The Forge

by BambooTora

Summary

Georgia Maddix, aka Forge, a metal bending mutant mechanic, meets Tony Stark while moonlighting as a construction worker at his Expo. It wouldn't have been a problem except for the thong, the undercover agents, and the Murderbots. Unfortunately when the dust settles Stark thinks she's a superhero, and SHIELD thinks she's a target.
Disclaimer: I don't own Iron Man. His shiny metal ass belongs to Marvel. I also don't own The Black Keys. I just get to use them in my puppet show. The show doesn't make any money and neither do I. Also, no puppets were harmed in the making of this.

Prologue

The first time Forge met the Iron Man she was bending reinforced steel beams into the path of the Hammer Tech drones chasing him. It was a fraction of a second. The red-gold flash, followed by the silver of War Machine, flew overhead as she flexed her fingers, and the building in front of her sprouted metaphorical claws. When she ducked back out from behind the truck with the little girl she’d grabbed, three drones were down. There were more though. So Forge was too busy to wonder over how the stumbling wreck of a drunk she’d found in a back alley of the expo a month before, could manage all those G forces without throwing up his toenails. Repeatedly.

The first time Georgia Maddix met Tony Stark, however, it had been a perfectly normal work day. Although, in retrospect, both days had gone to shit at about the same rate.

Chapter 1: The Drunken Billionaire

“Gold on the ceiling. I ain’t blind just a matter of time before you steal it. It’s alright ain’t no guard in my house.” Gold on the Ceiling by The Black Keys

2010 Stark Expo Construction Site, T-Minus 28 days to Open.

Forge had a headache. It was nearly half passed nine in the morning and she’d been stuck inside the safety briefing slash ass chewing for over two hours. They were in a glorified shipping container. The room smelled like expensive cologne and pit sweat, and at this point she was considering if crushing the tin can they were sitting in would be considered a mercy killing, or justifiable homicide.

She glanced across the despondent faces of the other crew leaders and then back to the stuffed suit tribunal. Both. Definitely both.

It wasn’t even her crew that had screwed up, but safety meetings were always held like this. So far, it had taken the whole morning to explain that the crew responsible for the KoleTech Demonstration Center had missed a Lego, and now the main entryway arch for it was a possible danger to expo-goers. Whatever. Idiot Zero’s crew couldn’t tell the difference in bolt sizes, and He-of-construction-shame didn’t inspect his crew’s work, so now Forge’s morning was gone. Also, the headache.

She aimed a glare at the side of Idiot Zero’s head until he sensed it and turned her way. “Yes,” her glare said as she narrowed her eyes. “This is your fault.” He hastily looked away. Clyde, who still had a name because he could do his damn job, reached from his seat next to her and patted her hand. Forge went back to her fantasies of can crushing and murder.

It was another forty five minutes with the corporate dementors before they were dismissed with reminders that all of their worksites would have building inspectors popping up in the next two weeks. Forge waved to a few of the guys she knew over her shoulder as she escaped out the door.

Air. Sweet and blessed, horrid-cologne-free, air met her. The guys would be on a mass lunch break about now, but before she could snag a sandwich, Forge needed pain relief.
She hustled down the isle and took a swift left. Medical was in the back isle closest to the main stage with the rest of the office boxes. It was also willing to give out Tylenol like candy. She could hit it and be back to her crew in five minutes. Unfortunately her neat plan was destroyed when another guy in a stupid, stupid suit pin balled out of a cross alley just in front of her.

She managed to avoid the collision. The little bits of metal she could sense on him gave her a heads up. The strange concentration of it in his chest confused her, but her thoughts were shoved to the side when she smelled him. Wow, she could probably light a match and the man would fireball, the alcohol fumes were so dense. The man unfortunately had the coordination to match the smell and did a header into the dividing wall without even bringing up his arms in front of his face. Ouch. Upside, medical was super close.

Her patience was so worn she actually hesitated over whether to make sure the man was still alive or just go eat lunch. She didn’t have a lot of tolerance for people that blazed on her good days. In the end she rolled her eyes to the sky, thought of her Uncle and Judy, and bent down to roll the dude onto his back.

“Still alive?”

Captain Hot Mess blinked at her and muttered something about vultures.

“Alright,” Forge drawled. “Let’s get you up. Do not. Barf on me.”

In the second it took her to reach down for his arm her brain connected the man’s face to her memories. A little despairing groan squeaked out of her throat. Captain Hot Mess was Tony Stark, and Tony Stark was currently playing rubber legged Gumby hanging off her shoulder and making little hissing noises with his mouth. Seriously? Fuck you Universe. Fuck you.

Her first instinct was to drop him. Everything she’d ever heard about the man screamed high profile trouble, and she wanted zero of it. He probably wouldn’t even remember it, but self preservation reminded her that this man was her boss. Sort of. He was her boss in the same way Bill Gates was the boss to Microsoft software monkeys everywhere. Also, she couldn’t get Judy’s voice out of her head.

“Let’s get you to medical.” Her tone was resigned. She was mostly carrying the man. Their height differences weren’t much and it seemed all he could do was put a single foot down for every three of her steps. Apparently a dozen steps in though, hers not his, what she’d said sunk into his brain. He wrenched his body back off her shouting a loud, “No!” Forge was impressed by how much he sounded exactly like an angry toddler.

Between her grip on his arm and his freakish fit of drunken strength he gained his footing, and then promptly vomited on the ground between them. It was green. It spattered her work boots. They both stared at the sick, then slowly back up at each other. Forge could feel her teeth clenched together.

“You owe me boots,” she demanded.

Tony Stark chose that moment to pass out, and even though she really wanted to, Forge didn’t drop him. It felt like a bad omen.

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Convincing medical to let her go with electrolyte pouches was harder than just getting the Tylenol. They wanted to actually doctor her for something like dehydration. When she asked for two doses of Tylenol for seemingly one person she had to take drastic measures. So much for candy.
She drug a nurse aside to explain she’d been a bit free with partying the night before (someone certainly had, but not her), been in a closed off box with smellly construction men, (certainly smellly, but surprisingly it was the suits that stunk), and she really needed to get back to work because she’d seen Tony Stark wandering the premises (true, so, so true). The woman was so excited about the possibility of seeing the Tony Stark she pushed Forge out the door.

Juggling her ill gotten gains, Forge made her way a fair few stalls down to the back of a souvenir shack. Forge remembered that Clyde’s crew had put this up, which meant that not only did it have all the Lego’s, the pipe crew had been by to turn on the water. Stark was where she left him, laying on his side, head propped on a plastic wrapped stack of expo t-shirts. If he puked on them he could replace them. She was sure he was good for it.

She ran the water for a bit just to double check the pipes were clear, then topped up her ever present water bottle. She would probably have to throw it away after sharing it with him, she thought mournfully. Possible diseases. Yuck. There was not enough bleach in all the land.

Wake him up? Not wake him up? Forge contemplated her plan of attack. He needed water. Wake him up it was. A twitch of her wrist and some water splashed on his face. He sputtered and tried to sit up. So she was being intentionally shitty first. She wasn’t a saint.

“You need to sit up and drink some water, please.” Forge didn’t use his name on purpose. She was going to pretend she had no clue who the hell he was. Plausible deniability.

He was still sputtering when she shoved her arm under his shoulders and manhandled him upright. The water bottle was likewise shoved into his face. Surprisingly he sipped from it without question. Forge had a sad sinking feeling enough other people in his life had run this rodeo before.

When she thought he had enough she pulled back, capped the bottle, and slowly eased off the pressure on his back. He managed to remain sitting upright. She didn’t give him the electrolyte pouch yet though. She herself had run this particular rodeo enough to know there was bound to be another round of bucking.

Tony Stark, most eligible bachelor, People magazine’s sexiest man alive 2009, smacked his lips like he’d eaten ten day old shit. He looked like he’d been on a train to Hell, tried to escape, and been run over. Twice. “Who?” he muttered.

“Not important.” Forge tried to hand the water bottle to him but he wouldn’t take it. She tossed it in his lap, which apparently was ok with him, because he picked it up. He seemed more with it. Sure. Why not?

He fumbled with the cap and took another gulp. “Where?”

“Ah, more important. Stark Expo.”

The man the expo was named after blinked confusedly. “Is it opening night already?”

Forge couldn’t stop herself this time. “Jesus Captain Hot Mess, how many consecutive days have you been drunk?” It wasn’t night out! You couldn’t go blind from alcohol could you? Wait. Hadn’t Judy said something about moonshine that one time? “Have you been drinking white lightning?”

Stark made the face of a man who had to poop. She was a mechanic moonlighting as a construction worker. She knew that face. Forge was not dealing that with that shit, literally. Stark managed a raspy “no” before doubling over to the side for the second round of vomiting. At least this time it went in a trash can and not on her boots.
“I’m going to have to upgrade your nickname. This is above and beyond hot mess.” She propped herself against the wall watching Stark’s back heave. When he finished wiping his mouth she looked him straight in the eyes. “You are henceforth dubbed Captain Catastrophe.”

His lip twitched a bit. “Sounds bad ass.”

“Yeah,” Forge drawled, “But it’s not.”

Forge ended up calling her second to let him know she was hung up and probably wouldn’t make it back to the site. Ah, the perks of being middle management. While she was on the phone Stark puked twice more. In between the fourth and fifth time she filled her water bottle, tossed it back into the billionaire’s lap (he was being weird about it), told him the actual date, and then played angry birds.

When a half hour had passed without upchuck, and he seemed a shade more human Forge went foraging. Some poor worker setting up an isle over sacrificed his peanut butter crackers, unknowingly of course. Whatever, this was a situation Dumbledore.

When she made it back from her second trip involving ill gains within a handful of hours that omen feeling Forge had earlier grew from a vague blob to a more humanoid shape. It was suspiciously Stark shaped. When she handed the actual Stark the purloined crackers and noticed the way he was looking at her, Forge realized that omen shape even had his crazy drunk hair.

“So,” Stark munched a cracker with far too much confidence for a man who’d had his morning. Oh no. He was feeling better. “I owe you a pair of boots?”

Forge groaned. Of course. Of course he was one of those drunks. Why couldn’t his brain cells die like a normal persons? The only way out of this without further oddness was to give up the debt. She didn’t want to see his eyes in the bad mojo cloud coming toward her. “Forget about it, man.” No really, do.

“Nah. I feel like we’ve bonded.”

“We haven’t.”

“I puked on your boots.”

“That you did.”

Stark paused to suck on the electrolyte pouch. There was a sparkle in his eye. Forge didn’t like it. “You need a nickname.”

Huh? So he was going to let it go? Something about the situation smelled wrong. Rumors about Tony Stark made him sound far more tenacious. Maybe this was one of those details he let drop through the cracks as unimportant?

“Yeah,” Stark dropped the empty pouch in the trash. “I’m thinking.”

Forge knew what he was looking at now. She was wearing her work shirt, which did nothing to hide her wider shoulders. Paired with her regulation steel toes, calloused hands, height, and no nonsense bun she was expecting a name like Bertha, or maybe he’d be ironic and call her Porcelain. In the end she gave him too much credit, and not enough.
“You’re Four.” He sounded like he tried to announce it flippantly, but his voice went breathy at the end. What was it with people sticking For in her name? First her Uncle dubs her Forge, upon seeing what she could do, now Stark?

Her wariness totally showed on her face. She knew it did. Her face said things. “What the hell is Four?”

“You are.” Whatever weird was going on with him passed quick. He struggled to his feet and then turned to splash water on his face. Stupid billionaire even finger combed it through his drunk hair and somehow made it look all better. In a dizzying turn he straightened, tossed a flip “It’s been fun,” over his shoulder and strutted out of the souvenir stand.

Forge sat on the rubber mat near a bucket of Tony Stark’s vile green puke, blinking at the abrupt. “Well, this has got to be the weirdest day working here.”

She didn’t even remember to take her Tylenol.
Clyde Loses His Name

Disclaimer: Nope. Still don't own Iron Man. Also don't own Death Cab For Cutie. I just get to use them for my bedtime stories. They keep the monster in my dresser away.

Chapter 2: Clyde Loses His Name

“There is a role of a lifetime, and there’s a song yet to be sung. And there’s a dumpster in the driveway of all the plans that came undone.” Black Sun by Death Cab For Cutie

They needed elevators built into the main stage. At the last damn minute. Forge had only been ankle deep in a restoration at her real, real job when Clyde called. A last minute addition to the line up for Friday, he’d said. The lifts needed to be build to hold a shit ton of weight. He and the suits-in-charge had zero time to plan and they were offering to stroke her ego to the tune of lots of money. Forge was a mechanical engineer after all.

She wondered if Stark was included as one of suits-in-charge.

Frustrated, Forge thumped her head against the newly reinstalled rocker panels on the ‘54 Mercedes SL 300. No biggie if they bent she’d bend them back. The car was due to go out on Thursday. Today was Monday. It was basically done. Another ten hours of work would be all it would take.

She’d been hoping to power through today and have the rest of the week off. Clyde, the dirty shiftless bastard, threw in bonus pay. Forge couldn’t turn it down. She needed to renovate the outside of her garage and she wanted AC.

So instead of spending Monday working on a metal piece of art, she called in backup. The phone only rang twice before Hay picked up. Sometimes she was tempted to marry that man.

“Boss Lady. Whatcha need?” He had an accent that almost seemed to sing the words. Alabama? Mississippi? She wasn’t sure. Hay came from where farms were, hence the name. He had also been working with her since her garage, Mad Axe Restoration and Fabrication, had opened its doors to the Brooklyn streets five years previous.

“Got the Mercedes ten hours from pick up, but the expo just called. They have a rush job. If I take I’ll be working tail off till Friday, but we’ll have sparo deniro.” Forge popped her neck and then double checked she hadn’t bent the new rocker. Nope. Good.

“What’s the problem? Use your life hack.” That man and his turn of phrase.

Forge blew air out her nose. “Yeah. No. It’s all fiddly work; glass, trim, lights. It’d take more time than doing it by hand.”

Hay made a clicking noise with his tongue. “When’s it due?” His accent made the sentence come out one smushed word. Adorable.

Just to be extra certain Forge double checked the wall calendar in the office. Sexy NY firefighters. Yes please. However the calendar reminded her she couldn’t marry Hay. He didn’t like girls that way. “Pick up on Thursday. Day buff or sure enough.”

Hay chuckled down the line. “Yeah I’ll have it done by tomorrow. I know you’re madness. A day
buffer on appointments or shit goes wrong.”

“Thanks. I’m off to see the wizard.”

“Hope he’s not drunk this time.”

Laughing Forge let Hay go be himself and got her things around. Within fifteen minutes she had gone through the tiny kitchen and out the back door to hop on her Triumph. She motored to the expo humming the yellow brick road.

Forge wondered if Stark would be there. The man had been conspicuous in his absences. On and off for three weeks or so after what Forge had dubbed Drunken Doom Day, it had felt like she and Stark were playing a game of hide and seek. She’d gone so far as to bribe the greenhorn on her crew to sit somewhere high on perimeter watch after the seat-incident-which-shall-not-be-remembered.

Oh sure, it had apparently taken him a few days to peg her name through employment records, but he was the boss. She’d only known he’d figured out who she was when she showed up for a morning safety meeting, (this one thankfully only twenty minutes) and found a brand new pair of steel toes in front of her locker. They were custom made La Sportiva work boots. They were also pink and sparkly, and so was the thong with them.

She’d retaliated in a way she thought might have gotten her fired; a twenty foot high, twenty foot wide green chalk splatter with the name Stark in red chalk bubble text inside it. Hay had completed it with a passable cartoon version of Tony Stark modeling said sparkly thong. The whole thing was right on the sidewalk of the main expo thoroughfare. It had been extra special because she’d had to wear a ninja outfit, bribe a security guard, and then spend all night making art. It was a chalk massacre.

Stark really needed to reconsider his vetting process for security.

Well, Forge could admit she didn’t always think things through, but the media loved it. Stark had even made an on the record comment about loving fanart and how the artist really captured his physique. Hay was good like that.

What followed however was a disconcerting amount of stalking by a certain billionaire. Forge was a little bit sensitive about that.

Including the thong cartoon really gave the game away. She thought it was possible she’d offended him, and he’d come to do the leg breaking in person. Until the seat incident. That was dirty pool.

After opening night, which she did not attended, Stark had seemed to vanish into Iron Man business. Senate hearings and crazy people on racetracks would do that. She was sure the weird was over then. Temporary insanity, or boredom, as expressed by Stark, apparently came across as stalking with perverted tendencies. But now she was going back.

As her bike rolled into the employee parking lot Forge reminded herself that it was only five more days.

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Clyde had officially lost name privileges. She was bouncing between re-dubbing him Jackass-who-got-me-killed or detail-less. That last one was a high insult in her field.

They’d been called in the Friday of the presentation. Hammer, (and Forge couldn’t help herself from wanting to add Time to his name, though the man did not deserve it,) wanted the team onsite to fix
any possible malfunctions.

Well, the lifts worked perfectly. PhD in mechanical engineering. Hello. The snag was that Hammer neglected to inform everyone he had built remote control Murderbots.

So Forge ran. Eventually Forge also had to stop. Oxygen was a thing, but that wasn’t what stopped her. It was the screaming.

Long ago, when Forge was newer and lived and worked in her Uncle’s garage, it was the not screaming that had stopped her. After all her Uncle couldn’t scream when his chest was crushed by the sudden drop of the ‘82 Chevy Caprice Classic.

He screamed in her dreams though. She hadn’t been in the garage at the time it happened but she’d imagined it for years. The what ifs and guilt haunted her, nearly killed her. In the end she tried to comfort herself that her Uncle Wall had died shoving someone else out of the way of that car. It wasn’t a way of going out he would have been upset over. Walter Maddix did not run away. Not in Vietnam, not in his garage.

There was a moment when Forge dithered about bolting anyway. It was her default choice or things got messy. She was not her Uncle, as much as she tried to do what he would have. When she looked back up again a little girl was running towards her and there was a drone flying behind her getting ready to aim. Whether the drone was aiming for the Iron Man who was speeding above, or the girl running painfully slowly on the ground, Forge didn’t know. She did make her decision though.

Her vision didn’t tunnel. Time didn’t slow down. This wasn’t like the time The Brotherhood cornered her and she had no choice but to fight her way out. It wasn’t like at FOKUS when she was desperately trying to escape, and was happy to leave the carnage dealing to bloodier minded individuals.

Her hands snapped up in front of her because Forge always leaped before she looked. She may not have been her Uncle, but she had something he didn’t. Forge was also angry, and she did angry very well.

The first time Forge met the Iron Man she was bending reinforced steel beams into the path of the Hammer Tech drones chasing him. It was a fraction of a second. The red-gold flash followed by the silver of War Machine flew overhead as she flexed her fingers and the building in front of her sprouted metaphorical claws. When she ducked back out from behind the truck with the little girl she’d grabbed, three drones were down. There were more though. So Forge got busy.

The first order of business was to get the girl to an adult that wouldn’t leave her behind to be trampled. A security guard ran by her at that moment and Forge used a little bit of power to pull on the metal of his outfit. It was enough to make him jerk back a step and gave her the time to thrust the kid, who looked about eight, into his arms.

“Get her out. Find her parents,” Forge commanded.

The man, whose name tag proclaimed him Ottinger, blinked glazed terrified eyes at her. Really. That vetting process needed to be addressed. Though Murderbots were a bit much. “Run, Forest!” She shoved the man. That seemed to be enough to get him moving.

Screaming people streamed out of the main stage area in front of her and behind them marched drones. Forge popped the knuckle in her thumb, and pulled metal sheeting off a nearby food stand. It wrapped around her from head to toe leaving only her eyes, and a slit for nose and mouth open. All the drones we’re metal. She could work with that.
Pursing her lips and taking in the fact that yes, her hands were shaking, Forge squinted into her best glare. She was pretty sure her face said “I am gonna shit my pants.”

The first flick of fingers turned the nearest one’s guns onto their brethren. Forge didn’t bother waiting and instead blew the chests apart on two others before molding a beam into a spike to kabob a third. These drones were easy. No flight capabilities for the army bots. How sad.

A half dozen destroyed Murderbots in, Forge realized she should probably be moving, as she currently made a fat stationary target. That Stark shaped omen of doom feeling crawled up her spine and she barrel rolled left. Ouch. People who did things like that in real life must be made of bricks. There was no padding in the thing she was wearing after all.

On the plus she did dodge a blast, on the minus she rolled into another bot’s feet. Well fuckity fuck. Acting on pure animal instinct to move! Her! Ass! Forge sprung up with a blade like motion from her right hand. The Murderbot split groin to head. Even in metal it was kind of gruesome.

Whipping one side of the dissected bot in front of her saved her another death, but the blast sent her back a few feet on her ass anyway. Oh her poor tail bone. That was going to bruise. Forge rolled, got her feet under her, and started running again.

She was going to have nightmares. New ones. That was entertaining right?

Forge ducked into the expo uni-sphere and hid behind a thick steel support. She just wanted to catch her breath. Before she could the sound of repulsers came through the sphere. Forge had enough time to look up, have the impact sound of a few Murderbots on the sphere make her deaf, and then run like hell so she didn’t end up medium rare. When she landed, hard, on her left side, she rolled, and rolled.

For a moment memory superimposed itself on the present. The gray cement of the Expo was replaced with scraggly grass and loose tan dirt. The shadows around her danced from the flames.

It was almost out of body. Forge hurt, all over. There was nothing but ringing in her ears, like the one time she’d gone out hunting with Uncle Wall and he’d shot the gun in the blind. Any minute she thought for sure she’d run out of breath, her legs would collapse, a dart would hit her out of nowhere. Forge had never killed a person before, but she thought she might be able to blank out long enough to show Hammer some things about old school Wallachia.

When her mind came back from that side trip Forge was running again. She didn’t even remember getting up off the ground the last time. She ran and when she came across a Murderbot she mangled, and sliced, and used all the wonderful metal all over the expo to shred them. She had no idea how many she’d actually taken out. It didn’t matter. She was just trying to survive now.

It seemed like every time she turned around a drone popped out and tried to kill her. Rude. Also they could fly. Not so easy to destroy them when they weren’t gravity locked, also unfair. Forge couldn’t fly. She changed her mind when all the remaining drones took to the air at once.

Forge watched as they all turned to head toward the same spot in the expo. Whoever was there was going to have a bad day. She figured it might be the Iron Man. Whatever. She was tapped out and he had a super suit. She was just a woman in a can.

By the time Forge felt like her brain had stopped spinning somewhere outside of her skull she realized her knees were all watery, the shaking was full body, and she was sucking in wind like a bellows. Forge hadn’t been pulling G forces, but she sure felt like she could upchuck her toenails. Repeatedly. Unfortunately she wasn’t allowed to brace on her knees and make like a Hoover. The
greenhorn, her bribed greenhorn, (with a hand to Jesus bow on his back) ran up behind her.

He eyed her outfit but didn’t comment, just ushered her on, away from the expo. “Everyone’s evacuating. We need you to get as far away from the expo as you can.” Once the guy got her running again he split off.

Forge took a moment to strip the metal pieces off of her as she jogged toward the mob running away. When the explosions started behind the herd of humanity she’d become a part of, she got her second wind.

In her memory there was nothing but candlelight and the smell of plastic. Forge told herself repeatedly she was in Queens. She focused on the bright blue shirt of the man in front of her. There had been no one in front of her before. Her side ached from hitting the ground, not because of a biopsy. It was not Texas. She was not in Texas.

Far away, a dim part of Forge was thankful for her greenhorn. If not for him she would’ve gotten blown up just sucking air.
Chapter 3: A Rock and a Hard Place

“Here I go again on my own. Goin’ down the only road I’ve ever known. Like a drifter I was born to walk alone.” Here I Go Again by Whitesnake

“Sir, Col. Rhodes is requesting access to the lab.”

“Let him in JARVIS, and cut the tunes.” Tony didn’t bother to look up from the schematics he was working on. Rhodey had brought the suit he stole back so Tony could fix the shitty Hammer Tech on it. It laid on a worktop across from him with most of the crap torn off it, but Tony couldn’t help but tinker. If he was going to let Rhodey keep a suit, so the world could keep War Machine and Tony could keep his free time, why shouldn’t it be a bit better?

“How long have you been down here this time?” Rhodey asked as he entered the lab.

Tony spun on his stool, and squinted his eyes. “Uh, I have no idea. J?” It was a lie. Tony knew he’d been holed up in the lab since Pepper left him. Pepper, who had dated him exactly one month.

“You are approaching you’re fifty second hour, Sir.”

Rhodey dropped a bag of take out on the desk next to him.

“What is this?”

“Food, Tony.” Rhodey put his hands on the desk and leaned forward. “You remember food right?”

Tony ruffled his hair. “I don’t remember putting in an order for,” he shuffled through the bag, opened a box and pulled out a French fry, “Whatever this is.” He popped the fry into his mouth and chewed. Not bad.

Rhodey had his ‘I’m worried about you,’ look on. Tony hated that look because it meant Rhodey was going to badger him about things like sleep, and hygiene. Tony did a sniff test and wrinkled his nose. Hmm, maybe Rhodey had a point about the hygiene. Another fry went into his mouth. He was hungry.

“Because you didn’t,” Rhodey sighed. “You need sleep, and a shower.” Yup, good old Rhodey. Right on cue.

Tony stood up and walked to the workbench. “Right, right.” He fiddled with the shoulder of the Mark III. “Hey,” he spun around, “so what did you find out about the tin man that destroyed those drones at the expo?” Diversion. He wondered if Rhodey would buy it.

The colonel rolled his eyes, but allowed it. “Intel thinks there was an enhanced involved. They thought she might have been affiliated with you based on the outfit.”

“Unaffiliated, and what is enhanced?”
Rhodey crossed his arms, but nodded. “Enhanced, mutant, whatever they call themselves.” He tried
to grab a fry out of the container but Tony smacked his hand away and snagged a handful for
himself. “I’ve never run across one in the field, but apparently metal manipulation is a known power
for some of them.”

Rhodey frowned. Tony cocked his head. “What?”

“The brief on the guy the government knows about is not,” Rhodey paused searching, “good.”

“Was he the one at the expo?” Tony knew of course, but he wanted to know what the government
told his friend.

Rhodey shook his head and sat on the corner of the desk. “No. No, the video feed never got a good
look at her, but it wasn’t the guy who caused problems before.”

Tony knew that too. He’d erased some of the video footage. Crazy woman ripped the side off the
Coney stand in full view of everyone. Not that Tony could talk. He announced himself to the world
at a press conference. He was Tony Stark though. This woman didn’t have the resources to run from
the government or lesser known but more powerful organizations. So Tony had done a little
redacting. He owed her for awesome art, among other things.

“So, an unknown for now,” Rhodey concluded.

“Well, that’s comforting,” Tony murmured. Those fries really were pretty good. “An unknown metal
mangling mutant woman running around, and me, Iron Man. Nice.” Not that Tony actually thought
Four would hurt him. She’d had plenty of chances, and that seat thing really had been over the top.
He was disappointed he didn’t get to see her sitting on it before she replaced it. He wondered if she
still had it.

“Look. I don’t think that’s something you have to worry about right now. I’ll keep you updated.”
Tony nodded his head. Rhodey was good like that. “What about a new assistant?”

At this, Tony knew his face flinched. He could read the look on Rhodey’s face. This conversation
was going downhill fast.

He distracted himself entering a few commands into his fabrication program. “I’m working on it,” he
evaded and tried not to grimace further when Rhodey sighed heavily.

“Look, I know Pepper..”

Tony was quick to cut him off. Pepper was currently she-who-must-not-be-named. “I’m working on
it,” he repeated with force. “Things didn’t work out, not that she tried for long. Not a big deal. It
happens.” Please move on from this. Please move on from this. He didn’t want to talk about this.
There were things to design, and he was working on the Mark VII, and he didn’t want to talk about
the catastrophe that was his and Pepper’s attempt at a relationship. Maybe he really was Captain
Catastrophe. Four was right. It wasn’t bad ass.

“Fine. Fine.” Tony couldn’t see his friend from his position hunched in front of the computer, but he
could hear that Rhodey was holding his hands in the air. “I’ll leave that alone for now, but you’re
going to need a new assistant.”

“And I’ll get one. Someone’s going through applications now.” That someone was Pepper, but he
wasn’t thinking about that.

Rhodey stood. “I’ve got to go. JARVIS try to remind him to at least take a shower.”
“Of course Col. Rhodes.”

“And Tony, about my car,” Rhodey started.

“Ah! Ah! I told you I’ve got that. I know someone. It’s good.”

Rhodey was shaking his head again, but also moving toward the stairs. “Alright. See you later.”

“Yup,” Tony quipped. Something he was working on sparked. Damn it.

“And shower!” Rhodey yelled back.

Tony dropped the screw driver he was holding and rubbed his face. Jesus. He blindly reached for another fry.

Tony had been emailing Four, under the alias Mr. Phe as in Catastrophe, for about a month. It started with a request sent about Rhodey’s original car, a Cadillac CTS, that had an unfortunate death by exploding Hammer drones.

He’d held his knowledge back in the emails, baiting to see if she would take advantage of someone who seemed over their head. She didn’t. Instead all the feedback JARVIS had found online about her and her business seemed true. She didn’t gouge, she didn’t pad her timelines, and she didn’t prevaricate.

Her response email to the one he’d sent, including pictures of the mangled car, was polite but to the point. He’d snickered a bit at how nice she’d worded it, but it boiled down to “this is not a classic car. This is a new car. Buy a new one. Idiot.” That was when he’d sent the follow up email for the real job. The one he’d hoped could tempt her out to Malibu for a few months.

That time the response email back made him laugh out loud. It was the only good laugh he’d had recently, and it had happened less than a week before Pepper left him. Four had tried, sweet girl, to be nice, but he had a bit of a measure of her by then. So when she assured him she understood the little test email, he really heard her call him some unflattering nick name. When she politely told him there was no way she could travel to California for an extended time, he heard her saying she wasn’t going to be delivering herself to a serial killer.

The problem was not only was Tony used to getting his way, but he had genuinely good intentions this time, mostly. He needed a distraction and she was a shiny metal bending puzzle. Beyond that, SHIELD was sniffing around her and Tony didn’t trust them not to kidnap her and run tests.

Tony wasn’t stupid either. Georgia Maddix knew who he was the moment she’d picked him up off the ground. Instead of fawning, or selling his drunk ass out to the media (he’d waited to see if she would before he sent the boots), she’d taken care of him kindly and without expectation. He could count the people to do that on one hand. Four, exactly.

It would have been over with the boots but the woman had to make art. He couldn’t even find it in himself to fire the security guard she’d bribed. Though Tony had the man moved to day shift, with a partner. He may have let it go again if the tricky woman hadn’t tried to hide from him when he went to find her. She’d even actively set up a perimeter watch at one point in his recon. The guy she picked had a hell of an aim too. He’d hit Tony on the head with a pebble twice. Of course Tony found out afterward the man had freakishly good aim for a reason.

But Georgia, her collective reactions we’re the worst thing you could do with someone like Tony. It just made him want to play. Of course he’d later been distracted by dying and the debacle with
Vanko, but of course the woman drew his attention right back to her at the expo.

Metal manipulation. Tony’s mind boggled at the possibilities. His mind also cringed at the probabilities. Agent Bow boy had been there as fake Natalie Rushman’s back up. He only met Four because of Tony. The woman had been well and truly off the radar before that. Now, SHIELD knew her name, and her address, (though only the one for her shop was on file). They had her picture. It was only a matter of time and Four was blissfully unaware.

The government we’re looking for her now too. A teeny, tiny, well hidden, part of Tony felt responsible. It was his SHIELD evaluation, his expo that went to shit. All the woman had done was save civilians, take a little weight off his shoulders, and make sure Tony didn’t die of alcohol poisoning.

So Tony had made his mind up. He was going to warn the woman about the groups after her, maybe give her the option to start over. Of course he was going to do it his way, and his way involved feeding his curiosity. Now he just had to get the stubborn woman to California.

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Ah, Tony thought. Yeah. Bait and switch. He’d been there. “It’s for my friend’s birthday.” Tony shrugged his shoulders. “His last car got blown up.”

Four snorted, but grinned. Tony started to feel cautiously optimistic she wasn’t going to metal bend him out her front door. “I feel obligated to tell you that if I go with you, I may put you in a tough spot.”

“Oh, a hard place,” Tony leered. The no nonsense reply look of ‘I will smack you in the mouth,’ was one he’d seen before. Somehow with Georgia her face just said more. Like also, ‘with an I-beam.’

“I mean,” she drew the word out, “That SHIELD has made it clear they expect me to cooperate, with whatever they want, or voluntary will become involuntary. I don’t roll with groups like that. They can bite me. You consult, rarely, with them. They might get all shirty if I hide in your garage.” She paused and seemed to evaluate him again. “Will that even help?”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “Shirty?”

Georgia rolled her eyes and crossed her arms. “Come on Captain Catastrophe, I’ve been serious for more than my quota today. I need to know you’re not going to ship me off to some shady government lab.” She was hiding behind being flippant, and Tony finally caught what was hidden in the stress. Four was scared. It made Tony dislike SHIELD just a little bit more.

“You’d be my employee, by contract. They’d be poaching. I don’t like that.” Four shifted a bit and Tony changed tracks. “You should come to the Expo with me. I have to tour it before I leave. We’ll stop and get some ridiculously amazing Chinese food on the way and then discuss business.” He turned toward the door and started walking.

“I can’t leave now,” she yelped.

Tony pivoted on his heel to face her. “Why not? You’re supposed to be all set to leave in the morning with Mr. Phe, provided you were convinced he wasn’t a serial killer. You can’t have left any projects that you’re desperately needed on to the last minute. It wouldn’t match your Yelp reviews.”

“Well no,” she admitted. “And by the way, Mr. Phe, lame alias. It took me about thirty minutes to figure out you weren’t just any old creeper from California.”

Tony gave a cheeky grin. “I am exceptional.” He turned back to the door and resumed walking.

“Do you only hear the good parts of what people say to you?”

“Come on Four! Expo and Chinese. We can continue you complimenting me in the car.”
Disclaimer: I make no money writing this. So I couldn't afford to buy Iron Man rights from Marvel. He's theirs. I don't own Middle Class Rut either. No one lets me own anything cool for free anymore.

Chapter 4: Super Cereal

“And this box is getting smaller. I'm trying to get out. How did I get so far from where I was?” New Low by Middle Class Rut

Well. This was extremely awkward.

“Happy, Four. Four, Happy.” Forge’s mind had the chance to ask huh? Before the man in the front of the vehicle replied.

“Nice to meet you, Four.”

Forge blinked at him as he pulled into the flow of traffic. “Is your name really Happy or does he nickname everyone?” She was a little indignant. Nicknames where her thing.

“Harold, ma’am, but you can call me Happy.”

So he was horning in on her bit.

The billionaire who’s car she had willingly gotten into, (and who does that even happen to besides hookers?) turned bright coffee colored eyes to her. “Nice to see you while sober Four.”

“It is nice to see you when you’re not pulling an Exorcist, or stalking me,” Forge paused in thought. “Though I’m not sure this doesn’t count as some form of stalking. Also, I protest. You stole my nickname gig.” So she was extra sarcastic, it happened when she was nervous.

His eyes did that horrible sparkling thing that bespoke some coming doom. “I’m older than you, so technically you stole the nickname thing from me, and stalking?” Stark placed a hand across his chest dramatically. “I don’t stalk. I was conducting extensive background research.”

Forge gave an unimpressed look. “Whatever you want to call it dude.” Total stalker. And she was going to work for him? Again? Yeah. Maybe. What the hell was wrong with her? Oh right, she did stupid shit when she got angry, and she got angry when she got scared.

She had thought he might try to intimidate her, or be defensive. Considering the man had to know some of what she could do by now, that would have been understandable. Instead he had answered her questions, and though he hadn’t come right out and said it, he was basically going to harbor her. Forge figured he wanted something with her powers. That’s what usually happened.

“As interesting as a debate on methods of intelligence gathering with you would be,” Forge’s eyebrows jumped at his drop in tone. “We need to talk about more important things. SHIELD.” Oh, he had serious face now.

Forge examined the man next to her. Clean pressed and stylish, but with a certain posture about him. A man who had everything, but was attached to few things. Those things did not include individual opinion. She could respect that. Sucking in a breath Forge reaffirmed her decision that if she didn’t
want to abandon another home for life on the road, again, he was her best option.

Damn Hay for making a reasonable argument.

Stark had an in with SHIELD. That was unexpected. She had a hard time imagining Iron Man, who was a hero, even if the man out of the suit was a drunken man whore, working with SHIELD. From her encounter with Agent Fischer she got a forced labor vibe from them. Maybe they had something on Stark?

“What about SHIELD?” she asked.

Stark shifted in his seat to angle towards her. “First, tell me what happened after the expo.”

Super cereal time. How much did she need to tell him? If he was really going to help her it was probably going to have to be a lot. Forge wasn’t cool with opening up to people but she was hoping Stark could be Switzerland.

“After the expo I went home. Got back into the routine, but,” She hesitated here. How to explain that she couldn’t stop thinking about it? That she dreamed about not being able to move? She’d had a particularly bad dream about her legs not working, knowing the drones would explode and all the while trying to drag herself away with her arms. That dream even bled together with the one about the plastic box. Hay had been going nuts trying to get her to sleep.

Her shoulders shuddered. “Normal wouldn’t come.” It was raw and true and she hadn’t meant to say it.

The eyes of the man across from her, who was a superhero, were grim and understanding. Forge was smart. She’d done her homework. This was a man who’d seen corners. He’d gotten out of his. She had to believe he could help her out of hers. Even if he did want to poke at her powers.

“I started jogging every day. I couldn’t not run.” She was rambling, so shook herself. “That’s not the point. While you were sending your delightful emails of deception I kept feeling like somebody was watching me.” Here she couched her words carefully. “I’ve had it happen before.” She shrugged a shoulder.

He blinked, and she could tell he was logging that bit of information somewhere in his genius brain. “You started looking?” He was still serious. Damn, she didn’t want to stretch herself. She believed in a firm amount of hours per day for adult thinking, otherwise things got tangled.

“It wasn’t hard. They were not the greatest. I got fed up. About a week ago I confronted creeper dude, thought I could get a measure of how deep the hole was. He got all official. There were threats.”

She hadn’t been prepared for the breadth of SHIELD. Smaller operations had come after her before. The Brotherhood amongst them. They had respected force. When they didn’t she usually booked it. She had her shop now though. Hay, after he had reamed her out, had convinced her to appeal to the superhero who was blowing up her inbox.

Stark nodded his head, but looked thoughtful.

“I was stupid,” Forge admitted. She closed her eyes and locked her jaw in self recrimination. She’d been stupid in a lot of ways. Something so basic as covering her damn face when she went and exposed her powers in an area she had known had security cameras. Security cameras whose footage the man across from her had no doubt looked at.
She could hear her Uncle's voice in her head from some past lecture over some past idiotic thing she’d done. He’d told her she had to stop leaping before she looked. Hay had sounded so much like him. “Confronting the guy was stupid. What I did at the expo was stupid.”

A hand settled on her forearm and Forge was startled that Stark would touch her. “No,” man his serious face could be intense. “What you did saved the lives of people at my expo. You didn’t do a damn thing wrong. Well,” he grinned a bit, “Besides not cover your face fast enough. Superhero’s always wear masks young lady,” he mock scolded.

“I’m a mechanic not a superhero,” she shot back. He grunted like he disagreed with her but she continued before he could speak. “Also, this is coming from the man who announced on national television that ‘I am Iron Man,’” she mocked him.

“Fair,” he agreed with a bob of his head.

There was a lingering silence between them before Forge admitted, “I’ve only fought with my powers twice before.”

Stark cracked a small smile, “You didn’t die. That’s a plus.”

Forge snorted in amusement. “Whatever. Creeper dude, he got me thinking, and I already knew you were, around,” She finished vaguely. Forge rubbed a hand across her face. Shit was complicated again. “Just, what am I dealing with?”

“Did creeper dude have a name?” Tony shot back.

Georgia bit her lip, “Agent Fischer.”

Stark’s brow furrowed. He whipped out a phone and tapped something into it before replying. “That’s not a name I recognize from them, but they’re a big agency. What I did recognize was the guy on your team you stuck up in a crane, presumably to watch out for me.” He sent her a teasing smirk.

Oh, she blushed. Damn him for the seat incident. “You deserved it.” She was unrepentant.

“Maybe,” He agreed. “But what you need to know is crane guy is called Agent Barton, and he works for SHIELD.”

Forge swallowed. Her greenhorn was SHIELD now? That didn’t fit either. “I saw him when the fighting was over. He’s the one that got me out of there before stuff started exploding. I didn’t really get the ‘I will lock you in a lab and never let you out’ vibe from him.”

Something beeped on his phone and he tapped a few more things into it before looking back up. “JARVIS is currently searching SHIELD’s files for anything on an Agent Fischer. I already have Barton’s file. You can read it over when we get to the Expo, but you should know he wasn’t on assignment looking for you.”

“So, what? Happy accident he ran into me?” she frowned.


Forge groaned and banged her head against the back of the seat. Whoops always whooped your ass.

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Forge had a headache.

The Chinese was spectacular. However, she had forgotten how much she disliked the little office boxes at the Expo, even when they were tricked out by Tony Stark. He’d gone off to do billionaire things, but before he’d left he’d warned her to stay inside and introduced her to JARVIS. She got it, press equaled video, equaled bad.

JARVIS was also spectacular, and Forge was pretty sure he was made of candy. Unfortunately no matter how often she asked him to call her Forge, or Georgia, or even Four, he continued to address her as Miss. Maddix. In retaliation she started to call him Mr. JARVIS. She wanted to call him Candyman but he wouldn’t answer to it.

In the three hours since she’d been plopped in front of the bank of computer screens, and left to eat her fortune cookies in peace, she’d been dutifully doing her homework. She was right. Agent Barton didn’t seem all that bad. SHIELD was huge, and scary, and sometimes didn’t take no for an answer. However there was no file for an Agent Fischer.

Forge wasn’t sure if that meant it was buried so deeply in SHIELD’s files that JARVIS hadn’t run across it yet. She wanted to ask, but didn’t want to offend the AI. Especially after he answered some questions about why Tony Stark was going out of his way to help her. It was apparent JARVIS thought she needed to know, and it said something about Stark that the AI hadn’t been programmed not to answer. It made her feel a little better when JARVIS told her Stark was interested in seeing what her powers could do.

Sometimes it felt like her whole life revolved around what she could do, and people trying to turn her into a science experiment, or use her as a weapon. Whatever. Stark was going to help her. Also he was paying her bank to work on his friend’s car. She could deal with some curiosity. Some. Plus she’d be able to leave when she was done, and not be locked in some secret lab in the tundra. JARVIS had personally assured her of that and she trusted the Candyman.

Besides she wasn’t a saint. She could admit to herself that a tiny part of her hoped to get her hands in the Iron Man armor. What? She was a mechanical engineer and that armor was a mad masterpiece. It made her fingers itch.

There was a beep from outside, because of course Tony Stark’s personal office box had all the electronic keys, before the door opened for said billionaire.

“Honey, I’m home.” He sashayed, (and she refused to call it anything but) into the room and dropped his suit coat over a chair.

Oh no, he was feeling feisty.

“Cute. You’re absolutely adorable,” she deadpanned.

“No, no,” he actually shook his finger, “Not cute, devastatingly handsome.”

“Whatever Captain C.” Forge rolled her eyes, “I have some things to talk to you about that require your adult brain switched on.”

He sat down in a chair next to her and made a show of giving her his full attention. When he spoke his voice was husky “I do so enjoy switching my adult brain on.”

“Somehow, I don’t think that happens as often as you think it does.” He pouted. “Anyway, three things. One, you said contract. I need to read and sign said contract.”
Stark nodded and took a moment to shuffle through files on one of the touch computer screens. He pulled up the contract and shot it through his monitor to hers. “And the others?”

“Two, you want to look at what I can do.” It was a statement. She wanted to see where he went with it.

He smiled what she figured he thought was his best charming smile. “Very much.”

Forge pulled a fancy metal paperweight, shaped like The Bean in Chicago, off the desk and held it up. “Demonstration?”

“Please.” His watched her hands with slightly wide eyes.

The bean went square, then flat. She held it up so he could see the thin piece of metal. It broke in two pieces and became two balls. She rotated them around each other two inches above her hands. Then she smashed them back together and, watching him very carefully, formed them into a blade. When he didn’t get aggressive, or show fear, she let the metal melt back into the bean and put it back on his desk.

“That,” he breathed, “was amazing.”

“Aren’t you frightened?”

His coffee colored eyes raised back up to hers. “Are you going to hurt me Four?”

“No unless you hurt me first.”

“No.”

Decision made she took a deep breath, and narrowed her eyes. “No medical tests. No stamina tests. I give the okay on anything to do with my powers. I don’t like. I don’t do. I suspect something foul, I’m gone. And,” she raised a finger, “I still have time to do the job you’re actually paying me for.”

Stark smiled. “Done.” Then he did that super serious face again. “But I’m not going to hurt you either Four.”

Time would tell, she knew, so she switched topics. “Three, JARVIS says there are no files for Agent Fischer.”

“Hmm, that doesn’t sound right.”

Forge nodded her head because yeah, stealth agent was a serious issue.

“J?”

“Yes, sir?”

Stark typed a few things into the screen in front of him and frowned. “No progress on Agent Fischer?”

“I have breeched all secure files within SHIELD and there is no documentation of an Agent Fischer.” JARVIS replied. “There are, however, several agents who match the physical description Miss Maddix provided.”

A few files popped up in front of Stark and he turned towards Forge. “You didn’t happen to snap a picture of this guy did you?”
Forge wrinkled her nose. “No,” she hadn’t thought of it.

“Well, what about these guys?” He slid the pictures onto the screen in front of her.

JARVIS had already shown them to her but Forge took a moment to look them over again. “Nope. Not him.” She shook her head.

Stark hummed before he looked over at her again. “He told you he was SHIELD?”

“Yeah.” Forge remembered the day easily. “I walked up to him in a diner a block away from my shop. Told him I knew he was following me, and that if he knew the tiniest bit about me, he should consider how many screws were holding the booth behind him together.”

Stark whistled a bit at that.

“He said that he was Agent Fischer with Strategic Homeland Intervention Enforcement and Logistics Division, and I should consider how SHIELD would take having one of their agents threatened. So yeah, SHIELD agent was definitely specified.”

The man across from her sucked on his top lip a bit. He abruptly leaned back in the seat, tapped his hands on his legs, and ordered, “J, keep looking.”

“Of course, sir.”

Stark pulled up another file on his screen and sent it over to hers. “You’ve already read this?”

Forge glanced at it, it was a SHIELD file on her, and nodded.

“You notice,” he pointed at her screen, “there’s nothing in there about approaching you.”

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “Well, technically, I approached him.”

“Same difference,” he cut in quickly. “There should be a note in your file about contact. This isn’t the first time I’ve hacked their system. I kept an eye on my own file while they were compiling it.”

Forge blinked at that. The man across from her had serious boundary issues. They were helping her out at this moment, but still.

“So either they’re keeping track of this on paper,” he seemed skeptical, “or Mr. Agent Fischer is a dirty, dirty liar.”

Forge met the eyes of the man across from her and furrowed her brow. “How do we find out?”

Stark gave her a grin and reached in front of her to tap her screen, bringing the contract of employment she was to sign back up. “First,” he gestured, “you sign.”

Sitting like that, leaned toward her with his palm raised in a beckoning manner and that smirk on his lips, Forge couldn’t help but blurt out, “Are you the Devil?”

Tony Stark laughed with that horrible twinkle in his eyes. “I am far more attractive.”
Chapter 5: The Devil You Know

“Cause wherever you go, wherever you go, with the devil you know you’re never alone. But it’s better to know the devil you know, the devil you don’t.” The Devil You Know by X Ambassadors

She left New York with him before it was even dark out. Forge wasn’t even really surprised when, once she signed on the virtual dotted line, Stark hustled her back to the car. Happy had already picked up all of the luggage she’d set aside for the trip. The few things she had left out to pack the next morning were rounded up by Hay and tossed into the top case without him even calling her. She called him though, and she had to deal with seeing Stark’s amusement out of the corner of her eye for the entire conversation slash ‘fear me I am you’re boss’ talk.

Days like these she could understand how married people occasionally thought about killing their spouses. Hay was her work hubby, but that didn’t mean she wanted him touching her toothbrush.

She’d turned to Stark and commented, “Minions these days.” Then she’d turned to Happy and said, “He was probably so compliant because he thought you were cute, Happy. Are you single?” Stark had laughed while his chauffeur body guard sputtered.

The flight to Malibu was six hours long. They’d left LaGuardia a little after six in the evening so by the time that they’d touch down it would be after midnight by Forge’s clock. Of course time zones meant it would really only be just after nine.

Once they took off she’d been presented with a tablet full of hiring forms, including a non disclosure agreement. She made sure to read them all too, just in case. It took her an hour before she surfaced. While she was binding herself in employment chains Stark was tapping away on his own tablet. He took notice when she cracked her neck and stretched.

Dark eyes looked up from his own work. “Done?”

Forge rubbed her eyes. “Mhmm,” she mumbled.

The billionaire tapped a few more commands into his pad and then made a flicking motion with his fingers. A little beep came from the tablet in front of her. The employment forms whisked away for information on a newly activated security clearance.

Forge took one look at the password, IronManizSEXy, and snapped her eyes back to Stark. “Tell me I can change this,” she demanded.

“The username is set but you can change the password,” he gave a despairing sigh. “Though why you would want to mess with something so patently true…”

Her eyes went back down to the tablet to read the username so she interrupted him with a groan. “BlondeDMech69. Really? You spelled ‘blondie’ wrong.”

He gave that eyebrow raise smirk combination she was starting to really dislike. “It says what I
meant.” His eyes drifted toward her chest.

She rolled her eyes and started changing the part she could change. She wondered for all of a second if he could see the password she’d chosen when he spoke up again.

“That’s hurtful.” Yup. He could see it.

“I doubt it.”

“Hey, I have feelings,” he complained.

Forge nodded. “Oh, I know you do.” He opened his mouth to say more so she kept going, “Drunk, hung over, horny, maybe hungry.”

“Those aren’t feelings. Those are biological imperatives.”

“Drunk is not a biological imperative, Captain C.”

He actually looked at her through his lashes like a coy little girl. “You could help with some of those.”

Forge set the pad down on the table between them and leaned forward. She adopted a sincere and innocent expression. “Oh, do you want me to get you a packet of peanuts? Something to drink?” She asked in a breathy voice.

He licked his lips. “Actually,” he started.

She sat back abruptly and picked up the pad again. “No,” she replied airily.

Stark was quiet for a second and when she glanced up Forge could see him genuinely smiling at her. And wow, okay. She was woman enough to admit the man was very pretty.

When he saw he had her attention again his eyes twinkled. “That’s okay.” He shifted to hit a button on his arm rest. “I have stewardesses for that. They don’t strip anymore either. So don’t worry about being uncomfortable.”

And she was reminded pretty things could be poisonous.

An extremely leggy, busty brunette stewardess walked into her line of vision right about then. Seriously? Didn’t flight attendants have to be able to tackle people since 9/11?

“What can I get for you Mr. Stark?” The woman was a tone off from a purr.

Forge knew her face was saying ‘Really?’ but she couldn’t stop it.

Stark could read it well apparently, as he was chuckling a bit as he asked for a scotch. Jessica-flight-attendant turned to her and Forge made a desperate bid to school her features. Judging by the up tick in snickers she hadn’t done a good job.

“Mojito please.” She wanted a fast buzz to deal with the crazy.

“Of course. I’ll be right back with those.” Jessica-flight-attendant’s hand drug across Stark’s jacketed forearm as she walked away.

If ever a grin was shit eating, it was the one that was on Stark’s face.
There was complete silence except for the sounds of the attendant at the bar. Once she dropped the drinks off and went back through the door in the front, hips twitching all the way, Forge broke. “You are a caricature.”

He tilted his head and tipped his drink at her.

“If you have more than two of those you are not driving.” Forge was completely serious. She would football tackle him for the keys. Although Happy was up front of the plane so he was probably driving.

“You are not driving my car. It’s an R8 Spyder.”

Damn her face. He’d been honed in on it waiting. She knew he mentioned what his car was on purpose. Forge gave a sniff and tried to regain some dignity. “I don’t really care for the grill on those. It looks like the car is wearing braces.”

Stark gave a happy little smile. “Well then, I’ll have to show you my ’32 Flathead.” Those coy little girl eyes were back.

Forge gave him her most annoyed expression for a moment. Then she took a big gulp of her mojito and leaned her elbows on the table between them. “Tell me you didn’t do something obnoxious to him like paint flames down the side.”

That pretty, pretty smile was back.

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background she was still a stranger. A metal manipulating with her mind type of stranger. Tony kind of wondered if he had a death wish or if he’d just used up the last of his Fuck’s to give.

He still didn’t think Four would hurt him. He believed her when she said she wouldn’t unless he hurt her first. That list of demands she put out, when she confronted him about his interest in what she could do, gave him plenty of insight about things she probably went through in the past. He was surprised she went with him so easily. That she had such reason to mistrust made him a little angry. Even years after Afghanistan Tony was still coming to terms with how horrible people could be to each other.

Well, she might hurt him if he kept eyeing her. She definitely would hurt him if they fell into bed together and had very satisfying one night sex, if she wasn’t totally okay with one night sex.

The pilot broke into his thoughts to announce they were landing and it was a good thing too. Tony was aching a little. Though, when they disembarked and she ran her hand along his car in what his mind could only call a ‘sensual caress,’ he thought he might be in real trouble.

Later that night, alone in the shower, after the fight over where she was staying, and getting her settled into her room, he laid his forehead against the tiles of his shower and shuddered in release. Tony uncurled his fist from around himself and tried to steady his breathing. He was definitely in trouble.

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Tony actually slept that night. Between the two plane ride’s and the rest of his day, he’d figured he would check out for a few hours. Normally he would wake and go down to the lab sometime in the night. Sleep and Tony hadn’t gotten along very well in awhile. He was laying in the between of awake and asleep enjoying the feel of the sheets around his legs when JARVIS addressed him again.

“Sir?”

“Yeah J?” Tony rolled over and coughed a bit.

“You asked to be alerted if Miss. Maddix entered the lab at any time you were not present in it.”

That was all it took to have Tony completely awake. “What is she doing? When did she get down there?” Tony sat up and went about pulling on a pair of sweatpants.

“She arrived in the lab five minutes and twenty six seconds ago and is currently examining the interior of Col. Rhodes Mustang.”

“Why didn’t you wake me up immediately?” Tony had a moment of panic. Five minutes was a long time.

“You did not respond to the previous alarm.”

“Let me know if she does anything else.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony pulled on some socks and dug for a muscle shirt. “What time is it JARVIS?”

“It is six forty seven a.m. Saturday July thirty first, sir.” Jesus, she was up early.

He was rinsing his mouth a few minutes later when JARVIS broke in again.
“Miss. Maddix has relocated to the kitchen.”

Tony paused putting his tooth brush away. “All she did was look at the car, J? What about the suits?”

“Miss Maddix surveyed the lab, but Col. Rhodes vehicle is the only thing she touched. She did not linger by the suits.”

“Huh,” Tony wasn’t sure if he was feeling annoyed she wasn’t more interested in the suits or wary she might be putting on a good girl act. She didn’t seem like a woman who knew a lot about subterfuge. “Guess I better go downstairs and find out,” he decided.

“A wise idea sir. Miss Maddix appears to be preparing breakfast.”

By the time Tony padded into the kitchen Four was shuffling around in front of the stove in work clothes. She must have heard him come down the stairs because she turned around.

“Good morning,” her voice was soft and she tucked a strand of hair behind ear. She gestured to the pans behind her, and Tony’s stomach growled a bit at the smell of bacon. He didn’t even know he had bacon. “Sorry. I just got up early. Wasn’t sure what tools I could use downstairs so I thought breakfast, and you did say make myself at home last night so…”

“Is there any coffee?” Tony cut off her slight rambling, recognizing that she was actually embarrassed.

“Uh, yeah,” she flapped a hand at the coffee pot, and he moved passed her to get a cup. She smelled like vanilla. A questioning hum from her direction drew his attention. She was holding up an egg. “Want one?”

Tony settled on a stool at the counter. Now she was going to make him breakfast? Interesting. He wouldn’t have pegged her as the kitchen type. “Sure.”

“Over easy? Or scramble?”

“Over easy.” Tony sipped his coffee and watched Four work. It was definitely odd.

After she’d plated up two servings and sat down across from him, they ate and sipped their coffee in silence. It wasn’t tense, but it wasn’t quite easy either.

She’d moved to fill the sink with water when Tony spoke up. “I built a robot to do the dishes.”

Four blinked at him, “Seriously?”

Fully caffeinated now, Tony let his lip curl into a smirk. “Genius. Come on. I’ll show you the tools you can use in the garage.”
Chapter 6: Rebellion

The Sorcerer’s Apprentice by Leopold Stokowski and the Philadelphia Orchestra

Stark helped her roll a few large tool boxes over to her corner of the garage. It was far enough away they had quite a bit of space between their areas, but close enough they could see each other.

That first day was an adventure in odd. Forge was part fascinated and part weird-ed out by Dum-E, U, and Butterfingers. Stark’s robots, when not given specific commands, wandered around causing what Forge could only consider mischief. She wondered if their creator had programmed them that way on purpose. Captain C had a little bit of crazy like that.

She’d thought he’d be after her for more demonstrations, or start questioning her, but instead he had simply asked if she wanted to get to work. Knowing she had a very tight schedule, Forge got right to it.

The 1971 Mustang Boss 351 hadn’t been driven into the ground by it’s previous owner, but it showed a lot of wear and age. A few body panels would have to be fabricated, which was a snap for her. The fiddly parts that rusted or wore down would take a bit longer. By noon Forge had the drop cloths down, a grease pencil behind her ear and half the interior out of the car. It was a decent stopping point, she decided.

Upstairs, away from Stark’s ear bleeding level of music, Forge vowed to take some time to order noise canceling headphones of the highest quality. She didn’t care they’d set her back three hundred dollars. She’d be deaf by the time she finished the rebuild if this kept up. As a stop gap she ducked into her room and grabbed some ear plugs. She meant to make a sandwich, but wanted to get the car stripped more. A granola bar in her pocket later she was back down in the garage.

Ear plugs in she made her way over to her area, noticing that Dum-E was much closer than he’d ventured to it all day. Scooting around the little bot, Forge dove into breaking down the dash. Hours passed. She refilled her water bottle and took a few bathroom breaks. She’d just gotten the driver’s interior door panel out and laid down, when she noticed the screws she’d taken from it, put on the cloth, and labeled, were short one. Forge started at the little white grease pencil circle the screws were supposed to sit in. It remained one short. She wiped the sweat off her forehead with the back of her hand, and looked again. Still short.

Forge figured she must have kicked it and so the search began. She took a moment to concentrate. One by one all the metal things in the lab started to light up in her minds eye. When she was younger, scanning the whole of a large area filled with metal bits easily overloaded her senses. After the incident with The Brotherhood and the junk yard though, she’d made a point of practicing.

There, Forge thought. The screw was behind her with an unfamiliar concentration of metal parts. A nudge in the back from the direction made her yelp and spin.

Dum-E was behind her with the screw in his gripper. “Oh, hey Dum-E. Where did you find that?”
She had seen Stark talk to the robots like they were people so decided to adopt the same approach. Why not? Forge held her hand out under the gripper and the robot dropped it into her hand.


Forge was manhandling the steering column free untold hours later when it happened again. She stared at the little grease pencil circle that was once again a screw short. Same circle, same damn screw. “Does that thing have fucking legs?” she mumbled.

She didn’t bother looking for it this time. Just cracked her neck and rolled her shoulders before making a notation on the cloth next to the wheel that it needed new leather wrapping. The continual thumping of music she could still partially hear through the earplugs had stopped, so she pulled an ear plug out.

Stark was looking at her. “What?” Forge asked, still half in the fog of work.

“What do you got Dum-E?” Stark asked.

Forge turned to the side startled to see the bot back again. He also had the screw in his gripper again. “Hey,” she frowned, “how’d you end up with that again?” She put her hand under the gripper and he let go of the screw. “Um, thanks again?” This time she could hear the robot whir happily. She carefully placed the screw back in it’s circle home, double checking it didn’t roll anywhere. When she stood back up, Stark was still watching her. Forge gave him a confused look when he started laughing.

“Are you messing with me? I’m not over on your side of the garage messing with your stuff.” A whir from nearby caught her attention and she turned to see Dum-E picking the screw up from the cloth. Forge gasped and couldn’t stop herself from pointing and calling, “Thief!”

Stark was still laughing when Dum-E started trundling as fast as he could back towards his maker. Forge hopped over the drop cloth in chase. “Get back here Robin Hood. I need that screw!”

By now Stark was full on guffawing as she caught up to Dum-E only to have him roll around where she stood in his path. She could have stopped him and made him give her the part, but that seemed tantamount to snatching a toy out of a child’s hand. “Hey! Where are you taking that?”

The robot went right to Stark and dropped the screw into his outstretched hand. Forge stopped in front of him and brushed the flyaway hairs off her face. “Did you tell him to do that? ‘Cause not cool.”

“No,” Stark choked out. He turned to Dum-E and proceeded to scold him like a bad puppy. Dum-E whirred. The tone this time sounded sad.

“Aww,” Forge couldn’t help but feel bad for the little guy. Noticing she had Stark’s attention again she held her hand out with a grunt and made a ‘gimmie’ motion.

“Have you been down here the whole time?”

Forge frowned. She wasn’t sure what time it was. “Yeah,” she drew the word out.

“J, what time is it?” Stark had a little lopsided grin on his face and some truly epic mad scientist hair. It was even worse than his drunk hair. So much for the coiffed prince on the magazine covers.

“It is currently eleven thirteen a.m. Sunday August first.”
“Sunday?” Forge asked a bit numb. That would explain why she was so tired. Mind over matter evaporated and a jaw cracking yawn split her face. She rubbed a hand across her eyes. “I think I’ll call it a day. Get a few hours of sleep.” Another yawn made her eyes water. Her stomach also chose that moment to growl.

Forge pulled the smashed granola bar from her back pocket in an absent manner, unwrapped it, and took a bite. Day catching up to her, and not paying much attention to her surroundings, she turned and headed toward the stairs. The granola bar was gone in four bites so she tossed the wrapped in the bin upstairs. “Hey Mr. JARVIS?”

“Yes, Miss Maddix?”

“Could you give me a wake up call if Dum-E moves anything important from my drop cloth downstairs.”

“Of course Miss.”

“Thanks,” Forge mumbled. She’d made it to her bedroom and was in the process of stripping down to head to the shower. Stark was different than she expected. Arrogant? Yes. Unrepentant flirt? Check. Constantly drunk, careless, waste of potential? Not so much. Whatever. Quick shower, nap, then back to work.

Ten hours later Forge was up, fed with a real sandwich, and armed with improvised ear buds for her ipod made out of ear plugs. She had hope they’d hold up against the Stark noise pollution. The music was still going strong downstairs so she figured that meant Captain C was busy with science still. After a moments pause, she threw together another sandwich, grabbed two apples and headed to the bat cave.

Inputting her security code while balancing everything was a bit of a challenge. Juggling things around Stark seemed to be a trend. When she finally managed to get in and steady everything in her hands she realized the billionaire was asleep with his head on the desk. It wouldn’t have bothered her so much if there wasn’t an empty scotch bottle next to him.

Maybe she’d been a bit hasty about the not constantly drunk. Forge mentally roped herself in. She had no idea how much had been in that bottle. The lack of drinking glass looked bad though. She reminded herself he wasn’t her, and she wasn’t Judy. She could never pull off that stern Southern woman look anyway. Forge decided not to bother him, and only settled the plate with sandwich and apple on the side of his desk. After a moments thought she ran back upstairs to grab a bottle of water and added it to the stack.

On the walk to her side of the room she put in her ear bud plugs. The man was dead to the world and ACDC was still Thunderstruck at a billion decibels. She’d be fine to work on the car if that racket didn’t wake him up.

The evening was spent detaching the hood, draining the fluids, taking off the belts, pulling the reservoirs, and radiator. In between she rescued screws from Dum-E twice, and a wrench from U once. Forge was in the middle of a long harangue at the two bots. It involved words like leash, baby gate, and spike strips. Mid lecture out of the corner of her eye she saw Stark’s head jerk up.

Not wanting to act weird she continued until she felt she’d vented, then sent the bots on their way. She turned back to her work and tried not to notice when he left the garage briefly, then returned and
stared at the corner of his desk. After a few seconds he sat back down and grabbed the sandwich. Forge flipped her play list back on. Ray LaMontagne sung out loud enough in her ears to drown out Stark’s current rock song, and Forge lost herself in work again.

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Tony watched Four bop around the car that was coming apart with amazing speed. She was mouthing the words to some song, lost to the world. Now and then she would pat Dum-E’s arm and take a screw from him. Once she marched across the garage and reclaimed three wrenches from U. Tony wondered if that glazed, completely in your own head look, was one he sported when he was deep in it.

He was working, but he was also paying more attention to her than last time. Tony had been completely zoned out in the Mark VII armor then and hadn’t noticed she was even there until he’d seen Dum-E over by her. He’d watched the whole screw fiasco from beginning to end. Best free entertainment in the lab yet. The music in the lab suddenly dropped volume significantly. There was only one person who would do that.

“JARVIS, time?”

“Ten a.m. Monday August second.”

Happy must have spilled the beans about Four. About that time he could see her. Black pencil skirt, sleek heels, white ruffed blouse and amazing red hair. She put her code in and the door swished open. Tony clenched his jaw and continued designing the repulsor system for the back of the Mark VII.

“Good morning, Tony.”

Tony typed away. “Pepper. I thought I’d cleared my schedule for this week. Don’t tell me. I missed a board meeting, again.”

He could hear the little disapproving sigh she made through her nose. “No. Your schedule is still clear, though I do wish you’d go to the finance meeting on the fifth.”

He grunted in disinterest.

“I came to see how you were doing.” Code for see if Four had off-ed him and made free with the suits yet. “Meet the new employee,” she continued.

Ah, yes. Tony finally looked up at Pepper and then spun and gestured to the other side of the garage where Four was coaching Dum-E into helping her block up the car. Must be time to drop the gas tank. “There she is. You can’t turn down her music though.”

Pepper had a strange look on her face. “How long has she been here?”

“Um,” Tony scratched his goatee. He was getting stray hairs again. “Picked her up Friday. She started working Saturday.”

“Have you been helping her, or is she so far because of her..?” She made a vague gesture he figured was meant to demonstrate Four’s powers.

Tony gave a little snort of laughter and Pepper brought her attention back to him. “No. No, haven’t seen her use those much. She’s been down here almost as much as I have in the last few days. She’s fast too.”
“I can see that,” Pepper said it slow, like there was some magic trick she wasn’t seeing. Well, Tony supposed Pepper wasn’t completely wrong.

She shuffled her clipboard. “I thought it’d be more Sorcerer’s Apprentice in here with parts whizzing around, not so, hands on.”

“Nope,” Tony turned back to the screens in front of him, “mostly hands on.”

“Why don’t you both come upstairs and take a break so we can be introduced properly.”

Tony hummed. “Nah,” he watched Four snatch another wrench from U and tell him to ‘cut it out Little John.’ “It’d be cruel to break up her flow. Plus I’m busy with the Mark VII…”

“Tony,” Pepper was giving him that disapproving look again. He hated that fucking look. It made him feel like he was the same screw up he was years ago, like nothing had changed.

“Fine,” Tony bit the word off a bit. “Butterfingers, go grab Dum-E and U’s shiny and bring her here would you.” The bot whirred a bit. Tony pointed to Four. “Go, fetch the squishy human.”

Butterfingers trundled off and Tony watched as he approached Four.

He could hear her from his side of the lab greeting the bot. “Oh, hi. So you’re the shy one. Should I call you Maid Marian?” The three robots all turned their arms toward Tony. Four rolled her shoulders before standing and then pulled the ear buds out of her ears before turning in his direction.

“What?” This was to him he knew. She blinked a few times when she took notice of Pepper and then slowly picked her way over to them.

“Four,” Tony gestured, “Pepper Potts, current CEO of Stark Industries. Pepper, Four.”

Four rolled her eyes. “You are so good at introductions.” She turned to Pepper. “It’s Georgia actually. Is Pepper a nickname too?”

“Legal name change,” Pepper held out her hand to shake.

Four held her hand out, then grimaced and wiped it on her jeans. “Yeah, my hands are filthy Miss. Potts, probably not the best idea.” She chuckled a bit.

Pepper dropped her hand with a grimace.

Tony saw Four turn to him with a mock serious expression. “You didn’t make her change her name legally did you?”

Tony’s jaw ticked a bit. Not that he’d ever considered, remotely, some day, being a reason for a possible legal name change, for anyone, ever. “No. Before my time.”

Four’s eyes went mock wide then. “Oh my mechanical Jesus. Things happened before your time,” she sounded scandalized and Tony couldn’t help but crack a grin. “What ever do the people around you call that epoch in their lives?”

Pepper said, “Freedom.”

Tony said, “Strangling insignificance, and lack of purpose,” at the same time as her. The freedom thing kind of cut though. He wasn’t that bad was he?

“Oh I don’t know,” Four pondered. “After a few days in your lab, I feel like you’re one pool of sharks with frickin’ laser beams away from becoming the next super villain, Captain Catastrophe. So,
I’m going to have to go with ‘unprepared for the apocalypse.’”

Tony grinned. “Have I made you a prepper?”

“I am feeling the need to hoard five gallon buckets of dehydrated eggs under my bed.”

Pepper cleared her throat next to them and Tony was a little disappointed. He’d had a really good come back for that. “Well,” Pepper gave a tight little smile. “I just came to see how you were settling in. Make sure everything was going okay for you.”

“Oh yeah,” Four waved a grease stained hand in the air. “I’m used to basically living in my garage, so as long as I have a bathroom, kitchenette, and some form of semi soft sleeping surface I’m good. The tools are great.” She turned aside to him, “Thanks by the way. Although you’re bots are fomenting a forest uprising. You should see to that.”

“I couldn’t crush their rebel spirit. That’d be mean,” Tony chuckled.

Four grinned and opened her mouth but before she could get started Pepper cut in. “Don’t feel like you need to keep Tony’s hours. They’re not fit for normal consumption.”

“Ha,” Four barked. “The first day we were down here, both of us worked twenty eight hours before we noticed, and neither of us remembered the other was in the room. Seems like we both get sucked into project holes. We’re good, so long as I can’t smell him on my side of the garage.”

“I do not smell,” Tony protested.

Four raised an eyebrow and Pepper wrinkled her nose. “You smell,” Pepper agreed.

Tony pouted, but saw Four smile. She had grease on her left ear and eyebrow.

“Well, if you need anything JARVIS has my number.” Pepper turned to go.

“Got it. Candyman has the hook up.”

Both Tony and Pepper turned to look at Four this time. “Candyman?” Pepper asked.

Four gave her a very serious look. “Oh Miss. Potts, Mr. JARVIS is made of candy.”

“Thank you Miss. Maddix.” JARVIS replied.

“You are very welcome Mr. JARVIS.”

Tony’s lips kept trying to twitch up into a smile as Pepper made a hasty escape from the lab. His first face to face with Pepper since the day-that-shall-not-be-mentioned, and he’d genuinely both smiled and laughed. Tony kind of thought Four might be made of candy, and wasn’t that a delicious thought.
Chapter 7: The Care and Feeding of Mechanical Engineers

“She drives me crazy. She gives me hot and cold fever then she leaves me in a cool, cool sweat.”
_Crazy Little Thing Called Love_ by Queen

Tony found out that first Wednesday that Four could be just as bad as he was about lab time. He had only had JARVIS announcing if she had shown any interest in his suits, or other things she shouldn’t have been into for the job she was doing. Since it seemed Four was focused on her project Tony didn’t bother keeping tabs on how often she left the lab. He didn’t really pay attention to when he ate and slept, another person’s well being didn’t factor to him at all.

JARVIS alerted him to the problem. Four had been in the lab for almost seventy two hours, only four of them had been spent sleeping on a dubious looking inflatable thing she’d brought with her. She was having nightmares.

So, Tony had taken a moment to order pizza from his favorite place and play Rhodey for a bit to drag her out of the lab. It was a very strange feeling.

Dinner was nice though. The uneasiness between them had dissolved somewhere between her inadvertently chasing Pepper out of the lab, and him threatening to have Dum-E follow her around with air freshener if she didn’t bathe regularly. Besides he knew first hand you had to have specialty stuff to get the grease off after it’d been on for a few days.

His little bots seemed to adore the woman, and she worked around them like she was used to people being in her way. He’d asked a few questions here and there about her powers. How long had she had them? Since she was a toddler. How long did it take her to master them? She claimed she still was. What was the biggest thing she’d done with them? She had thought about that one for long enough to eat an entire slice of pizza before finally answering it was probably the expo. He wanted to pry further but she had questions of her own.

When Four started asking about the suits he’d been cagey. He had good reasons. Her very first question had been one he’d heard a lot; how did it feel to fly? He’d told her the truth; absolutely amazing. It was the most freedom he’d ever had, stock answer but true. Next. When he was bored had he ever put the suit on and pretended to be a Power Ranger? Or the Iron Giant? That question had started a debate about how the suit was nothing like those leotard wearing posers, and that he was a person in a suit, not a robot. Then she’d wanted to know if he’d ever worn the suit and done the Risky Business dance? What? He had to stop and think about exactly why he’d never done that.

By the end of that round of questions they had both actually done the Risky Business dance. He’d even worn the suit. Every time he’d done a pelvic thrust in the suit she had busted out laughing. She finally made him stop because she was crying. Then she tried to explain about the Humping Robot.

They took a TV break upstairs, and he watched half a season of Robot Chicken while Four fell asleep on the end of the couch. He was converted though.

Thursday they managed to act like regular people for the first half of the day. Four ordered some
noise cancelling headphones, and then decided to make use of his treadmill. Tony, miracle of miracle’s, actually attended Pepper’s boring ass finance meeting. Not that anything he did made her happy. They had a small fight about him leaving Four alone in his house with access to his lab. He’d reminded her she’d been the one to bring up him attending the meeting to begin with.

The fight had sent him back to the lab for the evening. When he got there Four was working on the car again, and he learned via JARVIS during a bathroom break that she’d tried to take a nap and woke up after only an hour. Fuck it. Tony figured. The day was shitty. So he went about tempting Four into another Robot Chicken marathon.

She’d been asleep on the end of the sectional for almost an hour when Tony noticed her start to show signs of distress. He’d gone back and forth with himself about waking her up long enough she woke up on her own.

“Nightmares?” The lights were off in the living room so it was just the TV glow that illuminated them. Four had sat forward and covered her eyes with her hand.

“Yeah.” He could see her shaking off the adrenaline from the dream. “Sorry.”

He couldn’t deal with his own nightmares. He didn’t know how he felt about hers. “Nightmares suck.”

She flopped back against the couch. “Yeah they do,” she took a deep breath.

“JARVIS told me about you napping down in the lab.” He eyed her. “I don’t have to worry about you levitating cars in your sleep do I?”

Four huffed. “No.”

There was silence for a few moments before Tony pushed. “So,“ he drew the word out. “What’s the story, Dory?”

She turned to face him. He could see her eyes flicking over his face for a few seconds before she answered. “None of this,” and she nudged the metal coffee table a few inches over with a flick of her finger, “Works when I’m unconscious.”

Tony took in the implications of that statement. “Bummer.”

“Yep,” she agreed.

He tapped his finger on his leg. “You ever think of a backup system?”

“I’m not a computer, Captain C.” Her voice was disparaging. She glanced away before looking back to him. “What about you? You get knocked out what happens?”

“Ah,” he grinned. “That’s where JARVIS comes in.”

“What about when you’re not in the suit?” She questioned.

His smile faded. “Then it gets complicated,” he conceded.

She gave a breathy laugh. “That is a good way of putting it. Also, FUBAR.”

“FUBAR is accurate,” he chuckled. A few more moments settled between them before he ventured, “Maybe you need to get a suit.”
“Sure.” Her voice was falsely bright. “I’ll just whip that up in your lab between tear down and rebuild shall I?”

Tony leaned back further into the couch cushions and grinned. “Feel free,” he chirped at her. “You can always run designs by me. Mine my vast experience performing heroic deeds.”

She snorted. “Tell you what, in the event I lose my mind and build myself a super suit I will totally read you in.”

“I’m really warming to this idea.” Tony continued. “I could be your superhero mentor.”

“Let me stop you right there.” She held her hands up.

Tony was already running through options in his mind. “You need a cool name.”

Four shook her head. “No.”

“Something like The Mangler.” He paused with a frown. “No. That sounds like a villain.”

“Stop,” she begged.

His eyes went wide with excitement. “Oh, Steelclad. Mistress Titanium.”

She threw a throw pillow at him.

Forge found out that Saturday’s were apparently a Happy day. She’d been down in the bat cave working since Thursday night. Stark had been down there most of the time too. But Saturday morning she’d jerked up from a nap on her inflatable bed of wonder to find the lab quiet and Stark gone. At first she thought the billionaire had just done something normal, like go take a shower, or sleep. It reminded her of her own hygiene needs. They had a deal after the air freshener threat. That was how, on her way out of her bedroom after holding up her end of the smell deal, she became clued in to weird noises coming from the workout room.

She could admit to being hesitant to go anywhere near it. Who knew what the hell Stark was doing in there? Her imagination brought up some very unsavory situations to walk in on, but when she heard two male voices, she figured she wouldn’t be seeing anything too scaring. Also, curiosity. There was a lot of equipment in that gym. Forge was curious about what a superhero work out looked like.

When she peeked her head around the edge of the door she found Happy and Stark boxing of all things. So he did use that obnoxious ring. Unfortunately Stark was facing her. He made a time out motion with his gloves.

“Come to see my prowess?” That damn eyebrow popped up on his forehead again.

Forge moved away from the door toward the two men and decided it was best to address Happy. “Can you knock him down? Because that would make my day.”

Happy smiled from inside his protective headgear. “Sorry Miss Four, I’m just a target.” He held his padded palms up in demonstration.

“Four, Happy,” she corrected. If he insisted on using Stark’s nickname for her he could use it right. “And that’s too bad.”
“Wanna give it a shot?” By the time she was close enough to see the sparkle in Stark’s eyes it was too late to retreat.

“No,” but he was already rolling out of the ring and coming toward her. “I’ve never boxed before.”

“Oh, boxing virgin.” Stark was using his body to herd her toward the ring. “Come on I’ll give you a free shot.” She could have gotten away from him, but it would have looked too much like a desperate sprint for freedom. Which is what it would have been, and she didn’t want to give him that ammo.

“I’m not dressed for this,” she protested when he actually hip checked her into the ring. “I have steel toe boots on and might actually kick you,” she warned him.

“Don’t do that,” he commanded, climbing back into the ring with her.

Happy tossed her a pair of gloves and some headgear. What an enabler. She got all but the last glove on okay. Stark just stood there smirking at her. Hmm, urge to hit him in his face, rising, she thought. Happy, dear man that he was, helped her lace up.

Stark tapped his gloves together and did a few little hops. “Okay, hands up.” Forge copied him, bending her knees. It was a little foreign, she was taught to punch from her hips. “Deal’s a deal. First hit goes to you.”

Forge shifted on her feet a bit and thought, what the hell. She faked a right and popped him with a left jab. Nervousness made her hit harder than she meant and Stark grabbed his nose groaning. The look she gave her over his gloved hand was filthy. “Oops?” Forge questioned.

He actually growled at her. Forge had a moment to think, uh oh, and then he was swinging at her. He hit her in the shoulder. It wasn’t hard. Aw, he was being chivalrous. She went for his ribs.

The circled each other punching at things that were not each other’s faces for about three minutes. She imagined it looked like two little kids in the school yard. That was when Stark hit her in her left boob.

Forge yelped and involuntarily cupped her chest. “Ow, my tit,” Forge whined. She glared at Stark. “Dick move!” The asshole was snickering. “I didn’t hit you in the balls did I?”

“Want me to kiss it and make it better?”

Forge pulled her fist back and pointedly dropped her eyes to Stark’s crotch. He held up his hands. “Okay no.”

“Happy, hold him down.”

“Sorry, Four. No can do.” Happy chuckled and dinged the bell.

Forge was startled when her headphone was tugged down.

“What are you doing?”

It was Tuesday and they were both back in the lab. Forge had just finished pulling all the wiring out; a tedious job that always caused tension to build up in her neck and jaw. She’d been rolling her neck on her shoulders when Stark had blown through boundaries again.
Sighing through her nose, Forge pulled her headphones the rest of the way off and tossed them on the desk. She reached back to rub her shoulder. “Getting ready to set up the rotisserie.”

Stark must be bored, he was on her side of the lab again. “We’ve both been in here since yesterday morning. Take a break.”

She gave a distracted hum, moving to sit down at her desk. Her lower back ached a little too. “I want to get the chassis up before I break.”

“Can’t you do that with, you know, your mind.” Forge blinked when Stark brushed her hand away and replaced it with his own. That was a little weird.

“Well, yeah, but I can also do it with my hands.” He started rubbing gently along the back of her neck, and it had been a very long time since she’d been able to wheedle herself one of Hay’s back rubs. Her eyes involuntarily fell to half mast.

“Tell you what. I’ll keep doing this,” he dug his thumbs into her shoulder muscles and she hissed. “And you sit here and use your awesome talent to set up the rotisserie stand.”

Forge hummed skeptically but it was cut off with a short grunt when he ran his thumbs down either side of her spine. Her head tipped forward and shoulders slumped without thought.

After a moment he stopped, but his hands lingered. Forge rubbed a hand over her eyes. He was obviously angling to see her use her powers again. She noticed he seemed to go after the things he really wanted in a round about manner. “Whatever,” she agreed.

Pursing her lips she thought about what she needed the parts to do and concentrated. Stark continued kneading her muscles as the chassis got situated. For a moment there was only the sound of shifting metal in the lab.

“You should do that more often,” Stark commented. “I noticed you lifted the engine with the cherry picker.”

“I like doing things by hand.” Forge defended. “I don’t really flaunt my powers, outside of life threatening situations,” she added. Her eyes had closed and her head had dropped all the way forward.

“You should, flaunt your powers,” He elaborated.

Stark’s thumbs where pushing up either side of the back of her neck then, and it rattled through her mind to wonder if the man was trying to seduce her, or just see her move stuff with her mind. “It draws bad attention, obviously,” she reminded.


Forge tried to turn around but Stark kept a firm hold of her shoulders. “My garage is not dinky,” she protested.

“Moot point,” he huffed. “You’re here, not there, and no one but me can see you here.” She thought he might be trying to be comforting.

“I think you’re just trying to butter me up to use my powers more because you’re curious.”

Tony cradled the base of her skull between his palms and rubbed his fingers behind her ears. “Is it
“Working?”

She could hear the smirk in his voice. “You’re going to get grease in my hair.”

“You already had grease in your hair, Four.” The rumble of his chuckle surrounded her. It was nice. “I ordered food, come eat.” He swept his hands down her back and then stepped away.

Forge sighed a little in regret he was done, but stood up. She was done in. Food sounded spectacular. When she turned around he had a little smirk on his face. She went stern faced and pointed at him. “Don’t get any ideas.”

His real smile came back. The one that, even with crazy science hair and grease on his cheek made him look so very pretty. “I always have ideas.”

“That is not comforting.”

His eyebrows popped up and he held his arms out. “I could give you a hug.”

Forge rolled her eyes and pushed his chest a bit. Yup. The man was genuine for a moment and then he just couldn’t hold it. “Someone offered me food. I get all one track minded when I’m hungry.”

And there went the evil twinkle of despicable doom. “So do I.”

Forge groaned. “Lame.” She headed for the stairs.
Chapter 8: Bad Ideas

“Living easy, living free. Season ticket on a one way ride.” Highway to Hell by AC/DC

Two weeks from the day Tony picked her up in New York, Four emerged from a section of his garage she had prepared for sandblasting. It’d taken her a day to get the area to her specifications. Tony had spent that prepping his bots and tinkering with a gauntlet for the Mark VII. He knew she hadn’t even thought to use his systems for anything but minor assistance. They basically fabricated the Iron Man suit with JARVIS, so a little sandblasting was actually below their pay grade.

“Is it Halloween for robots?” She had her head cocked to the side a bit examining Butterfinger’s outfit.

“Nope. They’re suited up for an important mission.” He stepped back. “JARVIS take the specs on the Mustang chassis and run through the sandblasting protocol with U and Butterfingers.

Four’s eyes went wide. “Hey!”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m supposed to be working for you, not having your bots do it,” Four protested.

“This is easy work. Believe me, it’s not the first time they’ve done this. They can do it faster than you can anyway.” Tony wiped his hands off and ignored Four’s scoff. “Besides, I have an errand to run and you’re coming with me.”

“What the hell Captain C? I don’t remember running errands with you being in my contract.” She was cute when she got indignant.

“It was there, somewhere. Fine print,” he murmured. When she looked skeptical, he pouted. “Come on Four. You’ve been here for two weeks. Fresh air, sunlight, you’re in Malibu for Christ’s sake. You haven’t even used the pool.” He eyed her up and down. “I was hoping to see you in a swimsuit. String bikini? Thong?” He guessed. He didn’t think getting her out of the lab would be this difficult. Jesus was this how Rhodey felt?

“I didn’t bring a swimsuit,” she sassed.

“Oh, skinny dipping. Nice.” He leered at her.

She rolled her eyes. “I thought the point of coming to Malibu was to stay out of sight of shady government characters? Wouldn’t going out in public with you ruin that?”

“The point,” Tony made his way over to her and took her arm, “is not the point. JARVIS has a ninety two percent probability Agent Fischer is a dirty fake. Which means unless you agree to contact SHIELD,” he paused and waited for the shake of her head he knew would happen, “We’re
at a dead end. You know what dead ends are good for? Course corrections.” He continued to steer her toward the stairs.

“But,” she looked back toward the garage and Tony tugged her up the steps.

“Nope. Go. Take a shower. Change. Do whatever it is you women do with your hair.”

“There’s nothing wrong with my hair,” she protested.

Tony talked over her, “Get you’re weekly update from your shop monkey.”

“Hay is not a monkey!”

“Meet me in the kitchen in twenty.” He’d managed to tug her all the way upstairs and was herding her toward her bedroom.

She stopped before her door and turned to him. “Does this mean when you’ve been in the lab for two days I can manhandle you out?”

Tony blinked at her, “No.” He headed toward his own bedroom. There were plans he had in motion and he needed her temporarily out of the lab for them. U and Butterfingers may spend the day sandblasting, but Dum-E had an extra special mission. Bonus was that Tony got to spend the day with an attractive, intelligent woman.

“You are a menace!” Four called after him.

He pointed at her over his shoulder. “Twenty minutes.”

Stark’s errand ended up being lunch out at a Mexican restaurant. Just before they left JARVIS had announced Pepper Potts was calling. Stark dragged Forge out of the house so fast she couldn’t even grab her purse. It didn’t stop Miss. Potts though.

Before they’d even gotten in the Audi Stark’s cell had started ringing. Forge wouldn’t have paid too much attention to him sending the call to voicemail if the phone hadn’t immediately started ringing again. Eventually Stark had told JARVIS to hold all his calls, as he was ‘pretending to be Rhodey,’ and thus not actually the person whoever was calling him was trying to reach.

A little under two hours later they had ended up back at his house, on the couch together watching Sky High, and picking at a left over container of churros. Forge wondered if she shouldn’t be more freaked out by how comfortable she was getting with Stark.

JARVIS had interrupted them mid-movie with an announcement that Miss. Potts had left an urgent message. Stark had responded by muting JARVIS. Forge thought that was kind of mean, but the fight to rescue the citizen came on and she was sucked back into the movie.

They were at the end of the movie when Stark turned to her and announced, “You’re Layla.”

Forge knew her face said ‘what the fuck?’ “I am not Layla,” she denied.

He bumped her shoulder with his. “Girl has powers. Girl refuses to use said powers to their full potential. Girl finally bucks up and uses awesome powers to kick ass.” He pointed a sugar covered finger at her. “Layla.”

He may have had a point but she wasn’t going to tell him that. “Does that make you Ron Wilson,
bus driver?"

“What?” He yelped.

They started to bicker; Stark trying to claim the role of Will Stronghold and Forge finally talked over him. “Yes. Man has no powers. Man suddenly comes into powers. Man uses said powers to fight off giant robots for the mayor.” She watched him open and close his mouth. “You,” she laughed, “are Ron Wilson, bus driver.”

“That’s,” he stuttered a bit, “completely different. I didn’t fall into toxic waste.”

“And I am not a flower wielding sidekick,” Forge declared.

He sucked the sugar off his finger and wiggled his eyebrows at her. “You could be my hero support.”

“No,” Forge warned. “Get that idea right out of your head.”

He hummed at her with those twinkling eyes. People should fear those more, she thought. Everyone just thought they were charming, but she knew what they meant. “I have people after me.” She reminded him sternly. “I do not need to be super hero moonlighting. I am not a superhero!”

Tony smiled his genuine smile at her. “Layla.”

Forge threw herself back against the cushions, but flinched a second later when Stark poked her in the side. “What?”

“Tomorrow, nine a.m. Come to the gym with me,” he ordered.

She rolled her neck to look at him and frowned. “That’s Happy time,” she protested.

He grinned again. “Happy can get you started on some small stuff while I hit other areas. If you’re going to have people after you, it wouldn’t hurt to know a bit of hand to hand.”

Forge eyed him suspiciously. This sounded like the beginnings of a master plan she didn’t like. She opened her mouth to protest but Stark beat her to it.

“Powers are great, and I think you might have the punching down,” he said ruefully. “But you could use some work on dodging.”

She was still reluctant when he added in, “The sandblasting won’t be done until later anyway, so you have a free morning.”

“What if I wanted to get into the pool? You were so adamant about me trying it out earlier,” she teased.

His eyes darkened. “I thought you said you didn’t bring a suit.”

“Well you’ll be busy all morning.”

“I’d make an exception. Happy would understand,” he murmured.

Forge made a face at him.

“How about you go to the gym with me, and then we get in the hot tub afterward?” He purred at her. “You might be sore. I could rub your back again.”
She groaned. “I knew you were never going to let me live that down.”

“You need to loosen up.” He winked at her. “I don’t bite.”

Forge didn’t believe him for a second. “That’s a filthy lie and we both know it.”

Tony laughed.

“What next,” Forge asked. “Meet the Robinsons, or The Incredibles?”

Their easy camaraderie was broken by the sound of heels clicking on the floor.

Forge turned to see the CEO frowning at them.

“Pepper,” Tony greeted. He paused to unmute JARVIS. “Come to join the movie marathon?”

His voice sounded strained. Sure, Forge had only been around him for two weeks but she’d spent countless hours listening to him talk with the bots, or JARVIS, or bantering with her and Happy. Things must not have ended as amicably as the magazines claimed.

“Actually, I came to discuss the Stark Expo reopening ceremony with you.”

Oh, Forge thought, business, business talk. She grabbed a napkin from the table, the same napkins Stark had been gleefully ignoring, and wiped the sugary mess off her hands.

“I’m going to head down to the lab.” Stark made to protest but Forge plowed ahead. “It’s not a big deal. You have real, real job details to work out, and I have to make sure the bots haven’t set up their own government and declared Dum-E supreme leader.”

Stark cracked a grin. “It would be Dum-E.”

Forge turned to Miss. Potts. “I’ll leave His Unruliness to you. Have fun.”

Pepper Potts nodded in a distracted way, frown still on her face.

Forge swore she could feel eyes on her as she made her way to the top of the basement steps. She was beginning to think that woman didn’t like her.

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Down in the secret sanctum Forge peeked into the corner she’d set up for sandblasting. U and Butterfingers were still at it.

“Hey Mr. JARVIS, can you give me an estimated time of completion for the sandblasting sequence?”

“Oh course Miss Maddix. Sequence should be completed in nineteen hours. Would you like to schedule the priming protocol to follow upon completion?”

“You have one of those?” Forge’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yes Miss.”

“Wow. I feel like I’m not earning my pay check.” Forge dithered about it a minute, but flash rust was a bad, bad thing. She sighed. “Yeah, go ahead and schedule that please Mr. JARVIS. I don’t want to take a chance.”
“Priming protocol has been scheduled, Miss.”

“Thank you Mr. JARVIS.”

Forge moved over to her desk intending to boot up her computer when she caught sight of what was laying on her worktop. She stared, and blinked, but there continued to be a half assembled Iron Man gauntlet sitting on her desk in front of her keyboard.

“Um,” she drug the sound out, “Mr. JARVIS? Why is there a piece of the Iron Man tech at my work station?”

“I believe Sir was working on it between retrofitting for the sandblasting protocol.”

“Oh,” Forge started at the piece with her brows furrowed. Her keyboard was wireless, maybe she could just move it? Afraid she might bump the piece and somehow make it break into a million pieces causing untold science angst, she carefully reached behind it and got a grip on her keyboard. When she finally placed the board down to the right of her monitor she breathed a sigh of relief.

She looked back at the unfinished gauntlet, letting her eyes linger on all the interesting tidbits she could make out. “Damn,” she muttered in appreciation. “Science to the nth power.” She shook her head. So cool.

Cracking her neck Forge shifted the angle of the monitor and booted up her computer. The first thing to flash on the screen was the blueprint for the gauntlet. She pulled back from the screen a little in shock. “What the hell is going on?” She muttered to herself.

“Mr. JARVIS,” Forge sing song-ed, “I don’t think I have clearance for what’s on my monitor. You might want to remind Captain C to be a little bit more careful with his extra special toys.”

“Actually Miss,” and she swore the AI sounded amused, “Your security clearance is sufficient for all content present at your work station.”

Forge went still at that. “Really?”

“Yes, Miss.”

“Well that’s,” she trailed off. She had clearance to see the blueprints for a piece of the Iron Man armor? Not just a piece, but a new piece. Upgraded tech. Forge wasn’t sure how she felt about that. On the one hand, the idea Tony trusted her enough to leave out pieces of something she knew he guarded like Smaug did dwarf treasure, made her feel all warm and fuzzy. On the other, she wanted to scold him for being so lax with security. She’d been here for two weeks.

“I’m not going to hurt anything if I minimize the program with the blueprints right Mr. JARVIS?”

“No, Miss.”

She clicked to minimize the window and then pulled up her own program for project tracking.

“Thank you,” she hummed.

That man. Forge shook her head and entered the information about estimated completion time for the sandblasting. When she’d started working in the lab two weeks before, Stark had been like a third grader guarding a test when he remembered she was around; all elbows down around his work and side eyeing her.

She’d perved on the Iron Man armor from the corner of her eyes a few times, but she tried not to be
weird about it. Forge knew what it felt like to have someone want to poke around inside you and figure out how you worked. The armor might not be a part of Stark’s actual body, but she got it. So, she wasn’t offended. Years of wanting nothing but people to mind their own business when it came to her, bred the habit of minding her nosiness around others. Hay would’ve said it made her shut people out.

After the experience with FOKUS she could admit that yeah, that was probably true. Stark had been pretty good about his own curiosity. He certainly wasn’t malicious about it. If anything he was trying to get her to be more open about it, accept her uniqueness. Whatever. Unique is great, until it’s not.

Still, the gauntlet sitting at her station could have been absent mindedness. She didn’t think so though. Especially not with the blueprints up on her computer. If she had blueprints for how her body worked she would never bring them up on a computer someone else was using unless she trusted them.

“Mr. JARVIS,” Forge called.

“What can I do for you Miss. Maddix.”

“Is Tony trying to find out if I’m trustworthy?” Once it was out of her mouth she felt like a fool for asking the man’s personal AI about his creator’s motives. Forge dropped her head in her hands and groaned.

“Mr. Stark’s motives are not always clear.”

She gave a skeptical hum. “That was a non answer.”

The AI remained silent. Yup, Stark was totally testing her. Forge bit her lip. “Do you think I’m trustworthy, Mr. JARVIS?” She really wanted the AI’s opinion. So far he seemed like a good judge of character.

There was no hesitation in his answer this time, like he was trying to make up for his earlier avoidance. “I do indeed, Miss.”

“And that is why you are the Candyman,” she muttered. Forge drummed her fingers lightly on the keyboard.

She’d had a lot of heavy thoughts dropped on her and her mind was firmly out of work mode. Good intentions aside, temptation was sitting on her work station. A part of her mind was already cataloguing the schematics and itching to finish assembly on the gauntlet. Talk about metal art.

She wanted to process and that happened best lately when she was jogging. Bonus it would get her away from eventually breaking and messing with the tech. Tapping her feet she wondered if she could sneak by the two in the living room.

Forge glanced at the Iron Man gauntlet again and exited out of her program. Whatever, they were just talking business stuff. She could skirt through the room and be up the stairs in thirty seconds flat. Tiptoeing in the background like a vaudeville villain was a better embarrassed then Stark finding her mid-armor assembly cooing and stroking. Forge shuddered at the fodder that would give him.

Decision made Forge opened the security door to leave the lab and a wall of sound rolled down to her.

From up the stairs she could hear a female voice she knew was Pepper Potts yell, “You can’t leave her here, Tony! JARVIS is not enough to stop her stealing your tech if you are on the other side of the country!”
Oh, Forge thought a little numbly. Yeah. Pepper Potts did not like her.
Chapter 9: The Gambler

“Every gambler knows that the secret to survivin’ is knowin’ what to throw away, and knowin’ what to keep. Cause every hands a winner, and every hands a loser, and the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.” The Gambler by Kenny Rogers

Tony watched Pepper as she watched Four descend to the lab. He and Pepper had gone around a few times already about his decision to involve himself with the metal bending woman. He hoped this wouldn’t be another time.

He heard the beep of the security disengage before Pepper turned back to him. “You’ve been avoiding me,” she accused.

Tony had. “I’ve been busy.”

He saw the red head eye the left over churros, the couch cushions, and the movie credits rolling on the TV. “Clearly.”

He rubbed a hand across his face and around his goatee, hiding his rolling eyes. She obviously thought he was screwing the mechanic. As much as that idea appealed to him it hadn’t happened yet.

He’d abandoned the hands off plan the first day Four was in his house. It was never going to last anyway, but she was taking some time to convince. Tony was actually okay with that. The flirting was fun and he was finding more reasons to like her everyday. He thought they were becoming friends.

“What is so important you’ve been blowing up my phone all day?” He tried for a teasing tone, but knew it had fallen flat.

“Tomorrow is the reopening ceremony for the Stark Expo.”

He knew that. He failed to see why that was something to hound him about.

“The organizers and I agree that after the incident with Hammer it would be best if you were there to give a rededication speech,” she explained. Her heels tapped on the floor as she took the few steps to rest her hip on the back of the couch.

Fuck. Tony sighed. He did not want to go back to New York right now.

“I’ve scheduled you a flight out at eight tomorrow morning and have a full itinerary for your day,” she continued on, but Tony was still hung up on ‘flight.’

“Wait, wait. I didn’t agree to this,” he waved his hands. “I don’t have time for this right now, Pepper,” he argued. Tony had just started fabrication on a few pieces he intended for Four. That being vulnerable because of unconsciousness thing needed fixing.

Pepper raised her eyebrows and clipped, “Apparently you have plenty of time.”
He ignored the snide remark for something he considered more important. “You’re going to drop this on me now?”

“I would have informed you about it this morning but you weren’t taking calls.”

“I told you no out of town trips for a month Pepper. A month,” he stressed. “It has not been a month.”

She cut across him. “Yes. No out of town trips for a month because that woman is staying with you.”

“That’s what this is actually about isn’t it?” He questioned. “Again Pepper?” Jesus, if she hadn’t dumped him Tony would have thought she was jealous. “It’s done. She’s staying here. Decision made.”

“That is not what this is about,” she argued. “This is about the company and it’s public image. Your company, Tony.”

Tony hated the term public image. He knew it was necessary though.

“The reopening of the expo is an important day. A speech, a few meetings.” She held the itinerary out to him. “One day.”

When he didn’t immediately take the paper from her she laid it on the back of the couch. He stood up and grabbed the thing to read it, ignoring the slightly hurt look in her eyes. Tony didn’t know what the hell she wanted from him anymore.

After a quick read through he sighed. One day. He could do one day, and Pepper had a point about the rededication. “Alright. Fine. I’ll be there.” He dropped the paper on the coffee table. “Eight tomorrow.” He shook his head. “You know I hate early flights.”

Pepper tapped a few things on her phone. “I’ve got you three hotel rooms booked. I’ll send the information to Happy. Don’t skip the meeting with Mr. Vandimir at five. He wants to introduce you to his associate and discuss expanding the KoleTech presentations.”


He watched Pepper’s lips press so hard together they almost disappeared. “Two hotel rooms then,” she clipped.

Tony furrowed his brows. What the hell was going on? “I think I’m still missing something, and you didn’t answer my question.”

Pepper waved a hand, not looking up from the new tapping she was doing on her phone. “The usual two for you and Happy, and one for Miss. Maddix.”

“No, no. No. Four is not going to New York.” Why the hell would he take the woman back to the place where the bad guys were trying to get her? He registered the ominous pause from Pepper and knew then, that yes, it would be another one of those fights.

“What do you mean she’s not going to New York?”

“Exactly that.” He huffed. “New York is where she came from. It defeats the purpose of getting away,” he gestured, “if she goes back.”

He watched Pepper seem to swell up with some emotion. “You can’t leave her here, Tony! JARVIS
is not enough to stop her stealing your tech if you are on the other side of the country,” she exploded.

Oh, the emotion was rage.

“Again? Seriously?” His voice was starting to raise now and he really couldn’t stop it. He ran a hand through his hair. “How is this difficult for you to understand?”

Pepper dropped her arms to her sides. “It is! It’s difficult to understand why you felt the need to involve yourself in this Tony! Now it’s affecting your work,” she argued.

“She is not affecting my work.” He shouted. Pepper did not just say that to him. He was not the irresponsible man he’d been in the past. “You think I haven’t been keeping track of everything,” he stressed the word, “That has been going on with the company since June. That hasn’t changed!”

“And yet you won’t go on business trips for a month because she’s in your house!” Pepper accused.

“I set that up so that she and I could get used to working with each other!” He exclaimed. “I needed time to figure out whether or not I was comfortable leaving her alone with the suits. You know how important to me they are!”

Pepper huffed, “Yes. I am very aware of how important your damned suits are Tony!”

He continued as if she hadn’t spoken. Tony didn’t want to acknowledge another old bone between them. “I am fine with going to New York tomorrow. I go,” he gestured again, “She stays here. You get me at the reopening. What is the problem?”

“My problem is that it’s not safe to leave her here! You don’t know if you can trust her! Think of what she could do Tony!” Pepper cried.

Tony had thought of what Four could do. He’d had JARVIS think of what she could do. Both of them were of the opinion Four was trustworthy. “I am not taking her to New York!” He yelled. “Especially not the Expo. If I take her back to New York with me I might as well stick a fucking bow on her! And in case it escaped your attention the suit is metal! This,” he tapped the arc reactor, “Is metal! If she wanted my suit or to kill me, there’s not a god damn thing I could do about it but sit there and die! Being in New York or here doesn’t matter!”

“I don’t see why you had to do anything in the first place! She brought this on herself, and you! You couldn’t leave something so personally dangerous to you alone.” Pepper threw her hands into the air. “Of course not! When are you going to stop doing these things Tony!”

Jesus, they were arguing in circles. “When are you going to trust my judgment!? I’m Iron Man, Pepper! There will always be someone who can kill me, who wants very much to kill me.”

“But you don’t invite them to your home, Tony!” Pepper had reached new levels of loud, and Tony was grateful Four was down in the soundproof lab.

“Four does not want to kill me, Pepper!” Wasn’t that obvious? If Four wanted to kill him she would have done it the first week she was there. He’d seen her background. She was smart enough to work out the tech on her own if she wanted. Maybe Four would have run afoul of SHIELD later on for it, but Tony would have been long dead by then. The woman didn’t seem to want anything but to hide.

“She needs help!” Tony continued. “SHIELD, no one, knew shit about her before the Expo happened. That happened because of me!” Didn’t Pepper get it at all? For someone who had claimed to love him she sure didn’t act like she knew him. It wasn’t just that Four’s situation might be a tiny bit his fault. It was that he could help her. Four was brilliant, and special, and she did not deserve to be hunted around the world by people who were only interested in using her. “My evaluation with
SHIELD is why there were Agents even there to know her name before I could delete the records!

“Don’t!” Pepper turned to follow him as he stalked across the living room. “Don’t pretend that the only reason she’s here isn’t to sate your curiosity!” Tony scowled and headed for the bar top in the kitchen. He needed a fucking drink. “You are always like this!”

“Fine!” Tony cried, pulling down a bottle of scotch. “That is part of it, but it is not all of it Pepper. She’s smart, talented, what she can do is amazing…”

Pepper cut across him before he could finish. “Oh my God! I cannot believe you! Just because you’re sleeping with her does not make her a good person!” The octave of her voice really went up on the ‘sleeping.’ “Do you get bonus points for her being a shiny, deadly, puzzle for you!?”

Tony slammed his glass down on the counter. “Everything I do does not revolve around me fucking people, Pepper!”

Downstairs Forge listened to the argument between Miss. Potts and Tony escalate. That woman’s voice could carry. Back home people would have called this a half block argument. They would have whispered about how tacky it was to pull out your dirty laundry on the front lawn. Those same people would have had their front windows wide open to hear better though.

She wondered if standing by the open security door listening made her fit right in back home. Whatever. They were obviously discussing her.

Despite Stark’s refusal, Forge had to concede if he was needed on a business trip and wasn’t going because of her, then she was interfering with his work. She could give that one to Miss. Potts.

The discussion about the suits and her trustworthiness was interesting. Yes, she was being tested. Apparently Stark thought it was okay to leave her here for a weekend. Miss. Potts was definitely not on board with that though. Seen from the outside his decision to bring her to his house was reckless, maybe even a little stupid. But as Stark had put it, the genie was out of that bottle.

The two continued shouting about whether or not it was okay to leave the kid at home, and Forge cracked her neck, buffering herself from the unpleasant childhood memories with sarcasm. Oh, thanks mom and dad for making it easier for me to deal with people screaming at each other at the top of their lungs later in life, she thought.

She grimaced a bit when Miss. Potts claimed she’d brought creeper agent on herself. What Stark said seemed true too. It appeared Miss. Potts did not trust his judgment. Forge was a bit heartened when he defended her, but then immediately felt like crap as he blamed himself for her situation.

Forge knew when she took his offer to hide in Malibu, that she would probably make his life complicated. She hadn’t expected to disrupt it to this degree however. The man was putting his business on hold, playing detective, and now having to defend his judgment to his CEO.

She wasn’t surprised when he admitted she was there for his curiosity. That was old ground. Being called talented by a man like Tony Stark made her feel a little fuzzy though. Of course the feeling was immediately wrecked by Miss. Potts accusation. Fuck you to, lady. Apparently that little comment touched a nerve with Stark as well.

What would Uncle Wall do in this situation? A small grin tilted her lips thinking of how his whole face would have pulled down into a frown. Her Uncle wouldn’t have been too happy with Stark coming on to her, but her Uncle would have respected him for doing what he was doing for her.
Stark had issues, but he was playing the role of big, fat blockade between her and whoever was currently trying to get at her. All else aside, she owed Tony. Uncle Wall would have said ‘You pay your debts Forge. In increments if you have to.’

It didn’t seem like the argument upstairs was going to be resolved anytime soon and Tony seemed to be getting more upset the longer it went on. There was no hint of either of the people involved looking for middle ground. Forge had an idea of a compromise but it would require her stepping into the firing line of the red head’s temper.

She wiped her hands on the rag in her pocket and pushed some stray hairs off her face. Okay then. Big girl pants.

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Ever since Pepper had left him over a month ago she treated him like he was all the worst parts of himself. And yeah, Tony had a lot of bad parts, but acting like he was back to being the man he was before Afghanistan was insulting. He was capable of good, of wanting to help someone just because he could. Georgia, he could see it in her, was someone he could really make a difference with. That woman was just waiting for the right push to fly.

Pepper started in on a new round of chastisement and Tony started to tune her out. She was repeating the same arguments at this point. He wasn’t budging. If she wanted him to go to New York so damn badly she could deal with him leaving Four here. Otherwise, Tony wasn’t going.

A high whistle suddenly cut through Pepper’s screeching, and Tony turned to see Four standing at the top of the stairs. Tony thought her face said ‘I’m gonna kick some ass.’ Oh, shit just kept on coming.

“There is a very simple solution to this problem you are both overlooking.”

Tony grimaced. Four had heard more than enough to know what was going on then.

“I hardly think either of us trusts you enough to come up with a solution.”

Tony opened his mouth to protest when Four took Pepper’s acidity and tossed it right back.

“I think I am well enough aware of what you think of me, Miss. Potts.”

That was a very verbal slap, Tony thought. He watched, a bit taken aback, as Four turned to him.

“Lock the lab. Lock the house. I’ll put myself up in a hotel and you can have Happy watch me for the weekend.” Tony’s jaw went loose in shock. “We’ll rent chick flicks and eat cookie dough ice cream. It’ll be a mini vacation.”

Four turned back to Pepper. “That way he,” she pointed at Tony, “can go be business proper at his Expo without worrying about me being in New York. Meanwhile you,” she point to Pepper, “don’t have to worry overmuch about me making away with the proprietary technology and getting into a death match with a superhero.” Four crossed her arms. “Who, by the way, is very right about the fact that if I wanted to kill him, I could do so. At any time.”

Tony glanced at Pepper to see her eyes go wide. She even took a step back, and Tony had to agree because, yeah, that was a scary thing to say.

“Fortunately he’s also correct about me not wanting to.” Four dropped her arms and continued gesturing. “I was taught it is poor manners to kill someone who is doing you a solid. Or you know, anyone at all, unless it’s a life or death situation. For your information Miss. Potts, I have never killed
anyone in my life, and I have had cause.” Tony heard Four’s voice say the words ‘It’s happened before,’ in his memory.

“Now, considering I can waltz through a bank vault without a problem, my suggestion is the closest anyone is going to get to happy at this point. I vote we all take it, and get on with life.” He could see that her hands were shaking.

He knew from the look on her face that Pepper didn’t trust or believe Four and was about to start the argument back up again. Four had been so insistent that things having to do with her powers be her choice. Tony decided to let her have her choice in this too. He didn’t like it, but it was the quickest way to get anything done.

Tony took a deep breath, and drained the last of his drink. He saw Pepper open her mouth from the corner of his eye and spoke before she could. “JARVIS call Happy.”
Chapter 10: Happy Day

“I think I’m losing my mind now. It’s in my head, Darling I hope, that you’ll be here when I need you the most.” Don’t Let Me Down by The Chainsmokers

Sometimes Forge didn’t know why she bothered. It was her mother all over again. The kids in college hadn’t even known she was a mutant. It was enough for them she was young and freakishly smart. That had been easier to take. More normal. But her mother, her longest term lover, they knew what she could do and it scared them. Forge now knew for sure that she scared the shit out of Pepper Potts.

She’d apologized to Tony for making his life difficult once he got off the phone with Happy. He’d reached across the bar and actually grabbed her hand. It had startled the hell out of her. She had just casually mentioned how easily she could kill him at any time. What she had said was bound to freak anyone out.

Stark had rebounded quickly however. He had looked at her with those coffee colored eyes and that serious face he did, then told her it wasn’t her fault. It kind of was though.

Happy had been a sport about picking her up right away. He probably thought she had slept with Stark, since apparently that was going around, and things had gone weird or something.

Forge bundled up under the covers she was shelling out over three hundred dollars a night to stay in. It was a good thing Stark was paying her well. She was spending a lot of money on this trip.

Happy was situated in the room next door for all the good he would do if she decided to go Dr. Doomsday on everyone. The only thing that would stop her was death, or an all plastic cell way down deep in the ground. Most days Forge could square with herself that she had that kind of power. Tonight was not a part of that.

The problem with being a mostly good person with that kind of power, is that it didn’t matter how nice you were. People just knowing you could do things made them think you might do them. You were a threat to them and they treated you like that. Stark didn’t think it of her, but Pepper Potts certainly did.

Normally one person’s opinion wouldn’t hurt her so badly, but Forge felt like her life was slowly slipping from her control. She was trying so hard to keep steady and dig her feet in to fight instead of run.

A few years ago an agent showing up out of nowhere would have made her do two things. One, she would have threatened him. If he hadn’t gone away then Forge would have went option two, which was to disappear. That wasn’t a long term solution though. Someone always found her in the end and the cycle started over.

The first time she ran Forge ended up hiding on the ranch of the nice older couple she was working
for and drinking herself into oblivion every night. Forge had been at the bottom of a slope that had started with her mother’s alcoholism and fear of her, and kept going down through her Uncle’s death. Her nightmares and guilt had been waking her up three or four times a night when she wasn’t plastered, and Forge was just done with life. It was the woman, Judy, who’d given her a come to Jesus talk and convinced her to go back out in the world. Of course, that was when FOKUS had found her.

They had advertised themselves as a support group for mutants. It was a filthy lie though. Doctor Pittman had been, in retrospect, a dead ringer for a replacement Uncle Wall. They’d done their homework on her and knew who’d she’d open up to the most. Her Uncle had been the only one who’d known what she could do and still loved her.

Once he’d gotten enough information on her he’d stuck her in a box built especially for her. It was smaller than the office boxes at the Expo, but not by much, and it was made entirely of plastic right down to the screws. The smell had given her a headache. She’d been in there for three days before she managed to catch a guard being lax about the no metal rule.

It was the first time she’d fought with her powers. That kind of tooth and nail, if they catch you then you will never, ever, get out again, fighting was foreign to her. She’d been the most violent she’d ever been on her way out the door. The mutants who got out with her had been more so.

So yes, Forge had never killed anyone. Facilitated their murder by letting out people she knew would kill them though; that one she had done.

Friday night Forge thought about FOKUS, her younger self, and her Uncle Wall. She thought about her tiny living space in the garage in New York and a man with a southern accent who called her powers a life hack. Forge thought about Tony Stark’s insistence that what she could do was amazing, the way he saw it as a force for good. It took her a long time to fall asleep.

She dreamed that night, and it was of a memory.

Cliff went to the scrap yard to pick up more metal, so Georgia was on her own for the morning. She was using the belt grinder when Judy, Cliff’s wife, brought her a sandwich. The woman had a look on her face like she had something to say. So Georgia turned off the grinder and sat down on a stool to eat. These people had tolerated a lot from her after all.

Judy perched herself on the low desk Cliff had in his workshop. “You’re hung over every morning,” she started without preamble in her Texas accent, “And the mornings you don’t look it, or act it, I think you’re just so used to it you don’t show it anymore.”

Georgia didn’t take her prying very well. “I’m not drunk on the job.”

The southern woman sighed, as if Georgia was being stubborn. “No you’re not sugar, but you’re just wasting away. You don’t even eat unless I put it in your hand.” She gestured to the sandwich.

Georgia shrugged. She was. Whatever.

“I know you got some kind of pain in your past, but Hun, you embracing the south so much you turnin’ into a country song.” Judy shook her head. “I know that’s all that fool plays in this shop. Poor gal.”

“It grows on you,” Georgia mumbled.

Judy hummed. “Look, I ain’t going to lecture at you too hard. You going to do what you want, but sometime in your life somebody loved you. You too nice a girl not to have had that. That person,
they gone or not, would not want you to be no sad ass country song.” The older woman caught
Georgia’s gaze with her own. “The world gives us what we need to hold on,” she opined.

That was nice. That was a nice idea, Georgia thought sarcastically. “Oh yeah? Where the fuck is
mine?”

Judy pinned her with a look Georgia had only seen southern women pull off. “Well sugar, only the
very lucky get that thing to show up on they porch steps. You a long way out,” she teased. “How the
world supposed to give you anything if you so determined to run from it?” She held her hand up,
“And don’t sass me. They different ways o runnin’. You doing as many as you can at the same time.
Ain’t no prize for that, sugar.”

“So just stop running? That’s it?” Georgia asked skeptically.

“Stop running, Georgia. Be part of the world. Let it give you what you need.”

Saturday morning Forge thought about that memory and Tony’s last words to her. With a sigh she
drug herself out of bed and into the shower. Whoops always whooped your ass. Georgia was not
twenty one anymore. She was thirty six. This was not the first time she’d done something stupid.
Although, letting the opinion of a pointy faced CEO in horrible shoes drive her down into the
emotional quagmire that was her past, was a new twist on things.

So, it was Saturday. She was booked into the hotel until Monday, and she wanted to go for a drive.
Sunlight and fresh air after all. Stark seemed to have good ideas, and didn’t that mean the world was
coming to an end. Happy answered the door after her first set of knocks.

“Good morning, Happy.”

Happy was dressed and set to go wherever at eight in the morning. Bless him. “Good morning, Miss
Four.”

Forge shook her head and took another step toward not running. She held out her hand for a
handshake. “Your boss sucks at introductions. I’m Forge. It’s the name I actually prefer so, hi.”

He smiled and shook her hand. “I prefer Happy.”

She laughed. “Well he was bound to get one right.” Happy chuckled.

“Stark told you about what I can do, right?” Happy went shifty eyed and that was enough for her.
“Okay. Are you alright with hanging out with me then?”

“Yes Miss. Forge.” He corrected himself. “It doesn’t bother me.” Check another person who didn’t
seem terrified of her once they knew what she could do. She was up to three.

“Then are you up for a drive up the 101 to Santa Barbara? Strictly sight seeing. I’ve been in that
house for about a solid two weeks and I’m feeling a little buggy.”

Happy smiled again at that. “Sure thing, Boss Lady. You’re calling the shots this weekend.”

“Great. Then how about we meet back in ten, jump in the car, swing by Burger King for breakfast,
and then head up the coast.”

“Sounds good,” he disappeared back into his room and Forge went about making sure she had
everything she wanted. She slipped her phone into her purse, put on her shoes and waited the extra
eight minutes all the while reminding herself pity parties were one day only events.
They’d been in the car for going on three quarters of an hour, and were traveling over the Santa Clara River gap in Oxnard, when they were rammed from behind.

Happy had been driving in the outside lane. In the second before their car hit the rail and slipped off the side of the bridge, Forge could hear horns honking and Stark’s voice calling ‘Happy?’

“Shit. Shit.” Happy had his hands braced on the roof for free fall. The airbags had deployed with impact and were partially obscuring the front windshield. As the car nosed down, the view that was left over filled with the ground below them. Forge only had a few seconds to react.

It was easier for her to go with gravity on the big stuff. She could levitate them back to the bridge, but bad guy was still up there and she’d give herself a nosebleed doing it. Instead she slowed and leveled their decent to the bottom of the wash. Of course now she was pissed, and she could hear Stark gabbling into Happy’s phone.

“What the fuck was that?” Forge ranted focusing on bringing them down safely. Talk about shitty ass driving. The asshole could have killed them.

“You good Happy?” she asked.

“Y..yeah,” he replied.

From Happy’s phone she heard a faint, “Four? Would someone tell me what the hell is going on?”

“You want to answer him Happy?” Her voice was tight in concentration. “I’m busy.”

“Right,” he seemed to collect himself. “Got run off the bridge, boss. Big truck, a black diesel four by four. Should have some right front end damage. They smacked us out of no where.”

“Where are you?” Stark asked from Happy’s phone.

The car settled lightly onto it’s wheels in the dry river bed, but before Forge could sigh in relief she saw the group of men in front of them. She’d recognize what they were carrying even if she hadn’t been thinking of the organization that used them last night. Plastic dart guns, non-lethal, but they could knock her out, after which the coup de grace could be performed with a damned rock.

“Fuck!” Forge yelled.

“Who the hell is that?” Happy cried.

She realized right away the group wasn’t there to kill her. They were there to kidnap her. They were there to take her back to that plastic box and figure out how she worked. Forge felt that desperate animalistic terror shoot down her spine.

“Bad guys,” she breathed. “Stark,” Forge’s voice shook. “Santa Clara River bed, underneath the Ventura Freeway Bridge. Hurry up. Happy I’m really sorry about this but those are plastic.”

“You can’t stop them?” He had a gun in his hand now.

No. No she couldn’t. If just one of them hit her it was game over. They’d tie her down and chop her up.

“Not the darts, but let’s hope they’re stupid. This is going to be super uncomfortable for you, but if you can still shoot them, please do. Also just shoot a lot, bullets I can work with.” There was a
ripping, sheering metal noise as Forge wrapped both her and Happy in metal from the car to protect them.

“Code gold,” Happy yelled toward the phone.

“Already on my way. Twelve minutes.”

Twelve minutes was a long time. Forge was on her own until he showed up, but she was not by herself. If she went down they would probably kill Happy before Stark could get there. Forge made the decision that was not going to happen. She was never going back to that box, and Happy was going to live. She’d deal with the consequences later.

A flick of her wrist and the engine shot out of the car straight at the center of the group. With a bit of concentration tiny washers and screws became deadly projectiles. She aimed for eyes, throats, groins. If they had body armor she wanted weak spots. Forge tried not to notice the blood. She tried to block out the screaming. The whole world smelled like Texas in the summer.

Happy had moved on to repeating the word “Fuck,” and yelling. To his credit he shot three of the bad guys, and then pumped four more bullets into the air that Forge hijacked to take out more of them. Out of a group of twelve there were now two. One high velocity exhaust pipe later there were none.

Forge felt that watery adrenaline feeling again but it was muffled under a pounding panic. That group was down but there could be others. She needed someone to tell her what to do.

“Happy!? Four!? What the fuck is going on?”

‘Tony,’ the thought was wobbly around the edges. Iron Man could tell her what to do. Tony was Iron Man. She blinked and shoved between the seats to grab the phone with her metal hand. It crunched a little but stayed connected.

“Tony?”

“Four. I’m on my way. Ten minutes.”

“Okay.” She glanced back out the windshield at the wreck of humanity she’d created. Was something on fire? “Okay. Fuck.” That was so very different than anything she’d ever done before.

“Happy and I are okay.” They were okay, right? The little whistling rasp was coming from her? “There were guys here but,” she glanced out front again and felt very far away. “Well, they’re not a problem anymore. Should we move?”

“Can you see anyone else around you?” He asked.

“We’re still in the car.” She realized belatedly. Forge turned and shoved the door off it’s hinges. It wasn’t plastic.

“What the hell was that?” Tony cried.

“Me. Getting out of the car.” She looked up at the bridge but there was nothing there but a crowd of onlookers it looked like. “There are people on the bridge. I don’t know if its them.” Forge kept a wary eye on the group of people slumped on the ground. She didn’t know if they were dead, or just wounded. She knew they could still be a threat. “People on the ground. I don’t know how many are alive.” She could hear her voice wobbling up and down the scale. Being done running and killing twelve people were very different things to be okay about.
Her mind spun and the ground around her was dusty and tan. Happy said something that Forge missed. It drew her attention back to the present though.

“What?”

“Use the car against the bridge support to make a bunker.”

“Jesus Happy, that’s great. Okay.” Forge absently levitated him out of the car and over to the nearest bridge support. He yelped. “Sorry, Happy.”

“What are you doing?” Stark asked.

“Making a shield from the car against a bridge support. Out of sight of the people on the bridge.”

“Eight minutes out,” Stark assured.

“Happy can you talk for a minute? I just need to keep an eye out.”

Forge tuned out a bit after that. They were in California. She was counting down in sixties in her head and scanning for metal or people. It was day, not night. Nothing but the cars on the bridge, and the bridge itself. She was not alone. Ten sets of sixty later, she knew she was counting fast, Stark landed beside them in the Iron Man suit.

Forge gladly handed the reigns over to someone with more experience. She fell to her ass and started peeling the metal off her hands. Her heart beat was loud in her ears.

“Keep the metal on till I check on these guys.”

“Okay,” Forge breathed, closing her eyes, still seeing the men she had killed. In her memory someone snarled and a building exploded. “Okay.”
Chapter 11: The Other End of the Line

“The dreams in which I’m dying are the best I’ve ever had. I find it hard to tell you. I find it hard to take. When people run in circles it’s a very, very mad world.” Mad World Gary Jules

Friday

During the call with Happy, Tony heard Pepper’s heels walking away. She did that well. When the front door closed behind her, Tony felt like his emotions caught back up with his thoughts. He swallowed a few times around the ball of pissed off in his throat.

It hadn’t been enough for Pepper that he had committed to her, she had wanted him to change completely. She left him when he wouldn’t, and then continued to muck around in his personal life like she had a say. He and Four were building trust between them. Then Pepper came and rattled both their cages.

After the red head had left, Four had crossed the living room and sat herself on the other side of the counter from him. He watched her drum her fingers on the bar top.

“When did you want me to pick Miss Four up?” Happy asked, bringing Tony out of his thoughts.

“Tonight, please Happy.” Four broke in. Tony could see that she was frowning, her jaw tight. “Now, if you can.”

“Sure,” Happy sounded like he was already moving. “I’ll be there in twenty.”

“Thank you, Happy,” Four’s shoulders were slumped. She looked like she had lost the argument instead of ending it. It made him even more angry with his CEO.

Tony rubbed a hand across his forehead. “Thanks, Happy. You’re a good sport,” he added in. He knew Happy wouldn’t hang up without the safety phrase.

Tony continued to watch Four until she looked up at him. He wondered what the hell was going through her head.

“I’m sorry,” she was frowning. “I didn’t think this would mess your life up as much as it has.”

Tony’s life had been messed up for a long time before Four came around. He scoffed and reached across the bar top to grab a hold of her hand. Startled blue eyes raised to his. “This is not your fault. You haven’t messed my life up, Four.”

“You were holding off business meetings to deal with my crap.” Her brows pinched together.

“No,” Tony disagreed. “I cleared my schedule for a month. Something that was perfectly fine, until my CEO decided to go around me and schedule meetings.”

“She’s right though,” Four argued. “The reopening of the Expo is super important and you not going
is me messing with your real, real job.”

Tony gave a little tug on her hand, “And I would have went. You would have been just fine here hanging out with JARVIS.”

She smiled a little. “We would have had a house party. I would have made Dum-E a hat.”

For a moment his brain ran away with him and he got distracted in his thoughts. Her voice reminded him they were in the middle of something.

“It doesn’t freak you out? What I said?”

He felt his eyebrows go up and he hummed in question. “What? About the you killing me?”

Four gave him a wry look. “That’s kind of a big thing.”

Tony grinned. “I knew you could do that before I walked into your shop.” He shook his head. “Besides, I’m Iron Man. I could wait until you’re distracted and blast you with the suit. Hell, I could wait until you fall asleep and shoot you with a gun. I am just as capable as you are of doing horrible shit with the things I can do.” Tony took a breath. “I have done horrible shit with the things I can do. It’s why I’m Iron Man to begin with.”

He watched her pretty mouth drop open and Tony stood up to walk around the counter. He pulled her up out of her seat and into his arms. “You go have your girl time with Happy if you want, but I’m not locking you out of this house or the lab.” He made sure he caught and held her gaze. “What I’m saying is, you don’t have to go.”

“But Miss. Potts…”

Tony cut her off again. “Are you going to go joy ride in my suits while I’m gone?”


“Good choice. Probably wouldn’t be very comfortable in the chest area.” He leaned back from the hug and dropped his eyes to leer a bit.

He could tell she didn’t buy his playful flirting. “Why are you doing this?”

“Because you shouldn’t have to worry about people being afraid of you, or hunting you down, just because you can do something spectacular. You shouldn’t feel like you have to hide.” He closed the distance between them again and kissed her on the temple before releasing her. He needed to head down to the lab. Four would go or stay, but Tony had work to do.

Once he was back down in the basement he got started. “JARVIS. Bring up the applications for my assistant.”

“Yes, sir.” Was it his imagination or did JARVIS sound like he approved.

Tony glanced at Four’s workstation and saw the gauntlet for the Mark VII right where he’d left it. He clenched his jaw. Tony had made his decision about Four. Pepper could deal with it.

He spent the rest of the night in the lab combing through applications, looking for the right combination to deal with his shit. He found it five minutes before he was due to be on the plane for take off.

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Tony didn’t bother to answer Pepper’s calls. He knew she was only going to tear into him about being late for the flight. It was only by a half an hour. He’d been much later for much more trivial things.

JARVIS had informed him when Four had left the house. He was a bit disappointed. A quick call to Happy made sure the man knew to bring her back Monday, and also got him the information on the hotel in case he had to go drag her out. She didn’t know it, but she wasn’t paying for a damn thing while she was there.

Tony had settled back into his chair, sunglasses over his eyes, to catch a quick nap when JARVIS spoke up from the phone in his breast pocket.

“Sir, the air bags have deployed in Mr. Hogan’s vehicle. An emergency call is connecting now.”

“Put it on speaker J.”

The first thing he heard over the line were Four and Happy yelling and car horns going off in the background.

“Happy?”

“Shit! Shit!” That was Happy.

“Happy what the hell is going on? Is this a code gold?!” Tony was already up out of his seat getting the Mark VI ready to go.

“What the fuck was that?” Four sounded pissed. After a moment she asked, “You good Happy?”

“Y..yeah,” he replied.

“Four? Would someone tell me what the hell is going on?” Tony was standing by the emergency exit now.

“You want to answer him Happy? I’m busy.” She sounded strained.

“Right,” Happy seemed to get himself together. “Got run off the bridge, boss. Big truck, a black diesel four by four. Should have some right front end damage. They smacked us out of no where.”

“Where are you?” He was starting to wonder if it was a case of bad Californian driving. Wait, did he say bridge? Before he could get any clarification they both started yelling again.

“Fuck!”

“Who the hell is that?” Happy cried.

Tony was in the suit by the time Four’s breathy answer of “Bad guys,” reached him. He hit the emergency latch and flew out of the plane.

“Stark,” Forge’s voice sounded shaky as hell. “Santa Clara River bed, underneath the Ventura Freeway Bridge. Hurry up. Happy I’m really sorry about this but those are plastic.”

“You can’t stop them?” Tony could hear Happy’s worry.

“Not the darts, but let’s hope they’re stupid. This is going to be super uncomfortable for you, but if you can still shoot them, please do. Also just shoot a lot, bullets I can work with.”
He could hear the sound of twisting metal from their end. “Code gold,” Happy yelled. Yeah. Tony had already figured that out.

“All ready. Twelve minutes. JARVIS, give me everything you got.”

“Full power to thrusters.”

Over the still open connection Tony could hear a series of tearing metal sounds and then huge thuds and bangs. From far away he could hear faint yells and cries. It sounded like a damn war zone.

“Happy!? Four!? What the fuck is going on?” he called.

There was a loud crackle in the earpiece before Four’s voice came back. “Tony?” His heart almost stopped when she said his name. Jesus, she sounded terrified.

“Four, I’m on my way. Ten minutes.”

“Okay. Okay. Fuck. Happy and I are okay.” Tony could hear her whistling as she breathed. “There were guys here but, well they’re not a problem anymore. Should we move?”

“Can you see anyone else around you?” Tony asked, eyeing the distance to destination designator.

“We’re still in the car.” It sounded like she was dazed. There was more ripping metal and a echoing clang.

“What the hell was that?” Tony cried.

“Me. Getting out of the car.” She paused. “There are people on the bridge. I don’t know if its them.” Her voice started to crack and wobble. “People on the ground. I don’t know how many are alive.”

“A bunker,” Tony could hear Happy faintly.

“What?”

“Use the car against the bridge support to make a bunker.”

“Jesus Happy, that’s great. Okay.” Happy yelped. “Sorry, Happy.”

“What are you doing?” Tony wanted to keep her talking. She sounded like she was going into shock.

“Making a shield from the car against a bridge support. Out of sight of the people on the bridge.”

“Eight minutes out,” He assured.

“Happy can you talk for a minute? I just need to keep an eye out.” Four sounded like she was going to lose it.

Tony tried to keep her on the phone but before he could say anything Happy called out, “Boss?”

“Happy, talk to me buddy.” Tony demanded.

“We went off the side of the bridge.” It sounded like Happy sucked in a deep breath at that. “That woman is amazing. She saved our lives, Boss. Got us down to the bottom without a scratch. Had a welcoming party of a dozen guys waiting down here though. They had some type of plastic weapon Miss Forge said she couldn’t disable. She took them out. Extreme prejudice. The car’s a no save. She
ripped it apart and used it as shrapnel. Has us wrapped up in pieces of it like armor. I can’t get a good look at her, this stuff doesn’t move easy. I don’t think we’re hurt, but she’s shaken pretty hard.”

“Almost there, two minutes.”

“Sir, decelerate now or you will overshoot the destination.”

Tony cut the thrusters, and let JARVIS take over the flaps. He could see the bridge and the crowd of people on it now. He landed a bit heavy next to a lump of twisted metal braided around a bridge support.

A flood of information entered the HUD. Four and Happy were wrapped head to toe in black metal that molded to their bodies like the one she had worn back at the expo. There were a dozen men on the ground thirty two yards away. JARVIS was storing a magnified and enhanced image of their weaponry.

Tony turned his attention to Four when she dropped to the ground and woodenly started to peel the metal covering her hands off.

“Keep the metal on till I check on these guys,” Tony commanded.

“Okay,” Four breathed, closing her eyes. “Okay.” He watched her shake and try to breathe.

“Sir, Miss. Potts’ is calling you.”

“On the emergency number?”

“No, sir.”

Tony moved away to peer down at the splay of bodies. They were all dead. Though not all, it looked, by Four or Happy’s hand. “Answer it and take the call for me would you JARVIS.”

“Of course, sir.”

Tony took pictures of the bodies to examine later for identifying marks or logos. He noted at least two of them seemed to have foam on the corners of their mouths, suggesting they’d died from poison.

Before he sunk into the work needed for them to vacate the scene he saw Four from the corner of his eye. She’d come to stand over the pile of bodies. Her eyes flicked from one to the other, before she bent down and picked up one of the weapons.

“You can take the metal off you and Happy now, Four.”

All he got in reply was a soft okay, and then she was walking back toward Happy. The metal around her hands and arms dropping off piece by piece, leaving a trail behind her.

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Four didn’t fight him on going back to the Malibu house instead of the hotel. Over the time he was working on the site she seemed to slowly come out of her shock. Tony repeatedly saw her looking at the guys on the ground. Each time her expression grew more pinched.

Happy would be staying the night as well. Tony needed to get as much information from them as possible. He’d had everything from the hotel forwarded to his house, and gotten Happy and Four up to the road and into a cab, before SHIELD bothered showing up. Then he’d been stuck at the site
JARVIS had given him confirmation thirty minutes ago that Four and Happy had settled in the living room. Of all the shitty timing, a pissed off Pepper was there as well.

When he came up the stairs from the lab he could hear an intense but hissed conversation coming from the sofa; Pepper and Happy. He scanned the lounge and saw Four, bottle of rum propped against her thigh, sitting on the floor cross legged in front of the big windows. As he watched she took a swig and ignored everything else around her.

He approached her first. “How are you doing?”

“That’s a stupid question.”

He nodded. Yeah it kind of was. “We need to talk about what happened.”

She hummed a sound of agreement. “You want bullet points?” It was said a little caustically.

“Anything.”

She sighed and starting going over the day again from the morning on. “Happy and I were never going to pancake. I have enough control to stop a fall.” She explained, then paused for another drink. “They knew that. They had people waiting with special sedative laced dart guns I’ve come across before. The whole unconsciousness problem,” she waved a hand.

Tony nodded. Fixing that problem just became a top priority for him.

“I took them out. You showed up. I assume the guy who hit us got away.”

“Yeah,” Tony sat on the floor next to her and grabbed the bottle of rum. He had a feeling that what he asked next would be a painful question for her. “The dart guns. Where did you run into them before?” He took a swig and then handed the bottle back.

She grimaced. “Ever hear of Sprung Heel, Texas?”

Tony frowned and tried to remember. “Not really,” and that town hadn’t come up in her background check.

She let out a long sigh. “In ‘96 Sprung Heel, Texas was destroyed by what the government called a group of extremist mutants.” Tony didn’t like where this was going. He noticed that Pepper and Happy had gone quiet. “What really happened was a bunch of really angry mutants escaped from a group called FOKUS. The Fellowship Of Kindness, Understanding, and Sanctuary.” She gave a little chuckle and took another drink. “Should have raised red flags with the name alone right?”

“Theyir front was a therapy office specializing in mutations. What they were really doing was looking for mutants they could exploit. If they deemed you uncontrollable then they kidnapped you and locked you up so their scientists could try to figure out how you worked.

“They let you talk in therapy until they knew enough about you to take you down and contain you. That dart gun, all plastic like that. The FOKUS group built that especially for me.” Tony was starting to feel sick to his stomach. How long had these people had a hold of her?

“I was living on a ranch working for an older couple at the time. The woman, Judy, asked me to go to the store for her.” She shook her head. “When I got to the grocery I didn’t even make it all the way out of my car before I had a dart sticking out of my chest.” She took a quick swig of the rum
and swallowed hard. “I spent three days in a plastic cell getting experiment on until some new idiot guard walked in wearing boots with grommets on them.” Tony could see her jaw flex. “After that a lot of people died.”

A very unwanted voice from across the room spoke up. “I thought you said you hadn’t killed anyone.”

“Fuck, Pepper,” Tony swore.

Four raised her head and glared at Pepper. “I didn’t kill anyone then. I just busted out the pissed off mutants that did.” She took a huge swallow then. “The moral of the story, kiddies,” she said snidely toward Pepper, “is that those dart guns should no longer exist. I had at least a dozen mutants behind me wreaking havoc. When I left that place it was caved in and burning.”

Tony took the bottle from her again and drank. Christ, the world was a fucked up place. “There were computers and the internet back then too, you know.” He pointed out as he passed the bottle back. “You’re escape might not have been as clean as you thought it was.”
Chapter 12: Beautiful Minds

“We all have a sickness that cleverly attaches and multiplies, no matter how we try. We all have someone that digs at us, at least we dig each other.” Dig by Incubus

Tony turned to look at Pepper and Happy. He still needed to hear Happy’s impression of what happened. The man had proven he caught details Tony himself missed. “Happy?”

“She saved my life,” he said, and Tony knew that meant his bodyguard’s mind was made up about Four as well.

Pepper started to say something and Happy cut in. “No Pepper.” He turned to the woman. “I know you’re worried about her being around Tony, but this was not her fault.” He waved a hand. “Sure, they were after her this time, but these are bad people. The boss would have run up against them eventually anyway. He’s made his decision. You’ve got to let this go.”

The red head sniffed and started to cry. Tony grimaced. He hated it when Pepper cried. “It’s just. When is this all going to stop?” She choked out. “First he’s kidnapped, then Obadiah, and then Hammer and Vanko. Now this? I keep thinking this is the one that’s going to kill him. I can’t stop thinking about it Happy!”

Tony got to his feet and crossed the room. He sat down next to Pepper and hugged her. It was startling to find out that the way she folded into his embrace was familiar, but not as comfortable as it used to be.

He knew she worried about him, he just didn’t know what he could do about it. He wouldn’t give up being Iron Man for anything. It was the best thing about him; the gateway to all the good he’d done in the past two years. “I’m sorry, Pep.” Tony felt like a bastard when he said it, because he knew an apology was the only thing he could give her.

“He’s Iron Man, Pepper,” Happy said quietly. “It’s not going to stop,”

Pepper pulled out of his arms and rummaged in her purse for a tissue to wipe her face. “Well I can’t take it,” she whispered. “I can’t take waiting on the other end of the phone to know whether he’s alive or dead.” He saw her eyes fall on Four. “I can’t take him constantly throwing his life away for some stranger.” She drew in a shaky breath and stood.

Tony watched her gather her purse and knew, that for all the times she’d put up with his behavior, him being Iron Man was the thing that was going to end their friendship.

“I’m sorry, Tony. I’ll email you in the morning. I just need some space.” With that Pepper turned and walked out the door. She really was good at that, he thought.

Four stayed in the living room long enough to hear Happy’s side of the story. Before she took the
half bottle of rum up to bed with her she handed him the dart gun she’d brought back and told him to call SHIELD. Romanoff would be out in the morning and JARVIS was monitoring Four for alcohol poisoning.

The gun itself was a simple thing, cheap and easily made. It was multi-shot, with a clip of six darts and a full capacity of seven. Tony thought it was overkill to have a dozen guys each armed with a weapon that wouldn’t even puncture the car. Why not just shoot a gas canister from a distance?

There were no makers marks, no single identifying manufactured part. He had JARVIS searching down the pieces and tracing supply lines. The AI had narrowed it down to twenty eight possible manufacturing centers and was still working on it.

On a hunch Tony had swiped her phone. They were tracking her somehow. Once he’d synced it up JARVIS had found that it had been hacked. So that was one mystery solved. Tony would hand her an unhackable Stark phone in the morning, if she was up for it. Apple was crap anyway.

Four had killed six of the people in the riverbed. Happy had killed three. The other three had taken cyanide from a spot hidden in their teeth. They had been too injured to run away. That they were willing to die instead of being captured said all kinds of bad things.

It seemed they had gotten off lucky with video footage. Tony found and deleted only one shaky video of Four getting out of the car. You couldn’t tell who she was in it, but Tony didn’t want anything from that fight on the web.

Afterwards, he sat staring at Four’s side of the garage, the news articles and SHIELD report about Sprung Heel on the screens behind him. The news articles had, indeed, said that the town was destroyed by mutant extremists. They ran for a bit, and then petered off into sporadic updates until finally dying out. No one was ever caught. The SHIELD report had been more in depth.

What a horror show. The town had boasted seven hundred and twenty three residents. Of them thirty two had been killed and one hundred and nine injured. The structure of the town itself was completely destroyed. The roads were melted in places. SHIELD deduced there was at least one fire user, a feral (based on scratch marks both on people and buildings,) one that could cause explosions, and at least one that was super strong. Tony couldn’t help but think about Four running ahead of all that. Running for her life.

Then there was the mass grave on the South East side of town. Forty two bodies in there. Men, women, and kids as young as thirteen. That’s where Four would have ended up if not for the stupid guard.

Dum-E trundled by him. Tony watched the bot pick up a screw from Four’s drop cloth.

“JARVIS?”

“What can I do for you, sir?”

“The pieces I had fabricated under project Four, are they finished?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Let’s start testing.”

Agent Romanoff was very pretty. It was the first thing Forge noticed of course. The second was the
woman was carrying more weapons than Forge could imagine fit on one person. She couldn’t see half of them, but she could sense them.

“Mr. Stark. Miss. Maddix,” the red head greeted folding herself into one of the lounge chairs on the patio.

Forge and Tony were sitting in the other two, in a two versus one configuration. She figured she could call him Tony for today. He was making a visual show of being on her side after all.

Tony was in full billionaire playboy mode. Sunglasses and muscle shirt on, his arc reactor glowing through the fabric, as he held an alcoholic drink at an inappropriate time of morning. Forge wondered if he’d gotten any sleep after Pepper Potts’ dramatic exit. She expected not.

She herself had spent the night drunk as hell, thinking about the handful of times her Uncle Wall had talked about the war. He had once said that he’d felt bad that he’d had to kill, but not guilty. When she was younger Forge didn’t understand the difference. She thought she might understand it a little better now.

When the sun had finally come up Forge realized she mostly felt angry. She didn’t ask for what had happened to her. She had just wanted to be left alone to work in her garage in peace. Looking at the woman across from her in the full on leather cat suit, Forge started to come to terms with the idea she may never be left alone. It kind of freaked her out.

Of course Forge was also hung over. She had a glass of water on the table in front of her, but Malibu in the middle of August, even at ten in the morning, was stupid hot.

For a few minutes they all stared at each other. Tony smirked behind his drink, Romanoff had dead eyes, and Forge fidgeted the with metal cuff on her wrist. Okay. She’d had enough of this tension shit for the weekend.

When she leaned forward Romanoff tensed. Well fuck you very much lady. “I take it Agent Fischer is actually fake Agent Fischer, and isn’t with SHIELD at all?” She wanted that confirmed before she moved forward.

A few more seconds of silence passed, and if the woman didn’t start talking Forge was going to think she was broken, and demand another.

“He’s not one of us, no.”

Well didn’t that sound all hive mind-y. Forge distracted herself before she started thinking of SHIELD as the collective and made a Star Trek reference.

“Or affiliated?” Men in black were always twisty talkers weren’t they?

“Or affiliated.”

“He made threats to me in your agency’s name. Bad PR. That give you an incentive to hunt him down?” She knew she was being intentionally shitty again. Whatever. She’d had a hard day.

Apparently Tony was letting her take the reigns on this. She was hung over and didn’t want them. She was considering demoting him back to Stark when Romanoff moved.

Forge tensed all the way to her toes when the woman reached to her side. The area looked bare of weapons but housed what Forge were pretty sure were throwing knives. Sharp eyes scanned across Forge’s form and she could see the Agent taking note of her posture.
A grey folder appeared from between her hip and the chair, and Forge relaxed marginally. Apparently, Tony had taken a cue from Forge too, because he had shifted forward in his seat. Romanoff laid the grey folder on the table between them and flicked it open.

A picture of fake agent was the first thing Forge saw. The flash of rage she felt was intense.

“The man’s name is Geoff Rimzowski, a low level enforcer for a gang in New Jersey. He was being paid to pretend to be a SHIELD agent and to make sure he got your attention. We picked him up yesterday.” The redhead laid out coolly.

“Paid by who?” Tony asked.

“Wait,” Forge held up a hand. “Why was he supposed to get my attention?” Why not just bag her in the alley behind her shop and be done with it?

Romanoff was assessing her with those eyes again. “Two reasons we think. One to keep you from actually going to SHIELD. We were monitoring you with the intent to evaluate and contact.”

“That’s not creepy,” Forge muttered.

“The other, you have a pattern of behavior when being confronted. We think the goal was to scare you into running.”

“To make it easier to catch her where no one would notice she was missing and report it, because SHIELD would have noticed.” Tony nodded his head. “Except I swooped in to save the day.” He turned to Forge and grinned, “You’re welcome.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a real hero Captain C.” Forge rolled her eyes. “So, paid for by whom? The FOKUS group?”

“How do you know about FOKUS?” Romanoff folded her hands in her lap.

Forge glanced over at Tony and saw him shrug. “It’s your story,” he said. “I’ve had JARVIS digging and there are no records connecting you to them anywhere on the web. What you tell people about it is what they know,” he assured.

She licked her lips before looking back over at the agent. “I had unsavory dealings with them in ’96. The tech I saw yesterday was spot on for something from them.”

Romanoff’s face gave nothing away. “It’s not FOKUS. They were a local outfit providing services to larger groups. Perhaps they sold designs for their weapons to one of them,” she shrugged. “FOKUS was destroyed in ’96 and has never been reconstituted.” The agent studied Forge’s face again. “We’re still looking in to who paid Rimzowski. The group went to ground when their kidnap attempt on your failed yesterday. Whoever they are, they’re large and have a lot of funds. They threw a dozen operatives with inadequate weaponry at you and didn’t seem to care they were going to die.”

Forge frowned at that and argued, “But killing isn’t my MO. I’ve always incapacitated before. Wounded, never killed. How could they have known I was going to go full metal jacket on them?” After a beat she added, “Alternately they could be a very small outfit and I killed all the guns so the brains went to hide.”

“They would have to have some good brains to know enough about SHIELD to impersonate them,” Tony commented. “Also you didn’t kill all of them. The one’s too wounded to escape killed themselves.”
Forge jerked her head around to look at Tony. That was news to her. “What the hell are these people in to that they’re willing to die instead of be caught?” Tony shrugged. Apparently he didn’t know either. Well, wasn’t that peachy?

The Agent across from her was now looking at her very closely. Forge didn’t like it. “You have a good head on you.”

Forge snorted, “Believe me this is an anomaly. I usually don’t think before I do.”

“Not true,” Tony cut in. “You think in a fight, which is hard to do. You evaluate the variables in your situation and choose the level of force that would give you, and anyone around you, the best odds of survival.” He tipped his head down and looked over his sunglasses at her. “And the way you let me approach you,” he shook his head. “You set up a meeting on your terms, then added safe guards and escape routes.”

“When you say it like that it does sound super calculated. I was really just looking to hide in your basement for a few months.” Forge shuffled on the seat.

Agent Pretty jumped in then. “Stark is more vulnerable to you than you are to him, and he has the firepower and clout to put a hell of a wall between you and outside forces. We think that’s why they went after you yesterday.” She glanced at Tony. “Stark has been keeping you close. Yesterday you were alone.”

“I wasn’t alone,” Forge shot back. “Happy was in the car.”

Romanoff sent her a level look. “Collateral damage.”

So they really would have killed Happy. For the first time since the meeting started Forge actually glared at the Agent. “Fuck. That.”

“Regardless of your feelings on the matter they wouldn’t have considered him an impediment. You changing your behavior however, has kept you one step ahead of them.” The agent noted.

Forge rolled her jaw. “I spent five years building up my business. I’ve done the duck and split routine enough. I’m tired of running. Somebody else always finds me anyway.” From the corner of her eye she saw Tony turn his face toward her.

“How’s your hand to hand?”

“Like combat?” Forge knew her voice rose at that. Agent Pretty nodded. “Shitty,” Forge replied.

“So to sum up,” Tony broke in. “You caught the fake agent, but have no idea if the group paying him was extremely dangerous or just inept, and you seem like you’re trying to poach.” He actually waggled the finger of the hand holding his drink at the woman. “Uh, uh, Four here is under contract.”

“We’re following leads. The identities of the men at the bridge we’re scrubbed. No fingerprints, no digital trail, no money trail. That takes organization not often found in smaller syndicates. We know they started targeting her after the Expo so it’s safe to say they didn’t know she existed before then.” Romanoff stood smoothly and placed a card on the table. “Her contract runs to the beginning of October. If we have nothing by then Fury is asking you to extend it. Keep her in house, so to speak.”

“I have a life back in New York,” Forge protested. “I can’t hang out here forever.”

“How long will you have that life if you go back before we finish this?” Agent Pretty wasn’t pulling
Forge clenched her jaw and frowned. “Less time than it takes for me to get off the plane,” she admitted grudgingly.

“See,” and the way she said it made Forge want to scare the woman by using all the weapons on her body to drop her ass back into her seat. “You make good decisions. When you’re ready for an instructor in hand to hand combat,” she nodded to the card, “Call.”

Romanoff starting walking away, not looking back when Tony called. “Give Fury my love!”

“Your sense of humor, Captain C,” Forge scoffed. “Some day you’ll quip at the wrong time and get shot.”

“You didn’t like her either. Your game face, Four. You’ve really got to work on that.”

“I felt like a bug,” Forge griped.

Tony nodded, “She does that.”
Chapter 13: Fantastic Science

“I said hey, what’s your name baby. Maybe we can see things the same. Now don’t you wait, or hesitate. Let’s move before they raise the parking rate.” All Right Now Free

“Come downstairs.” Three days after the meeting with Agent Pretty, Tony had his hip propped against the counter in the kitchen.

Forge continued filling a glass with orange juice. “What? You wanna science with me now? I’m hung over,” she complained.

Sunday evening, after Romanoff had left, the two of them had descended into the bat cave. Forge, to check on the progress of the car and start a new project of her own. Tony to do something with his suits and check on JARVIS’ search for the gun manufacturer. In between fixing some rust spots on the Mustang and researching microchip implanters, she was describing and demonstrating her powers to the billionaire.

Since the bridge incident he’d seemed very focused on learning about what she could do. That was fine. She wasn’t concerned about him poking around her powers anymore.

She’d finally gotten her hands on the Iron Man armor two days before. It was that stupid gauntlet he’d left on her desk. It taunted her until she put it together and slapped it back into his hands. When she’d warned him not leave his toys on her desk or she’d play with them, he’d laughed.

“Background,” he’d chuckled, “I had it checked. PhD in mechanical engineering from the University of Michigan at age eighteen. Certified auto mechanic for the past seventeen years, and a PhD in Physics from MIT which you completed in four years.”

Slightly wrong footed she’d replied. “Yeah well, just so it’s out there. The only reason I’m interested in the suits is because they’re mechanical mad genius, not because I want to steal your tech and take over the world.”

“I know,” then he’d grinned and that stupid sparkle was back in his eyes. “Are you calling me a mad genius?”

Forge had rolled her eyes. “Dude, you’re a mad genius. You don’t need me to tell you that.”

“Well, now I’m flattered. Quick, take me to dinner.” He’d actually batted his eyelashes.

“It’s noon. How about I order pizza and you never mention this again?”

“Nah. How about I order Chinese and mention this as often as I want?”

“You’re the one that wanted to play the Star Wars drinking game. Live with the consequences.” He chuckled behind her when she turned to put the juice away.

“Captain C,” Forge whined.
A hand grabbed her glass of juice as she felt an arm go around her waist. He shuffled her forward a bit with his body. She had noticed he was being much more touchy feely lately too. Forge wasn’t sure how she felt about it. It wasn’t bad per say. She was woman enough to admit she liked him, but she was still concerned about his reputation.

“Come on. Downstairs. You can be hung over later.”

“I don’t think that’s how this works.” She made a grabby hand at her orange juice.

“Lab time, Four.” His amused voice was very close to her ear. The arm around her waist suddenly disappeared when he stepped back. Instead a hand found its was to the juncture of her neck and shoulder and squeezed a bit.

Her head was throbbing a little. They’d both spent the night drunkenly passed out on the couch. She’d woken up with his head on her hip. He seemed to bounce back quicker than she did though. Forge decided the pressure on the back of her neck was actually really nice and followed it all the way to the top of the stairs. Whatever. She could work with him for a bit and then take a nap on her Coleman inflatable. Forge gave up and led the pair of them into the lab.

“No loud music,” she commanded.

“Done.” Tony set her glass on his desk and nudged her down into his chair.

She obediently sat and sipped her drink, watching him cross to a work top near the cases of his suits. He came back carrying a tray with a set of different sized metal cuffs on them. Forge tried to discern what they were. They definitely looked mechanical, and she could sense they had a lot of movable parts packed into them.

After setting the tray down on the corner of his desk he reached for her and tugged on the metal band she’d been wearing around her wrist constantly. “Take that off.”

She frowned but curled her fingers around it and pulled it free. “What are you doing?” She was starting to get that Stark doom cloud feeling again.

“You’ll see,” he smirked. With swift fingers he clicked a thick piece around her neck, and one on each wrist. She twitched a bit when he fastened a clunky belt with a mini arc reactor imbedded in it around her waist.

“Captain C,” her voice held warning now. “You really should tell me what you are doing now.”

He dropped to his knees in front of her and rolled the leg of her jeans up slightly to fit the last two pieces on her ankles. “You remember that problem we talked about? The one that involves you going unconscious and not having a back up.”

“Be kind of hard to forget.” She fingered the gold colored piece on her wrist for a minute. It was much thinner than the ones around her neck and ankles. What he was putting on her looked suspiciously like super suit technology. “You know,” she joked, trying to ease her nervousness. “This better not be the beginning of some bad Princess Leia fantasy.”

Stark looked up at her from where he was adjusting the fit on her left ankle. “It wasn’t, but now that you’ve put the idea in my head,” His eyes roam her slowly from top to bottom, “I kind of can’t stop imagining it.”

“Would you get to the point?” That twinkle lit up his dark eyes and he started to grin. She quickly added, “With the tech your strapping on me.”
“Sure.” He stood up and grabbed her hands. Tony pulled her out of her seat and lead her further out into the lab. Forge really started to worry when she noticed Dum-E had a camera. “Stay there.” He walked back across the lab and then got into the Mark VI armor.

“This can’t be good,” Forge commented.

“Test of the Reel In protocol on the Mark II Four suit. Stamp date time.”

“Wait,” she went to take a step and Stark held his hands up.

“No. No. Stay there. You’ll be fine. Just don’t fight it,” he hurried to say.

“Don’t fight what?” She asked in trepidation. “Nothing about this is fine,” Forge protested.

“Start it up, J.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a shifting from the metal pieces around her and Forge called out, “Candyman! No!” The helmet wrapped around her neck and head, covering her lower jaw. It left her mouth and nose exposed but the visor settled over her eyes. Her vision lit up with an external video feed. She felt something extend down between her shoulder blades and attach to something that came up from her waist. At the same time her hands and feet were covered and she was suddenly in the air and flying across the lab with no control over her body.

“Whoa! Whoa! Slow it down J!”

Before she could do more than curse there was a thud, a clang, and a drop. Forge groaned as the visor unfolded from around her eyes. When she was finally able to open them she found herself on the floor, across the lab, on top of Iron Man. Forge took a moment to stare right into the glowing eye holes of the mask. “I kind of hate you right now.”

A week after Romanoff’s visit Forge was standing on the testing platform in the lab again. After Wednesday’s semi-successful test she and Tony had put their heads together to make something slightly more functional. The result was the Mark III backpack, a system designed to work independently or in conjunction with the collapsible gauntlets and boots.

“I like the backpack design much better.” Forge commented, shuffling in place a bit. “Much more comfortable.”

“You still have to wear the wrist and ankle cuffs if you don’t want to dangle all over the place,” Tony fiddled with something on her back. “Stop fidgeting,” he commanded.

Forge tried to hold as still as she could.

The newer version of her suit had been based around the jetpack stabilizer Tony had designed for the Mark VII. The bulk of the tech laid close to her back along the length of her spine. It was secured with straps that went over her shoulders and fastened around her chest. Stability and power was leant to it by attaching a waist belt. They had to increase the size of the cuffs around her wrists and ankles to allow the pieces to expand more. There was a power distribution problem with the gauntlets that they fixed by extending the armor over her shoulders but the boots were even trickier.

At the current phase the boots were attached to the waist belt by a single shielded connection that ran
along the outside of her thighs. It was a vulnerability neither of them liked, but if they went much further Forge might as well just wear the damn Iron Man suit. That thing was too bulky for day wear and she needed something she could keep on her at all times.

“Okay,” Tony walked around in front of her, running critical eyes over the front fittings. “I think we’re ready. Remember, directional shifts with your hands. Small increments. The jetpack will pick up the rest.” He scratched his goatee. “Maybe you should have a tether.”

“You are not putting a leash on me,” Forge protested.

He smiled that pretty smile at her. “Could be fun?” He offered.

“How about you let me put one on you?”


“Of course, sir.”

Forge broke in. “Wait. Shouldn’t we have someone on fire safety?” She asked. U and Butterfingers were still busy with the Mustang and Dum-E was currently on camera duty.

He looked at her for a moment. “No.” Tony walked off the platform and got into the Mark VI. “Trust me, you do not want Dum-E on fire safety. You’ll be fine.”

“That’s what you said last time,” she reminded.

“And you were fine,” he shot back.

“Bruised. I was not fine.”

“Mostly fine.” His faceplate came down and his voice went slightly mechanical. “Independent flight stabilizer test. Mark III Backpack unit. One percent power. Whenever you’re ready, Four.”

She took a breath to steady her nerves and tapped the control on her belt. Immediately the backpack started to unfold around her. Metal slid over her chest and stomach, covering her back and shoulders. The gauntlets expanded down her hands and up her arms. She felt the boots encase her feet up to her knees and relaxed into the familiar feeling of metal enclosing her. Metal was always safe. The visor slid down over her eyes last and the HUD booted up.

Forge took a moment to get used to the foreign feeling of her legs and the bottom half of her face being exposed. The metal was heavier as well. If she was ever to fly for distance or height in the thing she’d need to come up with some under suit that had a thermal and armor component. Not to mention a flight shield for the bottom half of her face. That was for later though. She was finally getting to fly.

She positioned her arms at her sides and stiffened her spine. The repulsors kicked in with a whooshing sound and Forge felt a giddy feeling start to grow in her stomach. A bit shakily she lifted off the ground a few feet. Her eyes traveled over the information on the HUD and a huge smile broke over her face.

“I can see you smiling,” Tony commented with amusement from across the room.

Forge started to laugh. She may have been only feet off the ground but it was exhilarating.

“If you jerk too much you’re going to start moving around,” he warned.
“This is awesome,” Forge cried. “Science to the nth power.”

She could hear Tony chuckling. “Go ahead a move around a little. Get a feel for it.”

Forge shifted her weight a bit to right and was startled by how responsive the maneuvering was. She overcorrected to the left and went shooting across the lab. “Whoa!”

“Gently! Gently!” Tony called.

She managed to reign it back in and moved a bit jerkily back to the testing pad to land. Once she was back on her own two feet she retracted the visor and stared at Tony for a bit.

That man had brought some dangerous stranger he knew nothing about into his lab, because she needed his help, and let her work with one of the most important parts of himself. He had taken the knowledge of her being helpless when knocked out and rigged her up a suit that could spirit her away from attackers the moment she fell unconscious.

He flipped up his faceplate. “Well?”

Fuck it. The man was rock star. Forge crossed to him in a handful of strides and grabbed the sides of his helmet with her hands. His eyes went wide and she didn’t waste a second leaning in to kiss him full on the mouth. “That was amazing. Thank you.”

Tony blinked in shock for a few seconds before a sly look crossed his face. “You know, usually when a woman says that to me I’ve had to do a lot less science based work.”

She smiled at him. “Well,” she gave him a mock patient look. “It’s a little late in life for you to learn this, but every woman has different likes,” she trailed off when his arms went around her waist. They were both still in their respective armors so it was mostly just a feeling of pressure.

“And all I had to do to get a kiss from you was build you a super suit?” Ugh, that stupid, stupid pretty smile.

“It helped,” she quipped back.

She watched him open his mouth, hesitate and then swallow. Her brow furrowed in confusion. “What do you say we go for a fly?” He asked. It seemed like he was changing the topic.

Forge blinked. “You think I’m ready?”

“Yeah. Best to get on the horse and ride.” His face plate came back down and he dropped his arms. “JARVIS check the sky.” He tapped the side of her helmet and her visor came back down. “Come on Four. Keep up.” His repulsors lit up and he took off out the ramp to the garage.

She shook her head a bit. That man could do abrupt. “Alright,” she drawled. Her own repulsors whirred to life and, narrowing her eyes, she took off after him.

She may have scraped the wall on the way out, but she wasn’t going to tell him that. He didn’t need the ammo.
Chapter 14: A Step Out

“Hold on to me as we go. As we roll down this unfamiliar road, and though this wave is stringing us along, just know you’re not alone.” Home Phillip Phillips

“What is that?” Tony watched Four unpack a box the new assistant had brought down that morning. She shuffled around through the packing material for a moment and then pulled out a small bag. Four sat it on the desk next to a wicked looking needle. “It’s a microchip injector and a GPS capable microchip,” she answered. “Thanks for bringing it down, Miss. Kaston.”

Miss. Kaston, the new assistant, murmured some reassurance it wasn’t a problem and then went back to trying to get Tony to sign something. “Just leave it on the desk. I’ll take a look at it later,” he told her waving a hand. He saw the young brunette purse her lips in disapproval but follow his orders.

“Mr. JARVIS,” Four called. “Have you finished machining those implants I asked for?”

Tony hovered over Four’s shoulders. “Implants?” He questioned a bit warily. What the hell was Four up to?

“Yes, Miss. Maddix.”

“Awesome.” Four spun out of her chair and walked over to the fabrication area. “Points to the Candyman.”

Tony turned to follow her and was a bit shocked the assistant was still there. “Is there something else, Miss. Kaston?”

She smiled at him. “No, Mister Stark.”

Why was the woman still there then? “In that case you’re free to go.” He watched Four come back to her desk with a set of tiny metal pieces on a tray.

“Do you require anything else?” The assistant asked.

Seriously. She was still around? Tony was starting to regret hiring her. The woman was in the way. “Nope. Good here,” he clipped and moved around her to the side work table where Four was setting up.

After the security door closed Tony looked up from the tray of metal to see Four watching him. “What?” He asked.

Four grinned at him. “Can I help you Mr. Stark?” She gave a faux pout and purred. “Is there anything else you need Mr. Stark?”

Tony blinked a few times, because yeah, that still got him going a bit. “You don’t think she’s gonna work out?” Why hadn’t he asked this woman out on a date when he had the chance?
“One of two things will happen. A, she’ll be completely ineffectual at her job, because you need a
minder not an assistant and that woman has no steel. Or B, she’ll try to sleep with you and Miss.
Potts will have to fire her.”

“Harsh, Four. I do not have sex with everyone,” Tony defended. He didn’t. Not for quiet awhile
now.

Four reached over and patted him on the side. “Oh I know you don’t,” she assured, “But in this case
I think she’ll be hunting you. I caught her staring at your crotch for at least fifteen seconds.”

He could feel his eyebrows shoot up. “Really?”

“Yup, I counted.” That cheeky grin was back. Damn it. He had the perfect opening with her the day
before and he choked. He just, damn, he did not want to screw this up with her. They had something
really good going on between them. Tony took a moment to wonder if it was worth jeopardizing
their friendship to try for something more.

Four bent over to grab a box of supplies from by her desk. Yes. Tony decided. Yes it was. He shook
himself out of his staring before she caught him. Four brought the box back over to the work table
and set it down, unpacking some swabs, gloves, and a bottle of alcohol.

“What are you doing?” Tony finally grabbed her hands to still her in hopes of getting an explanation.

She took a deep breath and then let it out slowly. “Hear me out.” Tony nodded. He could do that.
“All of that,” she freed a hand and gestured to the area of the lab that now also housed her backpack
suit, “Can be detected. It’s obvious I’m wearing it. This,” she pointed to the tray of what looked like
tiny metal grains of rice, “Will fly under the radar.”

“You’re thinking of injecting yourself with little metal pieces?” Tony had to say it out loud because,
yeah, it sounded a little crazy.

Four nodded her head. “Yes.” Tony opened his mouth but before he could speak she continued on.
“They’re medical grade titanium. The microchip is encased in silicate glass. It’s perfectly safe. There
have been entire companies who have chipped their employees as part of building security. I did my
research.”

Tony took a moment to mull that over. “I get the GPS enabled chip, but you’re talking about putting
metal in your body with the intention of ripping it back out.”

“Yeah,” she said slowly and he watched her brow furrow. “But that’s a last case scenario. I’m just
saying, everything else can be detected or taken away.” She held up her hand when he started to
argue again. “I’m not thinking about being unconscious now. You covered that nicely. Thank you.”
His mind flipped back to the quick kiss she gave him yesterday. “I’m just trying to cover all my
bases. This is what I was working on before you brought me in on the suit.” she explained.

“I want to see your research,” he demanded.

She tugged on his hand, which was still in hers, and lead him back to her desk. Four took a moment
to roll the chair out of the way and then leaned forward to call up several files on her screen. Tony let
his eyes slide down the curve of her shoulders and back. She took a step away and waved her hand.
“There you go.”

He narrowed his eyes and read through the files while Four stood with her hip propped against the
desk beside him. Tony typed a few commands and then asked, “JARVIS?”
“Miss. Maddix’s plan is a viable solution with no recorded medical side effects. The extent of trauma by removal would depend on the position she implanted the devices.”

Tony hummed to himself. “What position has the least possibility of lasting trauma, J?”

“Subdermal implantation in the arm between shoulder and elbow, or leg between hip and knee, would leave minimal scarring upon removal.”

He turned toward Four and reached out to tug on her belt loop. “Scarring, Four,” he pointed out. Tony dropped a hand to drum his fingers on her desk. The concept was sound. It was something he would do in her situation. Why did it bother him?

She gave him a little self depreciating smile. “A few marks on my skin are a million times better than ever being in a position to need a way out, and not having it. It’s a break glass in case of FUBAR.”

A flash of anger passed through him at the thought of her in that situation. Oh, that was why.

“Alright,” he conceded. “JARVIS agrees. It seems sound.”

She let her breath out in a whoosh. “Good,” she pressed her lips together, “Because I need your help implanting them.”

“What?” Tony yelped.

“The angle is wrong for me to do it well. I want to put them in a line down the back of either side of my arms.” She held her arm up and demonstrated where she wanted the implants. “I can do the GPS chip, it’s just going in my hand.”

He continued to look at her like she was crazy. She wanted him to stick her with that big needle a bunch of times?

“Look,” she placated. “If you don’t want to that’s okay.”

Tony cut her off. “You are not doing this on your own.” He sighed. He’d had such pleasant thoughts earlier too. “You want to do this now?”

“Yes, please,” she answered.

Tony followed her back to the work top and waited while she hopped up to sit on it. “You gonna take you top off?” He held in a grin when she blinked at him.

“I’m wearing a tank top.”

He titled his head a bit. “Worth a shot.”

She gave him an un-amused glare.

“-------------------------------------

“So, I think you owe me lunch,” Tony claimed.

It’d taken them about an hour to get all nine of the implants in. Even with the local anesthetic it was not a fun process. She could imagine how painful it would be to have to pull them out.

Tony had hesitated so much she’d finally yelled at him to ‘just stick it in already.’ That had resulted in further delays as he’d broken into nervous laughter.
“Considering you’re the one that did the sticking, shouldn’t you owe me food?” She asked throwing away the last swab and hopping down from the work top.

“Normally, maybe,” he conceded. “In this case, no. You traumatized me.” He gave her a wounded look from where he sat nearby.

“Mr. JARVIS can you give me a scan and see if everything looks to be sitting right?”

Tony and her both turned to watch the scan of her body show up on the screen across from them. Nine tiny pinpoints lit up, four in the back of each upper arm and one in the webbing between her thumb and first finger on her left hand.

“The implants appear to be sitting well and swelling is minimal. GPS coordinates are transmitting. However, your blood pressure is slightly elevated.”

“Yeah I bet. That hurt about as much as I expected it to.” From the corner of her eye she saw Tony lean forward and examine the backs of her arms. “Thank you Mr. JARVIS.”

“You are quite welcome, Miss. Maddix.”

“So,” he traced a gentle finger along the side of her arm. “Lunch?”

Forge pursed her lips. “Well, since we are both actually clean for once, I suppose I could feed you in public.” It’d be nice to get out of the house. “Do you think that’s safe?”

“I think if you wear the backpack and I bring the suit we could hazard some time out.” Tony gave her a bit of a grin. “I know a good place on the waterfront,” he tempted.

Forge crossed her arms. Ouch that hurt. She dropped them again. “Shouldn’t I get to pick the restaurant, since I’m taking you to lunch?”

“But I’m your date,” Tony looked up at her. “You should want to please me,” he teased.

“This is a date now?” she asked raising an eyebrow.

She watched Tony suck on his cheek a bit. “Maybe. A casual date,” he murmured.

Well, Forge thought, an actual date with Tony. That was risky. There was a lot at stake if things went wrong between them. Forget Miss. Potts having to fire Miss. Kaston. She would have to fire Forge. Was it worth possibly turning into another notch on the man’s bedpost?

“You sure you wanna do that?” She asked carefully. “Things could get kind of tangled. It could be bad.” she warned. It could be bad, like Forge ending up on her own again bad.

Forge was momentarily shocked when she realized the idea of going out on her own didn’t scare her as much as she thought it would.

She was distracted from her epiphany by Tony’s throat bobbing a bit. Was he actually nervous? “It could be good,” he ventured softly.

Yeah. “It could be,” she agreed. He gave her that pretty smile that Forge totally blamed the start of her attraction on. Damn man could be charming when he wasn’t trying to be.

“Then yeah. A casual date. Just lunch.” He seemed to gain some traction back after a moment. “That you take me to because you traumatized me,” he joked.
Forge took a deep measured breath. “Okay.” She gave him a tentative smile. “This restaurant you’re so keen on. Dress code?”

“Casual, ah,” he corrected himself, “Dressy casual.” Tony was watching her with those coffee colored eyes.

“Then uh,” she brushed some loose hair out of her face nervously, “We should get changed and meet back in twenty minutes.” He nodded and stood up. “You’re driving though,” she demanded, “My arms hurt like hell.”

Forge glanced at the clock and then looked her attire over again. Slim fit black slacks and a white tank top with a sage colored three quarter sleeve over shirt. She put on the only set of heels she’d brought with her and combed her hair out. The length of it swung in waves down to touch her lower back. It’d been a long time since Forge had worn her hair down. She slipped a hair band on her wrist just in case.

She chuckled a bit about meeting a date in the lab of the house they were both staying in. Going on a date with Tony Stark could be either really good, or really bad. Knowing Captain Catastrophe, it would probably be both.

When she walked down the stairs Tony was waiting near the suits dressed in slacks and a nice button up shirt. He’d freshly trimmed his goatee and Forge took a moment to notice how different he looked than when he was three days in the lab with crazy hair. She knew she was in trouble when she realized she liked him both ways equally. The man was handsome. There was no denying that.

She watched his lips part when he saw her and he took a few steps towards her.

“Hi,” he breathed, one hand coming up around her side to gently run his fingers through her loose hair. “I like this. A lot.”

Georgia found the courage the quip back, “I’m glad I have you’re approval.”

His brows went up. “Oh, you do.” His gaze ran down her body and lingered on her heels.

She could feel herself start to blush a bit and had to remind herself this situation had nothing on the seat incident, which she was still sore about. She cleared her throat a bit. “So where are we going?”

Tony blinked a bit and swallowed before seeming to gather himself. “Backpack first,” he reminded. He turned a bit and reached behind him, picking up a wrist cuff. She went to reach around him to grab a piece but he grabbed her hand instead. There was a soft click and he slowly dropped her arm back to her side before grabbing the next piece.

When he squatted down to situate the pieces around her ankles she felt him lightly stroke her calf.

“Tony,” she called quietly. He raised his eyes to hers as he stood up. “Slow. Okay?”

Tony reached around her and handed her the backpack, then moved behind her and gathered her hair up in his hands. Once she had the backpack on he dropped her hair and reached around her to click the waist strap closed. “I can do slow,” he whispered into the back of her neck.

Forge swallowed at his closeness. She wasn’t sure if she believed him. His hand settled below the backpack, dangerously close to her ass, and he steered her toward his Audi.
He opened the door for her but took her hand when she sat down. Before he closed the door he kissed the ball of her thumb. Something of her trepidation must have shown on her face because he reassured, “I can.”

Tony dropped her hand and closed the door. She watched him walk around and get into the driver’s seat. Yeah. What they were doing could be really good or really bad, and probably would be both. But sometimes Tony had good ideas. Georgia was finding out the world didn’t scare her as much as it had in the past. She thought the people who stuck with her, who’s words always rattled around her head, would be proud of that.
Chapter 15: Slow

“See the life that I’ve had can make a good man bad. So for once in my life let me get what I want. Lord knows, it would be the first time.” Please Please Please Let Me Get What I Want by Elefant.

The awkward was back. When they’d first gotten in the car Georgia found herself a bit tongue tied for what to say. On a normal day she didn’t have a problem talking to Tony, but just the idea they were on a date made her more careful with her words. The man had come to the rescue by asking about the progress on Rhodey’s car, and that conversation had carried them all the way to their destination.

The restaurant was an upper scale place on the beach. It wasn’t a place that intimidated her. As Forge had taken on more specialty restoration she’d had to meet a few clients in places similar to it. They’d been seated with a bit of fawning from the staff, ordered wine, and chosen their meals when the awkward came rushing back.

She was surprised that the man across from her seemed at a loss for words. Forge considered the way Tony seemed to come at the important stuff sideways. His reticence made more sense in that light. Whatever. When couldn’t they talk shop?

“So, I was thinking about the boots,” she segued. She watched the man’s eyes go from flitting all over the restaurant to focusing on her. A little frown creased his brow.

“Boots?”

She held in a smile. He seemed genuinely confused. “Yeah. The connection problem with the main power source.” Forge warmed to the topic a bit. “It’s vulnerable, but I don’t want to add any more armor. I don’t think there’s room for one, and I think it’d make the suit too heavy.”

With that they were off discussing the details of super suits. They’d gotten all the way through different ways to shield the connection, both his tech wise and her power wise, when Georgia finally had to point out the obvious.

“Does this happen to you a lot?” The waiter had been over three times since delivering their meal to see if they needed anything.

Tony smirked a bit. “The level of hovering here is a bit higher than usual.” He side eyed the waiter who was hanging around the patio bar to their left.

“We didn’t have this problem at the Mexican place,” she pointed out.

Tony shrugged. “I go to that place all the time. They’re used to me.” He popped a forkful of steamed vegetables into his mouth, chewed, and swallowed. “I’ve only been here twice.”

Forge shook her head, not wanting to touch why he might have been there before. That was
something she’d have to square with herself. The man had a past. Didn’t everybody? “And yet when you earn a free meal this is the place you want to go to,” she pointed out. “Somewhere you get stared at?”

“Well,” he was giving her those coy eyes again. “Maybe I was trying to impress you.”

She couldn’t help but laugh. The man was ridiculous. “You had me impressed at JARVIS. Also your knowledge of good animated movies.”

“It’s nice to know I’m appreciated for the little things,” he quipped.

She mock gasped. “You did not just call Mr. JARVIS little. You take that back right now,” she demanded.

They were both smiling and laughing when the flash happened. Tony didn’t let the smile slip off his face but she could see the way it became a little pinched.

“How do you want to handle this?” She questioned.

Tony took a quick glance at both their plates. They were toward the end of the meal. “Well, we could ignore them,” he offered, “But we’ll have to watch what we talk about. If they’re taking pictures I guarantee somebody will be listening,” he explained.

Forge took a bite of her steak and decided to be cheeky. She hummed a few bars of a song.

He blinked at her. “Did you just hum Lady Gaga?”

She swallowed and smiled. “Did you just recognize a Lady Gaga song by a hum alone?” Forge teased.

“Well it was a rather on point song,” he chuckled.

“So I think we should watch Wall-E.” Forge decided not to let paparazzi spoil her good mood. “Down in the lab though. It seems wrong to watch it without Dum-E,” she opined.

Tony grinned and shook his head a bit. “I thought Meet the Robinsons was next?”

“You just want to watch the movie about the boy genius,” she teased.

The rest of the time at the restaurant was spent with animated movie banter.

“That was ridiculous,” Forge commented on the way back to the house. “We were only there for an hour and there was a full on reporter storm when we came out.” She chuckled a bit in disbelief.

Tony reached over to grab her hand while driving. “Be prepared to be gossip page news,” he sounded slightly apologetic.

“Whatever,” she rolled her eyes. It’s not like she had a family to disappoint. Gossip rags weren’t going to do anything bad to her business. “Hay will love it. He’s going to call me all indignant claiming I haven’t kept him in the loop.”

He side eyed her a bit. “Did you two ever?” He trailed off.

“No,” she barked a laugh. “Hay doesn’t like girls like that. Going by the way you describe your friend, I’d say Hay is my Rhodey. He tries to make sure you can still see the girl under the grease.”
Tony toyed with the cuff of the suit on her arm. “Well the girl is very pretty.”

They pulled into the garage a few minutes later and he helped her put the suit away. Instead of stepping back when he was done he folded her into his arms and leaned down to kiss her.

This is okay, Georgia thought. Slow. Kissing was slow.

Tony pulled her tighter against him. She found her hands sliding up his chest to his shoulders. One of his hands found its way under the bottom of her tank top and stroked the curve of her spine. Her lips parted on a sigh and he swept his tongue into her mouth, tilting his head slightly. She could feel his other hand slide up her back and then his arm jostled the underside of her arm and a sharp pain zinged through her. She broke the kiss.

“Ow,” she complained.

He drew back and rested his forehead against hers. “Still sore huh?”

She wrinkled her nose.

Tony gave a lopsided grin and then leaned back to tug on her over shirt. “Off,” he commanded.

Forge gave him a look of mock chastisement. “I thought you said you could do slow.”

He gave her that genuine smile before it turned into more of a smirk. “Well, I have good intentions.”

She huffed out through her nose but pulled the rest of the way back and slipped the over shirt off. In the moment she was distracted he swept back in and placed a hot, open mouthed kiss on her left shoulder. Georgia felt her lashes actually flutter like some stupid bimbo. Damn man. He knew it too, based on the look he gave her afterward.

Tony gently lifted her arm and looked over the back of it. He hummed. “Icing it would probably be a good idea. Come on,” he gave her a little tug. “We’ll go upstairs, get you set up, and watch a movie.”

She spent the evening watching a movie about an evil bowler hat pressed against Tony’s side with her arms doctored up. Georgia couldn’t help but think the date with him had been really, really good.

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Wednesday JARVIS narrowed the possible dart gun manufactures down to seven.

They’d spent the morning testing Four’s new armored under suit and then working on the homing beacons for the Mark VII. Tony hadn’t expected it to be so nice to have someone to work on the suits with. Four was a good sounding board though. It seemed they could bounce ideas back and forth, and leap frog over each other’s thinking easily once they started discussing things.

Over the past two days they’d ended up making out like teenagers a few times. His favorite had been only a few hours before JARVIS’ notification. If that woman straddled him like that again though Tony would not have the consequences held against him.

“You’re staring,” Four commented from beside him.

Tony let a grin curl his lips. “Thinking about this morning.” He watched a faint flush cross her face and felt his smile grow larger.

“These two are out of the country,” she pointed to the map in front of them JARVIS was projecting.
He let himself be sidetracked. Four was still a little hesitant about their physical relationship. Tony understood, but if that woman pushed him much more he was going to pin her to a wall until she lost all rational thought. “True.” Tony took note of the locations; Sokovia and Austria. “You want to eliminate them?”

“Sideline,” she corrected. “Don’t you think this group is local?”

“There’s nothing that says they are. They found you at the Expo. That could mean anything. If they’re a big group like SHIELD suspects it could mean international.” He explained.

Four hummed in dissatisfaction. “So, what do we do?”

“JARVIS is still parsing some data.” Tony rubbed a hand over his goatee. “Unless something else happens or SHIELD gathers more information we wait.”

That Friday they were at a little road house on their second date having a contest for worst childhood.

“Raised by my Uncle in a late eighties auto garage. Do you have any idea what kind of things were posted on the wall in that place? My sex ed was hearing my mom and her boyfriend’s and then Hustler.”

He grimaced a bit, then tilted his head and countered. “Raised by the butler in a sheltered mansion, with an alcoholic father and a mother more interested in charity. Sex ed was older girls who were trying to get pregnant with the next Stark heir for money.”

Four’s face screwed up in disgust. “That is revolting.”

Yeah it was. Tony nodded. Also a good general education on life for someone in his situation.

“Also an alcoholic parent,” She continued, “Mother though. Father was a no show as soon as the ink on the divorce papers dried.”

That sucked. After a moment of silence he complained, “This is depressing.”

“Yeah,” Four agreed. “We both get gold stars for not being sociopaths.”

He felt himself smile. “Just workaholics,” he agreed.

“There are worse things.”

He watched her for a moment and then decided to push her a little. “Craziest place you’ve ever had sex?”

“Not fair,” she cried. “You’re gonna beat me. There is no way I can win this.”

Tony laughed.

Less than an hour later they pulled into the parking lot of the GlowZone. “What is this place?” Four asked. He watched her look around curiously.

Tony pulled her up out of the car, wrapped an arm around her waist, and began heading toward the doors. An older man dressed in a polo shirt uniform opened the doors for them.

“Good evening Mr. Stark. Thank you for coming to GlowZone L.A. We have the place all set up for
you.” The manager gestured as they walked into a black lit arcade. “You’re selections are prepared at the bar. There’s two sets of equipment ready in the laser tag zone,” he continued. “If you require anything simply call or text my number and we’ll be right with you.”

Tony freed his arm from around Georgia for a moment to shake the man’s hand. They’d done everything he’d asked. He’d make sure to tip well. “I’m sure everything’s great. We’ll let you know.”

“Enjoy your evening, Miss,” the man nodded at Four before turning and retreating to an office.

“You rented out an arcade?” He could see she had a bemused smile on her face.

“Have them open after hours actually.” He boasted a little.

The grin stretched her mouth and she chuckled a little in disbelief. She popped up on her toes and kissed him, before he could recover his wits she stepped away. “Come play laser tag with me?”

Hell yes. “What do I get if I catch you?”

Four smirked and shook her head. “You’re not gonna catch me.”

When he caught her he wrapped his arms around her and leaned down for a kiss. Mid-kiss his vest went off. Little minx had shot him in the back.

“That’s playing dirty,” he scolded.

She looked up at him from the circle of his arms and cocked an eyebrow. “You wanna talk about dirty? Lets talk about you replacing the seat of my motorcycle with one that had a picture of your face on it.”

He snickered a bit.

“I had to ride it home.”

She seemed to still be really put out by his little prank.

“The way I had to sit on it I could see your eyes from between my legs.” He busted out laughing and she slapped him on the shoulder.

“You didn’t have to listen to what Hay said!” He heard her continue over his laughter. “I had to special order a new seat rush delivery! Do you know what would have happened if the guys on my crew had see it!?” She demanded. “Uncalled for,” she crowed.

“Payback,” he declared, “for you drawing me like one your French girls.”

She shot him in the back again.

When they got back to his house it was after midnight. They were both a little sweaty from running around playing laser tag and tumbling through the obstacle course.

They’d been quiet since getting out of the car. With only JARVIS’ welcome home interrupting them. He followed her up to her bedroom door and waited to see what she’d do. He wanted to take her to bed, but he wanted to get things right between them too.

She put her back to her door and Tony closed the space between them. The kiss he gave her then was hot and searching. His fingers dug into her hip and a hand tugged the back of her hair to tilt her
head. He could feel her hand run up his back. That was promising. When he pulled back to breathe he could smell that scent of vanilla again. He breathed out heavily through his nose and tried to temper the ball of desire he felt in his gut.

Tony pressed his chest against hers and leaned in to kiss her again, taking a chance, he took a few tentative steps backward with her down the hall. She followed and made a breathy little meow noise. Fuck. He pushed back forward and ran a hand through all that pretty blond hair. When she broke the kiss he leaned in and sucked on the skin below her ear. She made another tiny noise and he walked her a few feet further down the hall toward his room.

When she continued to let him lead her Tony slid a hand under the back of her button up top and traced his fingers down her spine. He continued that push and pull until they were through the door to his bedroom. She was breathing faster now and all Tony wanted was to get her on his bed.

He stepped on the heels of his shoes, sliding them off, and spun her so she was walking backwards. His hand came off her back and around to tug on the buttons of her blouse.

Her hands pushed his shirt up and he raised his arms to let it slide over his head. He was gratified to see her looking at his face and not staring at the arc reactor or the scars around it, but was distracted quick enough by the tug on his waist band. Oh, yes. Finally.

By the time he pushed her back onto his bed they’d stripped their clothes off. He took a moment to look her over. Long legs and big hips, strong core, pert breasts, those outrageous collar bones, and all that hair finally spread out over his sheets like he’d been fantasizing about.

He could see her throat move when she swallowed and he leaned down to run his lips over it. One of those wonderful legs came up outside his hip and Tony groaned into the underside of her jaw.

Fuck. Condom. Condom. He pulled back and leaned over to his bed stand. A quick rummage later he was ripping the foil on the packet. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. The woman was sucking on the cords of his neck and dragging her hands down his back.

He managed to roll the condom on one handed and keep his knees under him. He slid a hand under her thigh and pulled her leg up further on his hip. Tony sucked in a breath when he felt her hand on him and he groaned aloud when she guided him into her. He panted for a second and then swallowed. One of her arms went around his neck and she leaned up to kiss him, her tongue sliding in his mouth.

Tony’s hips lunged forward and oh, fuck he wanted more of her. He pulled back a bit and let his lips wrap around a pretty pink nipple. Above him he heard Four gasp. She rocked her hips and called his name in that breathy voice that always got him going.

For the next while Tony’s mind was focused on smooth skin, and long hair, and her little cries of pleasure. He breathed through his nose and tried to hold on. When he felt his gut tightening in a way that was undeniable he slid his hand between them searching. Four gave a cry and he knew he’d found the right spot. He circled and titled his hips, thrusting and waiting. Her breathing shortened and he felt the muscles in her thighs start to twitch. Yes, yes, yes.

She called his name, gasped and tensed. Then Tony’s world was grasping slick muscle, and his back locking in a jagged rhythm, and oh. Oh God. Please. A groan tore out of his chest.

He dropped his forehead to her shoulder and panted. His muscles quivered in fatigue, but he picked his head up and kissed her. She ran her hands down his back and Tony sighed heavily.
After a few moments he leaned back and gently disengaged himself. He reached down and pulled the condom off, stretching over to drop it in the trash, before flopping on his side next to her.

Tony took a moment to watch her watch him. Then he pulled the sheets free from beneath them and held his arm out to her. She smiled a sleepy satisfied smile that made him feel a little warm in his chest and then cuddled into his side. Tony drew the sheets over them and let his jaw rest against the top of her head before settling down to sleep.

His last thought was that the date with Four had been really, really good.
Chapter 16: Swings and Roundabouts

“I tried to speak to you everyday, but each word we spoke the wind blew away.” - Into the Open Air, Julie Fowlis

“Good morning.” JARVIS called.

Forge jerked awake. The room slowly lit up.

“It’s seven am. The weather in Malibu is seventy nine degrees with morning fog. Surf conditions…”

“JARVIS mute,” a rough voice commanded from behind her.

She moved to roll over but a heavy tan arm slung itself around her waist. Oh right, Forge thought. She’d had sex with Tony last night.

A warm body slid up closer behind her and she could feel prickly facial hair on her shoulder before Tony kissed along the column of her neck. Also maybe possibly this morning?

His hand flattened against her stomach and slowly slid down. The kissing on her neck became more sucking. When the hand reached between her legs and pushed she let out a huff of air. Okay, yes. Definitely this morning.

Fingers circled over her clit steadily and she felt him hard against her ass. Forge moaned. She couldn’t stop her back from arching and Tony let out a deep chuckle. That steady circling gained a bit more speed and her eyes scrunched closed.

When he nibbled along the top of her shoulder he hit a spot that made her hips jerk. She could feel his lips turn up in a smile before he concentrated his efforts there. His other hand came around and clever fingers pinched and rolled the nipple on her left breast.

She couldn’t get her hand over her hip or between her legs to grab him so ended up cupping the back of the hand that was working between her thighs. She felt his wrist shift and then two fingers were sliding into her. Forge moaned again and Tony pressed himself tighter against her.

“Tony,” she called tipping her head back. He hummed deep in his chest and his fingers curled in her. A cry escaped her and the fingers picked up speed. Cool air brushed across her nipples and her hips worked involuntarily. She could feel his breath quicken across the side of her neck. A bit of testing in rhythm and speed was required before the sides of her feet twitched and her muscles locked in orgasm.

A satisfied sound came from behind her before both hands were gone and a chill raced down her back. There was a rustle sound and a bit of shuffling. Then he was back and lifting her top leg over his hip. He put his hand back between her legs and then sunk into her with one steady thrust. She let out a breathy moan.
“Fuck,” Tony whispered into her hair. He groaned and started thrusting.

Forge dug her fingers into the muscle of his forearm and braced her other hand on the bed to give leverage. Her hips worked back against him and his thrusts turned hard and short.

He grunted and wrapped his left arm around her waist, burying his face into her shoulder as he moved. Forge added a bit of a circle to her hips and he swore. The fingers plucking her clit became more insistent.

She clenched down on him and he gave a stuttered groan. His thrusts turned almost jarring and he titled his hips that little bit to hit that spot inside her. Forge cried out and slammed her hips back against him.

“Fuck. Yes,” he was grunting a bit with each thrust, snapping his hips hard against her backside.

Forge felt that tight hot feeling start low in her pelvis again. “Tony, please,” she whined.

The man craned his neck and sunk his teeth gently into that spot on her neck and Forge’s muscles locked. She tossed her head a bit against the pillow and knew she was still making noise but her focus was on the clench and release of her pussy. It seemed like it went on forever and she called out desperately when it was still going on after about fifteen seconds.

Behind her Tony let out a loud cry and jerked in her a few times. She could feel him swell and pulse. Forge let out a breathless mewl before going boneless.

Tony moaned and kept his hand cupped over her, breathing against her shoulder as his other muscles slowly went lax. She felt a kiss pressed to her shoulder blade before he removed his hand and shifted his hips out from between her legs.

Forge let her leg drop back to the bed and then carefully stretched her body out. When she rolled over Tony was propped up on one arm. He leaned down and kissed the corner of her mouth.

“Hurray for morning sex,” she quipped huskily.

Tony chuckled deep in his chest. “Shower?”

Forge flopped a hand across her forehead. “I don’t know if I can stand.”

The grin that broke across his face was shit eating.

“I’m just making this worse aren’t I?” She asked.

Tony nodded his head.

“Ugh,” she covered her eyes. “Shower.”

As Four had dubbed it Saturday was Happy time. She had gone with him to the gym and greeted his bodyguard but then asked him a weird series of questions. Chief amongst them was if there was some place outside she could set up, at least twenty yards away from anything breakable. Tony had suggested the helipad.

When he’d answered whether he had targets, ballistic glass, and ball bearings his patience had ended and he’d demanded to know what she was up to. Four had promised once she was set up she would show him. Then she had kissed him and left him to his work out.
When he’d turned back to look at his body guard Happy had been grinning.

“What?” Tony asked, tying on his gloves.

“She’s a special woman,” Happy had answered diplomatically.

Tony bounced on his toes a bit and tapped his gloves together. “Yeah,” he agreed.

Two hours later she popped her head back into the gym. Happy was spotting him on the leg press.

“How much longer is your workout?”

Tony let the sled down and sat up. “I could be done now.”

“I’m set up for a little bit of target practice outside.” He took note of the mischievous look in her eye.

“I’m guessing this is non traditional target practice,” he quipped.

She smirked a bit. “Hitting targets with fast moving projectiles. Seems traditional to me,” she teased.

“I’ve got to see this,” he decided.

“Yes, you do.” He noticed she was wearing tennis shoes and already had a light sheen of sweat on her. He wondered what all she had been doing. “You up for a field trip Happy?”

“Of course, Forge.”

Tony turned to look at his bodyguard as they left the gym. “Why do you call her that?”

“She said it was the name she preferred.” Happy answered easily.

“When was this?” Tony called ahead of him. “Hey Four, Happy is calling you names.”

She half turned to glance back at him. “Happy is calling me the right name.” They made their way out into the driveway. “Don’t pout, you got it half right.”

He could hear Happy snickering behind him.

“Half right? Who gave you this name?” He demanded playfully. His joking died off as the came across the helipad.

The helipad now had targets pinned to stands at different heights and distances. A cage of ballistic glass was set up down below in the driveway.

“You’ve been busy,” he commented.

“Someday, I will tell you about my Uncle Wall,” she said, “And why he thought it was fitting to call me Forge.”

Four hustled them behind the ballistic glass and then explained she was going to be using her powers to shoot ball bearings at multiple targets at the same time. “I want to improve my speed and fidelity of control,” she explained. “This is dangerous, so stay where I put you, please.” She requested. She tossed a camera into his hand. “If you would?”

Tony nodded, flipped the camera on, and settled in to watch.

Four walked to the center of the helipad and stood near a bucket. “Okay. Speed and fidelity test.
Thirty, three quarter inch ball bearings, simultaneous multiple targets. In five, four…”

When Four said, “Go,” there was a whizzing sound combined with paper ripping and a few pings. Tony couldn’t even make out the projectiles moving. It was over in a second, like a bomb.

“Whoa,” he exclaimed.

“Yeah,” Happy agreed. “Glad they’re paper this time,” he whispered.

Tony suddenly had a much more accurate picture of part of what went down in the river bed. No wonder Romanoff said the group sent those operatives to die. The reaffirmation that Four was a deadly force actually made Tony feel better.

“Ohay. We’re green now. You can come out and help me count and tag the shots.” Four walked to the nearest target and started to examine it.

Tony shook his head. “My landscaper is going to hate you. There are ball bearings all over my yard.”

She turned to him with that cheeky grin on her face. “Ah,” she sighed, “But I can do this.” Four paused for a moment and her brow furrowed a bit. From around the helipad ball bearings lifted themselves out of the grass and drifted lazily toward her. She bent down and picked up the bucket, then counting each one, had them drop into the container.

“Handy,” Tony quipped.

In the end she had gotten eleven kills shots, wounded seventeen, and missed two. They left the stands, but Tony was already making plans to order target silhouettes. He and Happy helped her set up the shooting drill twice more. She improved her accuracy by twenty percent.

Later that evening after he enticed her back to his bed he asked, “Those tests you did today, what are you doing them for?”

She propped herself up above him. “You know why I’m doing them.”

Tony sucked on his cheek a bit. He did. He wasn’t sure he liked it. She must have read something about that on his face because she sat up and scooted a bit to look at him easier. It was a bit distracting because she was topless.

“You said I was Layla,” she reminded. Yeah, he had. “This is the part where girl with powers finally gets it together and uses awesome powers to kick ass.”

He rolled his jaw a bit and reached out to touch a small circular scar on her side. “You don’t have to,” he offered.

She smiled a bit. “Yes, I do.”

Sitting there with his sheets pooled around her waist, Tony thought she was beautiful. I could fall for this woman, he thought. Maybe he already had. “You don’t,” he argued.

“Tony,” she reached out and ran a hand through his hair. “My entire life I’ve been able to do something that has mostly scared people. Someone is always going to find me and want what I can do. Whether to lock it up or to use it.” He watched her lips purse. “There’s even talk the government
is considering making all mutants register, like Jews in World War two.”

He sat up next to her and wrapped his arm around her waist, tugging her into his shoulder. The idea of people coming after her forever, of her name and power being on a government list, made something inside him snarl in protest. Tony made a mental note to find whatever law maker was behind that idea and squish him.

“One thing I’ve finally accepted, is that running and hiding is not the answer.” She shook her head. “I have to be able to defend myself.”

Instead of protest that he could defend her, that he was doing so now, he kissed her. They could have that argument never as far as he was concerned. Tony set about distracting them both in the most pleasant fashion he could imagine. They could spend the morning sleeping in.

When Four walked down to the lab late Sunday morning it was to find out that JARVIS had narrowed the possible manufactures down to three.

“What now?” she asked.

“Now I start checking them out in person.” Her eyes shot to Tony. There were a lot of things she wanted to say to that declaration.

Instead she asked, “Starting with?”

“New York,” he answered easily. “It makes the most sense. You, the Expo, these guys, all in the same place.”

“And the media coverage of you showing up in New York won’t hurt?” She questioned.

“I make unscheduled appearances places all the time,” he said flippantly.

Forge watched him closely. He was doing that thing where he was looking everywhere but at her.

“You want me to stay here.”

His eyes finally locked on hers. “Yes.”

Fuck. She got it. One she was not as experienced a fighter as he was. She was worried it was something more though, like he didn’t want her to fight at all. Funny how he started out encouraging her to flaunt her powers and be his hero support and now it was a different story.

“You gonna bust in and interrogate the guys?” Forge tried to reign in her angry sarcasm. She didn’t think she managed to filter it all out judging by the wince on his face.

“Reconnaissance first. Might be a few days.” He sat down at his desk and typed a few things into his computer.

Okay. That was enough avoidance for one day. Forge walked up to him and pulled his chair back from the desk. He made a sound of protest, but before he could move, she threw her leg over him and sat on his lap. His mouth dropped open a little.

“Hi,” she could tell he was a little taken aback.

Forge smirked. She knew he had really liked it when she’d done this before. So maybe this was cheating. Whatever. She wasn’t a saint. “Hi,” she quipped. “You need to start thinking up snappy
names. You get me?"

“I can think of a few names right now,” he flirted.

She flicked his chest above the arc reactor. “Appropriate hero names.” She corrected.

The new look, the stubborn one she couldn’t name, came back across his face. Judy’s voice floated through her mind. Mulish. Of course Judy had been describing her at the time.

“Also I need your okay to let Romanoff into the gym.”

He frowned. “Why would you want to let fake Natalie Rushman in my house?”

It was Forge’s turn to frown. Fake Natalie Rushman? Whatever. She got who he was talking about. “You know why,” she sing song-ed a bit.

“I don’t like this plan,” he complained.

“And here was me thinking it was your master plan,” she quipped.

Tony rested his arms on her hips. “Fine,” he agreed. Forge had a sneaking suspicion he was only agreeing to further postpone the argument she knew they were going to have.

“You know I worry about you too,” she leaned down to give him a lingering kiss. “You’re going to be out in New York doing Iron Man things.”

He watched her with those coffee colored eyes.

“I’ll worry. So you better take care of yourself.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Do not make me fly out to New York to save your ass. I will never let you live it down,” she teased.

He gave her a small version of the pretty smile she liked so much.

There were a lot of things she wished she could say then but Tony piped up, “I’ve got to pack.”

“You’re assistant doesn’t do that?” Forge questioned playfully.

“I don’t trust her around my underwear. She might snag a pair and sell them on eBay.” He joked.

“Oh, good idea. I could even get them used.” She gave him a mock innocent look. “Could you sign a pair? Hay would love them.”

There was the full sized pretty smile.
A Lack of Supervision

Disclaimer: I hereby disclaim all rights to the known characters in this tiny bit of fiction. I don't own Iron Man. I also don't own Black Sabbath. I find the band as fitting as AC/DC for a mash up however.

Chapter 17: A Lack of Supervision

“I want to reach out and touch the sky. I want to touch the sun but I don’t need to fly.” SuperNaut
Black Sabbath

It was amazing what lots of money and a private plane could accomplish. Tony was on his way to New York by two that afternoon. It’d be eleven in the evening there when he landed. But he claimed it allowed him a night of surveillance without people really being aware he was in town.

Forge hadn’t argued with him. She also hadn’t waited more than fifteen minutes after his flight took off to call the number on the card Romanoff left.

Romanoff was not the only MIB to show up that evening though.

“I’m not letting you in the house,” Forge announced to the man with the eye patch channeling Blade. “She’s allowed,” she added gesturing to Romanoff.

“We can discuss this right here,” leather trench coat man answered amicable.

Forge didn’t want to buy his cookies. They were probably made with bullshit. She looked around at the high concrete walls of the sunken section of the driveway. “In the kill box. Sure. Lets.” That intentionally shitty part of her was coming out again.

“See you say things like that and it makes me curious. Where does a girl like you pick up military speak?” He folded his arms behind his back.

He was trying to be intimidating. It was kind of cute. “Wikipedia,” she snarked. It was extra adorable because he had lots of metal on him.

Mini Shaft turned to Romanoff and commented. “I see why she gets on with Stark so well.” Romanoff nodded.

“What do you want?” Forge barked a bit. “I have a time limit in which to do certain things or my weaponized back up will get twitchy.”

“Stark left you with a babysitter?” He jeered.

“Times a wasting,” Forge sang with a smile.

Goth pirate Roberts dropped his arms to his sides. “I wanted to meet you in person. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“That can’t be good,” she quipped.

“On the contrary, you’ve managed to impress one of my most astute agents,” Mini Shaft continued.
Forge nodded because yeah, Agent Pretty had made it clear she’d been pervin’ on her.

“Barton wouldn’t shut up about what you did at the Stark Expo.”

That made Forge freeze. Barton, as in crane guy, as in her greenhorn. Her eyes sharpened. “I owe that man a solid,” she declared.

It appeared she’d thrown off the dynamic duo as much as they’d knocked her off her game. Hot Topic eye patch tilted his head a bit. “Why is that?”

“He saved my life.” Forge was completely serious. She would be bits of roasted person right now if not for that guy hustling her on. “Can you tell him I said thank you?”

“Sure,” he agreed easily. Agent Pretty nodded her head.

The man with the one eye to rule them all was studying her with it. For variety, he made her feel like an interesting and possibly useful fungus instead of a bug. “I’m considering attaching Agent Romanoff to you until this business, Stark is no doubt sticking his fingers into in New York, is finished. What I want to know is what you plan to do with what she’s going to teach you.”

Forge raised an eyebrow because, duh. “Save the world.”

“Save the world,” he rolled the phrase around in his mouth like he was tasting it. “You want to elaborate on that?”

“Bullshit aside?” she offered, because she really did have a time limit before JARVIS got all defense happy. The man across from her nodded. “Any group that wants me, and wants me alive, is not looking to do humanitarian work. I know what people like them can do. If I can help get them gone then it’s a public service.”

The man in the monochrome dream coat made a considering face at her. “We may contact you in the future.” He announced before turning to walk away.

Forge couldn’t help herself. “Word of advice, a spoon full of sugar,” she said flippantly. Then more seriously, “Barton needs me, you call.”

She watched the back of Shaft! walk away and then turned to Agent Pretty. “I wasn’t kidding about weaponized back up. We need to get in the house now.” The red head followed her up and around to the front door. “I’ve got to ask. Why does Tony call you fake Natalie Rushman?”

Tony spent the night setting up surveillance on the scrap yard in Washington Heights. He had JARVIS run facial recognition on the people running in and out of it. So far he’d pegged gang members from two different gangs, a drug runner, and various other shady people. None of the people going in and out had scrubbed backgrounds.

He returned to the hotel room and fell into bed around five in the morning. He woke up in time to take a meeting with Mr. Biel, the head of construction for the tower and then tour the expo. The day was tedious. The press was annoying. He missed Four.

When he was able to get back to his hotel room at six that evening he had a message from her with a video attached. Tony gave a little smirk and allowed himself to fantasize it was something dirty.

There was also a video message from JARVIS. The AI had very specific instructions, so Tony
opened that one first.

He felt his teeth grit together when he saw that Nick Fury had wasted no time in approaching Four once she was alone. He did enjoy hearing her be snappy with him though. Tony filed away in his head that she felt she owed Barton and that she was invested in personally removing the current group from the table.

Revenge was something Tony could understand. Protecting yourself was something Tony could understand. He could even get feeling like because you could save people maybe you should. What he didn’t like, at all, was the fact that Four wanted to put herself in danger. He was smart enough to understand he was being a hypocrite.

To get his mind off that thought he clicked into the video she had sent him. It was titled ‘Eatin’ Lightning and Crappin’ Thunder.’ Tony couldn’t help but laugh.

The video was obviously shot by Dum-E. Four and Romanoff were out on the helipad and Romanoff was carrying an assault rifle. “What the fuck have they been doing?” Tony asked aloud.

“Ready Dum-E? Start tight then go wide.” Four commanded. She took a few steps back and commented, “That makes me sound like an amateur porn director.” Her eyes went wide and she gasped. Then she reached forward to stroke the robot making a sympathetic face. “Oh, poor Dum-E. The things you must have seen,” she murmured.

Romanoff grimaced. “Let’s not speculate about Stark’s sex life.” Tony started to chuckle.

Four made a face. “Right.” she agreed. She rolled her shoulders. Instead of the stands with target papers on them there was a single backstop way off in the distance by the cliff. “What are we calling this?”

“Resistance training?” Romanoff offered.

“Good one. Okay. So you fire at the rubber curtain until you start hitting and then we count how many bullets I can hold up.”

Romanoff leveled the weapon. “That’s the plan.”

Four jogged toward the camera and ducked behind the ballistics glass with Dum-E. “Okay. Give me a countdown. Wait!” Four stopped them.

The agent turned to look at her in question.

“Are you sure no one is going to start wondering why there’s automatic gun fire coming from Tony Stark’s house?”

“Sure,” Romanoff assured. “It should be fine.” Tony wondered if the cops had shown up.

“Okay,” Four sang. “Give me a countdown.”

Romanoff counted down and then opened fire. After about a minute bullets started hitting the backstop in the distance. She unloaded the weapon and set it to the side. Only fifteen feet in front of her was a wall of bullets suspended in mid-air. “Clear,” she called.

A groan came from beside the camera before Four stepped out.

“Go ahead and drop them.” Romanoff said. “We’ll check the time in a second. I want to document
you’re physical reactions.” The bullets suddenly pinged to the tarmac.

“Well I have a headache, but no nose bleed,” Four replied, stepping into the shot. She rubbed the bridge of her nose with two fingers.

“What gave you a nose bleed?” The agent asked.

“Awhile ago I had a run in with a group and one of the guys tossed a dump truck at me. I stopped it.” There were several beats of silence. Tony started at the video in disbelief.

“Seriously?” Romanoff asked.

“Mutants, we’re a violent bunch.” Four joked. “I can’t wait till Tony sees this. He’s going to be so pissed I did the cool stuff while he was gone.”

She was right.

Romanoff glanced at the bullets on the helipad. “You were able to hold off an assault rifle firing six hundred rounds per minute for almost a whole minute. The rounds traveled around five yards from the barrel however. Can you hold off single caliber shots closer to the gun?” She asked.

“It’s about reaction time.” Four explained. “Assault rifles fire quickly. By the time I have a hold of the first shot several more have fired. It’s like trying to hold water in your hands. I’m not sure about a single round. Mutants, when fighting other mutants, don’t normally use guns.”

“We’ll have to do some testing with auto and semi auto hand guns of different calibers.” Romanoff planned.

“I also have the choice of shielding instead of stopping,” Four pointed out.

Romanoff tilted her head. “How fast can you shield?”

“As fast as I can get the metal to me.” Four shrugged. “Shielding is one of the things I’ve done almost daily. It’s just moving metal through space.”

The two women fell into a contemplative silence before a whirr came from off camera. “Yeah, Dum-E were done. Go ahead a turn it off.”

Before the video cut he saw Four ask Romanoff, “Can I shoot that?”

Tony picked his phone up. It was about four in the afternoon in Malibu. He wondered if his house was still in one piece, or on the news. He was never leaving Four unsupervised again.

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In the three days Tony had been gone Four had continued to send him updates. They talked in the evenings and sometimes in the mornings. He still missed her though. They’d only slept together two nights before he left, but they’d been living together for over a month.

She seemed to be having a grand time working with Romanoff. Tony figured it was working with someone she knew wouldn’t blink at how devastating she could be with her powers. They tested how much metal needed to be in something for Four to stop it. How fast she could stop it. How easily she could redirect it. Romanoff had put her through the ringer and then done it again with physical fighting.

In the second video Four had ruefully admitted she may never be more than serviceable in real hand
to hand combat, and that level certainly wouldn’t be achieved any time soon. Tony had obligingly reassured her with the fact that even after two years of being Iron Man he wasn’t that good.

The place in Washington Heights was a wash. Oh, it was an illegal weapons manufacturer, but not the one they were looking for. Tony forwarded all the information he’d dug up to SHIELD, the NYPD, and the FBI.

He had one more stop before he could head back to Malibu and Four. The second most likely place for the dart manufacturer to be was in Newark, New Jersey. He was headed there that night. If that turned out to be another dead end then he’d have to schedule a different trip down to Baltimore.

A few hours later he was down in Ironside at a nicely modern office block. This part of Newark had seen renovation and looked nothing like where you would find shady arms manufacturing. The minute JARVIS scanned the first people going into the building Tony knew he’d found it.

Business clad man A was Paul Ottinger who had a list of details that were all fake, but they connected him with the Expo. Business clad man B, who went in with him, had no identity. Tony got as close as he could to the car they had arrived in and shot a GPS tracker at it.

“Run the plate JARVIS,” he commanded.

“Accessing the New Jersey Department of Motor Vehicles. Plate number F twenty seven GXV. Registered owner is Paul Ottinger.” A license with picture flashed in the HUD. It matched man A.

Tony had JARVIS hack into the buildings security cameras and followed the footage of Ottinger and B through the hallways, into the elevator, and down into the basement. Their security system was something else. If he’d had anything less than JARVIS he never would have gotten through. In sub basement A he found what he was looking for.

Tony waited as Ottinger and B collected their shipment of various weapons in two briefcases and then left. He followed them out to the pier where they parked the car and got into a boat. When they headed into open water he had to let them go. It would have been obvious Iron Man was following them out there.

Frustrated with his inability to stick a tracker to the boat, he circled back to the building in Ironside. He might be able to hack into a satellite view later but he wanted something for his time tonight. Tony wanted the guy selling to them. That man had a background. He was a weak link and Tony just knew from looking at the man, he was a squealer.

He didn’t bother being nice about it either.

Iron Man crashed through three floors and snagged the man by the collar before they could even scramble their security. He tossed him against a crate containing the same plastic canister looking things Ottinger and B had left with.

“You sold these to someone I want to know the name of.”

The security force opened fire behind him and Tony had JARVIS target and take them out.

Squealer man, aka Henry Decario, aka a lot of aliases, gave a nervous smirk. “Hey man, I don’t know how it is where you do business, but we don’t give out client information.”

Tony moved to start threatening the guy, but a low electrical whine started.

Decario’s eyes went wide. “No! Hey, I haven’t said anything.” He glanced around in a panic. “I
wouldn’t say anything.”

“JARVIS find out what that is.” Reaching forward Tony once again grabbed the man by the collar. “Tell me,” he started but Decario cut across him.

“You got to get me out of here!” He demanded.

The whine intensified and Tony grabbed a hold of the man’s arm to do just that when there was a hollow whump and the world shut down.

“Sir,” JARVIS’ voice was cracking in and out. “You have approximately two minutes before the building reaches critical structural failure.”

Tony rolled his head. He was on his back underneath a pile of concrete. Decario was next to him pinned under a chunk of the same concrete on Tony. Both of them could tell Decario was dying.

“Xenix. They work for Xenix,” the man rasped. “Fuck them,” he coughed and went still.

The HUD flickered. “You are at fifteen percent power. Ninety seven seconds until structural failure.” JARVIS informed.

Fuck. The crazy assholes had blown up their own weapons manufacturer? Tony shifted, but the suit was pinned. “Remaining power to thrusters.”

After a bit of grinding and shoving he shot across the floor and impacted the remains of a wall. Tony grunted and felt something wet on his chin.

“Sixty five seconds to structural failure.”

“Find me a way out J,” Tony called. Several blocked passages flashed through the HUD.

“The elevator shaft is the clearest egress.”

“Yeah,” Tony watched the HUD flash a diagram of the mangled remains of the elevator car. He just had to clear that.

“Fifty three seconds until structural failure.”

Around him he could hear the steady crumbling of concrete and the squeal of bending metal. He didn’t have a lot of choices. Cueing up a small explosive charge he shot it at the elevator. It blew the car through the back wall of the shaft.

“The blast has further destabilized the remaining infrastructure. Eighteen seconds to critical failure.” JARVIS intoned.

Tony didn’t waste anymore time. He shot up through the elevator shaft, burst through the closed doors on what used to be the second story, and shot through the glass of a window. He was only a few stories above the crumbled mess when it seemed to fall in on itself further.

“Nine percent power,” JARVIS informed him.

Something in his back ached and he could feel a piece of metal digging into his thigh. Tony coughed. “Get me back to the hotel J.”

“Yes sir.”
Chapter 18: Who We Are

“I could be a warrior. Yes, I am a warrior. There’s no need to worry love...You know where to find me.” Warrior Chloe x Halle

Thursday morning Tony didn’t video call her. The news was talking about an office building in Newark being leveled overnight, trapping workers inside. It was a good thing JARVIS could tell her Tony was okay otherwise she may have begged a ride from Romanoff.

He was not supposed to be in New Jersey, but it was a little bit too close for Forge to brush off. Maine would have been too close for her to ignore.

He was due back at the airport in Malibu at three but didn’t want her there to pick him up. So Forge spent between three and the time he got home pacing around the living area waiting for him to walk in the door.

When he did she knew something bad had happened. The side of his face was bruised, he had a busted lip and it looked like he was holding himself a bit gingerly. Forge stood there cataloguing his injuries until she remember JARVIS.

“JARVIS scan Tony for injury,” she commanded.

“Uh,” before Tony could protest JARVIS was already done.

The AI flashed up an outline of Tony’s problem areas and started reciting them aloud. No broken bones. Some damaged muscles in his back. A nasty cut on his leg. Bruises, swelling. Forge took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a second. Okay. She could work with this.

She pointed up the stairs. “Upstairs. Strip.”

A smirk slid across his face. “I missed you to,” he purred.

“Oh, you’re gonna get naked, but you’re not gonna like it.” She would bet her smile looked a little threatening.

She followed Tony up the stairs and drug out the first aide kit. He had a separate tub in his bathroom and so Forge helped the billionaire superhero idiot out of his clothes and plunked him in the bath. First aide started with his face.

“Are you angry?” He asked after a bit.

At him, “No,” and that was the truth. “At the people who caused this, yes. Are they still alive? Do you have their address or name?” Because she could take a trip while he was taking a bath. Romanoff would totally be okay with lending her a ride for that.

He reached out and grabbed her hand, slopping a bit of water on the floor. “No, I think they’re all
probably dead.”

“Probably dead?”

“A building fell on them,” he commented lightly. Forge took his statement to mean a building also fell on him. So definitely New Jersey.

Forge let herself stew a bit as she fussed. She knew she was fussing too. Stupid man made her do stupid things right from the start.

The bruise on his back was enormous and black. The cut on his leg was jagged and deep enough to maybe need stitches. She didn’t know how that was going to work. Forge ran a hand across her face.

She hadn’t even been in the fight this time and she had a tinge of that sick adrenaline feeling. It was bad enough just knowing he was under a building; pinned, crushed. Forge held her breath for a moment and then drew a deep one in through her nose.

“Hey,” Tony called tugging on her hand.

Forge opened her eyes. She hadn’t remembered closing them.

Tony’s eyes darted around her face. “I’m sorry,” he apologized.

“No,” the word shot out of her mouth. “You didn’t do anything. I have,” she clenched her jaw. She did not like talking about it. It reeked of therapy and fuck FOKUS for ruining that for her too. “A few anxiety triggers.” She rolled her shoulders uncomfortably. “Normally its FOKUS related stuff. It has to be kind of bad for that, but being crushed,” she trailed off. “My Uncle Wall was killed by being crushed under a car that was on a malfunctioning lift. I wasn’t there to keep it from falling on him.”

Tony pulled her down until he could reach her temple and kissed the side of her head. Georgia took in another deep breath and centered herself. Tony was not under the building, stuck. Tony needed his leg looked at.

“What are we going to do about the leg?” She asked.

“It just needs a few stitches.” He kept rubbing her hand between his. She let her eyes fall closed again and focused on the calluses he had on his fingertips and palms. Was it too fast for her to love the man? It should be. Right?

“I don’t know how to do stitches,” she said lamely.

When she opened her eyes again he was giving her that small smile. “I do.”

“Right,” she sniffed. “I need my hand.”

He tilted his head but obediently released her hand.

“Tylenol, Ibuprofen, or Aspirin?” She was trying to be business.

“Tylenol,” he replied.

She collected the pills and a glass of water. It was tap. He could deal. He had that small smile on his face the whole time. When he’d taken the glass of water and pills from her she felt she could continue.
“I hope you found something worth,” she forced herself to say it, “almost getting pinned under a building?”

“JARVIS is trying to hack their systems right now. The Xenix Foundation. Their security is on par with SHIELD’s.” He answered.

“Of course it is,” she sighed. Rat bastards.

Tony watched Four buffer herself from bad memories with work. It didn’t seem to matter what kind of work. She just needed something to do with her hands. Taking care of him helped for a bit. When he went down to the lab to do the stitches she followed him and tinkered with her suit. When he was done with the stitches she was apparently done buffering.

“Next time, I go with you,” she demanded. She was at his desk while he was off to the side near the sink.

Tony still didn’t want to have that conversation. He finished buttoning his pants up, focusing on that instead of her face.

“That’s probably not a good idea.” He started to walk toward the door but it seemed she was done being put off.

“Can you shield yourself from a falling building? Keep a metal beam from falling on your head?” She didn’t raise her voice and the questions were more like statements.

He rolled his jaw and felt his chin set into what Pepper had called his stubborn expression. Tony knew he got off easy earlier. Coming back from being Iron Man with Four waiting was, so far, different than with Pepper. Even when they were just friends the red head went from scared, to angry, to nagging.

“Doing what you can do, doing good with what you can do, it’s important to you. Right?” Four asked.

This was the opposite of the other night it seemed. She was the one asking the questions she already knew the answers to. Tony nodded anyway. “It is.”

“You wouldn’t want anyone to stop you from using your powers?” She was close enough to lay a hand on his arc reactor and tap the side of his head. Tony hadn’t noticed her move. Maybe because he was looking anywhere but at her.

He wouldn’t. Tony tried for some levity. “I thought I was Ron Wilson?”

“You are a mad genius who MacGyver’d you’re way out of a cave in the middle of a desert. If you’re not Will Stronghold then you’re the non-super villain version of Syndrome.”

Tony chuckled a bit at that.

“You even have the crazy science hair,” she teased. “I’m just a woman who bends metal.”

“Don’t do that,” he murmured. He finally focused his gaze on her to see the questioning look she was sporting. “Don’t sell yourself short like that.”

She raised an eyebrow.
Tony got her point. He couldn’t tell her she was capable of more and then ask her not to be it. “I know I’m being a hypocrite. It’s not fair.” He put his hands on her shoulders and squeezed a little. “I don’t want to lose you. I can’t have you out there with me. I’d just,” He trailed off in his rambling.

Four shook her head. “I’ve always been out there, Tony. You said superhero’s always wear masks. My power doesn’t go away just because I’m not dressed extra spiffy, and neither does yours. We are who we are.”

He could feel the way every muscle in his face seemed to tense and he rubbed a hand over his face and goatee.

“Even if I never went out there with you specifically to super hero, am I supposed to ignore a car about to plow into a group a kids? What about someone waving a gun around in the grocery store?” She pushed.

“That’s happenstance,” he argued. “You’d be out there purposefully putting yourself in harms way,” he continued.

“That’s happenstance,” he argued. “You’d be out there purposefully putting yourself in harms way,” he continued.

“Like I did at the Expo,” she finished.

He gestured. “Yes, and look what it started.” Tony started pacing away from her.

“The longest I’ve lived anywhere since I was eighteen is the five years I’ve lived in my shop,” she confessed lowly. He turned back toward her and she continued with a shake of her head. “All that moving around wasn’t because I was out doing highly visible things like I did at the Expo. It was because of rumors, because people will always want what I can do. I need to be able to protect myself.”

Tony wanted to say that protecting yourself was different than being a hero, but he knew that sometimes to keep yourself safe you had to become a hero. Damn him if he didn’t spout what he’d wanted to say almost a week ago. “You don’t have to because I can protect you.”

“Yes, you can,” she agreed, “But I want to look after myself. I want to be able to protect you too.” She huffed out a breath and gestured. “Don’t you get it? We could have each other’s backs in this.” Tony could tell she was getting exasperated with him.

“I don’t know if I can take that risk,” he told her honestly his eyes trailing to the display of suits.

There was a long silence and when Tony looked up again he could see she was looking around the lab. “You wouldn’t give up Iron Man if I asked you to.” She stated.

No. He wouldn’t. Iron Man was him.

Her eyes shot back to him. “Don’t ask me to give up being Forge.”

Fuck. Tony had no idea what to say to that except, “You haven’t been a superhero before.” It sounded like a dumb statement even to him.

Georgia Maddix smiled at him. “I busted a dozen mutants out of containment built especially for them, with nothing more than the grommets on an lazy asshole’s boots, at the age of twenty one. I have always been a superhero. I’m just done running from it.” She leaned up and kissed him. “I’m going upstairs to get a drink. Join me when you’re ready.”

Tony stubbornly stayed stewing in the lab for the rest of the night.
When she reached the top of the stairs a voice called out, “Did it go as bad as you thought it would?”

Natasha, the creeper.

“Not as bad,” Forge said moving to the fridge and searching around until she found some crafty IPA’s in the back. “There was less yelling.”

The red head sat at the countertop bar and crossed her legs. “Will he come around?”

Forge popped the top on her beer. “I don’t know.”

“What if he doesn’t?” She tilted her head a bit.

After a drink from her beer, Forge shrugged. “I don’t know that either.”

“You love him,” she assessed.

Georgia gave a half amused chuckle. “Kind of stupid isn’t it.”

Natasha uncrossed her legs and stood up. “I don’t know.” With that she left Forge alone in the kitchen sipping her beer.

When Georgia woke up after a shitty night of sleep to JARVIS announcing the time and weather. She was alone in Tony’s bed. She wished she could talk to her Uncle Wall, or Judy, but she didn’t really need to. Forge knew what Hay would say. Be you. She wasn’t sure if she had gotten her right yet. She’d definitely found the best version so far.

“I have some aggression to work out.” Forge announced when she found Natasha in the kitchen.

“Powers or hand to hand?” The red head asked.

“I really want to let it rip.” Forge popped the knuckle on her thumb. “Can we do both?”

Natasha turned to her and smiled. “I’ve been waiting for you to ask that. You hobble yourself when you don’t use everything at your disposal.”

Yeah, Forge thought so too.

By eight am they were out on the grounds. The grass this time. Far enough away from the house to not accidentally break something. Forge stretched herself out, but kept an eye on Natasha. The woman enjoyed taking her out with sneak attacks way too often.

When the woman leapt toward her this time Forge had already planned her attack. ‘Visualize how you will attack, what you will hit with. When will you launch the attack? Visualize different scenarios so that you have one already in mind to choose.’ Natasha was totally her Master Shifu.

So when the woman lunged at her when she was bent over stretching her leg, she flipped her hand back and sent a piece of metal at Natasha’s wrist. Forge was already half down so forward was the way to go. ‘Don’t hold still, move.’ She slid inelegantly onto her stomach and then rolled, sending two bean bags with a single metal pellet hidden inside all the Styrofoam at the red head.

‘If you stop moving you’re dead.’ Natasha threw two blunted pieces of metal at her to simulate knives. Instead of simply spiking them in the ground like she had last time, Forge flung them back at
her. She knew it took extra time to reverse momentum or gravity, so she also threw two more bean bags at the woman and tried again with the wrist cuff. From there it was easy to lose herself in the fight.

The red head was going easy on her, no crazy pretzel tricks, no gun, no special taser. The woman did change it up though. A rock tossed at her forehead. A cheap plastic butter knife flung at her chest. Forge only had the two metal wrist bands she’d taken to carrying around the house, and bean bags.

Natasha had reminded her that in the city there were pipes, and staples in telephone poles, and… Ha. Forge almost forgot her pocket full of change. She spun it around the red head and clocked her in both shoulders before the woman swept Forge’s feet from under her. Even then Forge didn’t immediately give up. ‘So, you’re down. You’re not dead.’

Forge wrapped the metal around her own ankles and used it to pull her body between the red head’s legs. ‘Don’t be fancy unless it’s effective.’ As she passed her ankles Forge grabbed and pulled. Natasha kicked like a mule and made Forge let go. While she was temporarily fighting off the hold the metal manipulator tapped her three times in the center back with pennies.

“Hold,” Natasha called.

Forge rolled herself to her knees and stood up, brushing the grass off. The change zipped back to her pockets. The metal wrapped back around her wrists.

“You just won,” Natasha announced.

Forge blinked in surprise. Yeah. She had. Holy shit. “I thought you said I’d barely be adequate in a year if I trained every day?”

“You wouldn’t. That little talent of yours certainly helps cover the gaps, but you still have a long way to go,” Natasha warned. The red head brushed her own pants off. “Again?”

“Fuck yeah,” Forge answered.
Chapter 19: Actions and Reactions

“I see a mountain in my way. It’s looming larger by the day. I see a darkness in my fate. I’ll drive my car without the brakes.” Mountain At My Gates Foals

Tony hadn’t joined Four. Not when JARVIS told him she was drinking alone in the kitchen. Not when Tony had been informed she’d gone to his bedroom to sleep. Not when the AI had told him she kept waking up from nightmares. Tony stayed in the lab and worked on the Mark VII until he worked out the bugs in the homing beacon. Then he started to upgrade the weapons tech. Halfway through that he’d put the Mark VII away and started making a Mark IV backpack with weapons for Four. Halfway through that he’d gone back to the Mark VII.

He didn’t know how he felt. Tony didn’t express feelings very well. He knew the thought of her hurt or dead was intolerable. The other thing he knew was that if they split up he’d be poorer for it.

Tony wanted to call Pepper and apologize for being a stubborn ass. He wanted to tell her he got why she was freaked out by him going out and being Iron Man. There was a sinking feeling in his gut when he realized even when he saw things from her point of view, he wouldn’t give up being Iron Man.

Four said she was always Forge. He remember Happy saying it was the name she preferred.

She was right. Tony had been Iron Man long before the cave in Afghanistan. He’d just lacked drive. He was comfortable in the life he had. Even back then, when his company still made weapons, he’d thought he’d been doing good with what he could do.

Tony wondered if that was how it was for Four.

He couldn’t get rid of his brain anymore than she could get rid of her gift and Tony thought it was a gift. He just didn’t like the way she wanted to use it. Then Tony was back to thinking about Pepper.

He was Pepper. He didn’t like it. He didn’t want to be Pepper, especially because he knew that situation from the opposite side.

Of course that all became a moot point Friday morning when he went upstairs and saw Forge taking a trained SHIELD agent apart on his lawn. Tony could tell the red head was holding back, but so was Four. He knew then that she was going to go out into the world as Forge whether he agreed with it or not, just like him and Iron Man.

If Tony wanted to give Iron Man to the world, there was no one who should stop him from doing it. Fuck. Tony went back to building the Mark IV backpack for Four.

When JARVIS told him Four was upstairs in his bathroom taking a shower he dropped his work and went up after her. She was rinsing the shampoo from her hair when he stepped in behind her. He didn’t even give her time to say anything.
Four turned when he walked into the shower and he crossed the tile floor in three steps. He wrapped his hand in all that long wet blonde hair and pulled her head back to kiss her. She squeaked a bit but he didn’t let up. Tony walked her back to the tile wall and thrust his tongue passed her lips. Four gave a bit of a muffled huff before her arms slid up his back. That was all the okay Tony needed.

He used his foot to nudge one of her legs out and pressed his hips to her. One hand stayed in her hair and the other slid between their bodies. He ran a finger along the side of his cock before slipping the digit between her folds and searching.

Tony pulled back from the kiss and tilted her head with his hand before sliding his mouth down her neck. He stopped to nip at her collar bones and then down at her nipple. He tongued it for a bit, and traced his hand from her neck to her hip. Then he closed his lips around her pretty pink nipple and sucked. She gave a small mewl and rocked her hips.

He purposefully rubbed the side of his goatee across her chest as he moved to her other nipple and gave it similar treatment. His hands spanned her ribs and he stopped to place a kiss on her breast bone. Then Tony was sliding to his knees on the tile, and wasn’t that uncomfortable. Fuck it. He placed a teasing trail of kisses along her belly and the crease of her hip before hiking her leg over his shoulder.

“Tony,” he looked up to see Four looking down at him.

Tony paused to place a sucking open mouth kiss on her inner thigh before parting her and spearing her clt with his tongue. Four’s hips jerked and he grabbed a hold of them.

He tracked the tip of his tongue around her opening before flicking the tip across it. Above him Four moaned and tried to rock her hips. Tony slid his tongue up, and up, until he hit her clt again. Then he flattened his tongue, sealed his lips around it, and started listening to the sounds she made.

“Fuck,” she gasped and her hips twitched again. He circled a bit faster. “Tony,” she cried. Her hand was in his hair by then and he could tell by the tension in her fingers she didn’t know whether to pull or push. Tony took a moment to pull back and flick over her rapidly with just the tip of his tongue. Four cried loudly and inarticulately then. Then he sealed his lips around just her nub and sucked. He was mostly holding her up propped against the wall and her hips were a bit freer to move. Tony let her ride his face for a moment before squeezing her hip and moving back to flicking.

He listened as she started a chant of “Oh. Oh, oh, oh.” He could feel her thigh tensing and relaxing against his shoulder and knew she was close. Tony released her hip with his left hand and slid it down between her legs. She was so very wet, and he took a moment to rub the pads of his first two fingers around her entrance. Four cried out his name and Tony rolled his jaw and flattened his tongue back out to circle. Two of his fingers slid inside her and he turned his wrist to crook them where he knew she liked. It was only a few thrusts later that she started an inarticulate string of moans and cries that crescendo into a grunt and whimper.

Tony slowly lowered her leg off his shoulder and held onto her hips again. She was weak kneed and shaking. That was fine. She wasn’t going to stand long. Once Tony gained his feet he hooked his hands under her ass and picked her up. Her back slapped the wall and Tony was between her splayed thighs.

Four gasped and then mewled when he captured her mouth with his. In one smooth thrust Tony was in. He knew his grip on her ass had to be bruising but she didn’t protest. Tony slammed himself up into her almost brutally. He could hear the sounds coming from his own mouth now. Hoarse cries and shouts. She swiveled her hips a bit and he cursed.
Tony shuffled his position grasping her a bit so he was leaning most of her weight on the wall and she was only slightly propped on his forearm. The other hand went back between her thighs. When he got a good position he pinched her clitoris and she almost screamed. That just made Tony fuck her harder.

His mind was consumed with up. Up. In. Deeper. Fuck. Somehow he managed to get the pad of his thumb pressed to her clitoris and he was bouncing her so hard he didn’t even really have to move his hand. He felt her legs clench around him and she tossed her head. Tony leaned forward and bit at the spot on her neck she liked so much. He wanted a mark there. The heavy feeling was gathering in his balls. He could feel them slapping against her ass. Tony wanted harder.

Fuck. Fuck yes. In. In. He pressed a bit harsher with his thumb and this time Four cried out so loudly it rung in the tile shower. She grunted and her back arched. Her pussy clamped down on him and he was up on his toes. His hips pushed up and in, in, and fire was shooting through his cock. Tony felt the yell tear up through his chest. His balls drew up tight against him and the muscles in his ass clenched. In. Fuck. Yes. Georgia was whimpering next to his ear and his orgasm dragged on and on. He couldn’t breathe or see. His world was his cock, the sucking pull of her muscles, and the breath on his neck. Then it was like his strings were cut.

Tony fell back on his heels and scrabbled at the wall to keep from falling backwards. His knees wobbled. The hand on Georgia slipped and they both almost went down in the shower. When they finally gained balance her chest was smashed against his and Tony had slipped out of her. He rested his forehead against her temple for a minute and felt her muscles trembling as hard as his own.

This woman shouldn’t have to hide, and whether she hid or not her life was going to be at risk. Her life had always been at risk. Tony was going to keep her. He was going to go with her. God help the sad bastard who went after her.

Georgia turned her head and kissed up his neck to his mouth. Tony slid his hands from her shoulders down her arms and just enjoyed kissing her for awhile. He had a moment to thank unlimited hot water. When they pulled apart she rested her forehead against his collar bone and Tony could still feel his heart hammering.

“I’m sorry,” he hummed.

Georgia tilted her head back against the wall and looked up at him.

“I get it,” he murmured. They were who they were, and the only way to stay out of corners was to shove the people trying to put you there out of the way.

She wrapped a hand around the back of his neck and tugged some. He bent his head down and she kissed him again. “Good.”

She didn’t finish her shower. The both of them could barely stand and Tony let her help him towel off. His back hurt like hell and his thigh throbbed but he didn’t care. Once they were semi dry he herded her to the bed with his body and collapsed into it next to her. He felt Georgia tug the sheet free and it settled over his body. Tony reached out for her and pulled her into his arms against his chest. Within moments he was asleep. He dreamed about playing backgammon with Yinsen.

Forge had napped for a few hours and then slid out of Tony’s embrace. The man looked exhausted still. He’d shocked her busting in on her shower like that. Tony had moved like a man possessed. She was pretty sure she had hand prints on her ass and a bruise forming on the back of her left
shoulder. Not to mention the bite mark by her neck and beard burn on her chest. It seemed Tony had been feeling possessive.

Forge took a moment to stretch, feeling a dull pull between her legs that spoke of muscles well used. Her hair was a little stiffer than normal, having missed conditioner. Well worth it though. If that was the way the man apologized she was going to have to let him screw up more. She chuckled softly to herself.

She got dressed and headed down the stairs in her socks. Forge was starving and in the mood for something Italian. When she reached the kitchen she spotted Natasha in the living room watching TV.

The red head turned to her and griped, “I had to come all the way down here and I could still hear highlights.”

Forge couldn’t stop the silly smile from forming on her face. She hummed happily. “Make up sex.”

Natasha’s lips quirked. “Apparently Stark is doing something right.”

Forge’s smile grew toothy. The agent rolled her eyes and went back to her program.

Stomach growling Forge wandered into the kitchen and started the makings of lunch. She was waiting for the noodles to finish boiling when Natasha flipped to the news and their peaceful day was ruined.

“In a last minute change to the presentation roster, reclusive Military tech designer Benjamin Volek former employee of KoleTech Industries, will be speaking tonight at the recently reopened Stark Expo.”

The reporter wasn’t what Forge was looking at. It was the picture of the man named Benjamin Volek. The older looking man was on the pudgy side and had thin graying hair brushed back from his forehead. Her eyes lingered on the ropey white scar tissue above his right eye.

“Only this morning, KoleTech founder Nicholas Vandimir, announced that Volek would be opening his own bio weapons division, the Xenix Foundation, in partnership with KoleTech.” The woman continued on but Forge wasn’t listening.

“JARVIS get Tony up,” Forge commanded.

Natasha looked between the news report and Forge’s paling face. “The Xenix Foundation. That’s the name the arms dealer gave Stark,” she stated.

Forge felt herself nod but she was busy giving JARVIS more instructions. “Bring up all the information you can find on Benjamin Volek would you JARVIS?”

“Yes,” she breathed. This definitely qualified as emergency. “Go ahead JARVIS.”

“You recognize Volek?” The agent said it in a way that made it more of a statement.

“Volek,” and Forge was not startled she almost spit the name. “I don’t know if that’s his real name or not. I know him as Doctor Pittman. He was my therapist through FOKUS and the man responsible for running the experiments they did on me.”
Tony came stumbling down the stairs a bit. “Did I hear that right?”

Forge nodded. “I thought he’d died,” she continued. She couldn’t remember seeing him on her way out of the facility, but then she was busy at the time. Forge had just assumed he had died in the ensuing chaos. She wondered if that scar on his face was from back then, because he hadn’t had it when she knew him.

Tony turned to Romanoff. “You said FOKUS was destroyed.”

Romanoff turned to him. “As far as SHIELD is concerned it was. We didn’t exactly have a full roster of people involved with them. They didn’t hit SHIELD’s radar until after the town’s destruction.”

“How did I never know he was out there? He works for a military tech company,” Forge cried.

“Volek is not a name I’ve heard and I used to be a military tech company,” Tony comforted her.

Forge shook her head. “Your expo has shit luck with presenters.” First Hammer, now Pittman or Volek. Whatever.

“I need to go out there,” Tony announced.

“What? Can’t we just have SHIELD pick him up?” Forge asked.

“Volek’s presentation is in under three hours.” Romanoff commented. “We can have a team there,” she continued.

“And take the risk that he’s the only one there,” Tony asked. “He comes out of his science dungeon to go on national TV the day after I bust up his weapons manufacturer. He’s calling us out.” He concluded. “What’s the chance he thinks Four won’t recognize him?”

“He had me followed. He knows my behavior patterns. He knows my past. There is no way he wouldn’t know I would peg him as soon as I saw his face.” Forge ranted a bit. “You don’t forget someone who straps you down and does a biopsy without anesthetic!” She cried, breathing heavily.

Tony moved across the room and wrapped her up in a hug. She buried her face in his shoulder. She was trembling, but it was from fury not fear. “I go.” Forge whipped her head up to look at him. “You send a team to meet me. We grab the guy and interrogate him.” He continued.

Forge opened her mouth to argue but Tony cut her off. “It’s a six hour flight by plane. You’re suit is not meant for long distance travel yet,” he reminded.

“I could get on the plane and meet you there,” she protested.

“Nah,” he brushed a piece of hair over her shoulder. “All the good stuff would be over by the time you got to the Expo.”

Natasha was on the phone when Forge glanced at her. “I don’t like it,” she continued to Tony. “He’s expecting us. He waves himself under my nose like this. It stinks, Tony.”

“You and Romanoff button up here. He called us out. I’m going to answer,” Tony declared roughly.

“Natasha?” Forge questioned. She wanted the agent’s opinion because Forge couldn’t see all the angles on the problem.

The red head talked for a few more seconds and then hung up. “A team will meet you at the Expo.
You’ll pick up Volek for interrogation. We’ll find his base of operations for Xenix and go in,” she laid down the game plan.

Forge grit her teeth. “Then I should definitely be on my way to New York.

She watched the agent shake her head. “You and I are headed for the SHIELD helicarrier. It’ll be stationed in the New York New Jersey Bight. That’s where they’ll bring Volek,” she explained.

Okay. She could get behind that. As long as she wasn’t left behind in Malibu again.

“You’re wearing the suit,” Tony commanded.

Like she’d go without it.
Disclaimer: I don't own Iron Man. I also don't own Pink Floyd. I just couldn't get this song out of my head while writing.

Chapter 20: Throwing Down the Gauntlet

“There is no pain you are receding. A distant ship smoke on the horizon.” Comfortably Numb Pink Floyd

Before he left for New York Tony watched her put on the new armored under suit. It had thin plates that covered the exposed parts of her legs and hips. Thinner scale armor covered her upper body, arms, and part way up her neck. It left her hands bare and her feet unarmored though. The thing definitely needed more work, but they had run out of time.

After the under suit he helped her situate the Mark III backpack. Tony eyed her closely and then gave her a quick kiss goodbye. A few minutes later she watched him leave out the garage ramp before she headed back upstairs.

Forge would have to wait at the Malibu house another hour for a quinjet to show up. So, far she’d spent the time pacing around the living room and kitchen area in nervous anticipation. They were finally getting somewhere. It’d seemed for weeks they were at one dead end after another, and then Volek popped out of the woodwork.

The situation still smelled funky to her. She was worried about Tony.

“You seriously didn’t have one closer?” She questioned Natasha again.

The red head rolled her eyes from her seat at the bar. “Be glad it was this close. We don’t normally operate out of New Mexico.”

What was so special about New Mexico? “Do I even want to know?”

“Classified,” Agent Pretty smirked at her. Of course it was. Whatever.

Tony’s love of automation and hooking JARVIS into the house systems meant lunch was salvageable, even if Forge was no longer interested in eating it. Agent Pretty didn’t have that problem. She was two thirds of the way through her plate of pasta when JARVIS’ security alarms went off.

Forge looked over at Natasha to see the woman had dropped her fork and picked up her gun. Fuck it. Forge hit the control to activate the suit. It’d only been half an hour since the call for the jet went out. “Too early?” Forge double checked.

“Yep,” Natasha replied. The agent slid off the bar stool and stalked across the entryway to peer out the front windows. Double fuck.

“Four?” Forge blinked at Tony’s voice in her ear. It seemed JARVIS was programmed to call him. Whether it was on activation of the suit, or the security systems, she didn’t know.

“Forget it.” Forge blinked at Tony’s voice in her ear. It seemed JARVIS was programmed to call him. Whether it was on activation of the suit, or the security systems, she didn’t know.

“Not right now,” she half sang. “JARVIS. What’s going on?” Forge questioned.
A window screen lit up with video feed of the grounds and surrounding airspace. “Multiple assailants approaching from the East.”

“Son of a bitch,” Forge cursed. It was obvious Tony could see the same thing she could as he swore in her ear.

There was a team of what looked like three dozen commandos coming across the lawn. She could see the gray body armor they were wearing and attempted to reach out to it with her powers. There was nothing. Whatever material it was, it wasn’t metal. Their problems doubled when JARVIS highlighted an honest to God helicopter hovering on the ocean side.

“It appears they have air support,” the AI commented.

No shit, Forge thought.

“I’m turning around,” Tony called.

He had been flying toward New York for half an hour. There was no way Tony would make it back in time to help.

Natasha broke in. “Now would be a good time for that weaponized backup.”

“JARVIS, defense,” Forge barked.

When Forge glanced back to the guys in the yard they were in the process of setting up some thing that could have no good purpose. “What is that?” She asked the question even as she watched the men finish setting it up and retreat away from the house.

“Security systems activating.”

She could hear the systems powering up and a few metallic clangs as covers fell off hidden turret mounts.

The next few moments seemed to happen at the same time.

JARVIS had enough time to inform them, “The energy signature matches the weapon sir encountered at the manufacturer in New Jersey.”

There was a high whine in the air coming from it’s direction. Forge willed the metal in the strange tripod looking thing to implode. It crunched down in to a ball but the whine continued.

Her eyes widened when the thing, crushed as it was, still seemed live. She got a grip on it with her powers and started to send it flying back. Forge managed to throw it only a few yards before there was a whump she could feel in her bones. She had a quick impression of Natasha throwing herself over the bar top in the kitchen, then the whole world shook and blinked out.

Forge opened her eyes seconds later to find herself on her back. The HUD on her suit flickered, and between one image and next she watched a split in the ceiling above her double in size. He breath stuttered in her chest as she heard the cracking sound of loosening masonry. Concrete dust rained down onto her.

“Four?” Tony called again. “Four!?”

Forge knew she needed to move. Staying still was death. “Natasha?” Forge called as she tried to roll to her side.
“Here,” the woman coughed from across the room.

A tug on Forge’s left boot got her attention. It was pinned under chunks of concrete. Before she could consider a way to free herself there was a creaking groan above her.

Forge’s eyes widened as the crack in the ceiling unzipped further. With a resounding snap a piece of the ceiling broke away and headed straight for her face. She felt like her nervous system had been hit by lightning as the piece grew closer at ridiculous speed. Instinctively she threw a hand up and blasted the falling masonry with the repulsors. Bits of concrete pinged across her upper body and a chunk thudded to the right of her head.

Glass smashed from somewhere in the house and a steady hiss sounded. Natasha cursed and more sounds of collapsing stone were heard around her. Exposed wires from the ceiling sparked and Forge tried to free her boot again, kicking on the repulsor.

She shot free and rolled a few feet across the floor, landing on her stomach. There were more snapping, crumbling sounds from above and around her. A fist sized chunk landed on the back of her left thigh and Forge hollered in pain.

She knew if any of the larger concrete chunks hit her exposed legs, armor or not, it was going to be ugly. With a thought the metal coffee table she’d casually nudged so long ago flew over to cover her exposed body. More pieces fell, clanging off her shoulder armor and the coffee table. There was a squeal of bending metal in the din and Forge grunted when a particularly heavy piece landed on the right side of her ribs. It knocked the breath temporarily from her lungs.

What had, in reality, only been a handful of seconds, seemed to stretch to minutes as bits of the house rained down around her. She knew she was in serious trouble when the light started to dim and the echoing sound of rock falling became slightly muffled. Forge tried to move when the noises died down, but found she was stuck fast. Even with the suit she couldn’t budge the material above her. It was dark under the pile and her breath shortened as she started to panic. She was pinned down, could barely breathe. The phantom smell of oil swum around her head.

Gun shots rang out from across the room and they saved her from completely loosing her head. She knew Natasha was still in the fight. More breaking glass sounded from the front of the house and that hissing sound she’d heard earlier grew louder.

JARVIS’ voice finally stopped fluctuating long enough for her to hear. “Seven percent power. There is no longer enough power to enact the Reel In protocol. Chest armor integrity at thirty five percent.”

Finally the words Tony had been jabbering in her ear made sense. He’d been trying to have JARVIS remote activate the protocol. A sweet smell replaced the oil from memory and with a sinking feeling of dread, Forge guessed gas. She needed to get out now or she wouldn’t be able to get out.

She stretched her senses around her and decided that the coffee table would have to do. It was a risk to move it, as it was bracing part of the rubble pile, but it was the quickest way.

“Full power to thrusters JARVIS,” she demanded.

With a thought the coffee table was no longer covering her legs but flattened and shoved up with explosive force. The pile of masonry bits flew outward and toppled around her. A few more pieces clanged across her back and she shot forward on her side through the remains of the television and into the front of the couch.

Her escape took precious seconds, and by the time she was free the gas was thick in the room. A
white haze filled her vision and she couldn’t see where Natasha was. Forge choked and tried to think.

Shadowy figures were moving through the dust and gas in the entryway. Then the muzzle flash from Natasha’s pistol came from over by the kitchen counter. One woman against thirty men was not going to work out. Forge needed to get back in the fight.

A moment of concentration on her part pulled the silverware from the drawers in the kitchen. She flung it at the encroaching shadows with extreme speed. Unable to aim without a clear view she went with the strategy of bombardment. Several of the men went down screaming, but not all.

Gun shots rang out in return to Natasha’s volley and Forge took control of the bullets, sending them back into the group of men forcing their way into the house. The gun’s she exploded in their hands. Shrapnel ripped back into their arms and faces.

Forge’s vision started darkening around the edges and she coughed. She needed air. There was grit in her mouth that tasted like rock and her nose was clogged with the sickly sweet gas smell. In desperation she abandoned the fight with the men in the front and rolled across the floor. Her repulsors activated and she slid toward the ocean side windows on her belly. Forge could feel a few nicks open up on her cheek from the broken glass. In her disorientation she misaimed badly and rammed her side against a remaining steel window brace. She flipped sideways and then she was outside, blinded by the sudden sunlight and falling.

Tony was yelling in her ear and ordering JARVIS to take over the flight controls of the suit. Several yards down the cliff side Forge finally got herself right side up in time to hear JARVIS announce, “Four percent power.”

Her vision flickered again, and this time it wasn’t the HUD’s fault. Forge shook her head and forced herself to stay alert. She focused on gaining the altitude she had lost in her tumble. The main supports for the house were above her at this point. With a quick burst of power she was roof level again.

Behind her she could hear the bass thrum of helicopter blades. She twisted in the air and her first thought upon seeing the machine through her cracked HUD was a rather woozy ‘Whoops. Helicopters are metal.’ She didn’t stop to think before ripping the rotary blades off it and flinging them over the top of the house at the few men remaining on the lawn. The ones that fell short slammed with a splintering sound into the concrete roof of Tony’s house.

The low whine of the descending aircraft almost drowned out Tony yelling at her to land. Before she could make a move to do so the gun on the chopper barked and Forge could sense the approach of multiple metal projectiles. She kicked her repulsors higher as anger flashed through her, hot and thick.

Apparently the fact their transport was crashing was enough to have the gunner switch to live rounds. Unfortunately for them her gut reaction to being shot at by the falling helicopter was to crush it like a tin can. It didn’t shoot again.

“Two percent, we are now running on emergency back up power.”

One of the repulsors on her feet gave out and she dropped suddenly. Below her the wide white roof of Tony’s Malibu house rolled out in all directions. She briefly contemplated landing on the roof but from inside the house she could hear more gunshots going off. Natasha still needed help and if Forge was going to do anything she needed to get closer to the front and see what was going on.

Forge leaned forward and limped her sputtering suit over the roof. She overshot and when she was
about ten feet above the front lawn the power gave out completely. The cracked HUD went dark and she dropped straight down, stomach in her throat. Somehow she managed to roll into the fall but was temporarily blinded by the inactive video screen. A spray of something that was not metal pelted her back. Fuck. She’d landed in the middle of a group of them.

Unable to see Forge ripped the visor off and tossed it in the direction of whoever was firing at her. She heard a choked yell as the sharpened wedge she’d willed it into impacted with her attacker. With her vision back she could see there were still a good dozen men on the lawn. There was still a fire fight going on in the house as well.

Knowing the suit wasn’t going to do her any good with no power, she started ripping pieces off of it and throwing it at the people trying to take her down. In between she high jacked bullets from in the house and spun them out at the people surrounding her on the yard. A twist to the left, and three pieces of the suit went through the gap under the arm of the torso armor of one man. Forge slid her feet to the right, and another piece went through a man’s neck. Then Forge made the mistake of throwing one of the gauntlets.

Eleven men down the last one got lucky. Forge stared down in horror to see a dart sticking out of her uncovered hand. She had enough time to rip it out before the combination of gas and injected sedative overwhelmed her. Her world went dark. She didn’t even register hitting the ground.

When JARVIS called him he’d only been in the air for thirty minutes.

“Security alert at the Malibu home, sir. Miss. Maddix has activated her suit.” That woman really need to stop getting into trouble the minute he left her alone.

“Four?” Tony called. He could see a live feed of what she was seeing through her HUD.

“Not now,” she sang back.

Only a few seconds later the house was hit with a weapon similar to the one he’d encountered in New Jersey. Tony’s heart jumped to his throat. He knew how much she feared being pinned underneath something and that weapon had taken out several stories of office building. His house would slide off the cliff into the ocean under that kind of power. When her HUD flickered back on she was amazingly still in a mostly intact living room. But then, these people wanted to kidnap her not kill her.

After that brief moment of relief the ceiling started falling on her. He watched, as though he was the one lying there, as a large slab of concrete closed in on her head. Then, even when she escaped being crushed, she was still buried. Her HUD flickered in and out again.

Tony called out for JARVIS to initiate the Reel In protocol but it was already too late. Her suit didn’t have enough power. She used more of the dying energy in her suit to free herself from the rubble and the gas filled house. By then Tony could tell she was disoriented and he was scared she wouldn’t get control before she crashed into the cliff side or the Ocean.

Tony was forced to watch, knowing he was too far away to do anything, as Four once again fought off the assholes after her. He’d been yelling at her the whole time but it was clear she was already partially losing consciousness. He was damn proud of the way the woman took out the helicopter though.

When JARVIS announced four percent power he started screaming for her to land. He could see the
roof top of his house below her but then the HUD cut out. JARVIS announced the Mark III backpack had shut down and Tony was left to fly the rest of the way back to Malibu unable to contact anyone at the house.

Only a few minutes out JARVIS announced the GPS signal from the chip in Four’s hand was on the move. Tony didn’t know if that movement was voluntary or not.
Chapter 21: Working on a Jailbreak

“See I’ve been working on a jailbreak. Got no time for a mistake. Any moment till the day breaks. No more time to get to know you.” Jailbreak Awolnation

When Tony got to the house he knew Four was gone. Romanoff was walking through the front yard checking bodies alone.

“Where is she?” He asked the question anyways. Hoping maybe she was passed out somewhere. He knew it was a futile hope. JARVIS was still tracking her chip.

Romanoff shook her head, and dust fell from her hair. “Gone.” Tony grit his teeth as the hot wind of rage blew through him. “There were maybe five assailants who made it out, but it was enough to haul her with them,” the agent elaborated.

Tony swore viciously and then surveyed the scene of his home’s devastation again. “Any of them still alive?” God help them if they were because Tony would beat Four’s end destination out of them. He knew the answer before he saw Romanoff’s scowl.

“No,” she shook her head again. “Poison.”

“Fuck,” he yelled again.

“Throwing a tantrum isn’t going to get her back, Stark. We need intel.” The way her voice remained level pissed him off even more.

“JARVIS. Where is Four’s GPS now?”

Romanoff turned sharply to look at him.

“Currently moving at considerable speed to the North East, sir. The coordinates read over Nevada.”

Tony turned to the agent. “She has a GPS chip in her hand.” He repeated the location JARVIS gave him.


Tony didn’t need to hear anymore. For the third time that day he changed direction. “JARVIS. How’s that mainframe access coming?”
“Working to breach the final firewall now, sir.”

“Good. Let me know what you find.”

Those people, Tony thought. They had no idea what they had just done. He would get Four back and he would wipe the Xenix Foundation off the face of the Earth.

Tony thought about Four telling him about Dr. Pittman’s past treatment of her. He remembered her claiming she was a superhero. He remember the day he’d come back from New Jersey and the way she had admitted to having PTSD. Tony hoped he would get her back in one piece.

Somewhere between Malibu and where she ended up, Forge swum back to consciousness. It was caught quickly though and the man next to her rather brutally stabbed her with a sedative. Before Forge passed back out she had a moment to quip, ‘rude,’ to herself.

When she came to the second time she knew she was in deep shit. Before she even opened her eyes she could recognize the smell. Plastic and glass, an overwhelming stink of chemicals that was fresher than last time because they’d had less time to plan. And still headache inducing.

Forge expected panic at the knowledge she was in another plastic box, instead she was surprised by how funny she found it. She wondered if she was slightly hysterical or just out of fuck’s to give. Either way she kept her eyes closed and took stock of her situation. This wasn’t the first time she’d run this particular rodeo.

She was strapped to an upright surface with scratchy belting. Whatever it was, it was tight enough and strong enough to keep her from slipping down while dangling upright. They had stripped her of the rest of the suit and her under suit to boot. She could tell she was in the spandex shorts and sports bra she’d taken to wearing underneath the thing.

Her toes were cold. Her fingers were cold and she fought off a shiver at the knowledge she was underground again. Forge concentrated for a moment and felt the reassuring zing of metal in her consciousness. All nine implants were right where they were supposed to be. Bully for her.

She knew from experience they would come the moment they thought she was awake. So Forge hung lax and just surveyed her surroundings with her eyes closed. Two stories above her the dull feeling of non metal gave way to screws, wires, and pipes.

Advantage one, Forge thought, she had metal on her person they had not detected. If they came down with only the doctor, or less than three guards, she had a good chance of killing them and getting closer to large slabs of what she needed. Advantage two, they were working on old or limited intel about her powers.

Forge took a moment to sense a possible passageway and then experimentally worked a screw from a vent two stories up loose. Above her there was a bit of a plinking noise and she had to work not to grimace in reflex. Yup. She called the screw down the airshaft and let it rest next to the plastic vent above her head.

Disadvantage one, she did not have enough metal to protect herself from further sedation.
Disadvantage two, she was further down in the ground than she could sense. So more than two stories. That was a long way to fight up. They’d buried her deeper this time.

Advantage three, the GPS chip should still be transmitting which meant Tony was on his way. She had no idea when he’d get there though. Forge figured she’d listen for explosions.
She took another moment to pull a screw from a different area to the stockpile she was planning above her head. It plinked again, but no one came to investigate.

She tried to think like Romanoff. There was probably only going to be one shot at an escape. Which meant she would have to see how they approached her without attacking the first time. If she jumped the gun she could make her situation much worse.

Forge had a lot of options to go through. When, how, what, visualize, she reminded herself. Another plink from above her and still no response from guards or doctors. Forge breathed in through her nose and went about the business of plotting a jail break, stealing metal one small piece at a time.

She estimated it was about two hours later that they got tired of waiting for her to wake up. The sound of boots on hollow stairs came from far in front of her. She counted twelve steps before a door at the end of the hallway thudded open. There were multiple sets, which made it difficult to distinguish, but she thought it was twenty two or four steps from the door to her cell. A click sounded and she knew it would be an old style plastic bolt, they couldn’t afford electronics by her.

Lighting was always a problem for them in the past, and it seemed that hadn’t changed. Anything that could emit a glow usually involved wires, so they’d stuck to old school candles in the past. That seemed to be the way they went again. That meant it was harder for them to see her and easier for her eyes to adjust.

Guard two was a naughty boy and had metal fillings in two of his teeth. As a twenty year old Forge wouldn’t have been able to rip them out, wouldn’t have even thought of it, but Forge was thirty six now.

A slap across the face brought her out of her thoughts. Yeah. She was gonna shred them and not feel bad about it at all. She opened her eyes.

“Hello againm Georgia. You’ve made quite a nuisance of yourself.”

“Hi, Doctor Nick,” she sassed as she catalogued the location and position of the doctor and guards. Four guards, one doc, all armed with sedative darts. “You’re face has looked better.”

He smiled at her. “As has yours.” He gestured to the ropey scar above his eyebrow. “A memento of our last visit,” he explained easily.

“Well Doc Quinn, I do apologize for it not being more pleasant,” she kept her voice as sweet as sugar.

“Yes, well, thankfully this visit will not last as long,” he commented.

She wondered if this was the part where he spilled his evil plan. Whatever. She got extra sarcastic when stressed.

Guard three stepped forward and jabbed a bone needle in her arm. Asshole. She was dubbing him Igor. Forge tried not to flinch and tilted her head down to watch the syringe fill with her blood. So, this again.

They wouldn’t get reactions of horror from her this time. She knew she was a superhero now.

“Don’t worry Georgia,” Dr. Dastardly reassured. “We’ll have everything we need from you in the next day or so. Then, you’re free to go.”

Ha. Who did Dr. Delusional think he was fooling. It was so very sweet of him to give her a timetable
though. He left after that. Witty banter had never been his thing.

Five minutes later, Guard three was back for her blood with a pint bag. When she sassed him he punched her in the mouth. When she asked him if he’d had surgery to remove the back hump, he worked over her ribs. Forge was tempted to put one of her implants through his forehead, but held off. Guard one had stayed in the stairwell and Georgia hadn’t worked out of her restraints yet.

Advantage four, surveillance equipment had metal in it. There were no cameras down in Forge’s cell. She was going to make sure to make them regret that.

It seemed Benjamin Volek had missed his speaking appearance. Tony had been informed by SHIELD agents stationed at the Expo that Volek had never shown up. Instead his second, Bronson, had given the talk in Volek’s place and was currently sitting in SHIELD custody for it.

Four had been missing for almost seven hours now. Tony had tracked her GPS across the continental United States. She’d obviously been on a plane, one which landed in the Capital City airport just over five hours after take off. From there she traveled up the five eighty one to an area outside of the city.

“Sir, I have gained access to the Xenix Foundation’s mainframe.”

Fuck yes. “Lay it on me J.”

“They are headquartered in Marysville, Pennsylvania.”

What do you know? Four’s GPS said she was there too. Several sets of documents flashed up in miniature. “Tell me what I’m looking at J. Can’t fly and read.”

“Dr. Benjamin Volek has partnered with Baron Jon Bronson and created plans to genetically engineer soldiers using mutant DNA. The results so far are unstable and result in test subject fatality within minutes to hours. There are contract orders for several private military forces. One of which is labeled as metal wielders.”

Tony clenched his jaw. So Volek and this Bronson guy wanted Four’s DNA to make a force of soldiers that could do what she could. He took a moment to internally shudder at the thought. An army like that would be devastating on the scale of the introduction of the nuclear weapon.

“Is Vandimir in on it?” Tony needed to know exactly who to crush.

“It does not appear so, sir. Volek is keeping his genetic testing records on a private server. There are records that indicate KoleTech is being used as a new funding source. Money is being funneled from a legitimate project to the testing laboratory.” JARVIS continued.

Well, Tony thought, it can’t be cheap to scrub backgrounds of hired soldiers. Especially when Four kept killing them. Also not cheap to fund an illegal weapons manufacturer, especially when you blow it up. He understood the security better now. Xenix and Volek couldn’t afford to be linked to their under the table dealings or the shiny new funding from KoleTech would be pulled.

If only they had stayed away from Four they might have squeaked by long enough under SHIELD’s radar to have some success.

“Get me an address JARVIS.”
“2100 Legacy Lane Marysville, Pennsylvania, sir.”

What do you know? Tony was looking right at it.

…………………

Tony had been surveying the low brick laboratory building for twenty minutes before Romanoff got there. It was a struggle not to go in ahead of time. They could be doing anything to Four in there.

JARVIS had alerted him there was a quinjet landing a bit out. When Tony flew over to meet Romanoff he found she had brought a friend.

Clint Barton stepped off the jet behind the red head, his ever present bow on his back. Tony still thought a bow as a super agent’s weapon was stupid but he wasn’t going to complain about the backup.

JARVIS flashed the blueprints for the building across his HUD again and Tony detailed them for the two agents with him.

There was a single ground level comprised of offices, three sub levels, then a lone fourth. The first sub level housed what looked like barracks and containment units for two other mutants. The second, a set of rooms, as well as what appeared to be testing facilities. The third was Volek’s and Bronson’s offices and medical labs. Two floors further into the Earth, connected by what JARVIS surmised was a plastic stairwell, was a single hallway and cell. They were also plastic.

Everyone there knew who that cell was for. Tony felt his rage like a pool of lava bubbling in his gut. His scanning radar went a little wonky the deeper into the building he went. JARVIS could interpret the readings to say there were twenty men inside or fifty. He couldn’t even get a reading on whether the cell at the bottom was occupied. Tony didn’t need it though. The GPS told the story there. He had a moment to scoff at himself, and he had thought the woman was crazy.

“You want to go up and ring the bell?” He asked Romanoff flippantly.

Barton was the one that shook his head. “We have to be careful how we approach this or we could end up with a hostage situation,” he reminded.

Fuck. Four could only defend herself from a gun or knife if it was metal and she was awake.

“Do we know if Volek is in there?” Romanoff asked.

“Yeah,” Tony cut in. “He walked in the front doors about two hours ago.”

The three of them passed ideas back and forth about egress routes and contingencies based on the number of possible armed security. During that time Tony had JARVIS dumping everything non-Four related in the Xenix database to SHIELD. He wanted to bury the bastards, but he needed to check Four’s files for things to redact first.

After fifteen minutes of strategizing the problems circled around to one. They needed to get down to Four before the bad guys knew they were under attack. Once they got her moving then they could blow the place to hell.

“We need to get to Georgia,” Romanoff started them off. Tony was still a little weirded out how the two woman used their real first names for each other. It seemed they had grown close while he was in New York. “I can sneak in and get down to her,” she turned to Clint. “After I’ve got her, you and
Stark cause a distraction to cover our escape.”

“What about Volek?” Barton asked adjusting his communication ear piece.

Tony felt his jaw clench and eyes narrow behind his face plate. “Leave him to me.”

They made their way through the woods around the lab and positioned themselves. Before Romanoff could start to make her way across the open lawn to a side window there was a wrenching sound, yelling, and glass shattering from somewhere in the building. Alarms started to blare from within.

Romanoff and Barton looked at each other. “I don’t think she’s waiting for us,” Barton quipped.

Tony kicked his repulsors on and flew head on toward the building.
Chapter 22: Superhero

“I ain’t gonna be just a face in the crowd. You’re gonna hear my voice when I shout it out loud.”
*It’s My Life* Bon Jovi

Forge had been right. Ripping the implants out of her arms had been just as much fun as she had expected. She was bleeding down the backs of her arms, but she had more important things to worry about. The clock was ticking.

After giving up more than a pint of blood to the crazy assholes who had a hold of her, she knew she would only get weaker as time went by. She wanted to wait for the right moment, but if she waited too long she may loose her window.

Forge had a few ounces of metal trinkets stashed above her by then. She worked them through the vent and went about slicing off the heavy straps holding her up. Her feet hit the ground with a thud. It was freezing rough concrete and her toes curled in aversion.

She took stock of what she had to work with; Two fist-full’s of screws and nuts, her implants sans GPS chip, and a single pipe bracket. It was enough shrapnel for a pipe bomb and that was what she was going to be. First, the lock.

A screw flattened out and she carefully shot it through the bolts on the door. Forge didn’t want to shoot too hard and have the metal potentially make noise contacting with a wall. Once she’d unlocked her cell she knew she needed to move fast. They may not have an alarm on the door, sensors were also metal, but if they came down at an inopportune time they would catch her in the plastic part of the stair well. She wanted to minimize shit like that happening.

Without further consideration she stretched her senses out and sprinted for the door at the end of the hall. Forge kept her head enough not to let it thud open or closed, before taking the steps two at a time. She was half a floor below where the metal free zone started when the door above her opened and shitty timing happened.

Igor and Guard two apparently had a date with her. Rude. They didn’t give her time to do her hair. With a quick mental wrench Guard two’s fillings went through his brain and he dropped like a brick. Igor had a moment of what-the-fuck face before he also got Guard Two’s fillings to the brain. As gross as it was Forge added the bloody metal bits to her collection of death. Of course that was when all hell broke loose.

Guard one screamed and opened fire at her with the dart gun. Forge flung herself over the railing at the same time she sent two screws and an implant speeding through the unfortunate Guard’s skull. Her body slammed against the wall of the stairs and her hands slipped off the rail. She landed awkwardly on her right ankle, swearing. Wrong way. Forge needed up.

Trying to ignore the new pain in her ankle she lunged back up the stairs. The stealth approach was blown and she was close enough to feel the metal in the floors above her. Time to make things
Yelling could be heard above her but she’d deal with that once she was out of all the plastic. Her vision tunneled on the door above her while her concentration went to all the pipes she could find within reach. She didn’t bother with finesse or aim, simply commanded the pipes to burst up through every wall and floor with as much force as she could muster.

Glass shattered further above her and the yelling picked up. An alarm started several floors up. Forge slammed into the door and rammed her shoulder into the opposite wall. She was facing a dead end so spun around and sprinted the opposite direction.

She had a split second to recognize that Volek was in the lab passing by on her left and trying to aim a dart gun at her. Viciously Forge flattened the pipe bracket and shot it at Volek’s wrist. She followed it up with a volley of high velocity screws. Forge didn’t stop to see if the man lost his hand. Out first, revenge second.

Tony blew a hole through the side of the building and flew into it. He landed for a moment, shot repulsors at two armed guards, then he spun and shot a third. Kicking the repulsors back on and taking off, he heard an explosion happen behind him that he thought was courtesy of Barton.

He had enough time to notice the way metal piping jutted from the walls to create an obstacle course before JARVIS plotted a way around it. With a twist of his torso he dodged clipping his shoulder, picked a man off the ground, and threw him into a wall. Ahead of him a dozen more hired men arranged themselves in the hallway and opened fire. Bullets zinged off his armor before the targeting system locked. A flick of his eyes and they were on the ground dead.

From further down he could hear someone smashing the hell out of the place. With a bit of glee Tony thought that it was probably Four. He jerked back as a large sharp piece of metal jutted up from the floor. Definitely Four. He didn’t bother taking the indirect route, Tony smashed down through the open gash to meet her.

Escaping from somewhere you didn’t know the layout of was hard. Back in Texas, the facility had been smaller with less levels. She’d had a straight shot up from her cell, then down through the other containment and out. This time she was having to navigate to find stairs and the lazy bastards hadn’t hung the fun glowing exit signs above them. That had to be some sort of safety violation.

Three guards tried to box her into an office she’d accidentally barreled into. They had dart guns and were aiming them at her, so Forge flattened a vent cover and capped the ends of the guns. There was a comical moment when the guards looked at the guns that refused to fire, but by then Forge was lunging through them behind a cloud of all things pointy and fast moving. They men hit the ground and didn’t get back up.

She heard an explosion sound above her, and then another. The building over her head rattled and ceiling tiles fell all around her. One of them clipped her on the head. With a grunt of surprise she brought her arms up in an effort to protect her head, but didn’t stop. Her heart was hammering and sweat was joining the trickle of blood she could still feel making it’s way down her arms. Further down the hall she stepped on something that cut the bottom of her foot. All the while Natasha’s voice was in her head, urging her to keep moving.

Behind her in the hallway someone crunched on glass and Forge dove head long to the floor,
scraping her arms and chest. A set of darts flew over her and embedded in the wall. Rolling onto her back Forge mentally reached out for something to protect herself. There was a stainless steel sink in the room across from her. With a second of concentration she ripped it out and flattened it, using it as a wall between her and the man firing at her. Around the side of her shield she swarmed a set of fancy pens. There was a cry, a gurgle, and Forge took a moment to peek over the top of her barrier to see the man on the ground with an impromptu tracheotomy. Whoops. She did it wrong.

Another man jumped out of the room she’d stolen the sink from and Forge whipped the flattened metal around a bit lower and slower than she intended. It cut one of the man’s legs off at the knee and wedged in the bone of the other. With a grimace she ripped it back out trying not to acknowledge the grinding sucking noise it made. Her stomach rolled and her hands shook. The guy was on the ground but he still raised his arm with the dart gun in hand. Without further consideration Forge drilled an implant through his forehead and the arm went limp.

She took a moment to wrap the bloody metal of the flattened sink around her torso before finally finding the door to the stairwell of the next level up. Four men were coming down the stairs at her. She wrenched the screws from the tracks in the stairs and sprayed them at the men like automatic weapons fire. As she sprinted up the stairs over them, one man grabbed a hold of her sore ankle and she reflexively kicked out like a mule, hitting him in the face. She sent an extra piece of metal through him.

With a sinking feeling Forge realized she’d traveled up three floors and still couldn’t taste fresh air. She panted and stretched her senses out, trying to find more metal to work with. Bits of a swivel chair, computer, and light fixtures came into her grasp and she flung them out down the hall as fast as she could. People screamed, more glass broke. There were bangs and the funny dipping tone of ricochet.

She still didn’t have enough metal to wrap around her full body. Why were these people so into wooden office desks and bookshelves? Where were the god damn filing cabinets? After several long seconds she was finally able to separate out a heavy boxy feeling presence above her.

Lotto, Forge thought dizzily. There was a vending machine a floor above her. She pulled it through the ceiling at the end of the hall, smashed one bad guy with it, and then stripped the metal sides off of it. Metal wrapped around her and she sank into the comfort of armor plating with relief.

Forge took a second to ponder the hole in the ceiling. It might give her a nose bleed but fuck it. She levitated herself shakily up through the floor. Four floors, she counted to herself.

Darts pinged off her armor before she even got her feet under her, and some wise ass dropped the dart gun to grab his real, real gun. That was a bad idea. Forge made him regret that.

The gun exploded and the man screamed. It was cut off when the barrel shot through his eye. She broke open the magazine and added the bullets to her orbiting shrapnel cloud.

Between her and a door at the end of the hall where seven men in that plastic body armor she hated. Forge’s grin was feral. The vending machine she’d cannibalized had been one for canned soda. Through the hole in the floor came dozens of cans. They split open and the sticky pop splashed along the walls and floor.

She commanded her twister of all things metal and pointy down on the men and supplemented it with thin blades of soda can. The men fell before her. A few turned to flee down a side hall and were cut down from behind as she ran passed them. The door at the end of the hall was metal and she crunched in inward without a thought in her head but to get another floor higher. Upon breaking it open however, she found it wasn’t the way up to the floor above, but a containment unit for another
mutant.

‘Jesus,’ Forge thought in horror as her feet slid to a stop inside the room. The girl had obviously been there awhile. She was thin and pale, probably only twelve or thirteen. They had her blindfolded and strapped to another table, but by the way the child’s head turned toward the door she was obviously awake. Anger pulsed through Forge so strongly she stumbled.

Without wasting time to think it through. She ran over to the girl and started ripping out the tubes attached to her.

“Hey,” Forge greeted breathlessly. “We’re busting out of here. I uncover your eyes you’re not gonna make me explode or something, right?”

The girl shook her head, but Forge knew it was a gamble either way. She pulled the blindfold off and met the strangest eyes she’d ever seen. Orange irises started back at her from the younger girl’s face. More yelling came from down the hall and broke Forge from her staring contest. She could hear bullets firing from above her.

“Okay,” Forge ripped the straps off and yanked the girl up roughly by her arm. “We’ve got to run.”

“My brother,” the girl protested in a weak voice, pointing back down the hall the way Forge had come.

Fuck. “Show me,” Forge commanded.

The girl bolted for the open door and Forge had a moment to remember what adrenaline could do for a body.

Two doors down was another locked door, also metal. Forge busted it off the hinges. Inside was a boy of about fifteen. He was snarling and thrashing against his bonds until he saw the girl with Forge.

“How,” the girl called. She ran over and tugged at the metal bands securing the boy.

Forge took a moment to concentrate and snapped the bands at the latch points. They sprung free and the boy dove toward her with claws.

“No,” the girl called. Her voice stopped the boy inches from Forge’s body. She didn’t think it would have mattered, she was still armored up, but time was wasting.

“Let’s go,” Forge called.

She formed the metal door into a wedge and shoved it up through the ceiling. It created a gash above them. Then suddenly they all had to dive out of the way as the ceiling collapsed and Iron Man landed on the floor with a clang.

“Four,” he called, his voice slightly mechanical.

Forge felt her breath rush out of her chest. “Tony!” She wanted to fling her arms around him in relief but the boy was back to acting hostile.

“Whoa, whoa,” Forge called, holding her hands out to the feral boy. “He’s on our side.”

The girl wrapped her arm around one of her brother’s. He cast a side glance at his sister before grousing. “Can we please get the hell out of here now?”
Forge eyed the kids and then the hole in the ceiling. “Sorry in advance,” she quipped. Before they could protest she wrapped metal around the boy and girl’s waists. Hefting them up she then half jumped half levitated herself. Behind her she could hear Tony’s repulsors kick off and then finally they were in a corridor she could smell fresh air in. The boy didn’t waste any time dragging his sister toward a window.

Forge mentally pulled the door up behind her and then flipped it around in front of the siblings and smashed it through the outer brick wall. The three of them ran through the cloud of dust out of the opening with Iron Man flying above them.

The darkness out of the lawn was disorienting after the clinical lighting of the upper sub basements. Forge stumbled but kept her footing as she followed the two younger mutants across the yard. When they reached the tree line Forge noticed Tony land behind her so she gave a tug on the metal still around the two kids’ waists.

“Hold up,” she called.

Tony turned to her. “Barton will meet you here in a minute. He’s on the other side of the compound. He’ll get you to the quinjet. I’m going back to get Volek,” he stated.

“Third sub basement lab.” Forge panted. “Don’t know if he’s still alive.”

“We’ll find out,” Tony decided. With that Iron Man took off back toward the building and Forge went about reassuring two scared kids that, though things may not be alright, they were going to get better.

“JARVIS check structural integrity and give me a read on remaining live targets.”

“The building is still structurally sound, though the ceiling of sub basement two may become unstable.”

On the HUD a target lit up showing a man trying to run away across the grounds. Tony blasted him and then dove back into the building. He twisted through the holes in two of the sub basements made by Four, then flew down the stair well to the third.

In the second laboratory space Tony found Volek. His hand had been sliced off at the wrist and the man had made an attempt to stem the bleeding. It didn’t seem to have worked though. Of course it was equally likely the man died from any of the shrapnel wounds present on his torso. He’d died while Four and the kids were escaping.

Tony grimaced a bit but grabbed a hold of the man and maneuvered him back outside the building. On his way out JARVIS pinpointed two more men. Tony blasted them both and didn’t feel bad about it.

Dumping Volek’s body on the lawn he called out on the communicator to Barton. “Do you have them?”

“Headed back to the quinjet now,” he answered.

“Regroup at the jet,” Romanoff called.

Tony took a moment to survey the scene below him. The building had several large holes in it. One of the explosions had started a fire. He considered his options. The research in there was dangerous,
not just personally for Four, but overall. He didn’t want anyone getting their hands on it.

He remembered how Four had said that when she’d left the facility in Sprung Heel, Texas it had been caved in and burning. Volek had escaped then. Tony didn’t want to take anymore chances. Decision made he aimed a small missile at the building and let it fly.

The explosion forced him back in the air a few feet. He watched the flames dance across the yard, illuminating Volek’s body and the bodies of several of his fallen soldiers. SHIELD could pick through the rubble for whatever remained.

Tony spun in the air and flew off for the quinjet.
The End

Disclaimer: I do not own Iron Man. I also don't own Ed Sheeran. Once again I make no money from writing this tiny bit of fiction.

Chapter 23: The End

"Settle down with me. Cover me up. Cuddle me in." Kiss Me Ed Sheeran

The kids were turning out to be a problem. Four had spent the first twenty minutes cloistered in the back of the quinjet in whispered conversation with the siblings. She managed to find out that the two of them were effectively orphans. Once they manifested their powers their family had kicked them out. They’d been living on the streets when Volek had picked them up.

“It happens,” Four said, zipping the SHIELD issue jacket closed. “It’s easy for people to be afraid of you once they know what you can do.”

Tony read a world in that casual statement. He thought about how Four had told him she’d been raised by her Uncle after fleeing her alcoholic mother. He remembered how she’d asked him if he was frightened.

After that there’d been an argument with Romanoff, and then Fury. The agents had orders to bring everyone in for a debrief. Four refused to take the kids to the helicarrier.

“I’m taking them to the best place for them, and if you won’t give us a ride I will force this jet down and fucking walk,” she swore.

Barton had piped in with a, “They’re just kids ‘Tasha.”

That was when Fury was called.

“Listen up Mad-Eye Moody. I know we’re on threat level constant vigilance and all, but let me explain why you don’t want to get tangled in mutant affairs.”

At Four’s casual disrespect Tony had giggled. It was slightly hysterically but he blamed it on the adrenaline leaving his system. The back and forth between her and Fury had lasted only ten minutes. In the end Four got her way.

About an hour later they were landing on the lawn of a large estate. Four had shushed him as they got close and told him she was ‘concentrating on knocking.’ Tony had no idea what that meant.

When the ramp lowered she asked the Agents to stay put, but allowed Tony to come out with her. He followed her out quickly, unwilling to have her out of his sight so soon after getting her back.

On the lawn of the estate were a strange collection of people. A red haired woman, a man with a visor on, a shorter man with hair that stuck up, a woman with white hair, and a bald man in a wheel chair greeted them.

“Jean Luc,” Forge smiled at the man in the wheel chair. “You’ve added to your boy band.” She pointed to the shorter man and as an aside to Tony said, “He’s new.”

The new man growled at her.
“Don’t sass the metal bender, metal man,” she warned with an eyebrow raise smirk combo Tony was pretty sure she’d picked up from him.

“Georgia,” the guy in the wheel chair broke in. “Do you require medical assistance?”

Tony looked over and catalogued the blood and general grime on her hands and face again. She did look rough and probably shouldn’t be up wandering around. But the woman could be stubborn.

As if to prove his thoughts Four waved a hand dismissively. “I’ll get myself patched up in a minute. My ride is a bit miffed by the detour, so best get business out of the way quickly.” She turned back to Tony and warned, “When this night is over I am going to drink all the alcohol.”

Tony smirked and wrapped an arm around her waist, careful not to jostle her injured arms. These people made him nervous, especially the visor guy. You couldn’t see his eyes. “Got you covered, Honey,” he joked.

“It’s nice to meet you Mr. Stark,” Jean Luc held out his hand.

Four’s eyebrows went up and she straightened her shoulders before stepping out of his grip. “Tony meet Professor Xavier,” she waved a hand at the man in the wheelchair. “He runs the Xavier School for Gifted Youngsters.”

Tony took a few steps forward and shook the man’s hand. He had a feeling this was an important introduction. “Professor,” he greeted. “Nice place,” he quipped looking around the manicured lawn.

Before anyone else could introduce themselves Four cut back in. “I have two kids here who need somewhere to grow up.”

Xavier raised an eyebrow before frowning. A moment a silence hung in the air before the older man frowned. “Oh,” he said solemnly.

Tony had a feeling there were a lot of things going unspoken but still communicated. He didn’t know how that worked.

“Yeah,” Four drawled bitterly. Tony moved back to her side and laid his palm against her back. “It’s been a bad night all around. They deserve someplace they can feel safe for as long as they want it.”

She turned back to the jet and called out, “Hey Hugh, Abby, you guys ready to rock and roll?”

The brunette siblings hesitantly walked down the ramp, eying the people around them. The orange eyed girl, and that also freaked Tony out a bit but in a science-y what-caused-that kind of way, turned to Four. “Are you sure it’s safe here?”

Four made a face. “No place is one hundred percent safe, kid. But this place is better than most.” She turned back to the group of what Tony just realized were mutants. “Hugh and Abby, meet Professor Charles Xavier. He runs a school here full of people with unique talents.”

“And you don’t live here?” The boy, Hugh, asked a bit sarcastically.

“Cheeky,” she smirked back, “I like it,” she declared. “I am however, a bit old to live at a school.”

“Plus you’re with him,” he pointed back to Tony.

Four sighed and rolled her eyes. “Ferals,” she muttered. Tony noticed the slight blush on her face and wondered what it meant. “Mind you’re nose kid or I’ll plug your nostrils, leave you here, and let them figure out how to fix you.”
The kid dropped his snotty teenager look as his eyes widened. “You can do that?” His voice raised a bit.

“Where you paying attention at all tonight?” Four’s smile was a little toothy. Tony could feel his own lips quirking in appreciation.

“Yes, well,” Xavier interrupted again. He had a little grin on his face too. Tony had the feeling this man had dealt with Four in full sarcasm mode before. “If you two would like, we would be happy to extend a place to you here.”

“You guys good with that?” She raised her eyebrows at the siblings. “Place to stay, finish your education, learn to be kick ass?” Four asked. The two kids nodded hesitantly. “Off you go then,” she finished.

The two began to walk toward the group, before the girl stopped as she passed Four, and grabbed her hand. “Thank you,” Tony noted her voice was still a little rough.

A slow smile lit Four’s face, and Tony thought her eyes might have been a little shiny. “You are very welcome, Abby.”

Four suddenly raised a hand and a pen flew out of the quinjet. She flipped the girl’s hand in hers and wrote down a quick series of numbers. “Feel free to call. And keep in mind what we talked about. As long as you don’t run from it the world will give you what you need.” She dropped the girl’s hand, stuck the pen through her bra strap, and made a shoo gesture. “Go on with you now before you make me all weepy.”

The girl grinned but walked forward and joined the group of mutants.

Tony saw the man in the wheelchair give Four a fond look. “You have a place here too, Georgia,” Xavier opined.

“Nah,” Four leaned back against Tony. “Sorry Jean Luc. I’ve done you one better.”

The bald man smiled. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Under the scrutiny of the others, Four spun on her toes, tossed a wave over her shoulder and dragged Tony back to the jet. “Let’s go people. You are cutting into my drinking time. Also, I feel like I deserve ice cream. Do you think Shaft! would be mad if I ate a sundae while we debriefed?”

Tony couldn’t stop himself from laughing. He was pretty sure he loved the crazy woman.

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It was amazing what you could do when you had money and you were Tony Stark. Two days after the events in Pennsylvania SHIELD had finished the survey of Tony’s house. Not that the man let them inside his house, but they got to poke around the grounds and dispose of the bodies. They also got to keep the bits of the energy weapon they found after Tony played with them.

Tony had done a thorough scrub of the Xenix Foundation mainframe and performed some redaction before sending the last of the files on. In that time he had also had his assistant contract a construction company. By the Tuesday after FUBAR happened the house was busy with workers. Not that Forge and Tony had noticed much. They were both down in the lab. Forge had even convinced Tony to give her inflatable Coleman a try.

Volek and his tiny piece of the island of Dr. Moreau had also been swept up by SHIELD. Volek’s
second Bronson was off being locked up in some SHIELD prison and when the news broke about mad science KoleTech’s stocks had momentarily tanked. The Expo remained, thankfully, free of second acts of crazy.

The man in the iron eye patch had brought up the Avengers initiative. After running from fake SHIELD agent Fischer, and training with real Agent Pretty, Forge had opted in for the same deal as Tony. She now consulted, rarely, with SHIELD. Of course Natasha and the greenhorn both knew to call her if they got in a tight spot. She owed them solids.

Over a month had passed and Forge was glad to see that all of her various cuts and bruises were healed up. It was a good thing. She was going out of her way to wear a dress that night and scraped up arms would not have matched.

Somehow she and Tony had skipped over the living apart stage of the relationship. Maybe it was because they were living together at the start. Now most of Forge’s clothes were in Tony’s room. She even had a toothbrush in there and didn’t get all shirty when he touched it.

Sometimes she wondered if they were moving too fast. Most of the time she just said fuck it. She enjoyed being with someone who didn’t complain when she was two days working on a car and understood all her nicknames.

There was one large problem yet to be solved however. That night was Rhodey’s birthday and the big reveal of his car. It meant that Forge’s contract with Tony was over and she needed to get back to her shop and Hay. Both of which were in New York.

They hadn’t really discussed it yet. She’d tried to bring it up a few times but Tony had just said not to worry about it. So Forge had put it off to work on finishing the car, tinkering with the suits, and just enjoying being with Tony.

“You about ready?” The man stepped out of his closet adjusting the tie on his suit. Really? A suit to a birthday party? Whatever.

“Just about,” she fussed trying to put her hair up with a clip.

Tony walked up behind her and grabbed the clip from her hand, tossing it on the bed. “Leave it down?” He requested, kissing her shoulder.

“Down hair doesn’t really go with this dress,” Forge complained.

He smirked at her with that little glint in his eye that meant doom. “Who cares? I like it.”

“That is the title card of your life, isn’t it?” She joked.

“Pretty much,” he admitted happily. He laced his fingers with hers and tugged. “Come on. We wait much longer we’re gonna miss Rhodey’s girly squeal when he sees the Mustang.”

“You’re the one who wouldn’t leave me alone when I was trying to get dressed,” she pointed out, turning into his arms.

He gave her the small version of his pretty smile. “I like you undressed,” he pulled her forward and kissed her.

Forge hummed. “Girly squeal,” she reminded. It took another five minutes to get him to head out of the bedroom.
Later that night, when Rhodey saw the car, he didn’t exactly squeal. It was more like a muffled
whine. It was still kind of girly. Forge laughed anyway.

Even later, after everyone had finally left and it was more morning than night, Forge lay in the circle
of Tony’s arms. The light from the arc reactor reflected off the windows and illuminated their faces.

“So, New York,” Tony said it like a segue and she wondered if they were finally going to get down
to talking about it.

“Yeah,” Forge agreed. She kissed his chest near his shoulder.

Tony played with a strand of her hair. “You know technically you could do your job from
anywhere.”

Forge made a considering face, because yeah, she could. “True, but then what would I do with Hay
and the shop?”

“Satellite space. You do one project, let your shop monkey have the other. Maybe he could build his
own brand?”

“Hay is not a monkey,” she reminded lazily. She ran her hands up his sides. “Maybe,” Forge agreed.
Because yeah, Hay could totally handle that. But she wasn’t sure she was ready to give up having a
physical garage like her Uncle Wall.

“Or,” Tony drew the word out, rubbing his hands down her back. Forge felt her brows furrow in
confusion. She wasn’t following his train of thought.

“Are you going to keep me in suspense? Because that seems like a waste of a night, Captain C,” she
quipped, tilting her face up to him.

“Or,” Tony began again, kissing her forehead. “You could move in with me,” he finished.

She blinked and took a moment to confirm he’d said what she thought he had. “I don’t know if
you’ve noticed,” Forge started slowly, “But you live in California.”

He smirked at her and raised an eyebrow. “I also happen to have a finished penthouse in New York.
The commute to Brooklyn would be just awful,” he teased. “But I hear you can fly,” he drawled.

Forge felt her eyes narrow. “You want me to move into your penthouse?” She asked.

Tony nodded decisively. “Yes.”

“The one in that huge tower that is not yet finished,” she clarified.

“I’m pretty sure I just said the penthouse was finished,” he gave her a wry look. “If you don’t like the
color scheme you can have the decorator change it,” he offered flippantly.

Forge hummed in consideration. “Let’s talk something that’s more of a deal breaker.” He raised his
eyebrows at her in question. “What’s the lab look like and can we take Dum-E? I think if we left him
he’d get lonely.”

Tony chuckled and gave her that full sized pretty, pretty smile.

The End.
Well that’s that. There is a possibility I may write a sequel to this. I have the first chapter roughed out, but then got distracted by another story line.

Thanks to everyone who read, reviewed, favorited, and followed. Hope you enjoyed my little dalliance with the Iron Man universe. ~Tora

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