wasn’t even alive before for half the time they had him under their captivity. James Barnes might not even exist anymore. Are you prepared to accept that?”

“I am,” she said with a nod. “And I’ve talked to Steve. It’s hard for him, but he accepts that as well. Barnes can be whoever he wants to be, as long as it’s not a HYDRA controlled agent. We just need to remove the conditioning done to him.”

“Easier said than done,” Ava sighed, “Just look at these scans. His brain is a mess. Human brains are messy by default. They’re so complex, and of course they are. They make up almost all the processes in the human body. But one that’s been tampered with? That’s completely uncharted territory.”

“Which is why I thought we might need some help,” Toni nodded. “None of us have specialized in the brain and how it works. So I called in someone who knows the brain better than anyone else in
New York, and debatably the entire world.”

“Miss,” JARVIS called out to her, “A Dr Strange is here to see you. I have approved his request as per your earlier note that he would be visiting. He is currently heading towards the labs.”

“Thanks J,” she said as Bruce gave her a surprised look.

“I thought you hated Stephen Strange,” he said, confused.

“I don’t hate him,” she corrected, “I met him once at a party and thought he was pretentious. That’s completely different. Besides, he is probably the most qualified person to help with this kind of thing. So it doesn’t really matter what I think of him. Just what he can do.”

“I’ve never heard kinder words,” a voice said drily from behind her, “Really, please do stop singing my praises, Stark.”

“Strange,” she said, turning around to look at the man, “Thank you for joining us.”

“It’s not every day that such intriguing cases come across my desk,” Strange tilted his head at her. “I almost thought it was some sort of hoax. But of course, the mystery of it all was too great and I just couldn’t stay away.”

“Glad you found it interesting,” she rolled her eyes, “Do you need any more background, or can you take a look at the scans we have so far and make decisions about what our next steps should be.”

“I don’t need anything else from you,” he said, a bit dismissively, “I read the full file you sent over. Let me take a look at your recent scans and see what I can find from it. Of course, I probably will take more; ones that have been done by actual medical doctors and not just those who call themselves doctors after a bit of studies.”

“Of course,” she said, with a bite in her voice. “Well Doctor. Please let me know if there’s anything my team and I can do to assist you. But if you’d rather handle this all on your own, without any help, then go ahead. It’s not like there’s not other components to this or anything.”

He grinned at her, “You’re far more fun than I remember Stark. It’s not every day that I meet someone who can keep up with my banter while actually matching my level of genius. You bother me far less than half the doctors I work with.”

“A ringing endorsement I’m sure,” she said, with a shake of her head. “Anyways, we pulled these scans yesterday, so they’re recent. You can see from the MRI that there’s already quite a bit of behaviour that doesn’t match up with a ‘normal’ MRI scan.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Strange noted, as he looked at her screens. “These are very interesting readings. Are you sure the scans were properly completed?”

“Very sure,” she confirmed moving towards him to take a look at what he was seeing.

“Hm,” he said, as he immediately began to circle stuff on the screen with his finger. “Can you see these spots here? This isn’t normal as per a healthy functioning brain. It looks like they’ve been created over the years, but the tissue isn’t consistent with that of the patterns of a regular brain.”

“So there’s a physical component to this,” she said, confirming one of her original theories, “Whatever was done to him might also be psychological, but we have some physical damage that we’re going to have to clean up.”
“Yes,” Strange nodded in confirmation. “There’s no standard medical protocol for how handle a case of mind control so whatever we decide to do will need to be properly documented. Both for research purposes but also because of legal reasons. We won’t be covered under any of the existing medical practice laws if we don’t. And I’m assuming you’re going to have a legal case soon to allow Barnes to be cleared of all charges. You’re going to need something to give to the courts while doing so to prove that you didn’t make the damage worse, or even use it to your advantage.”

“What do you mean?” Ava asked, a little confused.

“Stark Industries might be out of the weapon producing business, but you were in it for decades. All one prosecutor needs to do is suggest that the Winter Soldier is still susceptible to his conditioning, and that either SI or the Avengers Initiative plans to use him as a weapon.”

Toni pursed her lips at that. While the theory in itself was absolutely ridiculous, she’d known better by now to expect any differently from the world. They’d always rushed to think the worst of her. It wouldn’t be the first time they took something good she did and used it against her to help further themselves.

“So everything needs to be by the book,” Bruce said finally, “We need to pull in some renowned psychologists as well, especially if we think one of the keys to helping him would be to work through his trauma. Regardless of the physical damage done to him, he’s going to have some long-lasting PTSD.”

“I can recommend some names,” Strange nodded. “There are a few doctors around the world that I’d trust for something like this.”

“So what’s our first step?” she asked Strange, “I doubt this is something we can just operate on and remove.”

“Depends,” he contradicted her, “We need to see how he responds to stimuli. This is his brain scans now, as James Barnes, prisoner of war. From what you’ve described, the Winter Soldier seems to be an entirely different entity. Do they have similar brain scans? Is it a separate personality all together? How can we help mitigate that personality? And does his brain show signs of naturally healing when not in the presence of his captors? You’ve described him to have super healing, does that extend to abnormalities in his brain functions as well? Will he just heal if given time and treatment for his PTSD?”

“Sounds complicated,” she noted.

“Very,” he agreed, “This isn’t going to be an easy process, Stark. We have so much we don’t know about the brain, and this is the first recorded case of any sort of mind control, so we have no protocol to follow. It’s going to be a long road ahead of us as we figure out how to heal him. But you must also be comfortable with the idea that we might never be able to heal him. Not fully. It may be possible to treat his trauma and help him readjust to society, but without knowing what was fully done to him, we may never be able to heal him. And even if we did know what was done, we don’t know if there will be anything that can cure this.”

He paused for a second, “The closest thing we would even be able to compare this to is Dissociative Identity Disorder, in which the patient experiences, what we would call, multiple personalities. His brain scans look similar, but I don’t know if I could definitively say that that if we treated it in a similar manner that we’d be able to help him.”

She looked over at Bruce.
“What is the treatment for it?” she asked finally, wanting to know if she had been right in some of her earlier theories of what would be able to help.

“The main treatment for that is psychotherapy,” Strange told her, “Basically where you work through whatever trauma created the other identities in the first place. But that still raises the question of was the Winter Soldier created by Barnes to protect him from the torture? Or did HYDRA create him to be complicit?”

“If psychotherapy does work, would a machine that allowed one to work through their traumas, in a manner that presented it in front of them as if they were in that moment once more, be able to help?” she asked finally.

“Do you have something capable of that?” Strange asked her, a bit suspicious.

She shook her head, “No, not fully. But it was something I’ve been working on as a side project. To help with some of my own traumas that I’ve had through the years. It doesn’t work yet, and it may take a few more weeks before I can even produce a working prototype. But if it could help Barnes, I can increase priority on the project to get it working sooner.”

“It could,” Strange acknowledged, “But it also may not. I cannot say too much about it one way or another, not without knowing more details about Barnes. If you would like me to continue to work on this project, I will need to meet him and conduct some evaluations of my own.”

“I can arrange that,” she nodded.

“Good,” Strange said, “Please call my offices to schedule an appointment with whenever works for you.”

She nodded at him, and he turned, leaving the room quickly.

“Well that was interesting,” Ava noted, looking after the man.

“He’s certainly a character,” Bruce said wryly.

“He’s also the best in his field,” she shrugged, “Slightly obnoxious personality or not, he’s our best chance of being able to truly help Barnes, so I’m willing to work with him for as long as needed until we are able to come up with a suitable solution to helping Barnes.”

“Have you considered what’s going to happen if you can’t?” Ava asked her gently, “What if there’s nothing we can do? Your entire legal defense is based on the premise that we’re able to help Barnes and free him from his conditioning. What if we can’t? What are you going to do when the US Government and every other government comes knocking on our doors to demand they take him in?”

“I won’t let them,” she said firmly. “Even if we can’t help him, I’m still Toni Stark, and I will not let them come into my home and take him. Barnes will be safe here, for as long as he wants to stay. He will have nothing to fear while he is here.”

“Okay,” Ava said, satisfied.

“Ms?” JARIVS called out then, “Mr Rogers would like to know if you and your ‘science bros’ are going to be joining the team for movie night. I believe he wants to show Mr Barnes Star Trek.”

“Is Peter present?” she asked quickly, “Because he would never stand for such an atrocity.”
“Mr Parker is not present,” JARVIS confirmed for her, “He is currently at band practise.”

“Good,” she said firmly. She knew Barnes was harmless, and in the case he was not, there was more than enough security around the Tower with all of them there. But still, watching Star Trek? At Steve’s suggestion? Peter may never forgive the man for even suggesting such a thing. “Please let Steve know we’re on our way.”

Ava grinned at her, and she quickly got JARVIS to save their projects before they made their way back up to the common floor where the Avengers were currently all assembled around the couch. Even Loki, as unamused as he looked, sat on an armchair slightly off to the side. She saw Steve in the middle, with Barnes on one side of him and an empty spot next to him on the other.

She sat down beside him, quickly pressing a kiss to his lips, and he smiled at her.

“Did you have a productive session?” he asked her carefully.

“I did,” she nodded, “We learned some new things, confirmed some old things. But we have a good basis to start with. But we need to all remember somethings.”

“In that?” Steve questioned.

“In that this is going to be a long process,” she told both Steve and Barnes gently, “There isn’t going to be some overnight fix for everything. We need to remember that. But we also need to remember that no matter what happens, Barnes is safe now. And nothing’s going to happen to him from here on out.”

“Thank you,” Barnes said softly, “For everything, Stark.”

“Toni,” she told him. “Call me Toni. If you’re going to live here from now on, you might as well use my first name.”

“Toni,” Barnes tested it out on his tongue.

“A beautiful name for a beautiful Lady,” Loki commented, and she winked at him.

“We’ve discussed this, Reindeer Games,” she wagged a finger at him, “I am very much taken.”

“A shame,” he drawled, and Steve shook his head amusedly.

“Can you call me James?” he asked her, and she looked at him. “I’ve spent so long unable to use my name. To being reduced to nothing more than just the soldier. I think I would like to go by James. Or Bucky. Please, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” she said gently. “Whatever makes you more comfortable. You do not need to ask for permission for your own happiness, James. If there’s anything I can do to make your life easier, just let me know. And if you can’t find me for some reason, as JARVIS, and he’ll take care of it immediately.”

“You’ve already done so much,” James said, a bit overwhelmed.

“That’s just who Toni Stark is,” Clint said, coming from the kitchen with bowls of popcorn in his arms. “She gives her best to make the world happy. She adopted all of us, didn’t she?”

“That she did,” Natasha said, glancing over at her carefully.

“I still appreciate it,” James said, as Clint handed out the popcorn.
Steve squeezed her hand, “She’s something, isn’t she?”

“You did real well for yourself, Stevie,” Barnes grinned at him, “Your Ma would have loved her.”

“Yes, she would have,” Steve gave her a gentle look. “She also would have embarrassed me endlessly with stories of me growing up until Toni ran away screaming from boredom.”

“She sounds like she was amazing,” Toni grinned, “I would have loved to have met her. And to have heard some of these stories about you.”

“I still have plenty of those,” James said, and Steve let out a groan.

“Please don’t,” he pleaded, “She thinks I’m cool. Please don’t ruin that for me.”

“Darling, I never thought you were cool,” she let out a laugh, “I just love you despite all of that.”

“My heart,” Steve said, grasping his chest dramatically.

“Okay enough of this,” Natasha said throwing a pillow at the group of them, “Can we please start this movie at some point today before we get old and die of boredom?”

“JARVIS?” Toni asked, and the film began playing on the screen.

Steve kissed her forehead and she leaned into his chest, as his arm wrapped around her. There was going to be a lot that she’d need to do to figure out how to help Barnes. But for now, she would just live in the moment. And that would be enough.

Harry walked into the Tower a few days later, looking agitated and she immediately went over to him.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, as he shook his head.

“Is everyone here?” he asked her quickly and she nodded.

“Yeah, they’re all around here somewhere. I think Steve and Nat are training, Bruce and Ava are looking over some samples, Thor and Jane are making up for lost time, and Loki is brooding in the library. Clint’s probably in a vent or something, but we’re all here. Why, what happened?” she asked him again.

“I need you to gather everyone,” he said firmly, “Something’s come up and we need everyone on board.”

“Avengers level on board?” she asked him, a bit warily. They hadn’t done any full Avengers missions since New York, with Thor off world, and Bruce choosing to leave himself as a reserve in case of emergencies for most missions. And she’d hardly suited up as Iron Woman for actual fighting since they’d fought HYDRA in Washington. Sure, she’d suited up from time to time to help out with rescue missions and the such, but it wasn’t the same.

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“Gather everyone,” Harry said again, not denying what she was thinking, and she let out a sigh.

“JARVIS, can you ask everyone to come down to the common level please? Tell them it’s urgent and that we need everyone here,” Toni said, “Including Loki and James. They may be able to provide insight if we need any.”

“They are on their way,” JARVIS confirmed, “ETA in thirty seconds.”
Well that was certainly quick. It was barely a few moments before the full Avengers stood in front of her, and she looked over at Harry.

“What’s happened?” Steve asked, crossing his arms as he looked at them.

“We’ve still been sorting through everything at SHIELD,” Harry told them, “After the fall in Washington and since Stark Industries provided us with a new home. And as such, we’ve still been trying to find half our lost weapons and tech and make sure that everything is accounted for. There’s been a lot of work that’s been needed to have been done to make sure that everything is still in check.”

“And I’m assuming something is missing,” Natasha noted, “What is it? What did HYDRA get their hands on?”

“Loki’s scepter,” Harry let out a deep breath, and the reactions around the room were instantaneous.

“What do you mean they took the scepter?” Steve immediately asked.

“The same scepter that had us under its control?” Clint demanded, “The same one that caused us to hurt people? That scepter?”

“Yes,” Harry confirmed, “It was supposed to be locked up deep in SHIELD’s underground faculties so only certain members could access it until we knew it was safe. But when going through the faculty, we found that it wasn’t there. That it had never been there.”

“What does that mean?” Ava asked her brother, reaching out to grab his hand. She knew this must have been rough for him, given that he’d gone through so much because of it. He’d still had nightmares from time to time about everything that had happened because of the scepter.

“It never made it there,” Harry said grimly, “HYDRA took it long before it ever reached the site. They’ve been in possession of the scepter for the last few years. And we have no idea where it is now.”

“I can trace it,” Loki said for the first time, and Thor looked at his brother in surprise.

“Brother are you sure?” Thor asked him carefully.

“Yes,” Loki said with a nod. “I was under its presence for the longest. I can trace its energy signatures and find out where it’s being kept.”

“That’s only one of the issues,” Harry said shaking his head, “Even with knowing where it is, we need to get it back. We believe List has the scepter and if that’s true, he’s been conducting experiments on it this entire time. We need to get it back, before any more damage is done with it. Who knows what they’ve been up to this entire time? It’s been three years, and if they’ve had it for three years, it cannot be good. We need to get it back.”

“If you need help finding some of the bases I may be able to remember where some of them were located,” James said finally, “Once you get a location on it. As the Winter Soldier I went to quite a few of them. And I-I remember seeing scepter of sorts once. Only briefly. I wasn’t told what it was, nor did I have any idea of what it did. If I had I would have told you all immediately.”

“It’s not on you, Bucky,” Steve said quickly. “We have plenty of time to go over other HYDRA related stuff with you later. We still have quite a few operatives to bring in. But in the meantime, the most important thing is finding the scepter and returning it here. And then finding out what was done with it. Without those two things, we cannot proceed.”
She looked over at Steve, nodding in agreement. “Loki, do you know how long it will take you to get a reading on where you think it is so we can see if James remembers any of the bases in that area?”

“I need a little bit of time,” he told the group, “Not too long, but I just need to get a focus on the energy from the scepters.”

She nodded as Thor looked slightly worried for his brother.

“Of course,” Steve said, looking over at the group, “In the meantime, everyone gather your gear. I want everyone ready to go as soon as we have the information as to where the base is. Avengers, it’s time to assemble.”
The Sokovian Bunker

Chapter Summary

The Avengers retrieve the Scepter

Despite his past experiences with the Scepter, Loki had opted not to join them on their mission to Sokovia to retrieve it. As he explained to them, he had never been a fighter back on Asgard nor did he enjoy going with Thor into battle most of the time. And as it was simply a find and retrieve sort of mission, it wasn’t as if they needed the manpower.

There were no signs that the base there was heavily active, so one less fighter on their team hardly made a difference.

Barnes on the other hand, very much needed to stay behind. Despite wanting him to have a life of his own, it would hardly do for him to be seen frolicking in other countries when he didn’t even have a pardon in his own yet. Nor was his mind fully freed yet of HYDRA, so the last thing any of them needed was to throw him straight into HYDRA’s grasp.

So the Avengers geared up and boarded the jet to head towards the small European country.

“Are you sure it’s wise to just go in there and retrieve it?” Harry asked her carefully, as he took a seat next to her. “Who knows what they’ve been doing with the scepter over the last few years. You saw what happened when Loki used it; he almost brought down New York. And that was while under its control. What happens if it’s used against us by someone with their full will power?”

“What do you mean?” Clint asked with a frown.

“You know what I mean,” Harry looked over at him. “While we were under it’s control we had to obey but there were still loop holes. Removing threats didn’t have to mean killing them. We could simply knock them out. Loki didn’t bring about anywhere near as much damage as both know that he could have with a fleet of that size. He held himself back. Because he didn’t want to take over Earth. He was under the control of someone else entirely. But HYDRA has the full control of the scepter and won’t have anything holding them back like Loki did. We don’t even fully get how it’s magic works. What’s to stop us from being put under its control once more?”

“I have something for that once we retrieve it,” she told her cousin. “Back when I talked to Loki in the tower alone, he tried to use the scepter against me. But the energy in the Arc Reactor cancelled it out. The reactor’s based on the Tesseract which we know has similar energy readings. So I designed a box to carry it, powered by arc reactor technology to be able to safely transport it.”

“Is the transport that big of a deal?” Steve asked her, “Over fighting HYDRA?”

“Don’t you remember the Helicarrier?” she asked him, “It was messing with our minds and caused us to fight amongst ourselves while just lying there. I’m not going to take that risk while we have it on board.”

“We also don’t know what state the scepter’s in,” Natasha warned them, “They’ve most likely been experimenting with it. Anything could have been done with it in the meantime. They could have
taken it apart and weaponized it into more modern tech, like guns. They could have done countless things with the technology. We need to be prepared for anything. The last thing we need is that power unleashed on the world again.”

“Why is why retrieving the scepter is our highest priority,” Steve said, nodding to all of them. “Taking down HYDRA at the base is secondary.”

“We will be landing shortly,” JARVIS announced to them, and she nodded around the room.

The base was surrounded by forest, and she knew that despite the tree cover they had, they wouldn’t stay hidden for long.

“What’s our plan, Captain?” she asked Steve, as her body was encased in the armour.

“We need to get in as close as possible to the base,” Steve told her. “Unfortunately, I don’t know if we can make it by foot; we’re too far out. But we couldn’t land any closer without them detecting us.”

“If we take a vehicle, they’ll see us coming,” she said, glancing at the others.

“They’re going to know we’re coming the minute we get within range,” Natasha said with a shrug. “Based on my intel, the base is under heavy surveillance. We won’t have the element of surprise this time. Our best bet is going to be to just attack and fight.”

“So going in guns blazing?” she asked with a grin.

“Guns blazing,” Harry grinned back.

“Let’s do it,” Clint nodded, glancing at the cars they had in the jet. There was a jeep and a motorcycle.

“If I Hulk up there’s no way that I can fit in that,” Bruce said, looking around the room.

“We’ll go with you,” Toni said reassuringly. “I can fly and Thor has his hammer flying power.”

“We shall accompany you into battle,” Thor beamed at Bruce.

“Nat, Harry and I can take the jeep,” Clint nodded, “Which leaves the motorcycle for Steve.”

He grinned down at it, “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

She turned to leave, as Steve grabbed her hand.

“Steve?” she asked him in surprise, as the others all began gathering their things. She lifted her mask to be able to look at him, and he cupped her face.

“Stay safe out there, Darling,” he said, brushing his thumb against her cheek. “No reckless antics okay?”

“I could say the same for you,” she said, wrapping an arm around his waist. “You always run into battle without a second glance.”

“I know,” he sighed heavily. “I just want you to know that I love you.”

“I love you too,” she said, and he kissed her softly. She closed her eyes, leaning into him, as a cough broke them apart.
“Shouldn’t the two of you join the others?” Ava’s voice said, coming over the intercom, interrupting them from what they were doing.

“Maybe,” she said, burying her head into Steve’s chest.

“We’ll continue this when we get home,” he said, growing slightly and she laughed as she stepped back from his arms.

“Let’s go join the others in the field,” she said, putting her mask back on.

“Avengers, Assemble!” Steve said and together, they charged towards the HYDRA base.

Of course, it only took a few minutes before everything fell apart. Just after clearing the tree line, it seemed as if they had immediately been spotted.

Not that she was surprised, given that they were literally driving into a HYDRA base.

“Report to your stations immediately. This is not a drill. We are under attack. We are under attack,” she heard an announcer call out over the station.

She flew straight towards the base, only to be blocked by some sort of shield. Of course they had some sort of shield.

“Shit,” she swore as she flew back towards it, scanning for any way in.

“Language,” Steve chided her jokingly and she grinned despite knowing he wouldn’t be able to see her anyways. “I, what’s it look like out there?”

“The central building is protected by some kind of energy shield. Strucker’s technology is well beyond any other Hydra base we’ve taken,” JARVIS told them from the satellites.

“Thanks Baby,” she said.

She looked at the blasts that were coming her way in a bit of shock. It wasn’t that she didn’t expect HYDRA to have some advanced weaponry, however what they were using was high tech. Far more than she would have given them credit for.

Peter would say that it almost looked like something out of Star Wars.

What with the blasts being brightly coloured and looking like the weaponry of that movie.

“Loki’s scepter must be here. Strucker couldn’t mount this defense without it. At long last,” Thor said, grunting as he fought some of the soldiers.

She could see Nat and Harry on the ground, fighting soldiers hand to hand. She’d seen her cousin fight before, but seeing them on the ground was something else altogether, and she could see Aunt Peggy’s fighting style with every move he pulled.

“At long last is lasting a little long, boys,” Natasha said, as she took down a HYDRA agent.

“Yeah, okay, we definitely did not have any element of surprise,” Clint said with a grin.

“We knew that going in,” Steve reminded them.

“I know,” Clint acknowledged, “I just wished it would have lasted a bit longer.”
“Are we not going to talk about how my boyfriend just used the word ‘language’?” she asked the group. “Especially given I’ve heard him say worse in the bedroom.

“She’s got you there, Cap,” Clint said.

“I didn’t need to know that,” Harry moaned.

“I know,” Steve sighed, “It slipped out.”

“Always the gentleman,” she laughed.”

He flipped off his motorcycle then, throwing it at the incoming agents.

“I may need a new bike,” he said with a shrug. “Mine seems to have exploded.”

“We’ll get one when we get home,” she acknowledged. “After we’ve dealt with these snakes.”

“Miss, the city is taking fire,” JARVIS told her urgently, “We need to get them to cover.”

“Well, we know Strucker’s not going to worry about civilian casualties. Send in the Iron Legion,” she said, referring to her bots that she’d made for cases like this. After New York she couldn’t have there be any more civilian casualties on her hands. Not when they would be on her hands.

“Guys there’s something out here,” Clint said with a groan.

“Clint!” Nat called over the comms.

“We have an enhanced on the field,” Steve said to them muffled.

“Clint’s been hit,” Natasha called out. “Somebody want to deal with that bunker?”

The Hulk roared over the comms and she knew Bruce would be on it.

“Thank you,” Natasha told him.

“Toni we need to get inside,” Steve said to her and she nodded.

“I’m closing in; or at least I think I am. J, do you see a power source for that shield?” she asked, blasting a HYDRA agent with her repulsor.

“There’s a pathway under the north tower,” JARVIS told her, “You’re close to it.”

“Great, I wonder if I can poke it with something,” she murmured, flying up to it as she took out soldiers along the way. She aimed another repulsor blast at it, only for it to be blocked.

“Time to bring out the big guns,” she said, and she blasted one of her missiles straight at the spot JARVIS had locked in on. She watched as the blue shield began to fall. “The drawbridge is down people.”

“The enhanced?” Thor asked.

“He’s a blur. All the new player’s we’ve faced, I’ve never seen this. In fact, I still haven’t,” Steve told them.

“Clint’s hit pretty bad, guys. We’re gonna need evacuate,” Natasha said to them urgently. “We need to get him help.
“I can get Barton to the jet. The sooner we’re gone the better. Cap and Toni can secure the scepter,” Thor said, as he flew towards where Clint was lying.

“Copy that,” Steve acknowledged.

“The HYDRA agents are being to line up,” Thor cautioned them, “They have metal tanks at their disposal.”

“Well they’re excited,” Steve commented. “Better give them a show.”

She looked back as she saw the blast left from Thor hitting Steve’s shield.

“Find the scepter,” Thor told them both.

“And watch your language, for goshes sake,” she said, and Steve sighed.

“Are you ever going to let that go?” he asked her.

“Never, Darling,” she cooed.

She entered the base then, hovering with the help of her repulsors, as the agents of HYDRA began shooting at her.

She sighed, why did they always think their guns could penetrate her armour? Men. They always thought they could stick it in wherever they wanted.

“Guys, stop, we gotta talk about this,” she chided them lightly as she landed. Her shoulder pads lifted as her suit began shooting back at them. Well they had the chance to stop shooting. “Good talk.”

“No it wasn’t,” one of the wounded soldiers said from the ground as he groaned.

She moved through the base, as she approached the control room. She saw a man there and raised her arm quickly, knocking him out before she had the chance to react.

She stepped out of the suit, knowing she wouldn’t be able to do any hacking in it.

“Sentry mode,” she said to the suit, and it put itself in stasis.

She walked over to the computer and began typing, as she downloaded the files, “Okay JARVIS,” she said, “I want it all, Sweetheart. Copy it to Hill at HQ.”

She continued typing, looking at the semantics of the base. “I know you’re hiding more than just files. Barnes recognized this base. That means there must be more to this here. He wouldn’t have come here for just a file storage location. So what are you hiding?”

She looked on the screen, “Hey J, give me an IR scan of the room, real quick.”

She looked around the room, knowing that there must have been more to it than what she was seeing.

“The wall to your left,” JARVIS said to her, “I'm reading steel reinforcement and an air current.”

Air current. Why would a wall have air current to it. Unless…

She walked up to the wall, “Please be a secret door, please be a secret door, please be a secret door...”
She pushed against it and it opened up, as the bricks slid to the side. She beamed at it, more than pleased that she had been right in her assessment. “Yay!”

“Baron Strucker. Hydra’s number one thug,” she heard Steve call out, and she tensed.

“Technically, I’m a thug for SHIELD,” she could hear Strucker respond and she nearly threw something.

“Well then technically you’re unemployed,” Steve told him sarcastically, “Where’s Loki’s scepter?”

“Don’t worry, I know when I’m beat. You’ll mention how I cooperated, I hope,” she heard the man say.

“I’ll put it right under illegal human experimentation,” Steve said firmly. “How many are there?”

She heard Steve groan then, “We have a second enhanced. Female. Do not engage.”

“Steve are you alright?” she asked him quickly.

“I’m fine,” he said quickly, “I still have company to deal with.”

“You’ll have to be faster than-” Strucker started, before Steve knocked him out.

“Guys, I got Strucker.” Steve said.

“Yeah,” she said softly, “Well I got something...bigger.”

She walked around the room, seeing artifacts from the Battle of New York. There was a giant Chitauri leviathan in the sky, as well as some of the Iron Woman armour.

How much had HYDRA scrounged up and taken from right under their noses? How long had they been doing this for? And how didn’t she see this before?

If only she’d known. She could have stopped so much from happening. Her parents. Aunt Peggy. Her own kidnapping. She could have prevented so much of it.

“Thor, I got eyes on the prize,” she said, as she spotted the scepter.

“Be careful, Stark,” Loki’s voice came over the comms, “It’s a dangerous weapon. Do not allow yourself to fall under its spell.”

A red mist came over her then, and she felt herself grow overwhelmed, as fear filled her systems.

She dropped to the ground, filled with pain.

The world around her began to fade, and the leviathan behind her came to life as it soared in front of her. She turned and suddenly she was in the black hole again. She couldn’t breathe as panic overtook her.

No. No. NO!

She couldn’t be here. She escaped. She made it back. She was safe. She had been safe.

Hadin’t she?

What if that had all been a dream. A figment of her own imagination as she suffocated for air and
hallucinated. What if none of it had ever been real?

She let out a sob as she struggled to breathe.

Please.

She couldn’t be back there. She couldn’t go back there. She needed to go back to her life. To her home. To Steve.

Please.

She looked around her and saw Bruce in his Hulk form struggling to breathe as he whimpered on the ground. Nat was dead on the ground lifeless. Clint and Thor had their eyes closed, as if they had simply fallen asleep.

Harry was covering Ava with his own body, but there was no mistaking that both of them were gone. They were dead as well. Just like everyone else in her life.

And Steve, with his shield cracked in half lay there, cold and still.

No. please.

They couldn’t be dead.

She needed them. They were her family. Please.

She bent down, to touch his face, to see if he was okay.

And she nearly fell back as he reached up and grabbed her hand.

“You…could…have…saved…us,” Steve said, gasping for air, before his hand dropped and he stared at her face with lifeless eyes.

No.

She stumbled backwards sobbing, as she looked around the room. No it couldn’t be.

She looked around and saw Aunt Peggy lying there as Uncle Daniel held her hand and she lay there in pain.

“Please,” she cried out.

“You should have stopped this,” Uncle Daniel told her, anger in his eyes. “After everything we’ve done for you over the years, you should have saved us. We gave you a home. We have you a family. And in turn, you let us die. What kind of monster does that make you?”

“Please, I did everything I could,” she sobbed. “I tried to save you all.”

“Bambina,” she heard a voice say and she sobbed more. She turned around to see her mother looking at her with pained eyes. “Why did you let us die? I loved you. And you let us down. You let all of us down.”

“Mom,” she said, trying to wipe away her tears. “Please no. Not you.”

“You could have saved us,” Steve said, his voice echoing in her head. “You should have saved us. Why didn’t you do more?”
“Toni?” Steve said, as the mist began to clear. “Toni what happened?” he asked.

She sobbed and he pulled her into his arms. The initial fear that had plagued her was gone, but it didn’t do anything to stop the pain that filled her. The pain from seeing everyone in her life. Everyone that she had loved, dead in front of her. That pain did not fade.

“You were dead,” she said, struggling to breathe. “I saw you and you were dead.”

“I’m here,” he said soothingly, “I’m here and I’m not going anywhere. I promise. Now let’s get this scepter and get out of here, okay? Let’s go home.”

She nodded, as he stepped away from her and grabbed the scepter. He turned back to face her, holding her hand tightly as the two of them left the secret room. She wrapped herself in her armour, feeling safe.

She thought she was doing better. That her PTSD was under control. And yet here she was having attacks in the middle of the field, just from seeing a Chitauri soldier. She couldn’t let this happen to her. Not again. Not when it would put the others at risk.

She didn’t say a word to anyone as they made their way back to the jet as Steve coordinated their departure. She still took out the odd HYDRA agent that she saw, but without saying anything.

Steve shot her worried looks from time to time, but she couldn’t bring herself to talk to him more than giving nods of agreement that she was doing okay. Not when all of this was too much.

“Darling talk to me,” he said, sitting down beside her as he took her hand in his. “I came to find you when you stopped responding to me over the comms. I had JARVIS tell me how to find you, and when I do, you’re sobbing on the ground, begging for it to be a dream. You kept saying my name. Please, at least tell me what happened to you. Please tell me what all of that was.”

“I saw all of you,” she whispered. “You were all dead, Steve. All of you were dead on the ground and there was nothing I could do to help. It was all my fault. I should have saved you and I didn’t; I couldn’t. It was my fault. I let all of you down. I’ve spent years since New York trying to make sure that nothing like that ever happens again but it still wasn’t enough. I still wasn’t enough. I still let you all die and there was nothing I could do to stop it. And even worse, I had a panic attack in the middle of the battle. I put all of you at risk by having a panic attack. Do you have any idea just how bad that is? What if it put you all at risk? What if I started fighting you?”

“Toni you haven’t had a nightmare in months,” he said to her gently, “Don’t you think it’s a little odd that you had one now? Right when you were in the middle of that fight?”

“Well I haven’t exactly come face to face with many Chitauri soldiers until now,” she pointed out to him. “We don’t know that I wouldn’t have reacted similarly if it happened sooner.”

“Toni did you see anything strange before you had the vision?” he said, ignoring her and pushing on. “Before you started to see the black hole and all of us dying in front of you? Did you see anything?”

“I saw a red mist,” she said, a bit hazily. “What does that have to even do with any of this?”

“The enhanced girl who attacked me,” Steve said, “She had a red mist about her when she shoved me down the steps. It was freaky. Like it somehow gave her the power to attack me without even touching me.”

“What are you saying?” she asked, a bit sharply. “That this girl attacked me too?”
“Do you know that she didn’t? he challenged her. “Hill can go through all the reports of the two enhanced, but we don’t know what their powers were. What if she did this to you? What if she caused you to see all those things? Even in all your nightmares, have you ever seen anything like that?”

She paused for a moment, as he rubbed her hand with the back of her thumb. She thought to herself about whether what he was saying could be true and shuddered.

“No. I’ve never seen anything like that. Even with my panic attacks. It was never with other people there. Or if it did, it would have one of you. Not all of you, there, dead. It’s never been like this before,” she said to him.

He wrapped an arm around her, and she leaned into him, taking comfort in his warmth.

“Whatever this was that happened, we’re going to get to the bottom of it, okay, Toni? Together. You and I are going to figure out what this was and what happened together. I promise, it’s going to be okay.”

He pressed a kiss against her forehead, and she tried to allow herself to relax. To let go of all the worries she’d been facing. But no matter how hard she tried, the fear would not fade. It was like it was embedded within her.

Something was out there. She knew that much. Someone had sent Loki to earth to carry out their bidding. Something was coming their way. And to pretend it wasn’t was pure ignorance.

And she couldn’t ignore it any longer. Not when her loved ones were at risk. Not when she could lose them all.

She had to stop it. That much was certain. And she wouldn’t rest until she had.

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