Invincible

by thegraytigress

Summary

Steve Rogers is Captain America, and Captain America can't die. At least that's what Tony keeps trying to tell himself when a simple mission goes horribly wrong and he's left to pick up the pieces.

Notes

**DISCLAIMER:** *Captain America: The First Avenger, Iron Man,* and *The Avengers* are the properties of Walt Disney Studios, Paramount Studios, and Marvel Studios. This work was created purely for enjoyment. No money was made, and no infringement was intended.

**RATING:** M (for language, violence, depictions of torture)

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** Hi, everyone! This story is canon divergent, considering it was written before *Iron Man 3, Thor: The Dark World,* and *Captain America: The Winter Soldier.* It's dark and violent, and it hopefully portrays a realistic look at the harsh parts of heroism and the importance of teamwork and friendship in overcoming trauma. There's a healthy dose of Tony/Pepper, Steve/Peggy, and a dash of Clint/Natasha. Please enjoy!
Chapter 1

It was a beautiful evening in New York City. The warmth of summer was slowly disappearing, the streets cool and pleasant and filled with sound and smells. The work day had just ended, so the sidewalks were flooded with rushing people. The city night life was just kicking into high gear, with the first hints of twilight brushing the blue sky, and, as the shadows began to descend, lights twinkled to life, filling the buildings with colors that washed the busy, bustling streets with rainbows of neon. Times Square was loud, teeming with business people and denizens and tourists. Cars honked, hardly audible over the hum of conversation and noise from the massive screens above. Most people paid no heed to the towering surfaces as they buzzed with commercials and news, save for the visitors who had never seen such a display.

They were, perhaps, the first to notice when the monstrous screens all simultaneously abandoned their blaring streams of talking and ads and flashy images. All at once, everything was dark as the lights of Time Square flickered off for an interminable, shocking moment. When the video resumed, it was horrific.

“Oh my god,” a traffic cop murmured as he, and thousands of others, stopped in their tracks and watched, pale-faced and wide-eyed, at the scene before them.

It was a picture from hell, some sort of dark, dirty warehouse. Darkness covered much of the picture, save for the man that hung, nearly naked, from the ceiling. He was tall, entirely too muscular for a normal sort of human, and beaten to within an inch of his life. Horrendous wounds covered him from head to toe, his skin more blood than flesh. The camera jerked wildly for a moment before zooming in on the prisoner, lingering almost sadistically on the worst of the injuries. A gaping hole in his right thigh. A long, jagged laceration across his belly that was slick and dripping. Innumerable bloody lines and deep, purple splotches along his chest. More damage done to his breast and shoulders. His head hung limply against his chest, and there was a cruel laugh as someone kicked his back. Suspended as he was by metal cuffs about his wrists, he swung lifelessly, and blood ran in a torrent down bare toes to the dirt ground.

A few more blows followed in quick succession, and there was chuckling and harsh taunts spoken in a language most of the unwilling audience didn’t understand. People were screaming on the streets, some covering their eyes or the eyes of their children, others watching in morbid, miserable fascination as this poor man was brutalized even further. The moment felt to last forever before the torturers tired of their sport. There was a snap and then a rattle, and the chains slid free from whatever secured them above. The beaten form crumpled to the ground, utterly unmoving. His face was hidden in shadow.

Then another man came, dressed simply but expensively, with dark hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and gleeful, unhinged eyes. He smiled, slowly, obviously pleased. The people in the streets gasped as he spoke. “Behold, Americans. Behold your beloved Avenger!”

Two other men grabbed the fallen form and hauled it upward, less than gently. The collective cry of fury and horror and grief heightened the already mounting sense of panic in Times Square, people screaming and fleeing. A gloved hand wove its way through the prisoner’s thick, dirty hair and yanked his head upward. The man’s face was mottled with bruises and blood, his hair matted from blows to the head that had wept crimson. Long lashes fluttered, revealing hints of blue, but he only groaned as a knee was dug into his back and his arms wrenched painfully behind him. A filthy blood-soaked rag gagged him tightly. The camera zoomed in then, and the face was unmistakable.

The well-dressed man laughed, as though he could hear the horror and dismay claiming the citizens
caught before his horrific display. “Your symbol of American might. Your pathetic, arrogant shield against your enemies. Your soldier. Your hero. Untouchable? I think not.” With that, the man turned and decked his captive, sending the barely conscious man reeling. The men restraining him hauled him back upward. “Indestructible? Hardly.” Another haughty laugh and a vicious kick to his captive’s exposed abdomen that was met with a ragged cry and a bloody cough. “A weakling turned into something pure and powerful. But a weakling still, underneath.” A vicious punch to the chest. The next came with a knife, a jagged blade that he spent a moment showing to the camera before ramming in between his prisoner’s ribs. The man howled and tears spilled from his eyes when the blade was yanked free.

By now the police were attempting to evacuate Times Square, but it was chaos. “Watch, America,” ordered the man. Too many of the crowd, and the cops, were. Transfixed. Horrified. “Watch your legend bleed. Hear him scream.” The gag was pulled from his mouth as a hand twisted in his hair and yanked back his head. The bloody blade hovered over his eyes. Then it descended again, this time into the prisoner’s flank. His wail was deep and agonizing. There were screams to stop, to help him, to save him. But the horror on the screen only continued, unabated. Unhindered.

“Let this be a warning,” hissed the demon who loomed over his prey. “Let this be a warning to the United States. To the Avengers. To the world. You will not stop us. You will not defeat us. You will fall.” The knife flashed red. “And then, you will bow before us and beg for your lives.” The men pulled their prisoner upright again. The hand in his hair yanked his head back, exposing his gasping throat. The camera moved closer, close enough to see the blood and tears glisten. “Follow the example of your dear captain. Watch, Americans, and do what you are told. Now beg.” A thumb swept across trembling lips, and the blade came to rest at his vulnerable throat. “Beg!”

“No,” came the whispered response.

The man reacted with an enraged howl and the knife swiped. But there was a horrific roar. The man fell, a black arrow protruding from his eye socket. Chaos followed. A show of bright lights and a blur of gold and red. A black shadow descended on the men holding the prisoner. Then the camera nauseatingly tipped to the ground, sending the picture sideways. The rest was screams, gun fire, and blurred images of battle. Eventually there was another earth-shattering cry, deep and inhuman and monstrous, and then the picture mercifully switched to black.
Chapter 2

It was the middle of the night over the Persian Gulf. The moon was bright and the wispy clouds were turned silver by its pale illumination. The sea was calm. The air was still. To all who perceived it, it was peaceful and serene. But the naked eye could not see the hulking, massive ship that hovered above the pristine and glassy waters. It had left the sea some minutes ago, its huge engines lifting millions of tons of metal into the air effortlessly in a show of power unparalleled by the ambitions of nations. Now it remained, cloaked in air and cloud and water, poised and tense. While the ocean was tranquil, the helicarrier was anything but.

Outside the infirmary, the Avengers waited. Tony Stark paced, the heavy thud of Iron Man’s boots resounding against the metallic deck plating. Behind him Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton stood silently, their eyes dark and their faces stony. Bruce Banner sat in a stiff plastic chair, hunched forward, his elbows resting on his knees as he nervously worked his hands together. And Fury stood, stiff and unyielding. Agent Hill was beside him, outwardly calm but inwardly shaken.

They were waiting. They had returned from their mission to save Steve Rogers more than hour ago. The med-evac had been chaotic, the helicopter landing on the deck to meet a flurry of doctors and soldiers. They had tried to treat Steve’s multitude of serious injuries en route, but his condition had been too serious and fluctuating. They’d nearly lost him twice during the hectic, horrific flight as his heart had wavered in its rhythm and his blood pressure had plummeted. Once inside the helicarrier, they had whisked Rogers away in a frantic rush. That was the last the team had seen him.

Tony turned on his heel again and stalked back the other way, across the short distance to the other end of the waiting area. He idly wondered if he could actually dent the floor with his pacing. He spied slick red on his gauntlets and gloves. Blood. Steve’s blood. Furious and disgusted, he looked away. “This is fucked up. When are we gonna know something?” Patience had never been his strong suit.

“Hold it together, Stark,” Barton said behind him. His voice was calm, even, infuriatingly so. Tony could hardly manage it. “Don’t appreciate your show of equanimity,” he snapped. “You saw what they did to him! Don’t pretend that it’s not eating you up.”

“It is,” Barton admitted, his eyes steely and his jaw clenched. “But tearing ourselves up isn’t going to help.”

Rage blossomed in Tony, hot and pressing. “Who the hell should we blame then? We killed every last one of those animals. I don’t feel any better. Do you?” Clint only shook his head, glowering and turning away. “It is our fault. No hiding it. No denying. We let this happen to him.”

Black Widow flinched and looked down. She’d been the closest to Steve when he’d been taken. She’d been at his side when the attackers had swarmed him. She had been the one to gather the intel. It had started out simple enough. A group of terrorists in Iran was moving a significant stockpile of weapons. The Avengers had been dispatched to prevent the sale, but when they’d arrived they’d found they’d been lured into a trap. The soldiers were well-trained, hardly the sort of terrorist rabble they usually confronted, and they quickly separated Barton, Romanoff, and Rogers from Stark and Banner. A few well placed, well timed explosions had caught the team unaware. Iron Man and the Hulk had been unable to reach their teammates. Barton’s position had been quickly compromised; he’d barely escaped with his life. And they’d hit Rogers with something, some sort of toxin, that had dropped the captain to his knees. They’d never seen anything like it. He’d been shot then in the fire fight, Natasha desperately trying to reach him even as the enemy
pushed her farther and farther away. Tony remembered the panic as the frantic conversation had filled his helmet, a wall of debris standing between him and his friends.

“Rogers is down! They took him down!”

“Can you get to him?” Fury’s desperation was naked and frightening. “Agent Romanoff, can you get to him?”

“Negative. He’s unconscious.” Pounding at the wreckage. The Hulk was furious, a beast caged and desperate for action. “They’re taking him.”

“Barton, do you have a shot?”

“No, sir. There are too many. Nat, get down!”

Another explosion. A shout to the Hulk. “Damn it, we have to get in there!”

“We lost Rogers! Repeat: they have Rogers!”

And that was that. What should have been a simple, easy, stupid mission had ended with their leader’s brutal abduction. They’d spent the last day tracking, hunting, scraping for every bit of information to try and find who had kidnapped Steve. These were no simple arms dealers or disorganized terrorists. Much to the contrary, this was an enemy with the funds, the skill, and the ambition to outwit and take down the Avengers.

There had been no sleep, no rest, no recovery. SHIELD had tapped into every wireless network to which they had access, scanning for any signs of the lost Captain America. But there had been nothing. No clues. No trail. It wasn’t until that horrific video had been broadcast to the world, interrupting every channel on every TV everywhere, that they’d been able to hack the encryption, trace the signal through the global satellite network, and find the abductors. The mission then had been fast, furious, and violent, fueled by rage and the need for vengeance. But Tony knew as he stood there that, even though they’d rescued Steve, they’d lost. These bastards had wanted them to find them. That video of them torturing and nearly murdering Captain America hadn’t been a warning at all.

It had been an opportunity to gloat. A demonstration. A fucking show.

He’d sat outside that hell of warehouse. They’d wrapped Steve’s almost nude, brutalized body in a few blankets as they’d waited the few moments it had taken the medical team to reach them. Clint had held him while Tony had worked to cut the manacles from their friend’s bruised and bloody wrists. His own hands had been shaking so badly that he almost hadn’t trusted himself with the delicate operation. But the metal bindings had fallen free just as the chopper sat down. Just as Natasha had pressed a long bandage to try and staunch the blood loss from the captain’s neck where that bastard had almost slit his throat. Just as blood poured from a stab wound in his leg. Just as he’d seized and choked and stopped breathing. Steve had nearly died, right then and there, in Clint’s arms.

The Avengers were not invincible. They had known that before, feared it despite the confidence and denial and arrogance they often used as a front. Now the world knew it too.

Fury turned slightly, the black leather of his long coat rustling. “We were careless,” he commented. His single eye skewered the team, but it wasn’t without its own guilt. “All of us. This should never have happened. And it will never happen again.” His conviction was strong, implying the declaration was not to be questioned, but inwardly Tony did so anyway, because he wasn’t a
moron. If a group of mere mortals armed with hate and desire could take down their leader, what the hell did that mean for the rest of them?

At long last the doors to medical ward opened. Doctor Sommers, an aging man who Tony personally found reproachable for his seeming disregard for any sort of bedside manner, approached them looking wearier and more defeated than he could recall. Bruce stood, and they all gathered closer as the doctor neared. The man sighed, wiped a pale hand over his balding head, and closed his eyes briefly. “He survived the surgery,” he finally announced. Nobody was relieved. They all knew better. “But it won’t matter unless we find a way to neutralize that toxin. He has enough traumatic wounds to kill an ordinary man, not to mention the hypovolemic shock that nearly claimed him. It’s a miracle he’s still with us. He’s still fighting.”

Tony didn’t find that at all comforting. “What about the toxin?” he asked.

Sommers shrugged, almost nonchalantly, and were it not for his pallor and worried eyes, Tony would have punched him. “We’ve rushed a blood sample down to the lab. They’re working on it right now. My initial theory is that this substance has somehow hindered Captain Rogers’ metabolism. His heightened metabolism may not be the basis of his physical strength, but it is the reason for his vitality, why he heals much faster than what is ordinary. My studies have indicated that his metabolism operates at a rate some four to five times the normal human rate. At the moment it’s depressed so badly that, for him, it’s deadly.”

“So we need a cure,” Fury said. “Quickly.”

“Yes, Director,” Sommers answered. “Physical trauma aside, infection has already started in the older wounds. His bowel was damaged. If bacteria spreads to his blood, he’ll die. Restoring his metabolism is his only hope. Once we’ve done that, it should jump start the healing process.”

“How long?” Clint asked.

Sommers seemed hesitant. “It’s impossible to know for certain, but not long. A matter of hours. A day, if we’re lucky. If he keeps fighting.”

If. The thought of Captain America giving up was heartrending. Panic set in. Thankfully, they were experts at channeling that into energy and action. “Then we need as many people on this as we can manage,” Fury snapped. “Doctor Banner, I know this isn’t your field-”

“You don’t have to ask,” Bruce quickly declared, and he rushed past the group and jogged for the elevators.

Fury watched him leave only for a moment. The Director was hiding it well, but he was worried. Extremely worried. “Barton, Romanoff, what did they find in the warehouse?”

Romanoff was flustered. Only people who knew her as well as they did would notice. “We have two teams working it, sir. Aside from the video equipment, they haven’t found anything. At least not the sort of materials necessary to develop and manufacture a poison.”

“Then they did it somewhere else,” Fury surmised. “We need to find where that is. And I want to know how the hell these people learned how to do this!”

“We have Captain Rogers’ medical records on file,” Sommers explained. “For all the Avengers, in fact. They detail emergency procedures to contend with each Avenger’s unique anatomy and physiology. Captain Rogers’ blood work, DNA analysis, and complete physiological and psychological workups were included, as well as plans to contend with traumatic bodily or emotional
injury. The captain poses a particular issue due to his accelerated metabolism.”

“So either we were hacked,” Agent Hill said, “or we have a traitor among us.”

The thought was aggravating and miserable. “Well, find out which,” Fury snapped to his subordinate, clearly displeased.

Hill grimaced slightly. “Right away, sir.” She headed down the opposite hall then, determination and anger in her step.

Fury turned to the master assassins. “You two figure out where the hell they made this toxin. If it wasn’t at that warehouse, it had to be somewhere else. Somebody somewhere did this. Maybe they know how to unmake it.”

Barton nodded, his face a picture of restrained wrath, as he and Romanoff stalked away. Only Tony and Fury remained. Iron Man couldn’t manage much; his head was spinning with adrenaline and exhaustion and worry. “When can I see him?” he asked.

Sommers was wary. Their dislike of each other was clearly mutual. But it was also clear that Tony wasn’t going to accept “no” for an answer and that Sommers was too fatigued to argue. “Follow me.”

They walked through the silent, dark medical ward. Most of the beds were unoccupied, save for the few agents who’d been injured during the raid on the warehouse. They’d taken none of Steve’s captors alive. Perhaps it had been a mistake to kill them all, but their rage had allowed nothing else. A moment later they were at the rear of the facility. The rooms here were private, open to only those with the highest security clearance. Two SHIELD agents heavily armed and dressed in black guarded the door to Rogers’ room. Sommers nodded, punched his code into the keypad by the door, and then jabbed his thumb to the above fingerprint scanner. The lock chirped its recognition, and the locks opened.

The sight beyond was unsettling, to say the least. Tony hadn’t known what to expect. When Sommers had said Steve was fighting, he expected more. He expected the captain to be sitting up, in pain maybe, but conscious. The six foot frame lying in the bed was nothing of what he’d hoped. Steve was still, utterly and completely. The nurses were working on bathing him as best they could, sponging away the blood and grime, but it was all too little, too late. Monitors and machines were all about, beeping and buzzing. Steve’s bare chest and belly were covered in bandages, many already soaked with blood. His right thigh was wrapped tightly as well, and his left leg was in a splint. Blood had seeped through the gauze on his neck where he’d been cut. There didn’t seem to be a spot on him that wasn’t hurt. His chest was moving, rising and falling evenly, but that was only because a respirator was shoving air in and out of his body. The tubes extended from parted, slack lips, taped into place. His face was pale beneath the bruises and cuts. His eyes were tightly closed and ringed in blackness.

Rage filled him, blinding and burning, and he resisted the urge to scream. Instead he rounded on Sommers. “Why the hell is he restrained?”

The doctor had the decency to look concerned. “If he wakes and struggles, he could hurt others as well as himself. He will likely be disoriented or delirious. Even as depressed as his body is, he will metabolize sedatives and pain medication at a fairly fast pace. It’s too dangerous, too unpredictable.”

Tony ground his teeth, clenching his hands into metallic, murderous fists. “He just spent twenty-four hours chained and tortured. We’re not bringing him home tied up. Get it, doc?”
Sommers actually paled at the ire in the billionaire’s voice. He wavered, glancing at Fury who nodded wearily. Then the doctor gestured at the nurses, who all seemed fairly frightened and unnerved by the tense situation. They set to unstrapping the cushioned cuffs from Steve’s limp wrists. “I put this on you, Stark.”

“Yeah, well, I’ll be here when he wakes up, so you have nothing to worry about,” Tony snapped.

Sommers skewered Tony with one final glare before stalking away, murmuring only briefly to Fury before stepping aside. Tony ignored him, coming closer to the bed where his friend lay suffering. Horrific images filled his head. The sight of Steve, bound and gagged and beaten. The sight of those fucking bastards, taunting and tormenting. The sight of their leader bleeding to death in Hawkeye’s embrace. “We need to make them pay,” Iron Man hissed.

It was quiet a moment, aside from the sounds of the monitors and the steady swishing of the ventilator. “We did,” Fury said.

“Not enough. Not nearly fucking enough.”

“We need you on this, Stark. In the lab or in the field. Staying here with him won’t avenge him.”

“When you find them, call me. Until then, he’s not going to be alone.” Tony turned to glare at Fury, inviting him to argue. “Sommers said he needs to keep fighting. I’m gonna make damn sure he does.”

Hours passed. Tony had been left alone with Steve for the most part, aside from the occasional nurse or doctor checking on the ailing captain’s vitals and changing the dressings on his innumerable injuries. They never seemed pleased with what they found, though at his persistent hounding hadn’t won him any more information than “he’s stable” or “no change”. Grumbling into his coffee, Tony decided that waiting was shit.

Sometime shortly after arriving, he’d slipped away to return Iron Man to the storage bay. He’d quickly assessed any damage to the suit and then set the storage facility to its automatic cleaning mode, the sight of Steve’s blood painting the metal plates too much to bear. Then he’d quickly talked to Pepper. He’d meant to only assure her that he was safe and unhurt, but she’d immediately asked about Steve. Ever since Rogers had accepted his invitation to live in Stark Tower (he was the only one of the group who had though Bruce was in the R&D labs enough to call it home), they’d grown closer. They had something of a strange friendship, given that they were pretty much polar opposites. But they complimented each other. Tony was fast-talking, sharp-witted, impulsive and complicated. Steve was calm, soft-spoken, simple and easy-going. Their friendship wasn’t based on common interests or common personalities or common anything, really, except their place as teammates. But they’d reached an understanding. And Pepper was worried.

He hadn’t been able to manage a lie. She’d sobbed silently when he’d told her everything that happened, that Steve’s life was hanging by a thread of hope. Then she offered to call Stark Industries’ biochemical department and wake whoever she needed to. But Tony had declined, explaining that SHIELD had some of the best and brightest and Banner; if there was a cure for this toxin, they would find it. She’d told him that she loved him, teary-eyed and troubled, and he’d ended the call.

Now he was back in the room, the tiny, suffocating space, in his miserable plastic chair. He realized he was right to not involve his company in trying to develop an anti-toxin. SHIELD answered to no government, to no media, and already the morons that called themselves reporters were pontificating and spouting nonsense. He watched, numb and exhausted, as one channel after another after another
was replaying the horrific video that had been broadcast all over the world a few hours ago. It was
edited, of course, and shortened to only a few short seconds that was permissible for television.
News anchors blathering on about nothing. “We’ve confirmed the prisoner was none other than
Captain Steven Rogers, known to most of the country as Captain America. Rogers leads a special
ops team of internationally renowned heroes, the Avengers, including billionaire Tony Stark’s Iron
Man and the Hulk, otherwise known as Doctor Bruce Banner, who destroyed part of Manhattan a
year ago. This team was responsible for repelling the alien onslaught in New York City six months
ago. We have been unable to ascertain what has happened to Captain Rogers, though it appears
from the footage that some manner of rescue attempt was underway when the film was cut off. We
know nothing more at this time. There has been no official statement from the White House or
SHIELD.”

Tony changed the channel with a swipe of his fingers across the screen in his lap. CNN. Another
talking head talking about nothing. “Rogers was America’s first Avenger, the result of a highly
experimental procedure in World War II. It was an attempt to create the world’s first ‘super
soldier’, and he was the only such attempt that was successful. Rogers was presumed killed in
action during the war but was recently discovered frozen but alive in the artic.”

Another swipe to MSNBC. “At this point, we can neither confirm nor deny if Captain America has
survived.”

Another. Tony gritted his teeth. They were replaying something else entirely. Senator What’s-His-
Face from New York. “This should be proof to all that these… Avengers are a liability, a danger to
the United States and her allies. They have provoked our enemies, both on this planet and
apparently from distant worlds. They are vigilantes that should be brought to justice. They speak on
our behalf with their actions, unauthorized, and the only language they know is of chaos and war!”

Tony shut it down and tossed the tablet to the foot of Steve’s bed. “Ungrateful assholes,” he
muttered.

The room was silent again save for the hum of the helicarrier’s massive engines and the steady
beeping of the monitors and the swish of the ventilator. Tony dropped his face to his hands. He was
so goddamn tired. He hadn’t slept in more than a day, at least not for more than a couple hours. He
was used to going without sleep; his insomnia bothered Pepper to no end. But he was bone-aching
exhausted. And hungry. And he needed a shower. His eyes started to close of their own accord,
and he fought the press of sleep by checking on Steve’s condition. Watching his pulse rate
(depressed) and his blood pressure (low) and his respiration (steady but only because of a goddamn
machine). The monotony of it all only lulled him to sleep.

He awoke to a low rumble. Tony’s eyes snapped open as the roar grew louder. It vibrated the ship,
rattling the chair behind him. There was a bright flash and then another and another. He stood and
wrenched around to look out the window behind him. Lightning stabbed through the blackness, the
clouds winking gray and white for a moment before disappearing again. Thunder crashed, louder
and louder, until the roar and the light were nearly constant. Then it ceased and there was a heavy
thud beyond the door to Steve’s room.

Thor stood outside, peering in through the glass, his blond hair wind swept and Mjölnir clenched in
his hand. When his blue eyes fell upon the scene before him, his countenance paled and his
expression grew lax and sorrowful. Tony stepped to the door and pushed it open for the wayward
demigod. “Way to make an entrance,” he murmured without an ounce of his normal bravado as
Thor stepped inside.

The other man never looked away from Steve’s unmoving form. The silence was vacuous and
miserable. “I had hoped I was not too late,” Thor finally murmured.

Tony’s bitterness and anger swelled within him, so strong that for a moment he couldn’t contain it. “Yeah, well, join the club.”

If Thor failed to understand the colloquialism, he made no mention of it. His bearded face, so much that of a warrior, was clenched in grief and disappointment. He knelt beside Steve’s bed helplessly, his hammer thudding to the floor. “Who did this to him?” he asked, his voice surprisingly rough.

Tony couldn’t answer that. Despite all this, they still didn’t know who had orchestrated the kidnapping and torture of Captain America. And he had a feeling they weren’t likely to find out now. “No one you know,” he eventually answered. “We primitive humans are still beset by pathetic ambitions and jealousies. Some assholes thought they’d make a statement.” Thor looked back at him, his face tight with fury. “Doesn’t matter. They’re all dead.”

“Are you certain?” Thor asked, obviously hungering for his own vengeance.

It was the only thing Tony was sure of, frankly. “Hulk smashed. Black Widow skulked. Barton… Legolased. There wasn’t much left.” Thor looked away again, bowing his head. He reached for Steve’s hand, grabbed it tightly, squeezing as if he could force strength into the fallen warrior. Tony was struck by the compassion. “Why are you here?”

“He led me in battle,” Thor replied in that same throaty tone. “I am the prince of Asgard, but here I was his soldier. And, perhaps, his friend.” He shook his head. “A great sense of foreboding was dark and heavy upon my heart. For days and days it plagued me until I could stand its misery no longer. I could not sleep or eat. I could not concentrate. It was the Allfather who convinced me to act upon my anxieties rather than suffer unknowing. The Bifrost is not yet complete; my father greatly exerted himself to bring me to your world.” Thor grew stiff with anger. “And for naught. It is already done.”

The quiet returned. Tony didn’t know what to say. “Will he live?” Thor finally asked.

“I don’t know. It’s not good.” Thor seemed deflated by that. “We’re doing everything we can.”

“Not everything.” The god stood and gently set Steve’s limp hand back to the bed. “I shall see what I can do to help.” And with that and a flutter of his red cape, he was gone.

Tony was left alone again with his damnable thoughts. His mind always wandered (even more) when he was outrageously tired, and he didn’t think he had ever been more tired than he was now. He returned to his chair, depressed and worried and fidgety, and as time slowly slipped away, he slipped with it.

A change in the rhythmic, steady pattern of beeps drew him from dozing again. Tony cracked open an eye, not quite awake, and watched the numbers change quickly on the screens surrounding the bed. Then his body caught up with his brain, and he lurched from his chair. Two long strides had him at the door, and he yanked it open. “Hey, get your boss!” he shouted to the nurses down the hall. “He’s coming around!”

He was back at Steve’s side in a minute. He watched intently, searching for signs of consciousness. The captain’s pulse was increasing. His brain waves were changing. He was coming to. “Come on, Stars n’ Stripes,” Tony impatiently encouraged. “Wakey wakey.”

Rogers’ eyelids fluttered. Tony leaned over him, probably closer than he should have. There was a heavy cough. Then another and another as Steve involuntarily fought the ventilator. “Stand down,
soldier,” Stark ordered, stilling the somewhat conscious struggling. “It’s just helping you breathe. Don’t fight it.”

Steve choked, a pained, pathetic sound that made Tony uncomfortable. Eyes cracked open, revealing glazed blue and trapped tears. Mindlessly they roamed for a moment. Then there was fear. Panic. “Keep it calm. You’re in the med bay. We got you out.”

Finally Steve seemed to focus on him enough to make reasonable eye contact. Something desperate flashed in those hazy blue orbs. “You’re safe now,” Tony insisted. “We killed them.” But either Steve didn’t understand or that wasn’t what was frightening him. Tears escaped the corners of his eyes as he weakly grabbed Tony’s arm. “What?”

Steve seemed to lose the battle against his body, his hand dropping lifelessly back to the bed as his eyes closed again. But he fought and looked to Tony once more. Something was troubling him. Something besides the obvious. “You suck at charades, Cap. What is it?” Then inspiration struck. Tony snatched the idle tablet from the foot of the bed and brought it before Steve. A press of the power button and a skilled swipe of his fingers cleared the screen. He knew Steve knew how to work one of these. At least the basics. “Write it.”

It took a great deal of effort for the other man to do so. After a long, painful moment, Steve had managed to scrawl “ok?” with a shaking forefinger. Tony shook his head. Leave it to loyal, heroic, noble, fucking stupid Steve Rogers to worry about the rest of them when he was hurt so bad. “We’re fine. Don’t worry about us.”

Steve was visibly relieved, the little strength he had fleeing him then. He sagged slightly, and then his brow furrowed. Tony felt him tense, felt muscles clench and spasm. Fresh blood dotted the bandages around his abdomen and chest. His face paled even further, and tears rolled freely down the side of his face. “What’s the matter? Come on, Steve, stay with me.”

He feebly reached for the tablet again. “Hurts”, he wrote in jagged, twisting lines. “Bad”.

Tony winced on Steve’s behalf as the captain sobbed silently, trembling and sweating. He grabbed his teammate’s hand. Rogers grasped him like a lifeline, squeezing weakly but still strong enough to break Tony’s fingers if they weren’t careful. “They flipped the switch on your super metabolic powers,” he explained to a half lucid and greatly suffering Steve. “Bad news is it’s killing you. Good news is, in the meantime, you can have some of the good stuff and actually enjoy it.”

Sommers finally showed up then, flustered and fatigued. He and his team swept in, pushing Tony aside. “Give him something for the pain,” Stark ordered as he was relegated to the foot of the bed.

The doctor ignored him at first, talking quickly and quietly to his team. Then he looked down on Steve, whose face was locked into an agonized grimace and who was becoming increasingly agitated. “Captain,” Sommers said, watching as the nurses adjusted his IV. New bags of blood and saline and antibiotics were hung. No morphine. Tony could have screamed. “How bad is the pain?”

This was retarded. “Bad, you moron,” snarled Tony as he pushed his way back among them. “Look at him.”

Thankfully, all Sommers did to continue this argument was skewer him with a vicious glower before turning back to his patient. He said something to a nurse, and more medication was prepared. A needle was thrust in Steve’s IV port, and another bag was hung. An analgesic and a sedative. “Relief is coming, Captain Rogers. Hold on.”
The man was true to his word. Steve languished a moment more, his hands tangled miserably in the
bed sheets as he quivered and cried. Tony never thought he’d see Captain America like this. The
pain must have been horrendous to reduce a super soldier to tears. But the tension eased, and Steve
relaxed as the drugs went to work. He slipped back into oblivion.

Then Sommers laid a hand on Steve’s marred forehead. “He has a fever,” he declared grimly. “Get
me a core body temp.” The nurses hustled to do just that. Someone else came with fresh bandages.
Tony backed away, letting them work, fighting to maintain his patience. After a quiet conversation,
the doctor turned. He pulled his wire-frame glasses from his face and pinched his nose. “104. This
doesn’t bode well.”

“I thought you said we had hours,” Tony countered, denial the only thing left at that point.

“He’s in danger of going into septic shock at any moment. That can and will kill him,” Sommers
explained wearily. “With the magnitude of internal damage, it was inevitable. There’s nothing more
I can do without that anti-toxin. We’ll keep him down, let him die peacefully. Standard palliative
care.”

“Fuck that,” Tony snapped. “We can’t quit on him.”

“Excuse me, doctor?” A voice called from the door. It was a young woman who seemed very
intimidated to be there. “Director Fury needs you on the bridge. They found the labs where they
think the drug was manufactured. He’s requested you and Doctor Banner monitor the team’s
search.”

*Thank God.* Tony could have collapsed right then and there from the relief. “Just a moment,”
Sommers said to the girl. Then he turned to his team. “I want updates every thirty minutes on his
vitals. If it looks like he’s regaining consciousness, give him more meds, as much as is safe. Bring
down the fever.”

One of the assistants shook his head. “He’s burning through the antibiotics fast.”

Sommers seemed frustrated. “Then pump him with as much as we can. It’s the best we can do.”
Their best wasn’t good enough. The doctor looked at Tony, angry and tired and desperate. “If you
believe in God, Mr. Stark, I suggest you start praying.”

After that, there was a flurry of activity. Tony backed away to the corner, watching as the medical
team rushed to stabilize Steve. Dozens of ice bags were brought in and placed around Steve’s
lifeless body. The flush of fever was disturbing on his friend’s face. Tony couldn’t stand to watch
as the hideous wounds were bared again as the dressings were changed. This wasn’t fair. It wasn’t
right.

Steve Rogers was Captain America, and Captain America *couldn’t die.*

He didn’t believe in God anymore, but he sure as hell believed in that.

He was out the door before he thought twice about it.
Iron Man made Tony feel invincible. He’d heard some airhead talk show host joke once that he must have been compensating for something. He’d never tell another living soul, but she was right. Not in the way she had meant, but it was one hundred percent true. And he hadn’t even realized it until the Avengers. He needed the suit to feel powerful, to compete with gods and legends and monsters. Otherwise, he was only a man. Pepper said his brilliance was his power, but brilliance hadn’t done much to save Manhattan or save Steve or save anyone.

He wondered how Barton and Romanoff could stand their own humanness. Maybe it was because he was fairly certain they were sleeping together. They were discrete about it, but it was pretty damn obvious to Tony. He’d only known them a couple of months, but the two master assassins were just a little more tender around each other, just a tad more caring, just a touch compassionate. Considering they were both well-trained killing machines that showed nothing and felt even less, that was saying something. He’d mentioned something to Steve not long after the other man had moved into Stark Tower, but the ever-naïve captain had seemed utterly mystified by Tony’s suspicions. Rogers might have been a genius of a soldier, but he was totally dense when it came to social interaction.

Thus it really didn’t come as any surprise to Tony as he flew past the cockpit of the quinjet Barton was piloting to see the archer lay his hand over Romanoff’s where it rested on the throttle. She looked at him, pale and troubled, and even Tony wasn’t blind to the guilt in her eyes. He felt uncomfortable himself just watching it. “Eyes on the goal, Clint,” Tony quipped, resorting to his first reaction whenever he was unnerved: making an ass of himself. “That’s the lab, by the way, not her breasts.”

“Go to hell, Stark,” snapped Clint, the quiet moment ruined.

Iron Man propelled past them, streaking into the sky as the first light of dawn painted the world. Afghanistan, he moaned inwardly. Why the hell did it have to be Afghanistan? He fought the prick of unpleasant memories dancing about the edge of his consciousness. He had to focus, not slip into the dark places in his soul, dark places that sucked him in and drained him of everything. Focus. Eyes on the goal. Right.

About thirty minutes ago a couple of SHIELD’s IT specialists finally traced a rather large payment from a terrorist faction known as Red Dawn to a small biochemical lab in the mountains outside of Kabul. SHIELD had access to a wide variety of intel, pilfered from the CIA and MI6 among other secret services around the globe, and nobody had much information on either of these outfits. They had confirmed that these bastards were the ones who’d taken Steve by matching the face and voice in the video to known members of the elusive Red Dawn, but other than that, they had nothing. This group was not obviously tied to the Taliban or Al Qaeda or Hezbollah or any other terrorist faction of which NATO or SHIELD was aware, which was strange considering the amount of organization and funds required to pull off what they had. And this biochemical laboratory was not on the radar anywhere. Whoever these people were, they hadn’t wanted to claim their “victory” with the gusto these types of assholes typically mustered after an attack. They were nobodies. Tony had a feeling there was much more behind all of this, but he didn’t know what. Not knowing made him antsy.

Romanoff said, “ETA three minutes, ten seconds.”
Thor stood behind the two pilots, a dozen SHIELD agents and sharpshooters behind him. “And what exactly is the plan?” asked the demigod, watching the approaching mountains ominously.

“Gather whatever information we can. Arrest everybody,” Natasha answered evenly, adjusting a few switches on the flight controls of the jet.

Thor was uneasy and itching to act. “And if they resist?”

“We don’t have time,” Clint responded harshly. “Banner’s waiting for whatever we can send him.” That was assassin code for “do whatever you need to”.

Tony turned back to the black, hulking rocks ahead. This wasn’t the most remote location he’d seen, but it was close. “Yeah, these guys have nothing to hide,” he grumbled as he flew past the forbidding, jagged peaks.

“Indeed, sir.” JARVIS’ calm voice filled his helmet. “All systems operating nominally.”

“Good to know. Find anything?”

“Negative, sir.” Tony had had JARVIS run his own search of the mainframes at the CIA and SHIELD that he’d quickly hacked before departing the helicarrier. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust Fury’s men. Well, actually it was. On two fronts. First, anything they could do he could do better and faster. Second, he wasn’t completely pleased with SHIELD’s handling of this whole situation. Somebody somewhere should have detected that the weapons sale was a trap. That was either gross incompetence, or… The thought made Tony’s blood boil.

“Whoever’s behind this did too good a job hiding their tracks,” Tony said angrily.

“Shall I search again?” JARVIS asked.

“Yeah. Keep searching until you find something. These fuckers can’t be that smart.”

“Approaching target,” came Romanoff’s announcement. “ETA two minutes.”

Iron Man flew ahead of the quinjet, Tony’s impatience getting the better of him. All they needed to do was get there, raid the lab, and hopefully emerge with all the information necessary for Bruce to concoct a magic shot for Steve. Hell, all he needed was a computer terminal and JARVIS and he’d have every bit of data stored in his suit and remotely on SHIELD’s network in five minutes. Four, if they used a primitive encryption method. This would be simple. Hack their computers or steal their files or steal their people, if necessary. Normally Tony didn’t applaud the sorts of “coercive” methods SHIELD and other intelligence outfits used to extract information, but in this case, he’d make an exception. He’d do anything and everything to save Steve, and he was pretty sure the others felt the same.

“ETA one minute,” Natasha announced, “bearing two kilometers, northwest.”

Tony saw where she meant. A series of fairly large peaks jutted against the navy blue sky, like a vicious claws scraping the heavens. Tony effortlessly weaved through them. “Sir,” JARVIS said, “the infrared.”

Tony glanced at the scan the AI was displaying before him. Beyond the mountains the world was red and orange and yellow, twisting and squirming. Rage filled Tony. “Shit! Fire! The whole fucking thing is on fire!”

“What?” snapped Hawkeye.
As they cleared the mountains, it became obvious. The installation wasn’t big, but it was engulfed in flames, the blaze tickling the sky and billowing black smoke. Tony could hardly contain his anger as he hovered, watching the fire devour the last of their hopes. “Son of a bitch!” he roared.

Shock claimed the jet for a moment. Then he heard Romanoff bark over the open line to SHIELD. “The base is burning. Director, what are your orders?”

Screw that, Tony thought as he shot downward toward the ground.

“Contain the situation. We need whatever you can salvage.”

“Roger that.”

Tony could hear Thor’s confusion. “Is it possible another of your factions attacked?”

Barton’s response was seething. “No.”

“Stark, wait!”

Tony’s boots thudded to the ground. “Incoming hostiles, sir,” JARVIS alerted.

“I see them,” he responded lowly. Like spiders a slew of figures charged across the barren terrain, guns cracking. The quinjet hovered above Tony, and he heard the whir of its guns spinning. The weapons guidance systems he’d spent so long perfecting guided his missiles and beams as he shot at the hostiles. There were screams and some of the shadows fell. Bullets smashed usually against the desert and Iron Man’s plating. These were mere men against the Avengers. They would all die.

The assault team inside the jet hit the ground a moment more, brandishing their own rifles against the charging foes. Natasha and Clint guided the aircraft to the ground, and not a moment too soon. The sky cracked and thunder slapped the world violently. Thor struck the ground beside Tony with enough force to shake the mountains. Mjölnir spun beyond fast in his hand, and the sky rumbled and threatened above. Then with a yell he raised the hammer and lightning encased it. He flung the bolt at the approaching men and scorched them alive.

Tony fought with abandon. He was vaguely aware of Black Widow rushing past him like a shadow, her guns flashing. Barton stayed back beside the now idle jet, arrows whizzing through the air as he expertly shot down their attackers. The soldiers fell like flies.

“Clear!” shouted Romanoff from some distance ahead. Their forces pushed up a small incline. The fire was very loud now, and very hot. Even Tony could feel it through the layers of metal surrounding him. SHIELD’s finest and the Avengers stood still for a moment, observing the blaze eat away at what was the lab. At their hopes.

“God damn it,” Barton hissed, looking away from the brightness and the unbearable temperature. Romanoff stared, her face emotionless but her eyes full of anger and misery. Thor looked away, glancing once at the field of the dead behind him. Only Tony wasn’t standing still. Only Tony acted.

“Stark, no!” Romanoff shouted. “Get back here!”

Tony turned around, Iron Man’s face locked in its permanent, threatening scowl. “I’m not giving up. If you want to, fine. But you know he wouldn’t.”

His words had the desired effect. Barton swore again as Natasha ordered the other men to secure the area. Thor followed, charging into the fire behind Tony without another thought. Silently Tony was
glad the others were with him because inside the building was hell.

It was probably once spartan, with drab white walls and overbearing, blanched fluorescent lights. There were desks loaded with flat screen monitors and computer terminals. Everything was blazing, flames licking the walls to caress the ceiling tiles overhead. The smoke and heat was unbearable, and Tony wondered for a moment if it wouldn't be better for Black Widow and Hawkeye to stay put.

“This is madness!” Thor shouted, his voice hardly audible over the roar of the fire. Tony grimaced, noting the vast number of bodies littering the floor. Some wore white coats. Others suits and security uniforms. He crouched and pushed one over with his foot. The dead face was hideous, a gunshot wound to the temple rendering most of the features mangled beyond recognition. The pistol was clenched in a lifeless hand. Self-inflicted. All of them, he suspected as he rapidly looked over the other bodies that he could see.

Clint shook his head from the door, wincing and raising his hand to guard his face from the heat. “What the hell is this?” he shouted, having noticed the same thing Tony had.

Tony growled and staggered over to one of the desks. All of the computers were melting from the extreme heat. There was nothing he could do with them, even if there was any power. *Fuck*, he thought. It became a furious chant as he swept useless machine after machine to the floor in a search for something usable. *Fuck, fuck, fuck...* *Fuck!*

“What about airlifting water from the carrier?” Natasha yelled from beside Clint near the entrance. “We can salvage something!”

“It’ll never make it in time. This place will be gone in a matter of minutes,” Clint answered. He was right. They were in the middle of the mountains in a barren wasteland, miles from any significant source of water. The time it would take to mobilize the equipment would be too much.

“Less talking, more searching!” Tony demanded, checking a few more computer terminals. But they were all dead. He charged through, dodging fire and falling debris.

“Tony, wait! It’s no use!”

Thor followed him, not to help but to grab at his arm and pull him back. He was too fast for the demigod, darting down a long corridor. He kicked open offices, but most were inhabited by only the fire and the dead. Eventually he came to a lab area with glass observation areas and benches loaded with equipment. Tony’s heart was thundering with panic and relief as he pawed through what he’d found, looking for something, *anything*, that might help them. “Sir,” came JARVIS’ concerned voice. “You should leave. This building is structurally compromised.”

“No,” Tony countered. “Not until we find something to help.”

“You are not immune to the heat. Your body temperature is rising.” He knew that, felt his heart flutter and sweat bead uncomfortably on his face and the back of his neck. His vision blurred slightly as he knocked useless equipment from the benches. There was nothing. God damn it! He wanted to smash something. “Please evacuate.” He could barely manage a thought through the searing heat and agonizing disappointment. The world melted. “Sir.”

A strong hand grabbed his shoulder and pulled him around. It was Thor, his face glistening in sweat, his blond hair limp and sticking to his skin. “Come, Stark! We must go!”

Tony could have fought him. Had in the past, even, so he knew they were fairly evenly matched.
But he felt so tired, so defeated, that he let Thor manhandle him back into the corridor. It was more a
tunnel of fire than a hallway now, a whirling inferno of flame and choking smoke and crippling
heat. Thor coughed, holding his forearm to his mouth and nose as he tugged Tony along far from
gently. If his grasp was any tighter he would have crushed Iron Man’s arm.

There was a crash to the right, and for a moment Tony thought it was only some portion of the
building collapsing. But there was a muffled cry. “Sir, I believe there is a survivor in the office to
your right,” JARVIS announced.

Thor was already kicking the door in. The room beyond was mostly aflame. The Asgardian was
inside in a matter of seconds, shoving a desk aside. Tony reached down and hauled up a balding
man in a lab coat. His clothes were singed, his one leg badly burned, and he was pale and soaked
with sweat. But his eyes were alive with hate, and he made the foolish effort to try and struggle.
“Found something to help us,” Tony said.

“Then get it,” came Natasha’s voice, “and get back here. Hurry!”

Tony flipped their captive over his shoulder, the man screaming and then cursing at him in numerous
different languages but unable to break Iron Man’s hold across his thighs. “Let’s go!” he shouted to
Thor, and the two were out of the inferno and rushing back into the front area. By now, most of the
way was covered with fire, and they ran through the danger, barely dodging falling, flaming debris.
Something struck Thor in front of him and the other cried out, brushing the burning material from his
arm as he nearly fell into the wall. Tony grabbed his wrist and hauled him upright, ignoring the
nasty burn covering Thor’s forearm and shoulder where his crazy lightning summoned armor would
have been if the other had bothered to put it on. They needed to stop underestimating this situation.
Apparently what happened to Steve hadn’t been enough of a lesson.

They pushed through the smoke, Thor choking on the black, foul plume. The god, as powerful as he
was, couldn’t see, couldn’t breathe, couldn’t go any farther. Tony held tight to his arm and pulled
him along. Finally he spotted the door, a wall of flickering fire between the two Avengers and the
rest of their team. “Barton!” he hollered. Hawkeye came as close as he could, wincing. “Go,” Iron
Man commanded of Thor, and the demigod nodded, grimacing and grabbing his injured arm as he
leapt mightily over the climbing flames. Hawkeye was there to steady him when he landed. Then
Tony yanked their find down off his shoulder and cradled him tight to his unyielding chest. The man
struggled feebly, but he had no hope of breaking Iron Man’s grip. “Stay still,” Tony barked, “or I
make no guarantees you won’t get flambéed.”

With that, he fired Iron Man’s thrusters to lift them safely over the burning debris. On the other side,
the Avengers rushed through the open door, desperate to free themselves of the fiery miasma. And
not a moment too soon. The building exploded.

The team was flung across the rough, unforgiving earth by the force. For a long moment there was
only the roar of fire and pain and fear. Then it was over.

Tony dumped the body in his arms unceremoniously on the ground. He took a brief glance around
and saw the team and the SHIELD agents reeling and struggling to their feet. Natasha was beside
Thor, helping him up gingerly given the bloody mess of his arm and shoulder. Seeing everyone
mostly intact, he lifted his arm and aimed his blaster at the coughing, quivering, bleeding mess below
him. There was the sound of a bowstring being pulled taut, and Hawkeye was abruptly beside him,
the deadly tip of his arrow pointed at the head of the man.

“Alright, asshole,” Tony snarled, “talk.”

The man grinned, bloody and hideous. “Of what?”
Iron Man growled and crouched, grabbing a fistful of sooty, bloody lab coat in his hand and hauling the man up far from gently. “We know what you did to Captain Rogers,” he snarled. “We know the Red Dawn paid you a shit ton of money for it. What is it? How can we make an anti-toxin?”

The man actually had the audacity to laugh. The chuckle was rough and full of pain. “You cannot,” he responded with a miserable giggle. “It would hardly be a poison fit to kill a super soldier if it could be cured.”

“You lie.” Thor stood, lifting Mjölnir overhead despite the pain wielding his great hammer undoubtedly caused him.

The man smiled again, the bastard, despite the blood in his mouth and the pain it seemed to be causing him. Tony knelt over him, digging the smooth, unyielding knee of Iron Man into the scientist’s torn chest. The man sputtered, his face collapsing in pain. Tony couldn’t help but feel a rush of satisfaction. “Is there more of the toxin someplace else?” The man said nothing. Tony shook him far from gently. “Tell us what you know. Tell us how to save him!”

“It is too late,” the man sputtered. “You Avengers.” He spat. “You are fools. You have awoken ancient enemies with boundless hatred and ambition at their disposal. We are but a small taste of what is to come.”

Tony dug his knee into the bastard until he heard ribs crack. “We’ll stop you,” he seethed. “All of you. Whoever you are and whatever you want. You won’t make us kneel.”

“Your captain knelt and screamed and bled. And he will die.”


“I know nothing, save this.” That grin again, bloody and vicious and sadistic. “You will fall. Cut off one head and two more will take its place.”

A black form covered in smoke and ash pushed through the men. Black Widow’s lithe body twisted, and with strength that seemed impossible given her slight frame, she curled her hands into the man’s lab coat and hauled him upward, tossing him unceremoniously toward the raging inferno behind them. Black, putrid smoke billowed upward, turning the silver and cerulean dawn into a foul mockery. It was nothing compared to the rage Tony saw in Natasha’s normally composed eyes.

“What happened to you, doc? Huh?” Her face was murderously calm as she lifted the man again, holding him inches away from the flames. “Didn’t have time to kill yourself like everyone did? Somebody had to light the place up, right. Or maybe you were just too much of a coward to actually pull the trigger.”

“Romanoff,” Barton called, lowering his bow and approaching his comrade. “Stand down.”

“Why?” she said, never taking her venomous, dangerous eyes from the petrified man’s pale face. “He’s a dead man. He was supposed to go down with his files and his secrets. Doesn’t matter how he dies then.” She carried him closer to the fire. The flames reached to the man’s legs. Sweat poured down his face, and terror shone in his eyes.

“Let him down, agent,” ordered the agent in charge of the assault team. “He’s worth more as a prisoner.”

“Nat, come on. Don’t do this,” Clint said calmly.

“Last chance,” she hissed as the blaze rose. It would take nothing to toss the bastard in the
wreckage. “Either you come with us and help Captain Rogers, or you get a little taste of hell before you die.”

The man stammered, “There is no cure.” This time it was not a taunt but a plea. “He was never meant to survive his capture. There was no need to develop one.”

The heat was unbearable. “There is now,” Romanoff seethed.

“I don’t know the particulars of the chemical!” the man insisted. “Please! Please!”

For the first time ever, Tony saw Black Widow falter. A torrent of emotions claimed her, as black and suffocating and damaging as the smoke around them. “Then there’s no reason for me to spare you.” She lifted his squirming form closer to the fire, a blade slipping down her arm to her fingers. Deftly she pressed its deadly edge to the man’s throat. The man whimpered, quivering and closing his eyes.

“Nat! Stop! Stop!” Clint put his hand on her shoulder firmly, and it was not about to be shrugged off. She paused, breathing sharply through her nose, taut with rage and a thirst for vengeance. Her eyes were narrowed and furious. The world held still. “He’s not worth it,” Clint softly said. “Please. Just let him go.”

Finally, after an eternity of tension, she dropped the scientist to the ground roughly, safely aware from the fire. Tony sagged slightly, sharing a glance with Thor. He heard guns being lowered, collective sighs of relief. Clint smiled weakly at Natasha, standing in between her and the man she’d very nearly murdered. “Let’s go home,” he said. “Let Fury have at him.”

Black Widow was visibly rattled, which was saying a lot, as she undoubtedly realized how close she’d come to killing a prisoner. She very nearly had. So had Tony. Iron Man clenched and unclenched his fists, emotions battering him fast and furious until he could barely manage a coherent thought. He closed his eyes for a brief second and wanted to fight the depression pushing at him, but he was so fucking tired. And Steve… There’s no hope left.

There was a snarl. The crumpled heap on the ground rose and sprung forward, drawing something from inside his coat. Tony snapped open his eyes and saw the flash of silver. But there was no time. “No!”

Clint cried out as the knife sunk deep into his side, stabbing through leather and cloth. The archer fell forward into Natasha, his bow falling limply from his fingers and the blade coming out with a spray of red. She turned at the cry, turned to catch him but it all happened too fast, and the two of them went down in a tangle of limbs and blood.

There was no hesitation this time. Mjölnir flew forward with lightning speed, striking the man with a horrific, bone-crushing crunch and he went flying backward in the fire. A few shots from Tony pushed him back into the blaze even further. The flames devoured him. Mjölnir careened back toward Thor almost instantly, and then the demigod was rushing to his fallen colleagues. Tony thundered toward then too, falling to his knees beside Barton.

“Clint! Clint!” Natasha turning herself around, gently easing Clint to the ground. Barton’s face was twisted in an agonized grimace. “Jesus,” she whispered, watching the blood pour from his side. “We need a med-evac now!” she desperately shouted to the SHIELD agents. Tony immediately heard chatter over the radio to the helicarrier.

Barton’s breath was a hiss of air through clenched teeth. “Remind me… not to go anywhere with you guys… ever again…” he gasped. “Goddamn it.” Then he groaned and fell back to the rocky
“Just hold on, Barton,” Tony snapped, quickly retracting his helmet and taking stock of the other man’s injuries. The knife had missed the Kevlar of his vest (lot of fucking good that had done) and passed in between two ribs. If his labored breathing was any indication, the blade had damaged his left lung. This was not good. _Not again_, he moaned in his head. _Not again… Please not again!_  

“We must control the bleeding,” Thor declared, kneeling on Clint’s other side near the seeping wound. Tony bit back a tense retort.

One of the SHIELD agents arrived with the med kit from the quinjet. Natasha opened it and frantically pawed through the contents to find some bandages. Tony’s brain was so distraught from adrenaline and exhaustion and too much damn chaos that for a moment he could only see last night. Only Steve had been the one dying, and Clint had been the one holding him. _This is fucked up… Somebody do something!_  

“Hold him,” Thor instructed, and Tony did just that, pulling the ailing, wheezing archer into his embrace. Natasha looked pale, her eyes glistening, but she bravely refused to falter as she held bandages ready. Tony tightened his grip on Clint, draping a metal arm over his teammate’s chest.

“Easy now, Clint,” Natasha implored, glancing once at Barton’s pale, sweaty face. Clint only gasped and moaned, his hold on consciousness already fading. The wound was letting loose a veritable torrent of blood. She was quick to try and staunch the flow with the bandages, but there was too much and her hands were quaking. Blood spilled from Clint’s side to pool beneath him. “_Bozhe moy_,” she whispered helplessly, shaking her head and trembling.

Thor’s steadier hands grasped Natasha’s over the bandages, and together they applied as much pressure as they dared to reduce the blood loss. It wasn’t doing much good. Clint sagged in Tony’s arms, all his energy depleted, his breathing strained. “Ow,” he said in a surprisingly calm voice.

“Hang on,” Tony demanded, watching in dismay as the color drained from Barton’s face as quickly as the blood was leaving his body. His skin was becoming a pasty gray, his eyes emptying of vigor, his breath a weak wheeze through red lips. Blood was welling up in his airway.

“Come on, Clint!” Natasha desperately cried, her hands covered in blood. “Don’t do this!”

“Where’s the med-evac?” Tony roared.

“Ten minutes out,” the SHIELD officer responded, looking apologetic and helpless and damn well shocked at the state of Earth’s mightiest heroes.

Tony gritted his teeth, panic setting his pulse racing and his mind whirling. “He’ll never make it.” Iron Man’s face slid back into place over Stark’s own, and he adjusted his grip to slide one arm around Clint’s shoulders and another under the man’s knees. He lifted the limp body easily and held tight. “JARVIS, put everything we have into the thrusters.”

“Already done, sir. You must hurry. Agent Barton will suffer fatal blood loss in a matter of minutes.”

“Thank you, Doctor Obvious!”

Without another word, Tony fired the thrusters in his boots and propelled like a rocket into the lightening sky. It was a little more difficult to control his trajectory this way, but he didn’t need to make any complicated or quick maneuvers. Just a straight shot to the helicarrier. He flew as fast as he could, as fast as his suit could take, glancing down only once at Barton’s face tucked against his
chest. The archer was still, pale with his eyes closed and blood dripping from his mouth. Tony didn’t know if he was breathing. “Don’t you dare die on me,” Tony cried. “Don’t you dare!”

As the clouds parted and the sun poured down on him, he bitterly wondered how many more of them would fall for their mistakes.

Chapter End Notes

*Bozhe moy – my God*
Chapter 4

At his point, there wasn’t much left of the Avengers that wasn’t damaged.

Vaguely he heard people talking over him. About him. Nurses hovering and his garbled attempts to tell them to back off. They were a little concerned about heat exhaustion, and truthfully he’d given them cause to be. He’d landed on the deck of the helicarrier and deposited the unmoving, unconscious, not breathing Clint into the care of the medics. Then he’d promptly collapsed, and he didn’t remember anything after that for what he’d been told was about twenty minutes while he’d been looked over by the staff. He’d awoken, cranky and worried, to see a blurry Thor on an adjacent bed, barking at the young doctor trying to treat his burned arm. That had seemed to be too much to deal with at the moment, and everything hurt, so he succumbed to the pull of sleep again.

The next time he awoke, it was to a silent room filled with sunshine. Tony groaned against the splitting headache, draping an arm across his eyes to hide the horrible brightness. For a brief, wonderful moment he managed to convince himself he was home. It was just the god-awful sun streaming through the windows of his penthouse. He’d been up too late, maybe had too much to drink. Maybe that was why his head hurt. The bed was warm beside him, and he rolled over just as Pepper snuggled closer. Her hair smelled like vanilla. “It’s too early,” she moaned. “Tell JARVIS to shut the blinds.”

“Shut the blinds, JARVIS.”

But the light stubbornly poured in. Tony sighed and opened his eyes again. Thankfully the thundering in his skull retreated to merely a dull pounding. With a grimace he managed to sit up, swallowing vertigo and the taste of smoke and soot. Then he glanced around and found himself alone. He grimaced and slid down off the hospital bed, trying to steel himself against the discomfort and the pressing rush of memory and worry. As fast as his pained body and head could manage, he went in search of the others.

He didn’t have to go far. He stopped at the first door he passed in the deserted corridor, glancing inside before pulling it open. Romanoff barely turned at his intrusion, seated tensely at the side of Barton’s bed. Her eyes were dead, wet and ringed in darkness. She had bruises and cuts on her face from the explosion, and her scarlet hair was messy. She looked in need of a shower, a good meal, and sleep. He probably looked the same.

Natasha held tight to Clint’s lifeless hand, an IV affixed to the archer’s wrist. Tony looked over his fallen comrade, wincing at the bandages wrapped tightly around the stab wound. Clint’s pallor was striking, his short brown hair sticking up in a wild mess, his eyes shut. The monitors were beeping, the goddamn monitors, and a respirator was swishing up and down. Beside his bed a pole stood with numerous bags hung. Blood. Antibiotics. Morphine. Tony didn’t know what to think, infinitely grateful that Hawkeye had survived the harrowing flight back to the helicarrier but wondering if the Avengers were destined to lose yet another member.

“How is he?” he finally managed to ask.

Romanoff was paler than Tony had ever seen. She glanced at Tony and then turned her weary gaze back to Clint. He remembered his snide comment about the relationship between the two spies during the flight to the lab and actually felt a little guilty when he saw the pain and fear in Romanoff’s normally coldly calm gaze. She held Clint’s hand tighter, sweeping her fingers over his in a soothing circle. “Doc says he’ll be okay,” she answered softly. “He’ll be out of commission for a while, but there won’t be any permanent damage.”
Tony didn’t want to admit to the waves of relief that assailed him. They were quiet a moment, Tony watching Natasha watch Clint as he lay unconscious and on life support but alive at least. Then Natasha sighed. “Thank you. You saved him.” He didn’t feel like a hero. What had they accomplished? There’d been nothing at that lab to help Steve, only the vindictive taunts of some evil scientist that had driven them all to the point of losing control. He certainly hadn’t stopped that. Steve was normally the voice of reason, the calm one. Clint had tried to assume that role, and look what had happened.

Natasha bowed her head. “I let my emotions cloud my work,” she admitted softly. Of all the screwed up situations, Tony never thought he’d be in the position to have the stoic, deadly Black Widow unveil her soul to him. He knew what she was going to say before she even said it, the words sharply bouncing around his aching head. “We should have brought a field medic and a better plan, but we didn’t and I didn’t stop to think... Just rushed out and everything’s gone to hell. I was so angry about what happened to Rogers. It was my bad intel. My job to have his back. My weakness that let those bastards take him... I wanted to make it right somehow. I was so furious... So furious. My rage got the better of me, and Clint paid the price.”

“You weren’t the only one who screwed up,” Tony reminded her, but the solace was half-hearted because he was too tired and emotionally bruised (and it wasn’t really in his nature) to offer more. She didn’t ask for it, anyway. Somehow that made him feel rotten enough to keep going. “Barton’s tough. He’ll be back on his feet in no time.”

She didn’t say anything else, and Tony grew increasingly uncomfortable with her blatant show of pain. He acknowledged things, then, that had been prodding at the corners of his conscience. Hitting the deck of the helicarrier with a heavy thud and nearly losing his grip on Clint’s limp body. The medics swarming him, pushing a stretcher among them. A rush of frantic words that pumped between his ears louder than his own heart. Blood and panic and a defibrillator. Now that he chose to remember, he realized Clint had pretty much died on the deck there. Or before when they’d been flying as fast as Iron Man could manage through the breaking dawn. It didn’t really matter.

Quietly, shooting the fallen archer one last pained look, he left.

His feet took him quickly away. He tried not to think, not to feel the misery and defeat in his soul, tried to focus on anger because at least that was better than despair. It wasn’t too hard to do that, actually, given what he found in Roger’s room.

Thor and Bruce looked up at this entrance. The demigod stood on Steve’s one side, arms crossing his chest. His shoulder was heavily bandaged, but the pain on his face was not from the burn. Bruce was on Steve’s other side, holding the super soldier’s limp hand in his own. The scientist met Tony’s gaze, and for once Tony thought Bruce was unreadable.

Rogers’ shield, the stripes scuffed and marred, rested on the floor at the end of his bed. He wondered who had brought it here. He glanced at it once, remembering when he’d finally gotten to Romanoff after the captain had been kidnapped to find only the shield where it’d been dropped. It was all they’d brought back. Then a disturbing image claimed him. Thousands of mourners crowded into a chapel and around the streets. Arlington. Captain America, his casket, draped in the flag he’d loved so much, carried by the army, his shield resting atop it. He shook the scene away and stared at Bruce. “If you’re here, it better mean you found a cure,” Tony said.


Tony glanced to the screens mounted on the walls around Steve’s bed. His fever was raging at a dangerous 104.6 degrees. His pulse was weak and irregular. His blood pressure was in the tank. There wasn’t much time left. “Then why aren’t you in the lab?”
Bruce sighed, pulling his silver-framed glasses from his face and pinching the bridge of his nose. He was exhausted, his form bent and his face pale, and were it any other set of circumstances, Tony would have cracked a joke and told the other man that this stress wasn’t good for his “condition”.

“There’s nothing more I can do, Tony,” he said. “We’ve managed to isolate the compound in his blood, but nothing we tried has inactivated it.”

“Well, keep looking,” snarled Stark.

Bruce wearily shook his head, opening his mouth but pausing as if he was trying to find the best words. There wasn’t any reasonable way to say what Tony knew was coming. “And try what? Do what? Nothing will bind to the toxin. Nothing renders it inert. Nothing. I tried every relevant combination of chemicals I could think of, and even a few I knew were long-shots, but nothing worked. Without something more, some clue, I’m dead in the water.”

“Then we’ll have to find something else,” Tony said. Denial is great. Keep at it.

“Unless your mission to the lab was more fruitful than I heard, we have nothing else.” Tony clenched his fists and looked to Thor, but the usually assertive demigod was quiet and lost. He wanted to argue, to shout and demand and generally do what he did when he wanted to stick his head in the sand. He was a master at deluding himself. “Believe me,” Bruce softly said, “I wish there was something more I could do.”

“You wish,” Tony repeated acidly. “That’s what we have left. You wish. He’s already mourning.” Thor visibly bristled. “Barton barely made it back. Romanoff is lost up in herself. Am I the only one who still wants to fight?”

Bruce’s eyes flashed with something. Tony had seen it before. A warning. “Don’t do this, Tony. We can’t save him. You can’t save him.”

“We’re the Avengers,” snapped Tony. “We’re not supposed to give up, especially not on each other, because if we don’t stand by one another, who else will?”

“Tony, this isn’t about standing by one another,” Bruce said.

“It’s not? Because, if you ask me, he sure as hell wouldn’t give up on any of us.”

“If you think there is more you can do, by all means,” Bruce said, frustrated but not sarcastic. Tony gritted his teeth. Biochemical engineering was not his forte, though he did know a thing or two. Perhaps he should have been down in the lab with Banner from the beginning. Perhaps he might have seen something Bruce hadn’t, thought of something that wasn’t obvious. But he doubted it. Bruce was a genius (not that he wasn’t, of course, but not at biochemistry). If Banner hadn’t found a way, no one would.

Frustration made him angrier. “We can’t just let him go!” he shouted. No ideas, no further hopes or suggestions. It wasn’t like him to hit a wall. But it also wasn’t like him to give up, to surrender, to let something go that he couldn’t fix. No, he’d work until his hands hurt, until his brain hurt, until he fixed it.

“I don’t think we can stop it,” Bruce said sadly, softly. He gripped Steve’s hand tighter. Tony never pegged Banner for the comforting type, but he was holding Steve like this was all they had left. Maybe it was. Standard goddamn palliative care.

The silence that followed was devastating. Tony couldn’t keep his fury at bay. “This is bullshit!”

“Friend Stark,” Thor quietly said, “there is no sense in this.”
“Then enlighten me,” Tony snapped, “what should we do now? Lay down and die? Surrender? Give up and let them win? Because you know they are still out there! The ones we got were just the henchmen.”

“Whoever they are, however they did this… It will take time to find them. Time we don’t have right now. The trail’s run cold, Tony. The best minds in the world are working on this and we all failed.” Bruce shook his head. “They won. Hurts to admit it, but it’s true. They made their point.”

“Fuck that,” Tony hissed, “and fuck you if you believe it.”

“Don’t get angry at me,” Bruce retorted, setting Steve’s hand to the hospital bed. “It won’t solve anything. Believe me; I know better than anyone.” The warning was even stronger. Bruce had been surprisingly composed this entire incident. He had nearly lost it when they’d seen the video flicker onto every computer screen on the helicarrier, when they’d seen those bastards torture Steve, when they’d waited for the trace to pinpoint their location. When they’d reached the darkened hellhole, Bruce had utterly let go. But since bringing Steve back, he’d been a paragon of serenity. It was infuriating that the one among them with the greatest anger management issues was somehow the one with the most control.

“Neither does rolling over and playing dead,” Tony returned.

“Nor does fighting amongst ourselves,” Thor cautioned, struggling to keep his own emotions in check. “This accomplishes nothing!”

“If he dies, it’s on your head.” Bruce’s face fractured in hurt and anger at Tony’s accusation. “And Romanoff’s, for her bad intel. And Barton’s, for not holding his position when the shit started to hit the fan. And yours.” Tony tipped his head toward a very stiff and irate Thor. “For not being here when we needed you. And it’s his own fault.” He angrily kicked that shiny shield aside, and it skittered along the floor with a dull hum and a rattle. “For going into firefights with nothing but a goddamn shield.” “The best offense is a good defense,” Steve had once told him. “What a load of passive aggressive bullshit. He’s a moron.”

“Don’t, Tony,” Bruce seethed, and Tony could practically see the beast clawing free from his restraints. “Don’t you dare.”

“Dare what? You think I’m blameless?” Tony shook his head. “I should have taken this more seriously. We all should have. But it was just easy mission wiping out another stupid ass group of terrorists who fancied themselves mighty enough to take on Earth’s mightiest heroes. For the first time in a long time, things felt good, you know? Easy. Simple. I just don’t do simple. Simple makes me sloppy. Twice we ran out the door without thinking anything through like we were God’s goddamn gift to the earth and we couldn’t be beat and twice we almost lost everything.” He didn’t know why he was blathering about his feelings like this. He didn’t do that, either. Or compassion, really. Or weakness. Or failure. Recently he was doing a lot of things he didn’t normally do. “I should have watched out for him.”

The last words were soft and laden with guilt that the others found raw, unusual, and awkward. “He didn’t need protecting,” Bruce said, but without the confidence to make it at all convincing. “Neither did Clint. They’d be the first to tell you that.”

Tony grunted, unappeased. “I’m not giving up. If you haven’t noticed, these assholes put two of us in the ICU! On respirators! Who are we if we let that go?”

Bruce looked at him like he was a kid throwing a tantrum. And maybe he was being a little childish with all this denial and blaming. He probably deserved it. “This isn’t just some villain,” he insisted
tensely and slowly. “It’s in his blood, put there by men we’ve already killed. We can’t fight or think our way through this. There’s no army to defeat, no battle we can win, no…” He stammered, flustered and growing increasingly irate. “Monster we can cut the head off of. It’s over, Tony. Let it go.”

But Tony wasn’t listening. “What was that you just said?”

Bruce was annoyed, sharing a withering, weary glance with Thor. “I said we need to let him go.”

“Not that.” Tony’s eyes were narrowed, distant in thought. His mind was spinning. “Cut off one head, and two more will take its place,” he murmured. “That’s what he said. The guy we pulled out of the lab before it blew.”

“What of it?” Thor asked.

“HYDRA.”

The demigod’s face wrinkled in confusion. “I have heard that word before. Is it some sort of Midgardian demon?”

More than you know, pal. “Not exactly. HYDRA was a secret organization that wanted to dominate the world, kill mankind, you know, the usual bad guy agenda. Evil, in the strictest sense of the word. That was their motto,” Tony explained. “But they’ve been fairly out of commission since World War II. That was the last time they really moved against us.”

“With the Nazis,” Bruce added. “I remember reading that in Rogers’ file.”

“Yeah, my father used to tell me stories about it all the time.” Tony swallowed the bitterness. His father had never stopped talking about Captain America and the Howling Commandos and the men who’d saved the world from HYDRA. Hell, his father had been one of them. They were all gone, dead or lost to old age, except for Steve. Howard Stark. Bucky Barnes. Dum Dum Dugan. James Morita. Falsworth. SSR. Colonel Phillips. Peggy Carter. They were names from his youth, legends and warriors and heroes. And they were the last people who’d fought against HYDRA.

“It can’t be a coincidence that that asshole said that to us,” Tony said. “It can’t be. My dad told me about their head honcho, a guy by the name of Johann Schmidt. A real nut bar. Certifiable.” Tony started pacing a little. He always had to move when his mind was working. “See, the thing was, Steve wasn’t the first person that got Erskine’s serum. He was just the first time it worked. Schmidt made Erskine use it on him, back when they were both working for the Third Reich in Germany. It turned him into a monster, or so it said in all the reports. The Red Skull.”

Bruce’s brow furrowed, and he ran a hand through his mussed mop of graying hair. “Yeah, all of this was in the file I was given before the Chitauri incident. Where are you going with this?”

Tony’s heart was pounding in excitement. “Schmidt was crazy, but he wasn’t stupid. He had two goals. Harness the power of the gods to rule the world.”

“The Tesseract,” Thor said.

“Right. And he wanted to take down Captain America. Steve was a thorn in his side for months and months, and with the Howling Commandos and the SSR and my dad behind him, they had managed to thwart Schmidt every step of the way. Schmidt would have had some sort of contingency plan, some way to take down Captain America. The weapons HYDRA built using the Tesseract were one thing, but they were just weapons. Weapons against a super soldier that had proved ineffective dozens of times. He would have had another way. If Steve was the world’s first
super hero, this guy was the world’s first super villain.”

“What are you getting at, Tony?” Bruce asked, growing impatient.

“I think - and I’m really trying to remember here, but I think my dad told me once of some notes he’d found in the wreckage of one of the HYDRA bases they’d raided. Something about a weapon to render the immortal into mere men. What if they’d really had found something that could kill Captain America?”

Bruce hesitated for a moment, not sure what to make of this. “That’s a long shot, Tony. They were probably picking up crazy nonsense all the time. Hitler was a maniac, and so was Schmidt.”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Schmidt had some version of the serum in his body. Who knows what he might have done. Point is: it’s worth a shot. We’ve got nothing else.”

“What are you proposing?” Thor asked after a long moment.

The excitement of an idea, maybe even a plan, rushed through him. “SSR was absorbed by SHIELD, which is probably why they had the old HYDRA weapons. Maybe they have files or something somewhere. In storage or on the mainframe.”

Suddenly Banner seemed to find some faith. Tony was infinitely grateful for that. “The last time we hacked into the mainframe didn’t go so well,” he reminded.

“I know. And we don’t have time, anyway. So I’m thinking of doing something more direct.”

As he led them quickly from the room, renewed hope driving their steps, Bruce shook his head. “What?”

Tony gave him a small, humorless smirk. “Asking. Not my typical MO, I admit, but crisis situations bring out the worst in me. Like trusting people who have previously shown themselves to be less than trustworthy.”

Bruce didn’t know whether or not to be relieved. “Whatever it takes.”

“Yeah,” Tony agreed as they broke into a sprint towards the lifts. *Whatever it takes.*
Chapter 5

The bridge of the helicarrier was surprisingly sedate, given the normal bustle of militaristic activity. Everything was muted, despite the bright morning sunshine streaming through the massive windows at the front of the area. Officers huddled over their stations, going through the motions and hardly anything more. The mood was somber, depressed and gloomy. Tony could hardly stand it as he, Bruce, and Thor exploded onto the bridge from the lift to the rear. “Why the long faces?” he said.

Nick Fury turned from his position on the main walk, his hands clasped behind his back. “I trust that means you found something.” His face was stoic, calm and seemingly above everything, which was one of the things Tony found so disagreeable about the man. They’d had their differences in the past (hell, it was hard to find someone Tony hadn’t pissed off or who hadn’t pissed him off), and with good reason. Fury was a master spy, and it was hard to trust someone like that, someone trained in secrets and lying and manipulation. But he had before, when the world was threatened by Loki and the Chitauri, because he had to. Now he would do the same and pray he wouldn’t regret it.

“Not yet,” Tony said, bounding across the bridge.

“Just a crazy idea,” Banner clarified. “But something at least.”

“Unless you guys are miracle workers, I have a feeling your crazy ideas have come too late,” Fury declared grimly.

Tony paused, trying not to seem as winded as he really was. The run across the helicarrier from the infirmary in the bowels of the ship had really taxed his already taxed body. “You’re in luck. Miracles are something of a specialty of ours.” Normally he might have baited and teased and enjoyed this a whole lot more, but even he wasn’t in the mood for his customary antics. “We need to see all the files SHIELD has from SSR on HYDRA.”

Fury’s brow wrinkled in confusion. “HYDRA?”

“The man we pulled from the lab told us if we cut off one head, two more will take its place. It can’t be a coincidence that Captain America’s old enemies are the ones who developed this toxin. It can’t be. So there’s gotta be something in those files to help us.”

Fury didn’t seem convinced, but then it was always difficult to read the master spy. His brow remained furrowed, his undamaged eye doubtful but interested. “HYDRA has been out of the picture for seventy years. A few whispers here and there, and maybe a couple of crazies acting up for old time’s sake, but they’re gone and mostly forgotten.”

“They never said anything about the other heads taking over right away,” Tony countered. Fury gave him an irate glower, and the billionaire sighed, annoyed himself. “Look, this is all we have.”

Fury hesitated a moment, glancing among Tony, Bruce, and Thor. “What is it you need?”

“Sir,” Agent Hill interjected, looking somewhat distressed. “They don’t have the security clearance to access those files.”

Tony glanced at her. “You’re really gonna pull that crap now?” He turned back to Fury when Hill looked down, ashamed and hurt. “Come on, Nick. Every minute we spend arguing about this is one less we’re gonna have to save Rogers, if we even can.”

If there was one thing to be said about Nick Fury it was that he didn’t waste time fettered by
indecision. A moment later he nodded and turned to Hill. “Set them up with everything we have in the lab. Hurry.”

“There are files in storage yet, sir,” Hill reminded. “Those as well?”

“Everything.”

Fifteen minutes later, everything was sitting in the chem lab where Bruce and other biomedical specialists had labored fruitlessly for hours. Machines were whirring idly, and the lab benches, starkly and sleekly white, were cluttered with syringes, flasks and tubes, and pipettes. The computer screens were displaying a rotating, 3D representation of a compound. But the three Avengers and Agent Hill were clustered around a series of computer terminals in the rear of the lab. Tony and Bruce were flashing through files on touch screens rapidly, fingers flying and minds whirling. Thor folded his muscular arms over his chest, pacing restlessly behind them. “Is there anything I might do to help?” he asked after quite a few long, silent minutes.

“Not at the moment,” Tony responded. “You can’t read German, can you?”

“Can we get someone down here to translate?” Bruce asked, never taking his eyes from the screen as he flipped through page after page of scanned documents. “If someone had actually found something on this, it probably wasn’t thoroughly researched. It exists.”

“It does,” Tony assured, narrowing his eyes as he brought up another series of files. “My memory is fantastic, out-of-this-world. I kid you not.” The documents pertaining to the Tesseract were extremely well indexed and researched; however, Tony sincerely doubted they’d find what they needed there. Everything else, unfortunately, was a real mess. Somebody had made a half-hearted effort to catalogue the files SSR had recovered as they had systematically removed HYDRA’s bases from the face of Europe. They were somewhat indexed by where the information had been found and when, but not well documented about what the files actually contained. That made searching much more difficult (despite Tony’s completely 100% accurate recollections).

They worked silently for what felt like a long time. The search proceeded via brute, tedious force, the two men examining each file as quickly as they dared. It didn’t help matters that Tony was dead tired, and a few minutes into the effort the files began to blur as his exhausted eyes refused to focus. It was only adrenaline keeping him going, adrenaline and fear and a damn strong wish to prove that he was right, but his body was beginning to fail his mind. He knew his limits, after many long, long nights in the lab. When things began to blur, when the ache was this deep and he actually needed to read things twice to make them sink in, it was time to quit.

But not this time. He rushed through the next batch of documents, which seemed to be some sort of inventory lists for one of HYDRA’s smaller bases in Austria. There were thousands of files to examine, some fully translated, some partially, and some not at all. It would take weeks, if not months, to perform an exhaustive search. As tired and impatient as they were, the odds of them finding the proverbial needle in this haystack were infinitesimal.

So when Bruce announced that he’d come across something, Tony was downright shocked. He’d been putting on a confident front, but truthfully, he’d doubted anything would come of this. “Here,” Banner said as Tony came to stand beside him. Thor squinted at the screen as though it was all Greek to him, and it might as well have been. “Logged December 17th, 1944. Strausberg, Germany. Howard Stark.”

Tony tapped his finger lightly against the file Bruce had found, and the computer quickly loaded a digital copy of the log. His father’s familiar scrawl covered the page. He felt strange looking at it. “What’s so special about this? My dad and his team logged tons of things for SSR. Oh.”
“What?” Thor demanded tensely and impatiently.

“Project: Red Dawn,” Tony read grimly. There wasn’t much to the file, merely the intake sheet and one scanned page in German. It had obviously been created on a typewriter. The page had the skull and cephalopod of HYDRA and the hated symbol of Nazi Germany proudly stamped at its top. It seemed to be some sort of letter, and Tony couldn’t read any of it. There was one section circled. Someone had scrawled a note in the margin. “A new age will be marked by a red dawn, dousing America in blood, and they will fall before our superior race. And when they fall, we shall offer no mercy. Should they kneel, we shall strike them. Should they beg, we shall maim them. But should they fight, we shall destroy them and desecrate their bodies,” Tony read. “Lovely.”

“Fascists,” Bruce commented, as if that could explain such a level of hatred against their country. “This was a letter from someone named Arnim Zola to a member of the Third Reich in Berlin.”

“Zola was Schmidt’s right-hand man, I think,” Tony said.

“If he was, he’d probably have intimate knowledge of Schmidt’s plans.”

“He did. Rogers and the Howling Commandos captured him to figure out what Schmidt’s end game was. That was the mission…” He trailed off, thinking back to his childhood, to his father sitting at his bedside when he’d been little and regaling him with stories from the war. This was one of the stories Howard Stark had always been hesitant to tell. He’d never been close to his father. The man had been judgmental and demanding and difficult (more like impossible) to please. And nothing Tony had ever done had won him praise. The only time he’d felt any sort of connection to the man was when Howard had told him about Captain America. It was almost as if Howard’s hope for a better world, for better men and a better future, had disappeared with Rogers. Tony hated him for that. “That was when they lost Barnes.”

“Who?” Thor asked.

“Bucky Barnes. Steve’s best friend from Brooklyn.”

They were silent at that for a moment. Then Bruce brought them back. “This looks promising, but all we have is the scan of this letter.”

“Nobody cared to keep up with the paperwork,” Tony surmised. “The war ended six months later.”

“Says the rest of the file is in location A-217.” Agent Hill was the first to reach the crates of old files that had been procured from storage. Thankfully SHIELD had been fairly meticulous with cataloguing their old files and it was easy to find the crate in question. With a few presses of her fingers to the keypad locking the crate, the top opened. She shuffled inside for a moment and then withdrew a black file folder. She handed it to Bruce. “Thanks.”

The top sheet in the folder was the letter than had been scanned, yellowed by age. Bruce set that aside. Beneath it were wrinkled and water-damaged pages, some hand-written and some type-written. Nothing was translated. A couple pages in, however, there was something strikingly familiar.

“That’s it, Bruce,” Tony said.

“Yeah,” Bruce agreed, narrowing his eyes and glancing between the spinning representation of the compound on the computer screens and the hand-drawn picture on the page. They were very similar. “I have to say I’m impressed. You were right.”

A compliment from an intellect the level of Banner’s would have normally meant quite a bit, even to
a comparable intellect like Tony, but he was too desperate to find something to care. He didn’t want to hope that this crazy idea of his might pan out, didn’t want to face the crushing disappointment if it didn’t, but he couldn’t help it. Warm exhilaration rushed through him. “They derived this from Schmidt’s blood,” Bruce concluded, looking over the pages. “There’s no way they could have manufactured it. The technology didn’t exist then to stabilize the chemical bonds.”

“Lucky for Steve,” Tony remarked. Or maybe not.

“Care to help me with this?” Bruce asked, glancing over his shoulder at Tony.

“Gladly.”

The translator arrived shortly thereafter, but Bruce and Tony hadn’t waited, delving into the numerous pictures detailing the steps in producing the compound. SHIELD’s expert linguist had sat down and answered their questions as best she could from the scrawl on the yellowed pages. They worked feverishly, comparing the toxin at each step in its production to what they already knew of it. It didn’t take long for them to figure out how to neutralize it. HYDRA had obviously never considered the possibility that their files would fall into enemy hands. The doctors and scientists who had originally worked on this project remarked in numerous places what the weaknesses of their plans were, that this compound would sufficiently bind to Captain America’s serum-enhanced cells and alter their chemical properties, but the bond was weak and easily disrupted. Any mortal wound would have to be struck accurately and quickly. This was a weakness limited in its use against Captain America. It was disturbing to learn that they had intended this weapon to be wielded against Allied forces. Against a mere man, the chemical had been shown to slow metabolism immediately to the point of coma. The war would have turned quickly against the Allies had HYDRA and the Nazis found a way to drop their enemies unconscious in the middle of the battlefield. Thankfully, as Bruce had said, the technology to stabilize the bonds and to mass produce the compound hadn’t existed seventy years ago.

Regardless, the chemical’s poor bonding patterns were the key to unraveling it. By adding a few key molecular groups that were conspicuously missing from the original plans, the modern scientists had managed to ensure the toxin properly bonded to Steve’s cells. Isolating those sections of the compound had led to a plan: introduce a counter compound to disrupt the cellular bonding. Once they did that, the toxin would be unable to interfere with Steve’s enhanced metabolism and regeneration. His body would flush it naturally.

Of course, figuring out how to do that was a bit more complicated. But at least with an idea, they could work. And they did. Quickly they ran down a list of possible chemicals that might do the trick, testing them in small samples of Steve’s blood and then checking signs of the inert toxin. For numerous minutes, there was only concentration, formulas and pipettes and a few shared words of progress. Thor paced nervously behind them, his arms taut across his chest. His face was a picture of wrath and fear. “This is infuriating,” he muttered. “I am not made for waiting.”

“Neither am I, pal,” Tony said as he moved onto the next possible neutralizing agent. He was beginning to fear anew they wouldn’t find anything, or that it wouldn’t be in time.

“You, at least, can help. I know nothing of this… science.”

“Some science, but mostly luck,” Bruce said morosely. Then, after a few more agonizing minutes, he leaned back from the bench, somewhat surprised. “This one is it, I think. This one will do it!”

Relief could hardly describe the enormity of what Tony felt. He closed his eyes momentarily, nearly bowing under the weight of exhaustion. Then there was a buzzing and AC/DC blaring from his jeans pocket. Tony wiped the sweat from his brow and fished out his phone despite the latex gloves
on his hands and any consideration for proper laboratory protocol. He unlocked it with a swipe across the touch screen and clench it to his ear between his head and shoulder. “Yeah.”

“Stark, it’s Romanoff,” came Natasha’s voice. She was either too tired or too worried to hide her urgency. “You better hurry. Rogers started having some sort of seizures, and they can’t handle it. Whatever this is, it’s too strong. They’re losing him fast.”

The fear in Tony’s eyes obviously spoke volumes of the situation because Bruce paled a little but then squared his shoulders. “Go. I’ve got this,” he promised sternly, turning back to his work.

“I’m on my way,” Tony responded shortly, and then he ended the call and slipped his phone back into his jeans. He peeled off the gloves and turned around quickly, nearly plowing into Thor. The demigod was solemn, his blue eyes laden with concern. “Come on, big guy. I think there’s finally something for you to do.”
They arrived in the infirmary to find alarms shrilly screaming and a flurry of frantic activity. The team of doctors and nurses were panicked, frenzied, and uncoordinated. In their defense, the situation was dire and not one with which they could easily contend. Captain America, even as injured and weak as he was, was still stronger than the strongest. This was far beyond anything they were trained to deal with. Standing aside and allowing the fits to pass wasn’t an option. These were not typical seizures and he was an unimaginable patient. So as he quaked, struggled, and flailed, it was all they could do just to try to hold him down as gently and as best they could before he hurt anyone else or himself further.

Tony burst into the room, Thor on his heels. At their entrance, Natasha looked up, her eyes wide and her face glistening in sweat. She was lying across Steve’s legs, her lip freshly bleeding. “A little help,” she called through gritted teeth, struggling as the captain lurched again, nearly sending her flying.

Thor charged by Tony and wasted no time in grabbing Steve’s wrists and pinning him to the bed. The soldier bucked, and Natasha and the other doctors and nurses brave enough to stay close fought to hold on. Tony pushed his way in, planting his hands as firmly as he dared on Steve’s shoulders and pushing him down. He quickly realized that being concerned about causing Rogers to injure himself or exacerbating the soldier’s multitude of wounds wasn’t going to matter; the sheets of the bed were already dotted and streaked with wet red, and it was going to take all his strength to even begin to restrain the other man. He looked to Sommers, who was desperately trying to keep an eye on the monitors during the chaos. “What is this?” Tony demanded breathlessly.

There was a crack and Tony realized miserably that it was Steve’s shoulder dislocating. “Easy!” Sommers barked, eyeing Thor angrily. “Holding him too tightly will only break his bones!”

“Sommers, what the hell is this?”

The doctor looked pathetically helpless, and it wasn’t at all encouraging. “I don’t know!” he gasped, barely sidestepping as another of the nurses was struck and fell. The man was sent reeling, his nose gushing. Thor snatched Rogers’ flailing wrist again and pulled them both to the side as carefully as he could but he still almost wrenched the tubes of the ventilator loose from Steve’s throat. “Careful! Careful! Trauma and fever can induce grand mal seizure activity, but not with such intensity or so quickly… I don’t know! And as injured as he is, this shouldn’t be happening…”

“These aren’t seizures.” Natasha was hardly a medic, probably trained only to treat emergencies in the field. But she said the only logical thing anyone had said. “He’s in pain. He’s struggling.” Steve’s face was clenched in a horrible grimace, his hands twisted in Thor’s leather jerkin. Despite the vicious muscle spasms and unconscious flailing, on some level, he was aware of how much he hurt. It was almost like a war between the super soldier serum and the toxin, and Steve was trapped in the middle.

That only meant one thing to Tony. It was over. Steve’s body was rebelling in a violent attempt to keep living. Fighting a battle that couldn’t be won.

Steve Rogers is Captain America, and Captain America can’t die. This was all Tony could think, but with every moment spent in horrendous, heartrending torture, desperation choked hope, and pretty soon he was thinking just to do something when all else was lost. He can’t die. God, what the hell? Give us a break. What the hell? What the hell? The seizure left them panting and fearing and praying. He can’t die he can’t die he can’t die –
The alarms screamed, blaring warnings for tachycardia. Tony grunted, draping an arm over Steve’s shoulders and pushing down, down against the bed and the blood. “Christ,” he whispered. “Somebody cut us some slack. Just a little bit. Come on. Throw us a bone.”

The fit thankfully ended. They worked fast to resettle Steve and adjust the jostled life support before the next hit. The peace wasn’t long-lasting.

“He will kill himself,” Thor groaned as he fought again against the onslaught of Steve’s contracting muscles. “We have to stop this!”

“Tell me how,” Sommers snapped irately. The alarms were wailing anew as Steve’s heart rate skyrocketed. “More lorazepam! Hurry!”

A nurse, obviously afraid of suffering the same pummeling as her peers, shoved a needle toward Sommers from as far away as she could manage. The doctor deftly jabbed the syringe into the IV line. His brief moment of relative calm left as quickly as it had arrived. The convulsions were coming too quickly, one on top of another, waves of torment that they could only ride with little hope of controlling. Steve arched his back. The bandages circling the numerous wounds on his chest and abdomen were saturated with fresh blood as stitches ripped and wounds tore. Tony grabbed the sides of Steve’s head and held him as steady as he could to at least ensure he continued to receive steady oxygen. He had a feeling it wouldn’t matter in a few minutes. Thor was right. Steve was killing himself. “Do something!” he howled in fury to Sommers.

“What?” the doctor returned acidly. His eyes flashed. “What do you want me to do?”

“Banner is coming with the anti-toxin!”

“I don’t think it will matter now,” Sommers returned.

Another seizure came then, this one even stronger than the last. Natasha cried out as she was flung less than gently off Rogers’ thighs. She crashed into a cart of medical supplies, bandages and drawers full of vials and needles flying haphazardly against the wall. She laid there, dazed a moment and nursing a bruised jaw, before scrambling to her feet and staggering back to the bed, shoving aside the concerned grasp of another doctor. She threw herself over Steve again without reserve, even as his knee grazed her throat.

“Give him another dose of lorazepam,” Tony ordered, hoping for another reprieve. He watched Steve writhe mindlessly, his body bent and shuddering against unseen blows from relentless monsters, and he could hardly hear for the thundering of his own heart and the shrieking of the alarms around the bed. “Get this under control!”

“He’s already exceeded the maximum safe dosage, even for him,” the doctor responded.

Tony could have screamed for the stupidity of that statement, and he probably would have hurled a few choice insults at the man, but he was too flustered to manage his normal sacrilegious wit. “Seriously? Will he be more dead if the drugs kill him instead of this?”

Sommers shook his head, exasperated, but he wasn’t a complete moron, so he realized Tony was right. “Cycle benzodiazepines,” he said to his team. “Keep flooding him until these fits stop.”

The frightened physicians hurried to do as he requested, nurses rushing around the small room amidst the struggling on the bed to find as much of the drugs as they could. Needles were exchanged, plunged into vials and dumped from open drawers onto chairs and the floors and counters. Thor grunted as another seizure wracked Steve. If the drugs were doing anything, it wasn’t obvious.
Tony swore under his breath when Steve arched his back again and the ventilator failed. “Get him down! Hold him!”

The team struggled to still the captain, but it didn’t seem to matter. Romanoff was gasping for breath as another of the doctors helped her keep Steve’s legs immobile. “This is insane! He’ll seriously hurt someone!” someone cried.

“Stark,” Thor said. His blue eyes darted to his arm across Steve’s chest, where the soldier had grabbed his forearm. Steve’s grip was unbelievably tight, crushing, and Tony winced. He released Steve’s head to pry the bruising fingers from Thor’s flesh. He wasn’t strong enough, not even with both hands. He clenched his jaw, digging his nails under Steve’s fingers to try and pull him away. Thor’s face was tight with an agonized grimace.

“I have means to put him down,” Sommers said then, trying his best to hold Rogers’ shoulder as another wave of uncontrollable spasms shook them all.

*Means to put him down. Like a goddamn dog.* “No!” Tony shouted, taking Steve’s wrist and pulling as much as he could. “Banner is coming with the cure! Didn’t you hear me?”

“It’s too late!” Sommers exclaimed, his eyes wild and his face dotted with sweat. “He’s as good as gone! Nobody could survive this! Do you want to see him kill someone? Or suffer more?”

“Don’t say it again or I swear I’ll—” Tony’s threat was interrupted by a different wail from the monitors. His heart lurching into his throat and he ripped around. Steve’s erratic blood pressure was plummeting. His heart rate was decreasing shockingly fast and becoming irregular. His blood oxygenation was sinking. And the erratic, violent movement of his body stilled abruptly.

“He’s v-tach,” a nurse calmly stated, watching the monitors.

“No shit,” Tony snapped. He pushed Thor away, the Asgardian holding his bruised arm. The medical team shifted quickly, pulling a cart from the side of the room closer. Tony balled one hand over another and started CPR (what little good that would do – prolonging the inevitable was all, but god damn it he could fix this). It proved a hard a task with Steve’s large frame, but he wouldn’t give up. He compressed powerfully, rhythmically, counting in his head and swearing loudly with each number.

The bed was quickly reclined flat and sheets and pillows tossed aside. Sommers was there with the paddles of the defibrillator. “Charge it,” he snapped. “Clear!” Tony pulled away just as the doctor planted the machine to Steve’s bare and bloody chest. The sound of discharge was thunderous, and Steve’s body jerked lifelessly. But nothing changed. The monitors still shrieked their warnings. Tony looked up at them before resuming chest compressions. They were losing this battle fast. Super soldier or not, cardiac arrest was deadly.

“Again!” Sommers cried, and Tony moved away when the shock was administered. It as well did nothing to alleviate the arrhythmia. The beeping of the monitor resumed a steady pace for a moment, but only that. Tony gritted his teeth in anger. “He’s still v-fib,” the doctor said, his eyes narrowed with worry.

“BP’s sixty over forty. We’re losing him,” one of the nurses announced.

“Epinephrine. Give him one directly and then do a constant push.” Someone came with the needle and Tony paused with CPR for a moment, breathing hard and watching dizzily as the long tip was thrust into Steve’s heart through his sternum. No other drug had provided any help, so Tony doubted this one would either. But it was worth a shot.
The monitors wailed louder and louder. “His pulse is down to thirty and collapsing,” the nurse monitoring Rogers’ vitals reported. “Twenty-five.”

They shocked Steve again. The inhuman writhing of his body was still difficult to watch, despite all the horrors and atrocities of the last two days. Again, no change. Tony pumped at Captain America’s still chest, trying desperately to move blood through his body before brain death, but it wasn’t working and he knew it. “Damn it, Rogers,” he snarled, out of breath and sweat (and tears) stinging his eyes. “I swear to God if you quit on me, I’m gonna kick your ass hard. With the suit. Lasers and thrusters and missiles and everything. You won’t stand a chance!” Nothing. “Come on, Steve! You’re Captain America, god damn it! Fight!”

Steve’s face was drained of any color and he was completely unresponsive. The frantic beeping of the monitors switched suddenly to a dead, even, monotone whine. The lines of the EKG that had bumped and bounced wildly across the screens were now a flat line. Terror clenched Tony’s chest like a vise and he couldn’t breathe. “Asystole.”

Asystole. Fancy way of saying dead.

“No.” He heard Natasha whisper behind him. Somehow her breathy plea was louder than the thunder of his own heartbeat and the desolate moaning of the machines around them and the cacophony of shouts from the medical team. Tony glanced over his shoulder at his teammates. They stood helplessly at the side of the room, Natasha subconsciously leaning into Thor’s mighty frame for support. Thor watched slack-jawed and bewildered, but his eyes betrayed his grief. In that glimpse, in the moment where the pain was raw and the fear was palpable, he saw what would happen to the Avengers if they lost the man who’d become their leader. If they lost one of their own.

“Come on, Steve,” he begged as he resumed pressing on Steve’s breast with all his might as though he could will a heart to beat and lungs to fill and blood to flow. “Please, don’t give up on us…” They had just become a team. They had just found each other, each burdened by pasts that would leave a normal person stricken and defeated, and in doing so had found purpose. Maybe they were freaks, a time bomb ticking ominously toward disaster or a mixture of mistakes and experiments and accidents that could only create chaos, but they had each other when there was nothing and nobody else. Tony couldn’t let that be taken away. Not from Thor or Bruce or Natasha or Clint. And not from him. It was all any of them had.

“Hit him again,” Sommers ordered. “Recharge higher.” The jolt tossed Steve’s limp form. “Again! Another shot of epi!” They worked tirelessly then, Tony pressing on Steve’s chest in hopes of massaging his heart enough to send blood to his brain. Seconds passed, each as long as an eternity, but nothing changed. Then they became minutes. One. Three. Five. Every moment Rogers spent without his heart beating was a moment his body was shutting down.

Sommers wiped the perspiration from his brow with the back of his hand, shaking his head and glancing at Tony. He opened his mouth to state the obvious, and Tony opened his mouth to object, but the swish of the door behind them stopped the argument before it began. Bruce ran through, a vial in one hand and a long syringe in another. “I’ve got it!”

Tony could have collapsed. “’Bout damn time. Hurry!” he shouted, and Banner pushed his way through the crowd around Steve’s bed to reach Tony’s side. “Could you have cut it any closer?”

“Nope,” Bruce answered, breathless and obviously very much aware of how bad things were. “How much?” He jabbed the needle’s tiny point into the vial and began drawing the clear liquid into the syringe.

“All of it.” Bruce offered him a questioning glance. “This is it.”
“Right.” Once all of the anti-toxin was loaded into the needle, Bruce injected it directly into Steve’s heart. Tony quickly began CPR anew. “None of this will matter if we don’t get his heart beating.”

“I know!” Tony snapped. More epinephrine followed, and then the whine of the defibrillator filled the room as it charged. Tony pulled away as Sommers shocked Steve. Again and again. Time seemed to move incredibly and painfully slowly. They watched the monitors intently, wishing desperately, but there was no change. He glanced at the clock. Steve’s heart hadn’t been beating for seven minutes. They worked furiously, praying the anti-toxin would do its work. It was a long-shot, and they all knew it. There were too many unknowns. How long it would take the antidote to affect Steve’s cells, if it would even act as they theorized. If enough of it could spread through his body, given Tony’s palms pushing on Steve’s chest was the only way blood was pumping through his veins and arteries at that moment. And even if it did work, the damage was severe. He’d been hypoxic for so many minutes. It might all be too late.

But Tony dared to hope. Bruce hoped, too, if the frantic shift of his eyes between the monitors around the bed and Steve’s lax face was any indication. And Natasha and Thor. They all were.

And all for nothing. Sommers sighed heavily, his eyes mired in sorrow and exhaustion. He set the paddles back to the cart. “Shock him again!” Tony ordered.

The other man only shook his head. “It’s over. He’s not coming back.” Tony heard him, but he didn’t make sense of the words. A terrible silence descended. He felt pain inside him, horrible pain, and he knew what it was. Hope withering away to nothingness. Something cutting his heart, shredding, ripping. He wished it was the shrapnel. “Call the time of death.”

“No. No.” Denial. That was the last thread holding him together.

“Tony,” Bruce said softly. He pulled the billionaire away gently, and Tony was numb enough to just let himself be moved. Bruce’s eyes were dark and his shoulders were slumped and he looked as though he’d been punched. Grief was better than rage. Grief was better than rage. “Let him go.” Tony looked down. Somewhere during this he’d grabbed Steve’s hand, his cold, limp, lifeless hand; he couldn’t remember when. Bruce laid his own hand atop his and slid a comforting, supportive arm across his shoulders. “Let him go. We did everything we could.”

For once, Tony didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what to do, how to fix it. His mind utterly failed him. He could feel Bruce gently unclench his fingers from Steve’s, and he didn’t stop it. His gaze drifted to Natasha, who was bent with shame and silent tears, her bruised face averted and her red hair hiding her weakness. Thor was stiff, not understanding, not wanting to understand. His eyes glistened. Bruce set Steve’s hand across his unmoving chest and then stared as the nurses covered the bloodied body with a sheet and turned off the ventilator. He seemed composed, but Tony could feel the knots of tension in the arm across his shoulders and see the fleeting control in his eyes. Just a mask.

This was not the way this was supposed to end. They’d figured it out. They’d beaten the bad guys, killed the monsters. This wasn’t right!

But he was too tired, too beaten, to be angry about it anymore. Anguish made his throat tight and raw. And he was about ready to submit when there was a beep. Soft and timid. He thought he imagined it. But then it came again and again. He turned and saw the flat line on the monitors quiver and then jump upwards in a defiant spike. Numbers returned to the screens. Small and uncertain, but then climbing. Stronger. The beats came faster and faster.

“I can’t believe it,” Sommers whispered, pale and wide-eyed.
Steve jerked suddenly beneath the shroud. Tony stumbled back to the bed, yanking the sheet away. “Get the vent back on!” he demanded of the medical staff. They scrambled to do so, and the swishing resumed right away. Steve’s once still chest rose and fell erratically and then steadily. Tony was afraid, truly and deeply, because now was the moment where he’d find out this wasn’t real. That Steve was dead and he was dreaming or hallucinating or delirious from too much trauma and not enough sleep. But he wrapped his hand around Steve’s again and found returning warmth. Tony sagged and choked on a sob he couldn’t hide.

There was noise in the room then: sighs of relief, some cheers, some murmurs and shouts of surprise and disbelief. Thor laughed loudly and came and clapped Tony far too strongly on the shoulder and he was nearly sent reeling. His knees almost buckled as he turned away from the bed, but Bruce fortunately wrapped another arm around him. The Avengers moved back as the nurses and doctors swarmed the bed again. Over the rush of blood in his ears, Tony could hear the conversation.

“Vitals are stabilizing, doctor. It’s amazing.”

“Let’s get him back into surgery. Some of the wounds have reopened. I want every inch of Captain Rogers reexamined for injury and treated as necessary. Do a full body scan. New rounds of antibiotics and more blood, as much as we have.”

“Right away, sir.”

“Doctor Banner,” called Sommers. “We’ll need more of that anti-toxin.”

Bruce nodded but said nothing. Then he turned his attention back to Tony. Behind them the medical team was preparing to wheel Steve out of the room, the monitors comfortingly displaying the captain’s heart rate and breathing rate and blood pressure. All depressed but far better than zeros. Tony watched for a moment more to reassure his agonized mind that this was all real and true and actually happening.

“Well,” Bruce said after a long moment, drawing his dazed attention, “you did it.”

“We did it,” Tony corrected.

“No. It was you.”

Tony sat in a plastic chair ungracefully, nearly toppling the flimsy furniture to the floor with his utter collapse. He sighed, scrubbing a hand through his hair and then down his face. “Okay,” he agreed. “I did it. All me.” He looked up and saw Thor towering over him, smiling and chuckling and wiping at his eyes. Black Widow was pale and battered, her own eyes twinkling with wetness that she was trying adamantly to blink away. “Smile, Nat,” Tony said tiredly. “I’ll give you some credit if you want.”

She didn’t. But her tense expression softened enough that Tony felt a bit relieved. That was enough, he supposed, because he was really getting tired. Adrenaline faded, leaving only nausea and fatigue deep enough that his bones ached. “Guys,” he said, sinking into the chair like it was the world’s most comfortable featherbed. It might as well have been. “Oh, man. We need a vacation. A long vacation. I have a great mansion in Malibu, you know, we could each have our own wing. Never even have to see each other. Or not.Whatever you want. There are beaches and drinks and steak. Yeah, a nice thick porterhouse, medium rare. And a baked potato loaded with sour cream and butter. Teeming, like dripping. I need fat and carbs, way too many carbs. And chocolate ice cream.”

Bruce chuckled. “Sprinkles?”
“Of course sprinkles,” Tony said, his eyes slipping shut. “Chocolate ice cream and chocolate sprinkles and chocolate syrup and fudge… and beer. Lots and lots of beer.”

He slept. He damn well deserved it.
Chapter 7

Ten hours later, Tony awoke in his room aboard the helicarrier. He was disoriented for a minute, but the drab, gunmetal gray and the sparse, ugly furnishings was enough to alert him as to where he was, even as the fog stubbornly refused to lift from his mind. The crisis in the infirmary was a hazy mesh of scattered images, and he winced when he thought about it, when he remembered the hellish moments where Steve had died before miraculously coming back to them. Then he remembered collapsing in the chair, completely beaten by the trying ordeal. After that, nothing for a time, and then Thor’s bearded face, beseeching him to get up and helping him plod to a real bed. He remembered asking the other about Steve, and the Asgardian had only smiled compassionately and told him to rest. He’d promised to stay with Rogers as soon as the doctors had finished their work. Tony had frankly been too tired to argue, and he thought (with no small amount of embarrassment) that Thor had actually helped him undress and tucked him into the bunk. He hoped that part wasn’t true, anyway.

For a bit of time he lingered in the room, trying to gather his thoughts and dash the remains of sleep from his head. He showered, brushed his teeth, and dressed in the same dark jeans and Pink Floyd t-shirt that smelled freshly washed. He was modestly annoyed that someone had laundered his clothes for him, but it was nice to be in things that were clean. It was nice to have silence, to think in stillness without the press of battle or fear or panic upon him. He gathered his composure, breathing deeply, standing still in the steam of the bathroom and illuminated by the pale glow of the arc reactor, humming, his mind still burdened by exhaustion and concerns and unanswered questions. But it wasn’t troubling enough to consume him. He called Pepper, told her the good news, basked in her elation. She wondered when he was coming home, and though she didn’t directly ask, he knew she wanted to know if he was bringing Steve home with him. The unspoken realization was there. Tony didn’t want to think about it yet, but once she said the words, he couldn’t clear it from his mind. “He doesn’t have anyone else.”

He told her he loved her, that he missed her, and she smiled and promised to be at Stark Tower when he returned. He knew she would be.

Tony went in search of food then, his stomach growling for sustenance other than coffee. He winced, queasy, as he sat in the shadowy corner of SHIELD’s cafeteria. He hadn’t even known the helicarrier to be equipped with such a massive eatery, but he supposed it made sense. Spies and soldiers had to eat, same as everyone else. He sat and devoured a burger and fries, and the few people taking a late dinner with him wisely left him alone. It felt good to eat, even if the glances and whispers were irritating. The whole world had seen that goddamn video, including everyone aboard the helicarrier. And most of the carrier undoubtedly knew by now that Captain America would survive his harrowing captivity. And then he thought again about what Agent Hill had said (God, was that only two days ago?) about being hacked or having a traitor in their midst. But the thought wasn’t well formed, so he just filed it away for the time being and tried not to wonder if some of the late-night diners were watching him for some reason other than curiosity.

Then he went back to the infirmary, getting a little anxious about how Rogers and Barton were doing. The helicarrier was quiet, maybe more at peace than it had been since the disastrous mission where Steve had been kidnapped, but there was still tension. Tony felt it in the pit of his stomach. A calm before the storm, maybe. Clint’s alright. Steve’s going to be okay, he thought as he walked down the corridors. We got this beat. He wanted to believe that, but the niggling voices of dissent wouldn’t shut the hell up. Pepper told him he thought too much. Actually, everyone told him he thought too much and too fast. Even he told himself that. But that was who he was.
He entered into the infirmary, the guards nodding to him as they opened the security doors. Inside, he found Barton pretty much as he’d left him early that morning. Breathing on a respirator. Hooked up to blood and antibiotics and enough morphine to keep him unconscious while he recovered.

Tony glanced at his charts, even though it was probably none of his business, idly reading through the nurses’ logs of his vitals and his meds and finding it all fairly mundane. Clint was on the mend. He’d be okay (and he wasn’t poking through his charts just to make sure of that).

Then he walked to the adjacent room in the intensive care unit. Steve already looked worlds better, but, then, dead was pretty much as far from okay as one could get. His wounds had been redressed in fresh, clean bandages, and he wore a loose fitting hospital gown. A light blanket covered him to his belly. He was still on the ventilator as well, but his breathing was stronger. His blood pressure was stable, and his heart rate was more normal. On the mend, too? Tony wanted to think so, but he was too smart for empty solaces and shallow promises. This wasn’t that simple.

Bruce was there at the foot of Steve’s bed, browsing through the tablet computer that held Steve’s chart. He looked up at Tony’s entrance and removed the glasses from his face. Thor stood from a cushioned chair near Rogers’ bed, and Tony immediately wondered what made him so special to get a comfy seat. His ass ached in memory from hours spent hunched in molded, miserable plastic.

“Welcome back,” Bruce said with a relieved smile.

Tony nodded and then winced slightly. “When you’re real tired, sleeping only makes you more tired, which is why I never do it. How’s he doing?” he asked with a tip of his head toward the patient.

Bruce regarded the monitors for a moment before returning his attention to the sleek machine in his hands. “As well as can be expected, I suppose. Vitals are holding.”

“No fever?”

“Not for six hours.” Tony nodded, relieved at that. “He’s already healing. The bleeding is much better. But he’s got a long road ahead of him. I’ve been monitoring the levels of the toxin in his blood. They’re definitely decreasing, but this isn’t going to happen overnight.” Somebody else would have asked the stupid question. But Tony didn’t do stupid questions. He’s not okay. He’s not going to be okay. Not for a while, at any rate. And not without help.

“He almost died.”

“He was dead,” Tony responded, regarding Bruce seriously. “There’s no almost about it.”

Thor stiffened beside Banner. “Well, regardless, nobody just recovers from something like that. Not even him.” Bruce sighed wearily.

“When was the last time you slept?” Tony asked after a long silent moment. Bruce seemed utterly bent with exhaustion. Surely after Tony’s collapse he’d gone back to the lab to cook up more of the anti-toxin. Then he’d probably run his tests on the efficacy of it. Repeatedly, in all likelihood. He looked like a man teetering on the brink, which was never good. Especially for him.

“Can you keep an eye on it? I’ve got it coming through the IV. There’s more out in storage; just ask the nurse out there.” Tony nodded at the instructions. But Bruce made no move to leave, staring at Steve sadly. A few silent, heavy minutes ticked away. “Sommers said if his breathing continues to improve, he’ll be off the vent in a few hours.”

“Great.”

“You know, when he wakes up, there won’t be anything standing between him and the pain.”
So that was what was eating him. Tony grimaced, not wanting to admit that that thought had been lurking around the back of his mind also. Obstinate he folded his arms over his chest. “Pain goes away. Death doesn’t.”

That didn’t placate Bruce. Truth be told, it didn’t placate him, either. Not that they should have let Steve die. But this was the awful reality of it. It wouldn’t be long, with his serum-enhanced metabolism reasserting itself, before the analgesics wouldn’t work. “There must be something we can do,” Thor declared roughly. “Something to help him.”

“How his hand? I don’t know,” Bruce said lamely. Unfortunately, that was probably all they could do. That and hope Steve’s recovery was swift enough that the misery wouldn’t last too long.

“Anyway, I’m gonna get some shut eye. Call me if anything changes.” He turned away, burdened and weary, and headed to the door. Outside he nearly collided with a pair of nurses and hardly even noticed their terrified, angry glances. Even if the Hulk had helped save the world from the Chitauri, the memories of the horrific minutes where the monster had nearly destroyed the helicarrier in a fit of rage were hard to erase. Tony felt for him, even though he’d never openly admit it. Bruce kept the “other guy” under wraps with remarkable aplomb, but it was always there, lurking under the surface. It was fairly shocking that the Hulk had remained contained through all this stress, misery, and danger. A few more hours without rest and Tony wondered what would have happened. Or if Steve hadn’t survived.

Tony sighed and retrieved the abandoned pad from the foot of Steve’s bed. He glanced at the charts and noted nothing of any particular interest beyond what Bruce had said. Thor’s soft voice drew his attention. “On Asgard, there are tales of warriors returning from the dead.” The demigod was watching Rogers sorrowfully. “They are wondrous stories of magic and heroes. I remember my father telling us of the legends, Loki and me. Quite often the warrior’s resurrection was for some grander purpose, a reformation of heart and flesh for glory and greatness.” He shook his head ruefully. “I see nothing of that here.” The distant memories in his eyes troubled him greatly. “Loki was right. I always believed in these stories, that one could come back from oblivion if the fates willed it, that some callings were stronger and destinies truer. That death was a fire that reforged the spirit into something stronger, something purer. Something invincible. He laughed at my ignorance. ‘A fire can only destroy,’ he told me.”

The taut lines of his muscles clenched as he squeezed his hands into fists. “I was a fool.”

“There are worse things you can be than a fool,” Tony said.

Thor didn’t seem convinced. “I do not wish to be played one,” he firmly replied. “At home we have magics that can heal the mind and body, but here I am bound by the limits of this realm and the broken Bifrost. Your science and medicine confound me, but more than this, I am wary of those we have taken for our allies. Do you trust them?”

“Who?” Playing dumb never suited him well.

“Fury. SHIELD.”

Tony shrugged, wondering how to answer. If he should be honest. Thor was his teammate, but he didn’t want to feed the other’s suspicions unnecessarily. The demigod had something of a short-fuse (who the hell was he kidding? They all did). He didn’t want to throw fuel on the fire. And they had no evidence of anything. “I think Fury can be a manipulative son of a bitch, but I don’t believe he’d lure us into a situation that would lead to this. Underneath all his super spy bullshit, he means well. He brought us together, didn’t he? And I know he took heat for doing it, for believing in us.” Even when we didn’t believe in us. He sighed. “And Phil was a good man.” The thought of the late Agent Coulson soured his mood even further. “You think he would ever knowingly work for a
group that would let something like this happen to Captain America? He practically had a nerdgasm just meeting him. And I think Hill and some of the others are on the level.”

But the truth was there, and when it came to it, Tony wouldn’t lie. “But, no, I don’t trust SHIELD or whoever’s pulling their strings.” He rolled his eyes when he realized Thor might not understand that. “The people controlling them. They don’t have puppets on Asgard, do they?”

Thor didn’t answer. He was grim, his eyes gazing distractedly at Steve’s unconscious form. “Perhaps there was no treason,” he offered but without any genuine sign of veracity in his statement.

“Unlikely. Even if HYDRA already had those old files and nobody sent them Rogers’ medical records, somebody on this boat alerted that lab that we were coming. That’s a fact.”

“So what must we do?” asked Thor, looking back to Tony. This wasn’t his place, really. The Avengers hadn’t been a team for more than a few months, but Steve was their leader. Steve was a soldier, trained to think in terms of strategy and plans. He had a mind for it, and even though Tony got entertainment (okay, endless entertainment) from poking fun at Captain America’s aversion to all things modern and technological, Steve Rogers was smart. He always seemed to know what to do, when and where to do it, and how. And why. Tony wasn’t a team player. He didn’t like plans. He didn’t like orders. He didn’t do cooperation. But when it came from Steve, he listened. That first fight in Manhattan with Loki’s horde raining fire and death upon them taught him to trust Steve, which was saying something because Tony had trust issues. He didn’t like stepping into Steve’s shoes.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “Nothing. At least, right now. Not until we can get out of here. And until then, we close ranks. You’re staying, right?” He was surprised at how wistful he sounded and how afraid he was of the answer. This was their team. Maybe even their family.

Thor was solemn, his blue eyes weary and worn. But he nodded firmly. “I am with you,” he said with utter certainty.

“Then get some rest. And something to eat. The cafeteria is serving something that passes pretty decently for a burger and fries. Not like double cheeseburger with extra bacon and a beer, but good enough.” The demigod gave a ghost of a smile at that.

“I have had such fare,” he said, “in New Mexico. I found it agreeable.” His expression suggested otherwise, though Tony doubted it had to do with food.

“Hey, you know, I can patch you through to Miss Foster, if you want.” He made the offer without thinking twice. Surprised, Thor looked away from Steve finally and regarded him doubtfully. “What? I own the largest telecommunications network in the world. You think SHIELD are the only folks with an internet connection and a webcam?” Thor stammered in confusion. “Never mind. Yeah, it’s no problem. Just… no kinky sex stuff. I don’t know how they do things in Asgard, but word of advice: here on earth, someone’s always watching. Big Brother and all that, hacking your bandwidth, making… illegal sex videos and such. The internet is a land of inhibition and free porn. No adding to it on my dime.”

Thor only chuckled. “Were it another time, I would strike you down for such a lewd comment, Man of Metal. As it stands, I will only thank you, and let it - what is it you Midgardians say - slide.”

Tony released a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding. He didn’t doubt Thor would have knocked his lights out (probably with a single punch). “Sure thing. It’s not much, but it’s better than nothing.”
The two turned then, but before they left, Thor gently touched Tony’s arm. “Banner may be right to fear, but he was wrong about what he said.” The god gave a small, sad smile. “We stand between our captain and his pain.”

A shield. Where there wasn’t one before. He didn’t know if that would be enough.

Bruce was true to his word. Midnight rolled around and Steve was breathing well enough to be taken off the ventilator. With this came another welcomed and promising development: Steve regained consciousness for the first time in twenty-four hours. Tony was there with him, feet propped on the bed and nursing an energy drink he’d snuck in, when the monitors beeped more quickly. He leaned forward a bit to glance at Steve’s face since this wasn’t the first time in last few hours that the injured man had flirted with awareness. This time, though, Steve’s fingers did more than twitch and his eyelids did more than flutter.

Tony hopped to his feet. A sudden rush of excitement jolted him, chasing away malaise, and he set his can and his tablet to the tray table beside the bed. He leaned over Steve, watched his head turn slightly on the pillow, his hand tighten in the blanket, a wince twist his face ever so slightly. “Cap,” Tony said, grabbing the flexing fingers in his own. “Come on. No more sleeping.”

Eye lashes that had been sealed so tightly fluttered, and Tony caught flashes of blue. There was noise behind him, and Sommers came in with two nurses. “He’s waking up, doc,” Tony announced. The other man nodded, probably having seen the change in Rogers’ vitals on the screens outside. “Faster than I planned,” Sommers remarked unhappily, taking a moment to check the monitors around the bed and take Steve’s pulse. “Up the morphine. His O2 sats are steady. Let’s get him off the vent, see if that brings him around.” The doctor then turned to Steve and leaned over the bed. “Captain Rogers? It’s Doctor Sommers. Captain, can you hear me?”

Steve flinched and twitched for a moment more, struggling to open his eyes. Eventually, after a long moment during which Tony had had about enough of waiting for the rest of his life, Steve managed to keep his eyes open long enough to focus on the forms looming over him. Sommers smiled a smile that was teeming with fake compassion. “It’s good to see you, Captain. You’re aboard the helicarrier. Please stay calm. You were very badly wounded.”

Tony rolled his eyes at the worst understatement of all-time and gritted his teeth to control his tongue. Steve blinked languidly, and if the haze in the blue orbs was any indication, he was only partially with them at best. “We’re going to remove the tube from your throat. It may be somewhat uncomfortable, but don’t struggle.” After a nod from Sommers, the nurses set about extubating Steve, which Tony had always imagined to be a rather uncomfortable procedure. He had been right. After removing the tape around his mouth, they pulled the tube from his throat. Steve gagged and coughed involuntarily during the extraction, and when it was finally gone he sagged in relief. He fell back against the pillows, panting and whimpering and Tony clenched his free hand in fury that Captain America had been brought so low. “How do you feel, Captain?” asked Sommers, monitoring vital signs for any indication of erratic change and glancing at his patient. “Take your time. If your throat is too sore, you can write your level of pain.”

But Steve rasped in a voice no more than a strained whisper, “Achy.” Then he closed his eyes briefly, breathing hard still and quickly becoming soaked in a clammy sweat. “Numb.” That wasn’t good. Tony glanced at the nearly empty bag of morphine being pumped into the soldier. The dosage was enough to send a normal person to La La Land for hours, maybe even kill him, but for Rogers the most it was doing was taking the edge off it. “Water.”

One of the nurses had obviously anticipated this, bringing a plastic cup loaded with ice water and a
straw. She handed it to Tony as Sommers inclined the hospital bed slightly with a brush of his fingers to the controls. “Here. Can you sit up?” It was more than obvious Steve couldn’t, at least not without help, so Tony slid an arm behind trembling shoulders and propped the other man up slightly. He guided the straw to Steve’s lips and helped him take a few sips. “Easy. You puke on me and you will suffer.”

Steve fell back, gasping and blinking repeatedly as if he couldn’t clear his vision. “Where… where am I?” he whispered dazedly.

Tony shared a worried look with Sommers. “On SHIELD’s helicarrier, Captain. Do you remember anything? Can you tell me my name?” Steve glanced at Sommers, but there was no spark of recognition in his eyes. The doctor was clearly disappointed. But Steve’s eyes quickly flitted back to Tony. His bruised forehead furrowed. “Captain?”

“How’dya… find… me? Peggy…”

“Steve,” Tony said, grabbing the sides of Steve’s face and shaking him slightly. The half-lidded eyes wearily opened again and focused lethargically. “It’s Tony.”

“Peggy… is she okay? Is she?” The sudden fervor and fear in Steve’s voice made Tony’s heart ache. “Tell me she’s okay.”

Clearly he was out of it. In a bad way. “Cap, look at me. You’re not back there. You’re here with us. The Avengers, remember?” Tony lightly tapped Steve’s cheek in an effort to get him focused and grounded. “Come on. Eyes on me. Tony.”

“The hypoxia might have caused damage, hopefully transient but possibly permanent,” Sommers softly declared, staring at Rogers gravely. “His brain was without oxygen for almost ten minutes.”

Tony looked to the doctor with no small amount of venom in his glare. “He’s just disoriented. He’s been through hell and back and you’ve got him doped to the gills. What the hell did you expect? The guy’s died twice in his life. So what if he’s confused.”

Sommers looked doubtful but ignored Tony’s assertion. “Captain, can you tell me what year it is?”

Steve didn’t answer or seem to even understand. Then his brow wrinkled in a wince again. “Tony?”

Relief washed over Stark, and he nearly thanked God as he took up Steve’s hand again. “Yeah. You got it now.”

But Steve didn’t. His eyes closed again and he lost consciousness.

The room was quiet for a long, miserable moment. Tony set Steve’s hand across his broken chest as it shakily rose and fell. “He’s breathing on his own. Woke up on his own. Seemed to know us, well, me at least. I’m pretty unforgettable, I have to say.” What he didn’t want to acknowledge was how much Steve mistaking him for his father was bothering him. “Considering he was on death’s doorstep twenty-four hours ago, I call this improvement.”

Sommers didn’t respond to him, instead turning to one of the nurses. “Let’s do an MRI and see what we’re dealing with.”

Damn it, Tony thought. He didn’t want to bother with this bullshit. But he couldn’t let it go, either.
“Do you ever listen to anyone but yourself?”

“Do you?” Sommers returned with a vicious glower. “He was barely cognizant of his surroundings. We have no idea how the super soldier serum might react given all the drugs he’s been in contact with and the serious injuries he has. We can’t ignore any possibility, even if it’s uncomfortable to address.” Tony seethed silently. “Get an EEG as well to rule out an epileptic cause for the seizures.”

He couldn’t keep his ire contained any longer. He was tired of defending, of protecting, of pushing action and faith and fucking hope when no one else seemed to be capable of it. He wasn’t the world’s most rational or optimistic person; he wasn’t blind to his flaws, despite the prevalent opinions of the obnoxious media, and lord knew he had his demons. But it seemed utterly insane to him to give up on Captain America. Maybe things were bad, worse than they’d ever faced, and he should admit the truth: he didn’t know that it was going to be alright. He didn’t know. But to hell with admitting it, even to himself. “He is going to be okay. Do you get that?” he hissed slowly and with every bit of his anger behind his words.

The room was silent again, the emotional declaration echoing in the vacuous quiet. Then Sommers’ shoulders slumped. “Mr. Stark, I don’t think you understand the magnitude of what happened to him. I believe, with time, he can overcome the physical trauma. Given his resilience, even brain damage. But the emotional and mental damage?” He sighed and shook his head. “You’re strong, powerful even, and damn arrogant. But you are not infallible. Not one of you.”

The thought cut deep. But then he remembered what Thor had said, the low rumble of the god’s words filling his head. “Together we are.”

Sommers grunted. “For his sake, I hope you’re right.”

Tony took the opportunity to gloat when the MRI and the CT scan showed no sign of ischemic damage and the EEG came back normal. He rubbed it in Sommers’ face until the doctor threatened to throw him out of the infirmary and bar him from entering again. Tony had taunted him then, told him he could try but he would probably need a small army and the casualties would be substantial. Thankfully Bruce stepped in and stopped the altercation from escalating any further. Later, when the two of them were alone, he reprimanded Tony for acting like a child. Tony knew he was being a jerk, but he was still smarting from what Sommers had said earlier. The man was an ass and he deserved to be shown how wrong he was.

They were monitoring Steve for signs of the toxin. Their last-minute cure was doing its job in full-force now, and his blood was literally flooded with the inert poison. As the hours went on, Bruce became a little concerned that Steve’s already compromised circulatory and excretory systems wouldn’t be able to handle the overload; his kidneys, and quite a few other internal organs, had been damaged from innumerable devastating blows to his chest and belly. They considered dialysis for a while. But Tony put on a brave face and told him to give Steve a chance. They did, and it ended up being okay.

Steve was drifting in and out of consciousness. Erratically and unpredictably he came around, and every time he seemed completely unaware of where he was and what had happened. Sommers begrudgingly admitted this was probably a good thing, though it seemed counter-intuitive. His confusion wasn’t rooted in any major neurological damage, and, frankly, the disorientation was probably sparing his weakened body and mind the further trauma of remembering his captivity. The doctor recommended no one attempt to explain anything to Rogers of what had been done to him. Tony actually had to agree with that one. Heal the body, and then heal the mind. At least it was a good theory.
Only things seemed destined to work against them. It had been almost a day since Steve had first regained consciousness, and the last few times he’d awoken, he’d been distraught. Crying, first for Peggy. Then screaming. His weak whispers, pleas. Shivering, bathed in sweat, struggling against demons that only his wide, teary blue eyes seemed to see. “No… Bucky…” His fingers left indents in the molded plastic of the hospital bed when he squeezed harder and harder. “Don’t… Let go!” He’d hit one of the doctors trying to reorient him in the present, giving the woman a hell of a concussion. After that, the Avengers decided that Steve couldn’t be left alone.

They set shifts earlier that day, when the first incident occurred, each sitting with the Captain for four or five hours (or however long they could stand it). They’d done this to share the awkward and exhausting difficulty of remaining with Steve when he woke up, but not surprisingly, when one came to relieve another, they both ending up staying. None of them would openly admit this, but it was comforting to be together after what had happened. They shared the same guilt, the same frustration and rage, the same worries, and they all knew it so there was no need to bring it out into the open.

Tony arrived to find Bruce busy documenting his work on his pad. The sleek tablet computer glowed in Steve’s room; the overhead lights had been dimmed, and outside the night was thick with gray clouds that were nearly sable without the illumination of the moon peaking through them. The helicarrier was cruising gently in the Atlantic somewhere off the western coast of Africa, heading northward. There hadn’t been any further unrest since the disaster at the biotech lab, and all intel channels were quiet. The world was still buzzing with the footage of Captain America’s torture, though with the lack of new information, people were losing interest. That was fortunate, at least, but Tony knew it wouldn’t last. Eventually the world (and their enemies) would come to learn that Steve had survived. He wasn’t sure what would happen then. He didn’t really want to think about it. All he knew was he was glad there seemed to be a moment of relative calm because, should earth face a grave enough threat to require the protection of the Avengers, mankind would be shit out of luck.

Bruce looked up, the silver frame of his glasses bright in the glow of his computer, the lenses reflecting the screen. “Hey,” he greeted tiredly.

“Still playing secretary?”

Bruce gave a noncommittal shrug. “Better this stuff gets logged and properly filed. Who knows if we might need it again.”

Tony grunted, popping a couple of M&Ms into his mouth. He hadn’t even bothered to sneak them in this time. “You have more patience for paperwork than I do. And for laboratory protocol.” He tipped his head. “And in general.”

Bruce smiled at that and looked down. “Goes with the territory. Besides, sometimes the little stuff matters. It was sheer luck we found that file on Project: Red Dawn in time. Imagine if all that information had been properly catalogued. Things might never have gotten so bad. It lit a fire under Fury’s ass, at least. He’s got a whole team of special agents and translators going through every bit of paper and data from SSR.”

Tony couldn’t help but feel satisfied. “Good.”

“Barton’s off the respirator. Did you hear?”

Tony nodded. He’d run into Romanoff on the way there. She’d been leaving Clint’s room, seeking a shower and a change of clothes and a bite to eat. After her shift with Rogers much earlier in the day, she’d retired to Hawkeye’s room. Trading one vigil for another. She’d told Tony that Clint
was weak and in a lot of pain, but doing remarkably well, all things considering. Despite the damage to his lung and the stress it had put on his heart, they had him sitting up in bed and breathing well enough. Black Widow was a master at controlling her emotions, so it was saying quite a lot when Tony saw how relieved, how happy she was.

One was recovering, at least. Ironic it was the one whose cells weren’t enhanced with special regenerative properties. “How’s he?” Tony asked, gesturing toward Steve as he sat in one of the other vacant chairs near the foot of the bed.

“Okay, I guess. He’s been sleeping pretty soundly for the last two hours.” Steve did look peaceful, the most serene he’d been since his kidnapping. His brow was smooth, the tight lines about his eyes gone. There was healthy color to his face. “But I wouldn’t say he’s any more rooted in the here and now.”

Tony was tired of everyone’s preoccupation with this. “He’ll get there. He’s Captain America. He was made to take more than this.”

Bruce’s look was doubtful and withering all at once. But he ignored Tony’s delusions. “I have to say… Never mind. It’s probably nothing.”

“What?” Bruce was too smart and too conscientious to get worked up over nothing. When Banner hesitated further, Tony got impatient. “What?”

“Barnes.” Tony didn’t understand and it was clearly shown on his face because Bruce continued after a moment. “He’s been… talking a lot about him. The last few times he’s been awake, he hasn’t said anything else. I can’t make much sense of what he’s saying.”

“He has nightmares about Bucky a lot.” Bruce gave him another stern look, this one a bit more disgusted and reproachful than the last. Tony had the grace to look a little ashamed. “What? It took JARVIS a little time to get used to having house guests. I swear, he never records anyone singing in the shower. That’s just mean.” The joke fell flat. It was more than obvious Bruce was really concerned, though honestly Tony couldn’t see why. “He blames himself for what happened to Barnes.” He said this like it explained everything. Maybe it did.

“I figured. I looked up what happened.” Bruce turned his troubled gaze to Steve’s peaceful form. “This seems more intense. Like he’s preoccupied with it.” He looked like he wanted to say more, but wasn’t quite sure what. Tony didn’t know where he was going with this. He didn’t know much about Bucky. Or about Peggy Carter, save that his father would have gone after her if she hadn’t been enamored with Steve. The pictures he had of them in his mind were hazy and heroic, the sorts of things that one conjures in one’s youth that stick for years and years. They were probably nothing close to the truth.

Hell, Steve hadn’t been at all what he’d pictured.

The Captain America from his boyhood thoughts and dreams didn’t feel guilt, didn’t have nightmares like a ritual penance, didn’t silently brood with teary eyes and a furiously clenched jaw when he thought no one was looking, didn’t sketch the ghosts of his past over and over and over again in some endless and futile attempt to breathe life back into memories. The Captain America his father had revered and made him revere could take anything.

Rogers had acclimated fairly well to life in the 21st century in the months since he’d been found in the frozen wastelands of Greenland. Considering the enormity of the adjustment, there were bound to be setbacks and challenges. He’d gone to sleep in the middle of a war, and he’d woken up in the middle of another one, only the game had changed drastically. It hadn’t been easy for him to mold
what he’d been taught to this new era, where life’s quaint and intimate moments were now almost constantly accompanied by noise and an interminable stream of media and worldwide social interaction. He did a good job of pretending everything was okay, of trying to understand, of trying to accept everything around him while sacrificing nothing of himself.

Tony hadn’t cared about all of this before. Hadn’t cared about Steve before. Hell, they hadn’t even started getting along until recently. It had never occurred to him how much strength it had taken Rogers to put his uniform on at the request of total strangers and fight a battle so far removed from what he remembered. It took courage to function like nothing was wrong when everything he’d known was different and everyone he’d loved was dead. At the time, Tony had thought Steve was just plain stupid, all brawn and no brains, so the cultural and emotional and physical shock of waking up seventy years in the future just hadn’t registered. But now he realized Steve was anything but; he was just damn efficient at bottling everything up in this annoying, self-sacrificing and self-deprecating manner that made Tony want to smack him sometimes. This would be the proverbial straw to break the camel’s back.

Bruce’s voice drew him from his thoughts. “It’s nothing. I’m jumping at shadows.”

Tony shrugged. “I’m sure this is gonna dredge up all sorts of stuff.”

“He’s going to need you, you know.” Tony looked at Bruce and immediately knew where this was going. Knew it and hated it and fucking feared it and didn’t want to talk about it. Not about that.

“Drop it. It’s none of your business.” The words were sharp and laced with warning, much more so than Tony intended, but he spoke without thinking. Bruce gave him that same doubtful, worried look he was constantly giving Steve. At least Steve wasn’t aware enough to be pissed off by it. Tony sighed, clenched his fists where Bruce couldn’t see. “Yeah, Mom, I know. What do you want? To air out all of our demons?”

“You said it, not me. You’re probably the only one of us that will understand, and he doesn’t have anyone else.”

Pepper’s sorrowful words from earlier filled his head. That only made him angrier, colder. “Drop it.”

Banner raised his hands in defeat. “Sorry.”

“No problem.”

They sat in a tense silence for a while. Tony tried to ignore the disquiet of it all, but he was unnerved. What Bruce had suggested frightened him more than he wanted to admit. If the apologetic expression claiming his friend’s face was any indication, Bruce recognized what remained unsaid. Tony’s own dark experiences weren’t resolved, raw enough in fact to haunt him still. Tony looked away, ashamed even though he wouldn’t admit that, either. He was too frustrated to think.

Something beeped a cautionary tone, and the screen monitoring the IV intake began to flash. As if on cue, a nurse slipped inside the room and swapped out an empty bag of morphine with a fresh one. She was gone a breath later, obviously none too comfortable or even afraid at being in the room with them. Bruce checked the time and then sighed. “Won’t be long he wakes up to the pain. He’s going through morphine like candy.”

Tony tossed another handful of M&M’s in his mouth. “Can’t we cook up something stronger that will last longer?” He’d thought about it since Bruce had initially dismissed Thor the night before about helping Steve with the pain. But he was sure Bruce had been contemplating it as well. The
frown that was permanently affixed to the other man’s features didn’t budge, and Tony felt his faith waver.

“Maybe, but I’m not sure screwing around with his metabolism is a good idea right now. Not until that toxin has been completely flushed from his system.”

“How long until that happens?”

“At this rate? Another four or five days. They loaded him with it and a ton of other drugs.” Bruce glances down at Steve’s chart and his own computer. He grimaced with dismay. “More realistically six days. His body’s doing what it can, but this chemical is a nasty beast.”

Six days. The painkillers would be doing a whole lot of nothing much, much sooner than that. Tony didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want to think about this, either. “I don’t know what brought him back,” Bruce said softly. “But, at this point, I don’t know if it did him any favors.”

“Stop!” Tony demanded curtly, skewering Banner with as much of a glare as he could muster. “You’re kind of a downer, you know that? Ease off.”

Bruce looked insulted for a moment, but then his hard expression eased and he sighed. “That goes with the territory, too.” He managed a weak grin. “Sorry, Tony.” That miserable, tense emptiness returned filled with nothing but the hum of the helicarrier beneath them, the sounds of Steve’s vital signs continuously beeping and chirping, and their own dark thoughts. Tony was sick of all of it. “I’ll go, then, if you’re okay?”

“Sure.” He always had been a remarkable liar.

Bruce left. Tony sat for a long time, his candy long gone, still and exhausted and trying hard not to think about anything. Eventually he shifted over to Banner’s vacant chair. The infirmary was ridiculously quiet. Tony didn’t like it. He didn’t like silence or stiffness or emptiness. In his head, things were always in motion. The world had collapsed outside, shrunk and shriveled down to this one room with the one dim light overhead that barely illuminated anything past Steve’s sleeping body. It was as if there was nothing else to see, nothing else to watch, no distractions. Just Captain America and every bruise, every laceration, every wound. And those goddamn monitors with their incessant monitoring. The monotony of it all was mind-numbing.

And he couldn’t stop thinking. About what Pepper had said. And Thor and Bruce. It all spun around and around in his head and made him feel nauseous and horrible. This was a hell of a mess. And in the maelstrom of thought and worries and memories pounding him, the darkness rose and rose until he tasted dirt and sweat and fear. Until he knew pain and saw only shadow. Rocky walls. Blood.

He opened his eyes, beating away the nightmare with a gasp. Its inky fingers were slow to unfurl about his heart, which was pounding and racing and straining in his chest, and he leapt to his feet only to find himself alone save for Steve, who was still locked in a drug and trauma induced slumber. He calmed his breathing, calmed his shaking hands by twisting them painfully in his hair, calmed his heart by remembering where he was.

He got himself under control and stood, glancing over at his charge only long enough to ensure everything was fine. Then he made for the door.

The infirmary was still incredibly quiet. And dark. The fluorescent lights that had for every night thus far continually blanketed the corridors were off. Immediately alarms went off in Tony’s head, and he crept to the door to Steve’s room on quick, light footfalls. He pressed himself to the wall.
beside it and angled around to glance outside the window in the door’s center.

At first he saw nothing in the blackened hallway beyond. Only the emergency lights remained alive, spilling crimson illumination on the walls and down to the floors like blood. A black pool glistened wetly – oh, fuck, that is blood – around two still forms crumpled upon the deck plating. The guards. Tony jolted back into the room’s center and reached into his pocket for his cellphone.

“Don’t,” came a low voice in his right ear. His blood turned to ice when he felt the cold press of a gun to his temple. “I came to bring down one Avenger, and I find two. How fortunate for me, Iron Man.” There was a gruff, cruel chuckle. “Not iron without your suit. Just a man.”

The gun cocked and Tony waited to die.
Chapter 8

Breathe. *In and out. In and out.* From his vantage, Tony could see Steve’s broad chest rise and fall rhythmically. It seemed so easy, but Tony could barely do it. He couldn’t hear either, not over the rush of blood in his ears. He couldn’t move, couldn’t run or fight without risking himself or Steve (or, most likely, both of them) getting shot. But he could think. He could always think, and his mind was racing. *Keep him talking. Taunt him. Lie. Insult. Beg. Do something. Keep talking until somebody comes. Somebody has to come oh God let somebody come here and help me—*

“So you’re the sick bastard who sold Captain America to his enemies,” Tony finally said, struggling to hold himself completely still and not provoke the man that held the gun menacingly to his head. He glanced to the door from the corner of his eye, but there was no one. Whoever this bastard was he was smart. He’d had to have been aboard the helicarrier undetected, under the nose of the Director of SHIELD, for days to plan something like this. Or weeks. Or longer, and that thought made Tony’s stomach twist. A double agent who had had his hands in SHIELD’s most sensitive inner workings. It was terrifying to think of how deeply they had been compromised.

“Such a brilliant deduction from a man of your genius, Mr. Stark,” his assailant sneered. He had an accent, British or Australian maybe. Tony couldn’t tell.

“What was the going price for bringing down Rogers, huh? Hopefully a hefty one, since it cost you your life.”

The man laughed haughtily. “Oooh. I’m shaking in fear.”

Tony swallowed through a tight, dry throat. “You’re not getting out of here alive. You’re fucked.”

“Do you honestly think I don’t know that? I volunteered for this mission, for the honor of killing Captain America. *That* was my reward, for my name to live as a hero’s among HYDRA for all time.” Tony could barely breathe for his horror and rage. “Unfortunately you stole my glory from me. I suppose it’s fitting that you repay me with an even greater legacy. The death of two Avengers.” There was a little chuckle again. “Oh, I’m sorry. Make that three.”

Tony didn’t understand for a long, horrible moment. Then he realized, and he closed his eyes against the sting of tears and the crushing pain in his chest. “I’ll kill you for this,” he said in a throaty, desperate growl.

“Unlikely.” A black gloved hand smacked down on his shoulder and shoved him roughly to his knees. “Hands on your head.” Shaking, Tony closed his eyes and did as he was told, lacing his fingers together on the back of his head. He couldn’t control the shivers that wracked him when his captor dug his free hand into his pocket and yanked out his phone. “It seems you’re the one who’s afraid,” said the man behind him. The assassin grabbed his right wrist and snapped something hard and plastic around it. His left followed quickly, and the two were then manacled behind his back. Tony heard cloth rustle and then the gun was jabbed uncomfortably into his head again. “It must be frightening to see how deeply we’ve cut you and how helpless you were to prevent it.”

Every bit of self-preservation screamed desperately for him not to fight any further, not to aggravate this dangerous situation, but he didn’t listen. Self-preservation wasn’t one of his strengths. “Next time, we won’t be helpless. Next time, you’ll fall. All of you. The Red Dawn. HYDRA. Whoever stands in our way. We’ll take you down and get our vengeance.”

“There will be no next time, Mr. Stark. Your hawk is dead. Your team is shattered. In case you
failed to notice, although I don’t see how you could have with it blaring on every television screen in the world, we brought your captain to his knees. And he will never rise again.” Defiance blazed through him like wild fire. In the shadows all he could see was Steve, chained and gagged and beaten. Weak and humiliated. *Destroyed.* “We spilled his blood, destroyed his body, turned his strength against him. And when the moment came, the moment to show the world our domination over your pathetic Avengers, he knelt before us. He knelt and he *begged.*”

“No, he never begged!” Tony shouted. “You couldn’t make him!”

The blow to the side of his face sent him reeling. White lights exploded behind his eyes as he struck the floor hard. Tony gasped as a boot slammed into his abdomen, curling in on himself as best as he could. The man didn’t relent, kicking at him again and again, until he was bloodied and wheezing. Another blow to his head sent him down into the shadows only to be hauled up again when the assassin pushed him onto his back, crushing his hands painfully, and lifted him by his shirt. There was a sadistic gleam in the man’s eyes as he loomed over his prey. Sadistic and wild and violent. Unhinged. Terror squeezed Tony’s heart. “Well, then you do me the honor, Stark.”

He didn’t understand at first, his brain so rattled from the blows to his head. The assailant grew impatient, jabbing the muzzle of the gun into his forehead. “Plead with me to spare you.”

The shadows spun nauseatingly. Tony mumbled around the blood in his mouth. “What is it with you guys and the kneeling and the groveling and begging? You and Loki... All you wackos... You must really get off on it.”

The punch to his jaw left him gasping and seeing stars. His head smacked to the floor as the man shoved him violently back down. Tony groaned, coughing, the bitterness of blood coating his tongue. “You got something to prove?” he asked, but his voice held nothing of his characteristic scathing wit. It was more a moan than anything else. He peeked to the door, but the shadows were too thick and his vision too blurry. No one was coming. No one.

“Only that your dear captain is not perfect,” snarled the hazy form overhead. “A bullet to the head will kill even him.”

Panic seized Tony. He was helpless. “No,” he gasped. “No!”

A haughty, hateful laugh. “So you’ll beg for him, then, but not for yourself? My, my, what would the world think of the great Tony Stark pleading for the life of another man? Perhaps everyone was wrong about you. Perhaps you do care.” The assailant curled a fist in Tony’s shirt, keeping the gun maliciously pressed to his forehead, as he hauled the billionaire up and shoved him forward. He slammed into the side of Steve’s bed and went down on his knees, struggling until the gun was smashed across the back of his head. Agony rushed over him in a heated, miserable wave, and he could hardly see. The man yanked Tony upright by his hair and pointed the gun at Steve’s sleeping form. “Okay, then. Beg. Beg or I’ll make you watch me kill him before I kill you.”

Tony was wheezing, horrified. *Fight him. Do something. Fight!* But, with that gun trained on Steve, he knew struggling would only end this faster and not in their favor. *Then do what he wants. Draw this out. Give them time to save you.* What the hell was he thinking? There was no way out of this. “Don’t hurt him,” he said.

The fingers in his hair pulled even harder. “You can do better than that.”

Tony licked his bloody lips. The humiliation didn’t matter. All he could think about was Steve and how he’d suffered and how he was damn sure he was never going to let that happen again. The logical part of his mind screamed at him, railing against the futility of it all. Begging wouldn’t
matter. Begging wouldn’t stop it. But he did it anyway, because it was all he had left. It was all he could do. “Please. Don’t take him from us.”

“Us?”

“Me, goddamn it! Please! If you wanna shoot someone, make a symbol of someone, take me!”

There was a satisfied grunt. “Alright, Stark.” The gun swung down and was rammed into his temple again. “You’ve convinced me.” Tony closed his eyes and tried to picture Pepper.

The sound of an alarm klaxon blaring shattered the horrible, endless moment, and then the door to the room opened. In the shadows silver flashed, and then the man cried out, releasing Tony and stumbling to the side. Tony gasped, struggling to rise and shove his attacker away. He saw something sticking from the bastard’s stomach. A scalpel.

The man looked up. It was impossible to see anything clearly, but Tony thought there was horror and then rage on his face.

In the doorway, Clint leaned heavily on the frame. His right shoulder bled freely from a gunshot wound, his arm held uselessly to his chest, and perspiration lined his pale face. He held another scalpel in his left hand, poised like a knife. “Yeah,” he gasped, clearly in pain and over-exerted. “You missed, asshole.”

The assassin howled in rage and brought the gun to bear, pointing it at Barton and all too eager to correct his mistake. Tony launched himself forward in the split second where the man was distracted, tackling him from the rear. They went down in a mess of tangled bodies, the gun clattering off across the floor. Tony tried to keep his weight on the other man; it was all he could do with his arms bound as they were. But the assassin twisted, and a well-placed kick to Tony’s chest sent all the air from his lungs. Squirming, he tried to overcome the burning in his ribs and get himself to his feet, but it was harder than it should have been. And he couldn’t move fast enough to stop their assailant from getting to Barton.

Clint cried out as the man rammed him, shoving him out into the hallway. Tony gritted his teeth, pushing himself to his knees and scrambling to Barton’s defense. In the ruddy shadows beyond, he could only see flashes of rapid movement and the glint of the scalpel. Then there was a gasp – thankfully not Clint’s – as the man reeled and fell back inside, holding a deeply lacerated cheek. Tony couldn’t see Barton but wasted not a moment, not thinking as he again propelled himself into the bastard. They fell to the side, taking a plastic chair and a cart of medical supplies with them. This time Tony had the misfortune to land beneath the other man.

A second later hands wrapped around his throat. Tony choked as thumbs pressed viciously into his windpipe. No! No! The words couldn’t escape his lips. Agony and desperation rolled over him in great debilitating waves as he fought for air that wasn’t coming. He kicked and struggled vainly, but he wasn’t strong enough to dislodge the weight from his chest and the murderous fingers from his neck. Everything was burning, straining, suffering. The only thing he could think was that he needed to breathe. He needed to breathe or he was going to die. Now.

There was a thunderous boom, and then the pressure was gone.

Tony sucked in a wondrous breath when the vise-like grip on his throat went slack. Precious air filled his chest, wonderful and sweet, and he greedily inhaled more. Coughing followed, and pain, too much pain, as the stark realization of how close he’d been to dying freed tears from his eyes and a sob of misery and relief from his throat. Something hot and sticky soaked into his shirt. “Oh, shit,” he whispered, choking on the air he so desperately craved. “Oh, God.”
Clint lowered the gun and then collapsed unceremoniously beside Tony as he tried to push and squirm out from under the corpse. A gunshot wound to the back of assassin’s head had killed him instantly.

Tony finally freed himself and scrambled over to Clint where the archer sat with his back to the wall. The two men rested there a moment, shoulder to shoulder. Tony managed to catch his breath a bit after a long moment of relieved silence. “I thought you were out of commission,” he said, his voice little more than a hoarse whisper. *I thought you were dead.*

Clint tipped his head back into the wall, the gun barely clasped in mostly limp fingers. The shoulder of his hospital gown was stained heavily with red. “He couldn’t aim for crap,” he murmured, closing his eyes. A wince was permanently affixed to his features, his short brown hair sticking up in all directions and damp with sweat. “Lucky for you, because somebody had to save your ass.”

“You alright?” Tony asked.

There was a small, weak, unconvincing nod. “You?”

“Been better,” Tony rasped.

“Yeah. What about Rogers? Did he hurt him?” A note of fear crept into Hawkeye’s words.

Tony swallowed thickly and glanced to the dark bed. “No,” he said gratefully.

“Good. Saved his ass too, then.”

They said nothing else, pressed close to each other for comfort with the dead body of the man sent to kill them on the floor at their feet. That was how the SHIELD agents found them when they barged into the room a few minutes later.

“Ow!” Tony snapped. The nurse trying to clean out the cut on his temple flushed nervously, unsure of what to do for a moment before reapplying the antiseptic to the sore area. It stung like hell. “Ow. Okay, knock it off.” She didn’t, held her ground though it seemed like she wanted to bolt. Tony glared a moment more but then let her continue to dab and clean and bandage the multitude of contusions on his face.

They sat in Steve’s room – or, at least, it had been Steve’s room until they had moved the unconscious and thankfully unhurt Captain America to another area. In the ten minutes or so since the attack, a veritable crowd of SHIELD agents had assembled inside, as well as Thor and Banner and Black Widow. Natasha was hovering beside Clint and trying not to make a show of her concern. Fury danced in her blue eyes as she glanced to the corpse that was lying on the floor in front of what was Steve’s bed. Clint himself was pale and sweaty, shaking as he lay atop a stretcher with three nurses and Sommers and another doctor Tony didn’t know treating him. He was breathing with an oxygen mask strapped around his face, hunched and grimacing perpetually. From what Tony could tell, the bullet wound to Barton’s shoulder was superficial; the shot had gone clean through him, and though it had bleed significantly, the bones hadn’t been damaged. He would heal, but for an archer, this type of a wound was debilitating. Tony highly doubted Clint would be atop rooftops with his bow in hand any time soon and without substantial therapy to regain full use of his arm. Additionally, the stab wound had reopened slightly during the melee and was oozing into fresh bandages. It would require restitching and extra care to ensure it wouldn’t be compromised by infection. It was all just too much for Clint’s already battered body. Tony realized how very close they had come to losing another Avenger.
Thor paced restlessly near the window, clearly struggling to stay in control of his anger. And Bruce was speaking quietly to Agent Hill. The young woman was troubled, staring angrily at the dead double agent. Tony’s attention was drawn from her when the nurse tenderly touched the back of his skull. “I said knock it off!” he snapped.

“Mr. Stark,” said the doctor supervising the nurse. “Sir, please. You really should have a CT scan. And take it easy! You may have a concussion.”

That was probably the least of it. He felt worse than he looked, and he knew he looked like shit. He was covered in blood, his own and Clint’s and that of the man who’d died on top of him. His face was a mess of bruises and swelling. His wrists were rubbed raw. His head was pounding both from the blows he’d taken and the horrific rush of brushing so closely with death. His torso was a mottled painting of red and purple; the doctor had palpated the area gently and found nothing to be broken and no signs of internal hemorrhage, but it still hurt like hell. He couldn’t breathe deeply, and even if his chest was capable of managing that, his throat wasn’t. It burned with every swallow, with every word, with every breath. This sucks, he moaned inwardly over the awful battering of his pulse to his skull.

But he ignored it all when the door swished open again and Nick Fury stalked inside. If he’d been awoken from sleep, it wasn’t obvious; he was decked out in his customary black coat and black shirt and black pants and boots and eye patch. His eye was narrowed and his jaw was tautly set. Every bit of the intimidating man radiated a dark aura of rage and wrath.

Everybody started talking at once. Thor wasted no time, rounding on Fury and shouting, “Lord of SHIELD, you have failed to protect our injured comrades. This is not acceptable! On Asgard you would have your titles and rights stripped from you for such a failure!”

Sommers said, “Sir, we need to get Agent Barton back into surgery right away, but he insists on knowing what is happening.”

And Hill said, “Director, I have information for you. These men–”

“But I have failed us repeatedly. From now on, I will not leave their sides,” Thor promised, and his blue eyes darted around the room as though challenging anyone to question him.

But that didn’t end the argument. It grew louder and louder, and Tony stood, steadied by the nurse still trying to treat his face. The noise was torturing his already tortured head.

“Enough!” Fury bellowed. Instantly the vitriolic debate died. The silence was tense, frightened even.

Clint groaned and pulled the mask from his face feebly with his good hand. “Keep it down to a dull head stomping, please,” he moaned, struggling just to get that one sentence out. He fell back against
the stretcher, closing his eyes in exhaustion. “Thanks.”

“Agent Barton, you can be debriefed later,” Fury said, shockingly compassionately considering the ire in his voice just a moment before.

“Yes, sir,” Barton murmured. “Later.” Fury nodded to Sommers, and the doctor quietly directed the others to wheel Clint out of the room. Natasha held onto his hand for a moment. “I’ll be okay, Nat,” Clint wearily assured her, cracking open his eyes for a moment to meet her gaze. She didn’t seem confident of that, hesitating as the nurses and other doctors prepared to move him. But she only nodded slightly and released his hand as they exited the room.

Fury stood at the door, staring down at the dead assassin. His face had grown about as dark as the night outside the helicarrier’s windows. Every light in the infirmary was on as bright as it could go now, and the sight of the grisly murder was disturbing. The man was dressed in black SHIELD garb, the same sort that Barton himself often wore. His face that had before been swathed in shadows was comely. Somehow Tony had expected this hideous monster, like a violent offender who’d escaped from prison, but he looked like an everyday guy – minus the gaping hole near his right temple where blood and brain matter and shattered skull left a messy sign of a bullet’s passing. The ruby pool spread beneath the body was fairly large and marred on the edges where Tony had scrambled free from his attacker. Just looking at it made the all too fresh memories of the assault push up in Tony’s mind, and he stubbornly pushed them back down with a shaking, nauseated sigh.

“I want to know how the hell this happened,” Fury seethed.

The statement wasn’t directed at anyone in particular, but Hill answered. “He’s Agent Andrew Caldwell, someone we pulled from MI6. He’s been with us for about a year but hasn’t been on assignment for the last two months. We found another body in the IT lab. Agent Carson Mathers, MIT graduate, telecom specialist.” She held a tablet before Fury displaying a picture of the other man. He, too, seemed like a nobody.

“Caldwell killed him first?” Fury asked.

Hill shook her head. “No, sir. The gunshot wound was self-inflicted.” Tony grimaced, fighting his anger at how screwed up this situation had become. “This was found beside the body.” She drew a folded piece of printer paper from the pocket of her uniform and handed it to her boss. The corner of it was stained in blood.

Tony held his breath as Fury opened the paper. He could see messy hand-writing on the other side. Fury’s cross expression grew even more so as he read the note. “This night will mark the end of the Avengers. The world will wake to the red dawn and know the names of the men who made it so. The men who killed Captain America.”

Bruce shook his head, disgusted. “What the hell is with these guys and theatrics?” The question was rhetorical, but even if it hadn’t been, no one really had an answer.

“Cowards,” Thor said, repulsed that someone would be so low as to take his own life rather than face punishment for his crimes.

Hill’s blue eyes were narrowed in thought. “Mathers must have tapped into our secure lines,” she surmised, “to warn the lab when the Avengers were deployed. And to warn the kidnappers of the plan to stop the weapons sale the night Rogers was abducted. He’d have had access to them.” She shook her head, tense and betrayed. “He might have even sabotaged our efforts to link the kidnappers’ with known terrorists.”
“He was involved with that operation?” Fury asked tensely.

Hill shook her head. “Unknown, sir, but he didn’t need to be. He had access to the mainframe.” The whole thing had felt wrong at the time, but everyone had been so distraught with Steve’s abduction that no one had paused to really explore why SHIELD, with its unbelievably fast computer core and its vast network of intelligence (legally obtained or otherwise), seemed unable to gather any information about who had taken Captain America and how they had managed a fairly complicated operation. Only when the video had been broadcast, only after the bastards had made their point, had they been able to find Rogers. Only when it was too late. “He had his hands in our computer for months. He was an expert hacker.”

“Yeah,” Bruce muttered darkly, “only he played for the other team.”

“And him?” Natasha asked, tipping her head toward the body on the floor.

“He was to finish the job if the captors failed in theirs,” Thor answered coldly. “Steven means nothing as the… symbol of their red dawn if he recovers and soon after resumes his duties as our captain.” Tony couldn’t help the sour thoughts spinning around in his head. Soon after. But maybe never. Steve should have been dead. A normal man wouldn’t have survived the torture. A normal man would have died from any one of his serious injuries, let alone all of them. A normal man wouldn’t have clung stubbornly to life when massive infection and cardiac complications pulled him into whatever lay after. And a normal man wouldn’t have had two of the greatest minds in the world fighting to save him. Or a master assassin to protect him when he couldn’t protect himself.

But Steve had had Clint and Bruce and Tony. The Avengers were not normal. They were extraordinary, powerful, and unpredictable. Still, this was evil of the worst kind. Not sloppy. Not stupid. Smart and calculating. They would have covered their bases. And they nearly had. They’d waited until the dead of night, until the infirmary was quiet and nearly empty of staff. Then it had been a simple matter of hacking into the infirmary’s security systems and setting the area to lockdown. Mathers had probably reinitialized the doors to accept a passcode from only Caldwell. He’d probably even been smart enough to make the people monitoring the helicarrier’s systems from the bridge think nothing was going on. Caldwell had infiltrated, shot Clint and another doctor and nurse who’d been monitoring the ICU from the desks outside, and taken down the two guards outside Steve’s door. They were lucky only four people had died.

Fury looked like he was grinding his teeth. He probably was. The depth of the damage done to SHIELD was only now being unveiled. They had been screwed from the very beginning, before Natasha had gathered the bad intel, before the call for the Avengers to assemble had reached Stark Tower, before they had gathered on the bridge of the helicarrier for Fury’s orders about their mission. “Get this piece of crap off my floor,” the director ordered lowly. The SHIELD agents standing about with their guns at the ready moved to do just that, and a cleaning crew was trying to slip into the room to begin to contend with the gruesome mess.

Fury turned to Hill. “I want this problem solved yesterday,” he ordered. “I want everyone on this boat checked and double-checked. I want to know how these two slipped past our psyche profiles and background searches. I want this covered and I want to know for damn sure it is never happening again.”

“Yes, sir,” Hill said, drawing a deep breath and squaring her shoulders.

“And I want constant surveillance of Rogers and Barton.”

Tony hadn’t said much during this conversation, which was extremely uncharacteristic of him. This was partly because his throat hurt like a bitch. But mostly it was because only a single thought had
dominated his mind since the SHIELD agents had arrived not long ago. And now he spoke. “No.” Fury looked at him as he shrugged away from the doctors and nurses trying to treat him. “As soon as Rogers and Barton can be moved, we’re gone.”

A long, tense moment followed. He expected an argument, or at least an objection, from Fury. But the director only watched him with a resigned look in his single eye. Obviously he, too, understood the sad fact. They could never be sure they were safe here. SHIELD had been compromised. And while Captain America and Hawkeye were too wounded to protect themselves, they couldn’t knowingly stay near danger. Finally, Fury offered, “I’ll make the arrangements to get you to New York.”

His submission stunned almost everybody in the room. Tony was quick to answer, despite the ache in his throat and his voice that sounded more like a croaking toad than a man. “No, I’ll handle it. Just get us close to the eastern seaboard.”

“Sir,” Hill said, making no effort to hide her displeasure and alarm, “if we bring the carrier closer to shore, it increases the risk that any other Red Dawn operatives aboard will escape.”

Fury turned to her. “If they get off this boat, we’ll hunt them down. They won’t get away. They’d be foolish or desperate to even try. In the meantime, secure this operation, Agent Hill.”

Unhappy with that, Hill wisely chose to back down. “Aye, sir.”

Sommers, however, was quick to voice his own opinions. And they were bad opinions. As always. “Director, Rogers should not be moved from my care. He may be recovering, but his situation remains serious, dangerous, and completely unpredictable. He may need access to emergency medical care on a moment’s notice should things take a turn for the worst.”

“I’m Tony Stark,” Tony said, wincing at how horrible his own name sounded when he said it. It really didn’t achieve the effect he was going for. He jabbed a forefinger into the air. “One phone call and I have ten of New York’s best doctors as my personal slaves. And we have Doctor Banner, who’s more than competent to handle anything that might happen. And any equipment we need I have or can get. Probably better stuff than what you have here.”

Sommers didn’t know a losing battle when he saw one. Tony supposed that was a good thing; despite all the doom-saying and moaning and groaning the doctor had done, he had stuck with Steve, fought to save his life when the odds were stacked against them. However, he didn’t want to argue with Sommers anymore. He was too damn tired of everything being a struggle. “Director, I don’t believe this is wise.”

Fury seemed torn for a moment. “You don’t own us,” Tony said. Thor folded his arms over his chest and approached his teammate supportively. Banner watched Fury worriedly, and Romanoff looked like she didn’t know to whom she owed the higher allegiance. She and Barton were SHIELD agents, after all. If Fury ordered her to stay, she had to stay. Tony silently dared the master spy to try. “You can’t keep us here.”

The tension rose again. All eyes were on Fury, waiting. Then the man nodded at Tony. “Make the arrangements. Hill, alter our course towards New York.”

The group then dispersed. Fury looked at the pool of blood on the floor disgustedly and then turned and left quickly with Hill at his side. After sharing a few short words with what remained of his medical team, Sommers went to tend to Barton, though not without casting Tony a weary, disparaging look. He had lost this battle, and he was not at all happy about it. Frankly, Tony couldn’t silence the niggling voice in the back of his head that maybe this wasn’t such a good idea,
that if something did happen, they *wouldn’t* be equipped to handle it. And there would be no one they could blame but themselves. *But me.*

But he couldn’t let it be seen that he wasn’t sure of this. He limped quickly over to the agents who’d lifted the dead body on top of a body bag on a stretcher. “Hold up, guys,” he ordered. He swallowed his nausea and forced himself not to look at the assassin’s face as he dug around in the man’s pants pockets. The SHIELD agents gave each other questioning looks, and Tony struggled to hold onto his dinner and wondered what the hell he was doing digging through the pants of the man who’d beaten him and nearly strangled him. But his fingers brushed against the corner of his phone after way too many awkward seconds, and he pulled the sleek item free. “Okay. Off you go. Doing a bang-up job, by the way.”

Bruce came closer, concern plastered all over his face. “You look like crap, Stark,” he said.

“Almost dying does that,” Tony said dismissively. He wiped the blood off the corner of his phone in revulsion, his mouth tight with a frown as he smeared it on his pants. He didn’t know why he bothered. His hands were covered with it.

“Couldn’t have just gotten another phone?”

“You think I know Pepper’s number?” he asked, unlocking the phone and trying not to seem as rattled and shaken as he felt. His fingers trembled but he managed to bring up Pepper’s name in his contacts list. Just seeing her picture grounded him. But he didn’t feel ready to call her. He didn’t think he could put up a brave face, and he didn’t want to scare her. At least his phone had survived this ordeal. “I’m gonna need a complete list of everything you need to manufacture that anti-toxin, as well as anything else you think we oughta have on hand.”

Bruce nodded. Natasha looked at him, concern unbridled in her gaze. “You going to be alright?” she asked.

Tony grunted. “Um, yeah. As alright as I can be,” he said. For some reason, he wanted to cry.

“Let me help you get cleaned up. Get you something for the pain,” Bruce said. Tony was too tired to argue, nodding wearily. “You guys stay here. If anything changes with Barton or the Cap, I want to know immediately.”

Thor nodded, sharing a quick look with Natasha. “We’re not going anywhere,” she assured. There was fire in her eyes and determination in her voice.

Bruce draped Tony’s arm over his neck and wrapped his own around Tony’s waist, effectively pulling most of Stark’s weight from his own feet. Tony would never say so, but he was infinitely grateful for the support, for the physical contact, right now. “Come on.”
Chapter 9

The walk to the quarters he’d been assigned was too long and too torturous. He felt worse and worse with each passing step along the gray corridors of the helicarrier. Bruce didn’t remark when he slowed his pace, didn’t pry, didn’t feel the need to fill the vacuous quiet with idle palaver. They just went on and on, and then they reached the room and Bruce opened the door. They slipped inside and Tony clumsily stumbled to his bed. “You want to sleep?” Bruce asked.

“No,” Tony said, though his body was betraying his assertion. The minute he hit the mattress, the comforting oblivion of slumber opened its arms to him and lulled him closer.

“Shower?” Banner asked, fishing around in Tony’s meager belongings that he’d hastily packed three (or four? He was losing count) days ago when he’d left New York with Steve at Fury’s hasty summons. Bruce found a clean shirt and jeans and laid them out on the bed beside Tony. “Can you manage that?”

Tony grunted, draping his arm over his eyes to blot out the overhead lights. “How the hell did this all go so wrong?” he asked.

There was no answer for that. How could there be? But Bruce tried to respond anyway. “We can’t win every fight. Sometimes, you lose.”

“We don’t,” Tony countered. “We’re not supposed to. And we’re not supposed to lose anyone. Especially not him.”

“Why?”

Tony couldn’t keep the raw edges of his emotions from bleeding into his tone. “Because he’s supposed to be invincible. He’s Captain America. Fucking Captain America… It’s not fair. He’s just a kid.” He swallowed a sob, and his throat hurt more and more for clenching his misery down into his chest. He’d been strong for days and he didn’t have it in him anymore. “Just a kid. Probably still a virgin even. Steven Rogers and his iron-clad morals. Bet he never got it on with that Agent Carter woman back in his time, and he sure as hell hasn’t brought anybody home in this time.” JARVIS would have told him. Steve hardly even went out, even, at least not without Tony or Pepper or Bruce. Tony winced, thinking about how lonely it must have been for him. He doesn’t have anyone else. God, he wished he could stop thinking that. “That really sucks. Dying a virgin.”

“He’s not going to die, Tony. He’ll heal.”

Tony felt wetness beneath his eyelids, wetness he refused to let Bruce see. “I feel like we’re all the king’s men, you know? We’re not going to be able to put him back together.”

Bruce didn’t say anything for a long moment. Tony felt him shift uncomfortably and then move closer. The other man set a warm hand on his knee. “Go get cleaned up. I’m going to go get things ready. Once we get out of here, it’ll be okay.” It’s not going to be okay. It’s not. That brought a fresh burst of stinging heat to his eyes, and he was sure Bruce noticed his shuddering sigh. “Don’t be such a downer, Tony.” The statement was meant to be light-hearted. Tony peaked at Bruce from under his arm and saw a small smile. “Ease off, right?”

He swallowed. “Yeah. Right.”

Bruce helped him sit up and into the bathroom. Then he was alone.
He stood still for a long moment, struggling to compose himself. He didn’t want to break down, didn’t want to collapse, because he was afraid if he did he wasn’t going to be able to get back up. He was so tired, so miserably fucking tired. And everything hurt. Everything. But after a few minutes of heavy breathing and wavering on his feet, he managed to pull it together. He wasn’t always the best at that, but this experience was teaching him to find strength he didn’t know he had. To find selflessness and maturity, those things that Steve seemed to be utterly saturated with. So he numbed himself to the pain, physical and emotional, and methodically stripped his blood-covered garments from his bruised body.

The shower eased the aches in his chest and head a little. He stood under the spray, the water as hot as it would go, and let it slam into him like little fiery needles. It didn’t take long for him to become numb even to the pleasant massage against his back. He fumbled for soap, just a perfume-less, boring lump of white, and scrubbed. But when he saw the pale pink tint of the water running from his face, he cringed. As suddenly as strength had come, it was gone. And when he saw his hands, stained red, he scrubbed at them harder and harder and harder until it fucking hurt and all he could see was red but not because there was still blood on them but because he’d tortured them so badly that they were scalded and swollen. “Fuck,” he moaned, and the tears came then, hot and unstoppable. He slid down the tiles and sat on the floor. He cursed again and again, the whirlwind of trauma and terror and anger and worry rushing over him, and he felt every speck of misery and despair he hadn’t let himself feel before over the last few days.

He didn’t know how long he sat there. The water got cold. His grief was spent. He stood gingerly, finished washing, and turned off the shower. Steam had filled the small bathroom. He grabbed a towel and dried himself wearily. He stood before the mirror, wiped the foggy surface clean, and then looked at himself. He didn’t really recognize who he saw. He hadn’t recognized himself after Afghanistan either. The blackness rose inside him again, the murky memories trying to break free and torment him. The arc reactor shed its pale blue light, and somehow, even though it had been borne from some of the darkest moments in his life, he found comfort in it. He focused on that. Sometimes he saw Yinsen’s face so clearly, and other times it was all just a haze of suffering. Sometimes he forgot it had even happened. Sometimes it was all he could think about, and he had nightmares that scared Pepper as much as they did him. Sometimes he could talk about it, the good parts (admittedly few) and the bad parts (way too many), and other days he thought he would never get over it. But that light – it had become the one constant in his life.

That, and Pepper. And, he had a feeling, the Avengers.

He dressed in the clothes Bruce had found, brushed his hair and his teeth as much as his hurt jaw and hurt throat would allow. The minty freshness chased away the lingering bitterness of blood, at least. Outside he found a container of pills and a bottle of water. Vicodin. Obviously Bruce had stopped back, and he hoped it hadn’t been during his meltdown. He downed one with a wince when the fire in his throat became a veritable blaze of pain. It took him a minute to steady his breathing, and he drank a few more tiny sips of water to soothe the flames. He sat on his bed and saw his phone resting on the gray comforter. He felt better, more in control, more like his normal self. He could call her without breaking down. At least, he hoped so.

A second later, Pepper’s voice came over the speaker of his phone. “Tony?”

Well, he wasn’t going to be able to hide anything. “Hi, Pep.”

“Oh, God, what happened to your voice? Are you alright? Why do you have the video off? I want to see you.”

“No. Don’t think you really want to,” he murmured, grimacing at the thought of how he looked like
he’d been hit by a tank. “I want you to still want me after all this, thank you very much.”

“Let me see you,” she replied, and there was no room for argument. A tap of his thumb to the touch screen of the phone initiated video calling, and Pepper’s pretty face appeared a breath later. Her auburn hair was drawn up into an elegant bun. She wore a green silk blouse. Her blue eyes instantly filled with tears and her hand flew to her mouth. “God. Oh, Tony. What happened?”

“You should see the other guy,” he lamely said, but the joke fell flat and only reminded him of what had happened. So he just cut to the chase, because watching her fear for him made everything hurt even more. “I need get to in contact with Rhodey. We need a ride out of here.”

Pepper was smart. She was well-versed in all things Stark, so she knew that determined look in his eyes meant whatever she wanted to know about how he was would have to wait. “Rhodey? I’m not sure he can get away. I think he’s at Langley.”

Tony sighed. “I need someone I can trust to get us to Stark Tower. This is media nightmare waiting to happen. I need to know whoever gets us back is someone on the level.” He didn’t feel the need to tell her about the Red Dawn, about HYDYA, about these monsters than seemed bound and determined to use their allies against them to kill Captain America and any Avenger they could get their hands on. No, there was no need to tell her about any of that. “Give him anything he wants. I’ll do anything. Just get him here. I’ll send you the coordinates when I know more.”

Pepper didn’t need to be convinced. Every word made the fear shine brighter in her eyes. “I’ll call him right away,” she promised. “You’re coming home?” She was afraid of his answer, afraid he’d say no. The hope in her voice almost made his heart break.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I’m coming home.”

The helicarrier was aloft off the coast of New Jersey about twelve hours after the failed assassination attempt on Captain America. It was early afternoon on the east coast of the United States, so they waited until nightfall to make their move. For Clint, this was well enough. He needed the extra time in the care of the doctors. The second surgery to deal with the wound in his shoulder had been minor, but the stress of another injury on top of his near-death experience outside the biochem lab was a cause for some worry. They put him back on oxygen for a bit and resumed a blood transfusion. He was going to be alright, but this was definitely a setback.

For Steve, though, this further delay danced perilously close to the point where his metabolism had restored itself enough to render all forms of analgesia and sedation useless. He was burning through drugs like a fire went through gas. They could barely keep him asleep for more than an hour, and even then, his rest was light and fitful. At least with the unfortunate resilience to medications, his enhanced healing abilities were returning as well. Even still, his more serious injuries, the internal damage, the stab wounds and deeper contusions and broken bones, were still of major concern to both Sommers and Bruce.

The doctor was paying a final visit now. Tony and Bruce watched him check Steve’s vitals. The nurses were changing the bandages and giving Sommers a chance to examine the worst of the wounds. Then they dressed Steve in a light drawstring pants and a loose hospital gown. Eventually Sommers turned to them, but he only looked at Tony. “This won’t end when he wakes up. This won’t end when his body heals. I hope you know that, and I hope you know what you’re doing, Mr. Stark.”

Tony wasn’t angered at that. There was a soft light in Sommers’ eyes. Concern. Hurt. Even fear. “I do,” he said firmly, trying not to betray how uncertain of this plan of his he really was.
“Take care of him,” Sommers ordered.

“We will.” With a last look at Steve, Sommers slowly and unwillingly headed for the door. Tony sighed against the ache of shame in his chest. He hated feeling wrong about anything. He hadn’t trusted Sommers, probably out of paranoia more than anything. But Sommers was fantastic at what he did, just arrogant. And so was he. “Thanks, doc,” he called. Sommers turned at the open door to meet his gaze. An apology was not offered by either party, so there couldn’t be forgiveness. But there was understanding. Then Sommers was gone.

When Tony looked back, the nurses were working on getting Steve ready to travel. They were covering him in blankets, tucking him in tightly. He winced when they did so, struggling a bit. A nurse caught his hand and shushed him gently, tenderly brushing the hair from his forehead. Tony felt even guiltier. Whatever else SHIELD had done, whatever they had let happen or hadn’t stopped, they cared. And they wanted to make it right. The Avengers couldn’t take all the credit for rescuing Steve and bringing him back from the brink of death.

Bruce stepped closer to the bed. “We ready?” he asked.

“Yeah. What’s that?”

“Oh, just a little something I cooked up,” Bruce said. He tried to sound confident, but Tony saw through it. He jabbed the syringe he’d brought into Steve’s IV port. “There’s enough in there to bring down a small elephant for a couple of hours. Hopefully it will last until we get back to Stark Tower.” After finishing the injection, Bruce dropped the empty needle in the sharps container and stood back.

The nurses began to push Steve toward the door, where they were greeted by half a dozen armed SHIELD agents to escort them. And Thor. The demigod looked at Rogers worriedly and then stepped inside to stand with his colleagues. “Barton is ready as well,” he said. His face was grim. Mjölnir was clasped in his right hand as though at any moment he anticipated a surprise attack. It wasn’t a bad idea to be so vigilant.

“Then let’s go. The chopper is on its way,” Tony said.

The three went for the hall. On the way there, Thor spotted Steve’s shield, still sitting idly in the chair beside the window. He went to retrieve it, lifted it hesitanly and swept his hand over the edge of it. Steve was always so protective of his shield. He never let anyone touch it. Tony had once offered to upgrade his father’s old design, install some new technology to give Steve an edge in battle. The soldier had adamantly refused, claiming the shield was part of who he was and he didn’t need any enhancements. Tony had made some lewd joke, one Steve had not appreciated, and things had degraded from there. It was all too easy and infinitely enjoyable to get Steve riled. There was nothing more amusing than a flustered and embarrassed Captain America.

The memory battered Tony with a fresh round of emotions he’d rather not deal with right now, so he looked away from Thor holding Steve’s shield as though it might break at any moment.

Outside, they were wheeling Clint down the corridor. The archer was semi-conscious, mumbling about something to Natasha, who quieted him periodically. She caught the eyes of her teammates and nodded. Then they all began towards the doors of the infirmary.

Fury was waiting for them. “Stark,” he called. His face was unreadable. “A minute.” It wasn’t a request. Nothing with Fury ever was.

Tony looked at the others, catching a nod from Bruce and a wary glance from Thor, before parting
with the group and heading towards the empty patient room at which Fury stood. The director
gestured for him to enter the darkened place, and he did, though with no small amount of dread. The
door shut behind them.

“What’s up, Cyclops?” he asked, trying not to betray that he was actually kind of frightened to be
alone in a darkened room with a master spy. “Kinda need to be somewhere.”

Fury stepped closer. He didn’t speak for a long, uncomfortable minute, during which Tony became
increasingly antsy and impatient. At long last, Fury sighed like he couldn’t find the words he wanted
to say so he was settling on something. “I know you all think I have blood on my hands.” Tony
was surprised at the admission. “I know you’ve thought that from the moment we lost Phil Coulson.
I lost your trust then, if I ever had it all. Don’t think I don’t know that. But don’t think that was
what I wanted. We’re fighting on the same side. I want your trust.” He said this last part slowly.

“Trust isn’t given,” Tony said. “It’s earned.”

“I know,” Fury answered irately. “But believe me, this is not what SHIELD was founded for.
We’re here to protect this planet from all threats, to stand strong when the nations of this world
falter. That was the purpose behind the Avengers Initiative.”

“I know,” Tony responded, just as irately.

“If we can’t save the world, we need to protect those who can. You and Banner and Thor and
Rogers… You are all irreplaceable. We can’t afford to lose any one of you. We must protect our
protectors,” Fury continued. “We have to. And I failed in that. I’m sorry. This was not what I
wanted. And this was not what your father wanted. SHIELD was founded to make and protect a
better world.”

He was enraged to hear Fury use his father against him. He had little love for Howard Stark, that
was true, but there was no way in hell he’d stand for this. He wasn’t going to let himself be
manipulated by Fury. He thought of Coulson and saw red. “I’m not marching to Fury’s fife,” he’d
told Steve after Coulson had died. And he’d meant it. He meant it now more than ever.

He was about to tell Fury to shove it all up his ass, but the director reached into the pocket of his
leather long coat. He pulled out something and handed it to Tony. “A better world needs Captain
America,” he said quietly, his eye open and sincere for perhaps the first time since Tony had met
him. Tony looked at the item resting in Fury’s open palm. It was a tablet computer about the size of
a cellphone, sleek and transparent and forbidding.

A chill festered at the base of Tony’s spine. His brow wrinkled in confusion and then budding
horror. “What?” He hesitantly took the device. It was SHIELD issue, the emblem popping to the
clear screen the minute his hand brushed against it. Whatever was on the computer was encrypted.
Strongly. “Is this…” He began to realize. He began to understand. And then Tony thought he was
going to be sick.

“What people saw can’t be erased. And it wasn’t even all of it.”

*The cameras got it all. All of it. “Fuck.”*

“The world needs Captain America,” Fury repeated firmly, “and he needs someone to know what he
went through.”

“Have you seen what’s on this?” Tony demanded, disgust and shame and rage twisting his already
twisted voice into little more than a strained rasp. “Have you?”
Fury didn’t answer immediately, and when he did, it wasn’t at all what Tony wanted to hear. “The Avengers are our first and last defense. Our only defense. We can’t lose that. Can you stand without Rogers?” Tony’s mouth was dry and his heart was thudding. He said nothing, but Fury knew the answer anyway. “Then help him get back on his feet and back out there with you. By whatever means necessary.”

Tony stared at the tablet a moment more, trepidation leaving him dizzy. Then he clenched his hand around it tightly as if it was something he could crush and pulverize out of existence. When he looked up again, Fury was gone. He was alone in the shadowy room, alone and feeling more defeated than before and more lost than ever. Then he remembered the others were waiting and he needed to get the hell off this boat.

He slipped the device into his pocket and limped as quickly as he could manage out of the infirmary, trying his damndest not to feel as though he was carrying the weight of the world.

The flight deck of the helicarrier was secure. There was no unauthorized activity, the jets quiet and empty, the flight crews sequestered inside. Fury was taking no chances. The helicarrier was hovering near the sea, kicking up spray into the night, and the autumn sky was shrouded in gloomy gray clouds. A storm was threatening. Everyone and everything was still. Waiting.

Rhodey was late. The group of SHIELD agents, nurses, and the Avengers stood in one of the loading docks, protected from the cold mist of water outside. Tony had donned Iron Man, and he stood stiffly, trying not to show how heavy the armor was when he was this bruised and sore. Maybe he didn’t need to be wearing the suit, but he’d be damned if they got caught in another hazardous situation unprepared. The others were about as impatient and apprehensive as he was, darting glances at each other and Clint and Steve. Finally they heard the flight controller’s voice over the PA system alerting the team that the chopper was incoming. The next few minutes seemed to last forever as they stood there. Finally, the sound of the helicopter grew louder and louder until the aircraft descended and settled on the vacant flight deck. The roar of the rotors was loud, the blades beating against the air furiously. “Let’s go,” Tony said to the others, and they were eager to agree.

The belly of the huge helicopter opened as the group quickly made their way across the deserted deck, the moist chill of the night air coating them all in a matter of seconds. The SHIELD agents flanked them, warily watching the sky and the sea and their own ship for any signs of an attack, their guns clenched tightly. Rhodes stepped out from the chopper, dressed in a gray flight suit with his name emblazoned on the left breast. He sprinted out to meet them, and then his eyes went wide. “Holy shit,” he said breathlessly. “You weren’t kidding when you said you needed me.”

Tony carried Iron Man’s helmet, watching as the nurses and agents worked to moved Clint up and inside. “When have I ever been prone to exaggeration?” He was nervous and itching to take off. He felt like he was being watched. Again, probably just paranoia, but he couldn’t shake the feeling.

Rhodey didn’t even bother rising to the bait. He shook his head and his eyes widened even further. “Is that—”

“Yeah,” Tony said as the stretcher with Steve passed them. He hadn’t mentioned who Rhodey would be flying back to Manhattan when he’d received his friend’s call a few hours ago. He hadn’t wanted to jeopardize Rhodes’ help, not that the other man wouldn’t have aided the Avengers. But the thought of the enormity of it all might have complicated things. He was bringing America’s fallen golden boy home. A goddamn national treasure. He trusted Rhodes, but he was military, after all, and he didn’t need the Air Force or Congress or anyone sticking their noses into this.
Rhodey shook his head. “So he’s okay, then?” It was a logical question to ask. The last time he or anyone else in the States had seen Steve he most definitely had not been okay.

“Does he appear to be well, flying man?” Thor asked harshly as he pushed by. The demigod was frustrated; irritation was practically oozing out of him. He stalked away, staying very close to Rogers’ side.

“Nice to meet you, too,” he grumbled, eyeing Thor’s retreating back indignantly.

Tony clapped him on the shoulder in a light embrace. “Don’t take it personally. You caught him on a bad day.”

His friend took the moment to appraise him. And then he winced sympathetically. “Talk about a bad day. What the hell happened to you? You look like you’re about to keel over.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, right. You ever gonna stay out of trouble, Stark?”

Tony grunted. “Hard to avoid it when everything I touch turns to shit. Come on.”

A moment later they were inside the helicopter. It was owned by Stark Industries, one of their largest and fanciest and fastest, with extremely wide seats made for lounging. Pepper had sent the best, and he was grateful for her foresight. The interior was leather and cashmere and polished, smooth redwood. It was alarmingly nice to be away from gray.

The nurses lifted Clint from the stretcher. The archer was somewhat conscious and a little loopy from the Demerol Bruce had given him. He giggled and then groaned as they carefully laid him on the large, leather upholstered bench. Tony caught a glimpse of bloody bandages underneath Clint’s loose brown shirt and hoped Pepper wouldn’t be too mad if the expensive seats got a little stained. Romanoff was there to help settle Clint. “Where are we going now?” Barton asked, his face flushed and sweaty. He looked panicked for a second. “You’re coming, right?”

“Yes. Shut it, Barton,” Natasha said. She’d already answered him three times; he was just too high to remember anything she was saying. Tony would have never guessed that Hawkeye got so babbly when he was drugged out. He’d been mumbling inanely since they’d left the infirmary.

“This is nice,” Clint murmured, sliding his unhurt right hand along the smooth leather. His left arm was in a sling. “Who paid for this?”

She draped a blanket over him. “Sleep.”

Simultaneously the nurses worked to move Steve. Given that he was significantly bigger and weightier than Clint, it was a good thing Thor was there to help. It was a careful operation with Rogers’ injuries, but they managed to get him settled on the opposite bench. Steve’s upper body lay in Thor’s lap, the thunder god grasping him tightly and protectively. Bruce covered the fallen soldier with a couple of blankets and did a quick check of Steve’s wounds and vitals. Then he sat at Steve’s feet and looked up at Tony. “We’re ready.”

Tony nodded, walking to the front of the chopper where Rhodey was already readying the craft for take-off. He set Iron Man’s helmet to the console beside the co-pilot’s chair and slid into the soft leather seat. Then he slid his own headphones on. “Let’s roll before Fury changes his mind,” he said.

The chopper rose from the flight deck and a breath later they were high above the helicarrier. Tony
looked down at it out the window, hardly listening as Rhodey conversed tersely with SHIELD’s flight controller aboard the carrier. He watched the great, hulking black mass below them, the ocean writhing around it, until they were in the clouds and he couldn’t see it anymore. He didn’t feel relieved leaving it behind.

The chopper bucked and rain splattered against the windshield. Rhodey shook his head a little and adjusted the controls as the turbulence worsened. He flipped a switch to activate the PA system in the main cabin. “Everybody, hold tight,” he declared, looking at the gray and black swirling clouds before them. “It’s gonna get bumpy.”

“It always does,” Tony muttered as they flew into the storm.
Chapter 10

There was no fanfare when the Avengers returned to New York City. Not that they felt there was anything to celebrate. This wasn’t a victory. This wasn’t even a success, unless they considered the fact that none of them was dead a success. But even so they had specifically returned to Stark Tower during the night so as to keep the public in the dark. Since the Chitauri incident, Tony had had an increasingly difficult time keeping the media off his back. He’d been a celebrity before the Avengers, and now he was even bigger than he had been. He didn’t mind the attention, even enjoyed it (a bit too much, if Pepper had a say). Steve, on the other hand, didn’t know how to handle it. The shock of 21st century social networking and the instant proliferation of information and images aside, he was too humble to want to be part of the paparazzi’s obsession. He hated the spotlight, hated adulation and reverence, hated the public outcry for and against him. Tony could only wonder how he would feel when he learned what the world had seen.

At any rate, he was pleased to see the city quiet and peaceful and hopefully unaware of what was happening. The chopper set down on the helipad atop Stark Tower in the light autumn drizzle. The doors opened and Tony hopped out as gracefully and stoically as he could manage. Iron Man’s heavy metal boots struck the sturdy concrete, and he wavered, so incredibly glad to be home. He saw Pepper at the door to the tower. He jogged toward the building, stepping down as quickly as his battered body would allow. She ran outside, dressed in a blue turtleneck and jeans, sweeping across the distance between them. Then she was in his arms. Despite the hard edges of the suit, she embraced him, and he wrapped himself around her and breathed in deeply the vanilla scent of her hair. “Tony, thank God,” she whispered before he smothered her words in a passionate kiss.

The cold misty rain saturated clothes and skin and drew all the heat from the moment. She pulled away to cup his face. He took her hands in his and managed a small smile. “Looks worse than it is,” he promised to her unbelieving frown. She looked behind them.

Bruce was out first, holding Rogers’ shield and Iron Man’s helmet. Then Thor exited, Steve’s large frame in his arms. Even though the demigod struggled with his burden, he made a quick stride across the helipad and into the tower. “Where?” Bruce asked as they passed, eager to get Steve out of the chilly, wet air. He handed Tony his helmet.

“Thirty-third floor,” Pepper said. Her face was white at seeing Steve’s limp form tucked against Thor’s chest. “There are rooms ready.”

“Thanks, Pepper,” Bruce said. “Good to see you.”

“Wish it wasn’t like this,” she said sadly. “How is he?”

Bruce faltered for a second, glancing at Tony and then at Thor who was pushing past them with only a sad nod toward Pepper. “Alive, which is probably the best we can hope for right now. If you’ll excuse me.” Pepper nodded, and the two wasted no more time, carrying their charge inside the warm safety of the Tower. Behind them, the beating of the rotors slowed with a whine. Natasha and Rhodey supported Clint as they stepped down from the chopper. The archer sagged between them, and it was clear from his gray face that every step was agony. The Demerol was wearing off.

They shuffled slowly inside. “God, what happened?” Pepper whispered.

“I’ll be right there,” Tony said as they passed. Natasha shot him a worried, angered look, and he wondered anew if he hadn’t made a tremendous mistake.
Once they were gone, Pepper gathered her composure quickly. She had always been good at pulling herself (and him and his company) together. And hence why he’d fallen for her. She took care of him when he never took care of himself. “You need to rest,” she said softly. Tony sighed and limped to the platform on the left, and the mechanical arms emerged from the floor and moved in perfect order to extract Iron Man from his body. Pepper followed below, never taking her eyes from him, as the suit was methodically pulled away and stored. By the time he stepped inside the Tower, he was clad only in his jeans and shirt. The doors swished shut behind him against the cold night. Despite the protective metal that had covered him, he felt like the icy, wet fingers had touched his bones.

“Tony,” Pepper said as he staggered slightly down the steps.

He reached the bar, found a glass and some bourbon, and downed the shot in one gulp. It burned miserably the whole way down, scorching his already scorched throat, and he almost regretted the drink. But he needed something to calm his riled nerves so he poured himself another. “JARVIS,” Tony called, swallowing against the ache in his throat.

“Welcome home, sir,” came the calm voice of the AI.

“I want constant surveillance in the Tower. Infrared, motion, impact sensors, everything. Nobody goes in or out without my knowledge.”

“Understood.”

“And keep an eye on the airspace for five miles around us. If any aircraft so much as tips in our direction, I want to know about it.”

“Of course, sir.”

Pepper regarded him as if he’d grown another head. “You think they’ll come here?”

“If by ‘they’ you mean the assholes who did this, then, yeah, I think they might. Or not. I don’t know,” he said wearily as he reached her. Her face fractured in fear and concern. His was tight in a grimace he couldn’t seem to get rid of the last few days. “They tried to finish him off once already. Hence my new look.”

Her lips drew into a thin line as she appraised him, sweeping her thumb over the bruises on his face. His neck, he knew, was particularly colorful, and when he braved looking in the mirror he thought he saw fingerprints in the mottled pattern of black and blue covering his Adam’s apple. “Who did this?” she whispered. He wasn’t sure if she was referring to his particular state or in general, though he supposed it really didn’t matter.

“HYDRA.”

“The Nazis your father fought during the war?” She shook her head in confusion and wrapped her arms around him and leaned into him. He was tired of being the support for everyone else, but he didn’t mind doing it for her. “Why?”

“Because they’re little men,” he responded with as much bravado as he could manage. “They’re little men who want to feel mighty by taking us down. They’re fucking monsters and sadists who need to hurt and kill to feel powerful. Well, they failed to kill Steve. And they failed to kill Barton. And, as you might have noticed, they totally failed to kill me. So they’re oh-for-three and probably pissed off about it.”

She tried to smile, but her eyes were filled with tears and terror. “Tony.”
“This runs darker and deeper than I want to think about,” he admitted. “But SHIELD is too much of a liability right now. We weren’t safe there.”

“I’m not angry you brought this into our home,” she said. “It’s not the first time. I just…” Pepper offered another apologetic smile as the first tear escaped. “I’m scared for you. For all of you, but especially you.”

Tony couldn’t stand her fear. She knew him too well, better than anyone. “Don’t worry about me.” He brushed aside her concern. He was a master at brushing aside her concerns. He moved away, fighting to walk without the limp even though it made his side ache ferociously where he’d been kicked.

“You need to rest,” Pepper reminded, not about to let him off the hook so easily, following him toward the elevators. “You’re not fooling me.”

Tony shook his head. “After I know the others are settled and alright.”

Her eyebrows rose in surprise, stopping in her tracks, and for a moment she seemed flabbergasted. Like she didn’t recognize him. He supposed that was damn well possible. “Well, that’s new.” She resumed following him, her long legs devouring the distance to catch up to his side. “You never used to care.”

He grunted, narrowing his eyes. “I have to. Believe it or not, I’m holding us together. Barton and Rogers are down. Banner would have given up already. Thor’s a man from another world; he’s like a lost puppy. Romanoff… is sulking. More than normal.” He was so damn tired. “I’m all we got right now.” *And if that isn’t a sign of how bad things are, I don’t know what is.*

Pepper took his arm and drew him to a stop. “Fine,” she said, kissing him gently. She drew his arm over her shoulder and made him lean into her. Despite her slender frame, she bore a significant portion of his weight. His lips twisted in a little smile.

“She always does.”

“But you’re going to let me help you. And then you’re going to sleep.”

Pepper had transformed the thirty-third floor into a medical ward. She’d done it in less than a day, which was something of a marvel in and of itself. There had always been an emergency first aid center tucked behind one of the Tower’s numerous state-of-the-art kitchens, as accidents sometimes (well, often) happened in the R&D labs above and below them. Science was a messy and dangerous venture, and Tony was oddly proud of the number of times he’d nearly (and not so nearly) blown himself apart while tinkering with things he shouldn’t have been tinkering with. But this new set-up was far more advanced than what they’d previously had. New shelves had been installed, loaded with bandages, sterile pads and gauze, and other paraphernalia to dress both minor and major wounds. There was a cabinet secured with a key pad and a retinal scanner filled to the brim with drugs; obviously Pepper had called in a few favors with New York’s medical elite to procure such a stock of medications (some of which were potent and possibly illegal to have in such quantities outside of a pharmacy). In addition, a secured refrigerator was teeming with drugs that needed to be kept cold, which included some of the components Bruce needed to produce more of the anti-toxin. Counters gleamed under florescent light, stocked with jars of swabs and drawers full of syringes and scalpels and other surgical equipment. The portable defibrillator had been replaced with something much more high-tech and expensive. It looked like she’d transported an entire emergency room into the Tower, and Tony was impressed. It might have seemed excessive, but he grimly realized this probably wouldn’t be the last time one or more of the Avengers crawled home wounded. Maybe it would be good to have all this on hand.

Adjacent to the main supply room and kitchen, two fairly large penthouses had been converted into
sick rooms. Each had a large, spacious bed decked out with the best monitoring equipment money could buy. These systems were wired directly into the pervasive computer network of the Tower, so if a heartbeat faltered or blood pressure dropped, they’d know about it instantly anywhere. Dressers stocked with things for emergencies were not far from the beds. Couches, soft and plush and inviting, filled a living area a step down from the bed. There were blankets and pillows at the ready. A huge TV sat dark and idle, surrounded by gleaming coffee tables and opulent furnishings. To the right of the beds, massive windows displayed the twinkling, peaceful lights of the city. The two rooms were connected by a hallway beside these windows, and in the center between them was a bathroom that put most five-star resorts to shame. It was more than what they needed. Not for the first time that evening, Tony basked in the awesomeness of being rich.

He realized (again not for the first time) that they were going to have their work cut out for them. There were five of them caring for two gravely injured people (four and a half if he were to take his own injuries into account). He was hoping to make that six people, but Rhodey met him at the door to Clint’s room.

“I can’t stay,” he said regretfully. “Sorry.”

Tony nodded. He’d figured Rhodey wasn’t here with permission. The military was goddamn annoying like that. “You AWOL?”

“Not that bad, but enough of a problem that I shouldn’t be missing in the morning if I want to keep my job,” he said. He held out his hand. “Take care, Tony. Call me if there’s anything I can do for you. Or for them.”

Tony grabbed his hand in a firm shake that ended in a fierce hug. “Thanks for bailing us out of there.”

Rhodey slapped his back gently. “No problem. I’m always hauling your ass out of trouble.”

“Hey. Not always.”

“Close enough.”

Rhodey was gone then, and Tony sighed. Pepper had already gone to see Steve, and he followed her into the darkened room, dreading what he would fine.

Thor and Bruce had already settled Steve in the bed. They were in the process of assessing his wounds, some of which were unfortunately bleeding again. Pepper was watching, ashen-faced and uncomfortable. Thor gently lifted Steve’s torso so Bruce could pull his hospital gown off. The bandages were next to go, the gauze slowly and carefully unwound and the pads discarded. Most were dotted or stained with blood. “I should go,” Pepper said. But she made no move to leave as the worst of the injuries were unveiled. Tears filled her eyes, tears that spilled onto pale cheeks, and she covered her mouth with a trembling hand.

Through the constant fear and rage and worry of the last few days, Tony hadn’t really taken the time to look at Rogers, to look and see it and take it all in. Not since that first night, anyway, and even then the bandages had obscured the worst of it. And things undoubtedly were better now than they had been at that harrowing moment, but it was still terrible. The damage was disturbing to say the least. In addition to the stab wounds the world had witnessed, further such wounds covered his abdomen and chest and back, if the reddened bandages coming away from under him were any indication. The blood loss from his right thigh had almost killed him, and probably would have if the Hulk, green and roaring his rage and grief, hadn’t wrapped his massive hands around the gaping wound in Steve’s leg to prevent volumes of blood from pouring from his damaged femoral artery.
Tony hadn’t remembered that about the night they’d rescued Steve until that moment, and he wished he hadn’t.

And the bruising. Steve’s ribs had been broken, too many to think about. His lungs had collapsed from punctures due to broken bones and blades. Even now his chest was an ugly painting of red, black, blue, and just the faintest hints of yellow where healing was occurring. His wrists were marked gruesomely from struggling when he’d been chained. Slashes. Burn wounds. Lacerations that cris crossed his abdomen and side and back. A gunshot wound to his upper right breast. Natasha had said at the debriefing after they’d lost Steve that he’d been shot. It was all there, even after the time that had passed, plain and undeniable.

Pepper turned away, and Tony was there to hold her. She buried her face into his neck, weeping quietly. Steve had only been staying at Stark Tower a few months, but Pepper had taken to him right away. She had boundless patience and compassion for broken things. She tried to include him in every gala at Stark Industries, every event, every dinner and movie. He’d been an unwilling and unwitting third wheel on every date they’d had since Rogers had moved in, much to Tony’s chagrin and Bruce’s amusement. Hell, she’d even tried to fix him up with a couple of her friends or employees, but he’d never taken her up on the offers.

“Fear not, my lady,” Thor rumbled from the bed as Bruce went about examining the worst of the wounds again and dressing them in fresh bandages. “Steven Rogers is my brother in arms, and I know his heart as I know my own. He will rise again, I swear to you by the might of Asgard.”

That sounded utterly ridiculous, and Thor said it so seriously. It was so completely out of place. Like some line from a really bad fantasy movie. The red cape and battle armor didn’t help. Pepper tried to keep a straight face, but she couldn’t and giggled, covering her mouth in embarrassment. Thor flushed. “I’m so sorry,” she said. “Just…” She laughed outright, wiping at her eyes. Tony couldn’t help but chuckle as well. And then Bruce laughed at Thor’s expression.

“I fail to see what is humorous,” Thor said, shaking his head. He looked like he didn’t know whether to be angry or hurt. But his frown rose into a smile and he laughed as well, quietly at first, and then louder, stronger, and more boisterously. It felt surprisingly good to laugh, even if it was stupid and it would hardly solve anything, and laugh they all did, driven by exhaustion and the need to feel anything other than despair.

But the mirth died away. JARVIS’ placid voice filled the room, echoing in the shadows. “Doctor Banner, I believe Agent Romanoff could use your assistance with Agent Barton. He is in significant pain.”

Bruce’s face fell instantly. “Tony, Thor, can you finish here?”

Tony sighed unhappily. “Think so.”

Bruce was up and down the hallway connecting the rooms in a heartbeat. Tony went to wash his hands, don some gloves, and work, trying not to think about anything and not to let his hands shake too badly. Pepper’s steady fingers came to help. When they were done, they redressed Steven in the hospital gown and pants.

Tony grimaced as he and Thor laid Steve back against the pillows. “Does he feel warm to you?” he asked the demigod as he laid his palm over the soldier’s forehead. Thor nodded. Steve’s skin had seemed hot while they’d worked, but neither of them had wanted to address it or even think about it. “JARVIS?”

“Captain Rogers’ body temperature is 102.3 degrees Fahrenheit and rising, sir,” the AI responded.
“His respiration and heart rate have also increased. I believe this is the onset of a respiratory infection.”

*Fan-fucking-tastic*, Tony thought miserably.

“I thought he couldn’t get sick,” Pepper said.

Tony didn’t want to recap the last few hellish days right then. “Go get whatever antibiotics we have. Bring them all; Banner can figure out what he needs when he gets back,” he said to Pepper, and she nodded, frightened but eager to help. Tony turned to Thor. “Let’s get an IV back in him.” SHIELD’s medical staff had left one in Steve’s right wrist, but it had gotten dislodged during the bumpy flight from the helicarrier. Bruce had removed it.

Thor was hesitant, his blue eyes scrunched in apprehension, as Tony gathered what they needed. “Have you ever done this before?”

“Had it done to me lots of times,” Tony answered as he tore open the sterile bags. “I know what I’m doing. Just hold his arm steady.” Tony moved to Steve’s left side, wiped his bruised arm down with some alcohol, and set to putting in the IV port. Steve’s veins weren’t in the best of shape after all the blood loss, and he might have had better luck somewhere else, but he’d only ever done this on the arm and he wasn’t an expert. Thankfully he got the needle in and threaded the catheter without any trouble. He attached the tubing and waited for Bruce.

Pepper returned right as Banner did, her arms loaded with vials and IV bags. “I did the best I could. There may be more.”

Bruce looked between her and Tony. “What happened?”

“The captain has taken ill again,” Thor answered worriedly.

“I was worried about this,” Bruce commented, his brow creasing in anger and concern as he stepped quickly toward Steve’s bed. He felt Steve’s neck near his jaw, pressed around his belly carefully where he could, and pulled a stethoscope from the pocket of his jeans. He listened to Steve breathing, the entire room painfully silent as they waited. Bruce sighed. “I think it’s pneumonia.”


“At least it’s not sepsis.” Bruce went over to Pepper and picked through her load of drugs until he founded what he wanted. “Pneumonia we can deal with. His body can beat it.”

Pepper wasn’t convinced. “Even like this?” she softly asked, clearly afraid of the answer.

“Even like this,” Bruce affirmed. For the first time in days, he sounded confident. He hung a bag of antibiotics and connected it to the IV. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Barton gets it, too. He had more damage to his lungs than Steve did, and he doesn’t have the serum to protect him.”

“Gets better by the minute,” Tony muttered.

“Man of Iron,” Thor said tersely, “you cannot falter. Our teammates need your aid.”

Anger swelled in Tony, black and thick with pain and weariness and frustration. “What they need is a fucking arsenal of the world’s best doctors and shrinks and probably a miracle or two. I was a goddamn moron to bring them here.”
Thor set his jaw sternly. He glanced to Banner, uncertain, perhaps, of how to proceed. “You only did what you thought was best. It is done, and we are here, where we are at least safe from the shadows inside SHIELD. We have protected our team, and we will not let our friends suffer.”

“Don’t see how we can stop it,” Tony snapped, guilt over everything that had happened to Steve and Clint aching so strongly in his chest. He was too beaten to bottle it up anymore. Tears burned in his eyes and he was thankful the room was so dark so the others wouldn’t see. He could feel acid in his throat, vicious things he wanted to say. He wanted to push everyone away. Run away. Like he’d done in the past. Pepper put her hand on his shoulder and rubbed lovingly. It took every ounce of his willpower not to shove her away. Her touch burned.

“Perhaps we cannot,” Thor answered, “but you yourself said when Steven’s life hung in the balance that we could not lay down and die. That was when the situation was most dire, and now there is hope. We should not surrender. It is folly and faithless.”

Tony couldn’t shake the hurt, but he tried. At least, he said nothing more about it. That was about the best he could do. Pepper’s hand fell away when her cellphone buzzed in her pocket. He wondered who the hell it could be at this hour, but it was only closing time on the west coast. “Sorry,” she irately said, pulling out her phone and disappearing from the room. He was glad she was gone, and felt horrible for it, but he was so damn low right now that he didn’t want her to see him.

A groan from the bed immediately drew their attention. Tony turned barely in time to avoid Steve’s swinging arm. Thor quickly grabbed Steve’s wrist and as gently as he could held it to the other man’s chest. “Steve?” Tony said as he righted himself and walked around to the other side, all his despair from the moments prior forgotten. He sat and took Steve’s other hand as it twisted in the sheets. Rogers’ face was flushed and caught in a grimace. Breathy words fled him through dried lips. Tony couldn’t hear what he was saying. “Open your eyes, Cap. Wake up.”

“Steve?” Bruce patted his cheek lightly and brushed the dirty blond hair from his brow. “Can you open your eyes?”

They all waited tensely, hoping. It was fairly surprising (and fortunate) Bruce’s magic concoction of drugs had lasted this long. Then Steve’s eyelids fluttered and opened. At first he couldn’t focus on them, the blue orbs drifting hazily and lethargically from face to face. After blinking repeatedly for a few moments, his tongue darting out to wet his lips, Steve finally seemed to ground himself. “Bruce?” he whispered. It was a monumental moment. He was awake and not lost in the past. He was awake and he knew them.

“Welcome back to the land of the living,” Bruce said with a huge smile on his face.

Steve closed his eyes again, and for a moment Tony feared he’d lost consciousness again and prepared to prod him back towards awareness. But Steve shifted slightly, winced, and asked, “Where am I?”

“How are you feeling?” Bruce asked.
Stupid question. Steve winced again, twisting beneath their holds. It was clear the pain was coming. “Horrible,” he murmured. “What… what happened to me?”

It was a moment they had been dreading for days. How the hell do you explain to someone that he was captured, beaten within an inch of his life, and then stabbed repeatedly before the eyes of the whole world? You don’t, Tony thought fervently, because he’s gonna remember. We won’t need to. It was there, Tony knew. Like a monster in the shadows, lurking beneath the cloudy surface of confusion and drugs and pain.

“You do not recall what befell you?” Thor asked gingerly.

Steve trembled slightly. “Don’t… don’t remember you being here.”

“You missed some stuff,” Tony explained. “Nothing too serious.”

Rogers wasn’t satisfied with that. His eyes burned with a fever consuming him far too quickly as he stared at Tony. “Tell me.” It wasn’t a plea. It wasn’t a request. It was an order, and Tony damn well knew it.

The billionaire hesitated for a moment. Then he decided that beating around the bush or sugar-coating things really wasn’t his style, and he was too tired and impatient to manage it anyway. So he just let it spill out. Under everything, he respected Steve, and were their places reversed, he’d want the truth. “They took you, Cap. The weapons sale turned into a shitstorm and they got their hands on you. They had you for about a day. You almost died.”

Steve’s face was oddly calm for a moment, like maybe he’d understood the words but the meaning hadn’t registered. The three Avengers shared concerned glances. Steve’s brow wrinkled in a mixture of fear and confusion. “HYDRA.”

“Yeah, they’re back,” Tony said.

“What did they… They did something to me.”

Bruce explained, “Nothing we couldn’t fix. They depressed your rapid metabolism with a toxin. We neutralized it, but it’s going to take some time before you recover.”

That was beyond Steve’s ability to comprehend right then. There was something dark creeping about his eyes. The monster of memories. He bravely kept it bay, probably for their sakes. But everything else, mostly his control, was degrading rapidly. Steve clenched his eyes shut. His grip on Tony’s hand turned painful. Tony tried to ignore the feeling of his bones grinding together under the crushing pressure. “Try to stay still, Steve,” Bruce suggested as he helped to pull Steve’s hand away before he broke Tony’s. “You’re going to be in a lot of pain, but it will pass. We’ll get you through this.”

Steve only groaned through clenched teeth. “Are… are we safe here?”

“Cap, you let us worry about that,” Bruce answered, his concern mounting over Steve’s distress. Tony helplessly flexed his fingers, infinitely grateful that Banner had rescued his hand before Steve’s superhuman strength had pulverized them. Thor grabbed both of Rogers’ hands and held them tight.

Steve gasped. “S’my job.”

Tony got frustrated. It’s what he typically did when he couldn’t do a damn thing to fix a problem. Bruce had said the best they could do was hold Steve’s hand through the worst of the pain. He couldn’t even do that. “We’re fine,” he snapped, darting warning eyes to the other two that
specifically said *don’t say a word.* The last thing they needed was Rogers trying to run the team and worrying about everyone else’s safety from a goddamn sick bed.

“Where does it hurt?”

Steve was bathed in sweat and shaking. He curled on his left side a little, squeezing the life out of Thor’s hands. Even the god was pained by the soldier’s death-grip. Rogers gave a gasping, twisted little laugh. “Everywhere,” he moaned. Then his eyes snapped open, and he looked trapped. Lost. Terrified. “Get away from me!”

Any spark of recognition was gone, devoured by agony and memory. Thor came closer, holding to Steve tightly as well. “You are safe,” Thor promised. “They can hurt you no longer.”

Steve wasn’t really convinced by that, becomingly increasingly embroiled in waking nightmare. His first scream was the worst, even though they’d been expecting it. Tony winced and tried not to look away, imagining the horrors in that warehouse, imagining the horrors held on the tablet in his pocket. The second cry was hoarse and clenched, like Steve realized he what he was doing and wanted to stifle it. The third was choked with tears and ragged breathing.

He couldn’t take it anymore. Mistakes be damned. Depression be damned. *It can all fucking be damned.* He pushed by Thor and Bruce and grabbed Steve’s face. “Look at me, soldier,” he ordered, holding the other man still and forcing his wild, feverish, frightened eyes to focus. Steve breathed heavily through clenched teeth, tears slipping from the corners of his eyes. But their gazes met, blue on brown, and Tony’s stoic stare grounded Rogers. “You look at me. We brought you home.”

“Stay with me,” Steve pleaded.

“Couldn’t pull us away. We got you, Cap,” he swore softly. “And we’re not letting you go.”
The night dragged on for what felt like forever. Steve spent it in a fevered, suffering hell. The pain vacillated between dull misery and downright excruciating. He lay in the bed, shivering, sweating, struggling mindlessly. Nightmares pressed upon him, nightmares from the war and his captivity, and he was their hapless victim, bent with blows from demons they couldn’t see and couldn’t fight. They tried. They would have killed, would have murdered and burned and destroyed if it would have eased Steve’s pain. But they couldn’t. Like Bruce had said before: this wasn’t a monster they could defeat. The Avengers were made to protect, to stand between the world and its most dangerous foes, to defend when nothing else and no one else could. But they couldn’t do a damn thing as Steve Rogers burned and writhed and begged for reprieve.

He was never alone. As the evening stretched to midnight and then to the late hours and then the late, late hours, the Avengers stayed by his side. Thor, in particular, remained steadfast in his vigil. He had changed into Midgardian attire, a simple pair of gray sweat pants and a blue sweatshirt that proudly hailed LA Dodgers across its chest (Steve was closest to his size, and this was all he had that fit the god). Aside from that small moment away, he’d been constant, sitting beside Steve’s bed and maintaining a watchful eye and a soothing voice when the moments were calmer. When the torment became too much, when the delirium wrested any sense of control from Steve, the Asgardian held his fallen comrade firmly as Pepper whispered soothing words and doused his forehead and neck with cool washcloths. His fever raged, and the delirium that came with it was devastating. Tony watched, uncomfortable and scared and angry and enfeebled by it all. He’d put that tablet that Fury had given him in the safe in his penthouse, not ready to even consider watching it, but he couldn’t stop thinking about it. Out of sight, but never out of mind.

Bruce moved between the two sick rooms. He was exhausted, but he was trying vehemently not to appear so. What he had feared had unfortunately come true. Shortly after midnight, Barton had developed a fever as well. His was not as dangerously high as Rogers’, but his lungs were already compromised, and they quickly filled with fluid and mucus. He was having a difficult time breathing, and that alone was enough to seriously concern Bruce. Tony had checked on Clint himself when the situation in Steve’s room had quieted momentarily. The archer lay in a fevered sleep, wheezing, and Bruce pressed the stethoscope to his bare chest with a morose look twisting his face. Banner looked up unhappily and sent Tony a worried look. Then he pulled his glasses from his face and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Cold rain. It hit him hard.”

“Fucking poor luck,” Tony added darkly.

“What can we do?” Natasha asked. Of the three of them, she was the most awake, the most energized, the most driven. Driven to make sure her partner was alright.

“I put him on more antibiotics. Let’s get him on oxygen and see if that improves his breathing. If it doesn’t, we need to take him to a hospital.”

Tony helped Bruce do what was necessary, not wanting to think about failure. Then he watched Clint’s damaged chest rise and fall, the shadows swooping hot and heavy around them. Romanoff sat at Barton’s side, her eyes never leaving him. She said nothing, his hand trapped in her own, her eyes unblinking and her form stiff with too many emotions that were too tightly restrained. Every slight movement, every wince and cough and moan, she was there, hushing Clint in a voice that was too devoid of feeling to be anything but a front. “Go ahead and cry,” Tony finally said, hating the silence. “I won’t tell him if you shed a tear or two. Feathers might even like knowing his, uh, lady bird is calling for him.”
Natasha turned to glare icily at him. “I won’t cry over him.” It wasn’t about him. It was about crying and what it meant. The shamed tears she had shed when Steve had nearly died were weakness and admitting defeat. She didn’t do weakness or defeat. Tony thought she might physically hurt him for a moment and had the decency to back away. Who knew how many concealed weapons she might have on her? Hell, she didn’t even need weapons to bring him down. But she didn’t. “And fuck you, Stark.”

He left her alone after that.

It was too late to be night but too early to be morning. Tony sat on the edge of Steve’s bed and blearily watched the digital clock on the touch screen embedded in the nightstand beside Steve’s bed. The clear surface was cluttered with empty glasses and washcloths and bandages. Every bit of him hurt, from his hair (which he’d spent too much time wrenching with stressed hands) to his toes. He sighed. He was having a hard time focusing on anything other than how tired he was and how much he ached. Pepper had told him to rest a while ago, had gotten angry with him at his stubborn refusal, frustrated with his “self-destructive tendencies”, as she put it. She herself lay curled on one of the plush sofas down in the living area. Tony stood, the anger in her eyes and voice hard to forget when he was this beaten. Gingerly he stretched his sore body and stepped down to her, grabbing one of the folded blankets and carefully draping it over her. He brushed his bruised knuckles to her cheek tenderly.

“Friend Stark.” Thor always spoke loudly, but he’d lowered his tone given the utter stillness of the penthouse. It still seemed to reverberate, but that might have been because of the vicious headache that had been tormenting him for… well, days. The demigod stood beside Steve’s bed, himself looking rather drawn and weary. “You should rest. For the moment, at least, everything is well enough.”

Tony looked at Steve. For the last thirty minutes or so, he had been sleeping, having mercifully passed out from the pain. Thor dunked another washcloth in a bowl of lukewarm water, wrung out the excess, and set the damp article across Steve’s forehead. “What’s his temp now, JARVIS?” Tony asked softly.

The computer was smart enough to lower the volume of its response. “102 and steady, sir. I believe Lord Thor is right; you should take this opportunity to rest. Captain Rogers may sleep for some time. The human body is capable of producing its own protective responses to acute or chronic pain.”

Tony was too tired to even make sense of that enough to be relieved by it. “Sleep,” Thor implored. “I will stay with him.”

“You shouldn’t go it alone,” Tony countered.

“He’s not alone.”

Tony whirled, nearly losing his balance as he did. Black Widow stood at the mouth of the hallway connecting the two rooms. “Don’t do that,” he hissed, surprise shattering his hold on his temper.

She looked weary and white. Her eyes were wet. She’d cried. He knew it immediately. “I’ll stay. You go and get some sleep, Stark. You look like you need it.”

He did. Maybe more than he ever had before. And it was too much to argue, to even form another sentence or another thought. So he nodded and turned and limped away. He couldn’t – wouldn’t – sleep there. Steve was resting, but the peace wouldn’t last, and as long as he stayed close to his fallen teammate, he wouldn’t be able to let go.
He heard a quiet conversation behind him. Rustling. Steve’s foggy voice, teeming with pain and longing. “Peggy?”

Hesitation. Tony stopped and watched. His eyes were so blurry that when the dim illumination overhead struck Romanoff’s short, curled red hair and pale skin even he saw a ghost. Natasha sat and smiled sadly, taking Steve’s reaching hand and sighing as though this wasn’t the first time Steve had mistaken her for someone else. “It’s Natasha, Cap. Sleep. You won’t be alone.”

That hurt enough to make Tony run, and run he did, all the way to his bed without another wayward thought. And when he hit the mattress, he cursed the world and everything in it and fell asleep furious.

Overnight the gloomy storm rolled away, and the sun washed New York City with a new day. Tony blearily opened one eye, hardly lifting his head from the bed. Light, bright and powerful and freaking cheerful, streamed through the grand windows of the penthouse, bathing the room and chasing away the shadows. If only it could chase away the ache in his head. Tony groaned and rolled over gingerly. He was where he’d collapsed the night before. Or morning. “JARVIS,” he croaked. He scrubbed a hand down his face. His eyes felt like sand was trapped beneath the lids and his mouth tasted like something had died in it. “What time is it?”

“10:23 am, sir,” the AI responded evenly. “You have been sleeping for six hours.”

Tony sat up at that, his abdominal muscles protesting the movement sharply. He groaned, dropping his head into his hands and bracing his elbows on his knees. “What did I miss?” he asked, reaching for the Vicodin he’d brought from the helicarrier and a half drunk bottle of water beside his bed from he didn’t know when.

“Captain Rogers’ fever has broken but he remains distraught,” JARVIS detailed. “Agent Barton continues to languish. His respiration has slightly improved, but Doctor Banner remains cautious.”

Not great news. But nobody had died or gotten worse, so that had to be something. “What else?”

“I suggest you view the morning news, sir.”

The AI activated the image for him on the opposite wall without waiting for his order. From nothingness, the news winked into existence. It was CNN. A pretty anchorwoman was speaking, and scrolling on the bottom of the screen were the morning’s breaking stories. Unfortunately, only one seemed to be worthy of coverage. There was live footage of a helicopter landing atop a building at night. It took his beleaguered mind a minute to realize the building was his building. “Oh, shit,” he murmured.

“We are showing you footage recorded last night of what we believe to be the Avengers returning to Stark Tower at around 10:30 eastern standard time. Stark Industries is at this time issuing no formal statement as to who was aboard this helicopter, or from where it flew, but sources inside the company indicate that Tony Stark was among its passengers, and that it was piloted by Lieutenant Colonel James Rhodes of the US Air Force, Stark’s longtime friend. These sources have spoken on the condition of strict anonymity, but they indicate Captain Rogers may have been transported back to Stark Tower. We’re going live to Brian Mulroney outside of Stark Tower right now for more information on this breaking story. Brian?”

The image split into two halves, and the right now contained a nondescript man standing outside the doors to the lobby of his building. “Thank you, Diane. As of this moment, there has been no direct information as to whether or not this helicopter returned the Avengers to Stark Tower. All attempts
to reach Tony Stark or Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts, Stark Industries’ President and former CEO, have been unsuccessful. We can confirm that a significant amount of medical equipment was installed in the building in the last twenty-four hours.”

“In preparation to treat Captain America?” asked the anchorwoman.

“That we don’t know, but it would be a probable conclusion. As you said, there has been no formal statement, but people here are waiting to know something. Hundreds of well-wishers have gathered this morning, many bearing wreaths and flowers and other tokens of thoughts and prayers.” The camera zoomed in on the crowd outside his lobby. Tony winced. The man was right; the pile of crap outside was sizeable. “I need to reiterate a key point here, Diane. As of right now, I cannot confirm or deny that Captain Rogers survived his capture. We can only speculate what this late night flight last night might have meant.”

“Clearly people are hoping for the best,” she answered, and Tony wanted to slap her.

“We also have reports that Senator Boynton of New York plans to issue a press conference some time later this morning requesting that Stark or another of the Avengers ‘come clean’, as he put it, about what happened earlier this week regarding the capture of Captain America. There has been a significant amount of unrest in Congress this week pertaining to national security.” That was fucking typical. Tony clenched his hand into a fist in anger.

“When the Senator’s conference begins, we will of course switch to it. Here is the footage again of the Stark Industries’ chopper returning to Stark Tower, caught on video by numerous citizens last night.”

“JARVIS, shut this off,” Tony ordered sharply. The images winked out. He stood still a moment, seething, wondering what the hell they were going to do now. “Remind me to figure out who the hell ratted us out and fire ‘em,” he snarled.

“I will make a note, sir.”

“Do the others know about this?” he asked, stepping to the window and looking down. Of course, he couldn’t see the street from this vantage, but he could picture the media circus.

“I believed Doctor Banner and Miss Potts do. Agent Romanoff has been sleeping for the last hour, and Lord Thor has refused to leave Captain Rogers’ side.”

Tony sighed. “Patch me over to Pepper’s cellphone.”

There was a quiet moment where Tony impatiently waited for Pepper to answer. Eventually she did, and she sounded exhausted and irritated. “What? You could have just come to see me. Not every interaction needs to be facilitated by technology.”

“I need you to schedule a press conference,” he immediately declared. He limped to a bathroom that was larger than most people’s living rooms. Pausing at the counter, he regarded his ragged, bruised reflection and grimaced.

“Not a good idea,” came the tight response.

“No, a great idea. The best, in fact. Schedule it for ASAP. And then I need you up here to make me look presentable. You excel at that. Get that girl who does your make-up. She’s a pro, right?”

He could practically imagine her eyes rolling and her aggravated sigh. “Does this have to happen now?”
He ran the water and splashed his face. “The more we let the world think Captain America’s dead or hurt or **defeated**, the more the people who did this get what they want.”

“Steve *is* hurt,” Pepper interjected tightly.

Tony ignored her. “Not to mention what a clusterfuck this is going to become if Congress starts spouting off their typical bullshit. We need to stand now before it gets any worse. Just… please, Pep. We can’t let them push us down.”

She hesitated a moment more. Then another sigh, this one defeated and worried. “I’ll be right there.”

Pepper was a miracle worker. Tony had known that for years, but there were still times he was amazed by it. By the time he got out of a super-hot shower, she was there with clothes and a make-up artist. Tony emerged from the bathroom clad in only a towel loosely and lowly wrapped on his hips, and the young woman with Pepper gasped and turned away. Pepper scowled at him, but before he could make an inappropriate comment, she snapped, “They’re sending up breakfast. Get dressed. You’re on in an hour.”

She handed him something to wear, glancing at the mess of bruises all over his torso worriedly, before turning away. She knew better than to try to dissuade him from something once his mind was made up, but he knew she wasn’t pleased. He dressed in charcoal slacks and jacket and a maroon turtleneck. Normally he’d never be caught dead in a turtleneck, but he needed something to cover the damage to his throat.

Then he sat in a chair and the make-up artist worked her wonders. He tried not to wince when she concentrated on the sore spots. And when she finished, he looked in the mirror and thought he looked pretty good. Hell, he always looked good. His voice wasn’t back to normal, but there wasn’t anything to be done about that. All in all, unless you’d known he’d been beaten and nearly strangled to death two days ago, it wasn’t all that obvious.

Pepper showered and changed as well. She emerged dressed in jeans and a pink blouse. Her hair was drawn into a loose ponytail. He caught her tired eyes, and she seemed relieved to see him looking fairly normal, but the disapproval lingered between them. The need for comfort after the harrowing night was stronger, though, and he embraced her. “It’s gonna be alright,” he said against her ear.

“You know that?”

“I’m Tony Stark. I know everything.”

They walked out of the penthouse and into the spacious kitchen and dinette that was down the hallway. On the gleaming granite countertops numerous trays of food sat, including eggs, bacon and ham, toast, an assortment of pastries, and fruit. The smell set his mouth watering; the last time he’d had something to eat that was more than junk food was aboard the helicarrier.

He grabbed a doughnut and bit into it, catching another disapproving glance from Pepper about his choice. At the breakfast bar across the room, Tony was a little surprised to find Bruce, his cup of coffee forgotten before him. He sat stiffly on one of the stools. Every bit of him radiated something very black and very brittle. Tony glanced at Pepper. “What’s going on?”

Banner didn’t turn to look at them. His eyes were glued on the TV where Boynton’s promised press conference was beginning. “Rogers was screaming. I just couldn’t take it anymore.” His voice was
Pinched and thick with unspoken anger. “Barton’s out like a light.”

Pepper grasped Tony’s arm in warning, but he still stepped closer. “You need a break. You haven’t had one,” Tony said as evenly and gently as he could.

“Hence why I’m here,” Bruce responded tensely, “only to find this ass about to denounce us as traitors.”

Pepper tried to be calm. “You don’t know that.”

“What a goddamn wonderful way to start another day of this never-ending nightmare.”

“Turn him off, Bruce,” she suggested softly.

But Bruce did anything but. “Make it louder, JARVIS.”

“I said louder!” roared Banner, and Tony flinched and backed into Pepper.

The AI did as it was commanded, and the volume increased substantially. Boynton was standing before a podium some place (probably in Washington) with a crowd of reporters filling the room. His bland face was a picture of indignation and seriousness. “Fellow citizens, I come before you this morning with the same frustrations, the same questions, that you have. Reports have indicated that last night around 10:30 in the east, a Stark Industries helicopter secretively and unlawfully entered US airspace and landed atop Stark Tower in New York. We know nothing more than this, but it seems fairly obvious that the Avengers have returned to US soil. And they have done so without explanation.

“Given the lasting trauma done to our great nation by the horrific footage to which we were all subjected earlier in the week, I believe we are entitled to answers. Captain America wears our flag on his chest, carries a shield with our emblem proudly stamped upon it. He is a symbol of our country, a living legend and a war hero. But he no longer fights for our nation. The Avengers answer to no government, make no mistake. Not ours, and not any other in our world. They don’t answer to NATO or the United Nations. So when Captain Steven Rogers gallivants into battle, he brandishes our country’s flag without our consent. I have said this before: we never asked these superheroes to protect us. And it’s their way or no way.”

Tony saw Bruce’s fists ball tightly, grinding, squeezing. This was a bad idea. But Boynton blathered on. “I want to know now: is Captain America dead? Who took him and turned him into a symbol of our country’s downfall? If our self-appointed defenders could not even protect their own, what does this say about their ability to protect us? And who decides our battles and our enemies? Tony Stark, an arrogant rich man who has previously shown little to no concern about the wellbeing of anyone other than himself? Bruce Banner, a man who has let his scientific ambitions cloud his judgment so severely as to create a catastrophic accident?” Bruce clenched his jaw tightly enough that Tony thought he heard his teeth cracking. “An alien from another planet or dimension who knows nothing of our world and whose argument with his brother caused the deaths of thousands of innocents? These are maniacs and monsters, not heroes. We cannot allow a team of rogues with this sort of unbridled power loose on our world with no accountability!”

Boynton paused a moment to allow for some dramatic flair. Tony never wanted to punch someone quite so much. “I say this to you, fellow citizens. We are innocents often manipulated and abused by those with power. But this is the moment where we must demand answers and demand control of our own destinies. As I speak to you this morning, I am gathering many of the top minds in
Washington on foreign policy and armed services, including Senator Stern, who, as you may recall, tried vehemently last year to force Tony Stark to turn over the Iron Man suit to the proper authorities. Our group, which is a bipartisan movement across both houses of Congress, will be introducing legislation to force the Avengers to disarm, disband, and report to the Secretary of Defense. I believe the President will support us in this cause. With the exception of the supposed ‘god of thunder’ Thor, these men are US citizens. If they do not agree, we will compel them. The Senate Armed Services Committee will be subpoenaing Tony Stark to explain the kidnapping and torture of Captain America. I promise: we will get answers for you. We will restore our country’s sovereignty in all matters of its own defense. We will restore America. And if there is justice to be done, it will be done by the United States military, not the Avengers. Thank you all.”

There was a loud crash. Bruce had slammed his fist into the shiny, spotless countertop of the breakfast bar, and the granite shattered. The scientist was breathing raggedly, stiff with rage and looking decidedly green, and Tony backed away. There were few things that frightened him, and the Hulk truly out of control was one of them. “Bruce,” he said.

There was a growl, mostly Bruce’s voice, but the monster’s, too, inhuman and teeming with the threat of violence. “They deserved to be in that hellhole, not him. They deserve to scream. Not him.”

“I’m gonna tell them all to shut the fuck up and shove their subpoenas up their collective ass. Short of attacking Washington and taking out the whole useless lot of them, it’s the best we can do. What do they know? Huh? Not a damn thing.”

Pepper retreated even farther, pale with fear and reaching for her phone. Tony didn’t know who the hell she would call; Thor was the only person who could stand toe to toe with the Hulk, and the demigod was two floors down and busy with Steve. By the time Thor was on the scene, it could be too late. He needed to talk Bruce down and quickly. “It’s not worth it,” he asserted softly. “Don’t prove these people right. We need you, Bruce. Not the other guy.”

Bruce said nothing, did nothing, for a seeming eternity of fear. He was very, very still, breathing heavily through his nose. The green tint to his skin threatened. His hands opened and closed methodically. Tony stepped closer slowly and dared to set his hand on Bruce’s shoulder. He felt the knot of bulging muscles straining to be free beneath his fingers. “Don’t.”

Eventually Bruce released a long breath. He closed his eyes briefly, tipping his head back slightly, and relaxed his fists. Slowly the greenish hue faded from his bronzed skin, leaving only a healthy, normal color. Tony felt he could breathe again. The thundering of his heart slowed. His limbs tingled with sensation, free from panic. He glanced at Pepper. He’d never thought about it completely until then, but through Steve’s capture and torture and near death, Bruce had held it together. The “other guy” had been tightly under wraps. Bruce had never faltered, never for a moment indulged his anger. That was strength. That was loyalty. Most of all, that was friendship. To stay strong because rage and vengeance and wrath weren’t at all what they needed. Calm and courage and careful thought… Bruce had wielded those with such precision and restraint, so expertly, that Tony sometimes forgot that underneath it all resided a beast that craved destruction.

“You got it,” Tony said, patting Bruce’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” responded the other man in a hoarse murmur, sagging with his near loss of control. He looked exhausted and defeated and ashamed. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. I don’t.”

Bruce grunted. “You should.”
Pepper hesitantly stepped closer. “Here, Bruce,” she said, guiding him to another stool. She seemed hesitant to touch him but only for a moment. Then she went back to the kitchen and returned with some ice and a towel. She took his damaged hand and pressed the cubes around the bleeding fingers. “Let me help you.”

Bruce winced, but Tony doubted it had to do with his injury. “Sorry about the counter.”

“All the shit I break around here. It’s nothing,” Tony said.

The anchor on Fox News was speaking now, the change in voices and images drawing their attention. “That was Senator Boynton commenting on the alleged return of the Avengers to New York City last night. In a few minutes, we’ll continue our coverage of this breaking news story by taking you to Stark Tower. We have recently learned that billionaire Tony Stark, creator and pilot of Iron Man, has arranged to speak with the press. We can only assume he will offer a rebuttal to Senator Boynton’s claims that the Avengers are, in fact, rogues that answer to no government. We also expect he will address what has happened to Captain America. While we wait, let’s turn to Peter Harvey, our White House correspondent, to get an idea of what the President’s reaction might be to Senator’s Boynton’s initiative.”

“You have ten minutes,” Pepper said, glancing at the clock.

Tony took a deep breath. He was a little wary of leaving Pepper to tend to Bruce. Even though Banner seemed to have everything well under control now, he was just as worn and tired as before. What would it take to bring him back to the brink?

Bruce met his eyes. There was that glint, that hint of fury, but there was also determination. “Go,” he said. “Give those bastards hell.”

Tony smiled and slipped his hands down his clothes to smooth his attire. “I always do.”
Chapter 12

Tony had never been afraid of cameras. Howard and Maria Stark had been wealthy and influential people, forever trailed by the media and the paparazzi, even in those days. So he’d grown up around flashes and reporters shouting questions and every inch of his private life being invaded. Where a lot of people shied from the attention, he’d learned to embrace it. Therefore, as he stepped toward the podium proudly displaying the Stark Industries logo, he wasn’t at all nervous.

Mostly he was angry. And eager to shoot back at the idiots who’d branded him and his friends nothing more than maniacs and monsters. Maybe they hadn’t realized this was the Avengers’ darkest hour, but they should have been smart enough to figure that out and back the hell off.

The group gathered around him was sizeable. Reporters and correspondents from all the major news networks were there as well as some from lesser known establishments. There was also a fairly large crowd of civilians, a few hundred maybe, many carrying flowers or candles or pictures of Captain America and the Avengers. That did make him nervous, that their fans and well-wishers and supporters had come out in droves, fearful and worried and wondering what had happened to their heroes. He owed them more than the tongue-lashing he had planned. Police had been deployed about the city street to keep order, and they eyed him warily as he approached.

As he stopped before the collection of microphones and video cameras, the anxious assembly quieted. Tony sighed gently. He really hadn’t rehearsed what he wanted to say. He normally didn’t when he addressed the press or public, which was probably why things so rarely went well (at least to Pepper’s standards). This was the sort of unhinged feeling that had led to his completely unpredictable announcement that he was Iron Man a few years ago, an announcement that had changed his life almost as much as his ill-fated trip to Afghanistan. Thankfully, the awkward silence permeating the crowd was short-lived as his brain caught up with his heart and supplied words to fit the storm of emotions roiling in his chest. “I want to make this short,” he began. “We rescued Captain America. He’s alive and he’s going to be fine.”

He expected the wave of sound from the crowd. Mostly it was cheering. The roar was deafening a moment, and Tony felt something inside swell with pride that people were so relieved, so elated, to learn that Steve was alive. But that wasn’t enough to appease them or to satisfy the media. A thousand questions bombarded him. He waved his hand at the roar. “One at a time. I can’t answer them all. I might not even answer any, depending on what they are.”

The crowd quieted and one of the reporters was the first to interrogate him. “So Captain America is recovering from his abduction?” the man asked.

What a moron. “I think I just said that.”

“Can you describe his injuries?”

Not happening. “They’re bad,” was all he said.

The same woman persisted. “You mean life-threatening.”

Tony tried to maintain his patience. “You saw the same footage I did. What do you think?”

“Who was responsible for his capture?”

“Can you tell us what happened?”
Tony raised his hands slightly to try to calm the crowd. “All I will say is the men who did this are dead, so it really doesn’t matter who they were. Nobody important.” Bringing up HYDRA was completely out of the question; too many historians had documented the Nazi special sciences division for that to escape scrutiny. People didn’t know everything, but they knew enough to maybe figure things out if he let too much slip. And the Red Dawn, in his opinion, didn’t deserve mention. That would only validate the statement they’d tried to make. “And even if they try anything again, we’ll be there to stop them. They won’t catch us twice with our pants down. Let me make this perfectly clear: they are no threat to the US.”

That seemed to incense the crowd. “How can you say that, Mr. Stark?” shouted someone from the thick of the group. “How can you be sure of that?”

“They went after Captain America! Captain America! I say that’s a pretty strong sign they want all of us dead!”

These people were afraid, and rightly so. They’d seen a group of terrorists kidnap and torture and nearly murder a superhero. They didn’t know that these bastards had played dirty with drugs to render their victim damageable and that they had had moles littered throughout the Avengers’ support structure. This attack had been the Red Dawn’s single best chance to kill Captain America; they couldn’t try again, and if they somehow did, it would be harder than ever to succeed. The message had been the important thing. And Tony wanted to be certain that message carried no weight. “They just wanted to scare us, to scare you. Yeah, they grabbed Captain America and, yeah, they hurt him. But they didn’t kill him. I promise you: he’ll be back out to defend you, stronger than ever before.” The group was not sure what to make of that. There were again cheers, but there was doubt and dismay, too.

One of the reporters chose to fuel the uncertainty. “Captain America himself said he would return as an Avenger?”

“Of course,” Tony said. “They don’t call him the Star-Spangled Man with a Plan for nothing.” The crowd cheered at that, too, this time more emphatically. Tony smiled, exhilarated to hear their applause. And he kept going, his mouth running fairly detached from his brain. He knew he should stop, but it felt damn good to bask in accolades even if he didn’t deserve them. Hell, these people didn’t know that. To them he was a bearer of good tidings, of vindication and hope. And it was all too easy to get swept up in that after days of suffering. “Look, I know this whole… mess was traumatic. Hell, I was scared, and I faced down hordes of gray alien space monsters. But it’s all gonna be fine. I know Steve Rogers. He’ll be back on his feet in no time.”

“What is your response to Senator Boynton’s statements this morning that the Avengers should be disarmed and disbanded?”

And then he really got going. “With all due respect to our esteemed Senator and his colleagues, they have no idea what they’re asking for. If you think the Chitauri are the only ones out there gunning for earth, you’re an idiot. You need us to fight the battles you can’t fight, to stand when no one else can. We can’t agree on much in this country, let alone in this world, but we should agree on this: earth needs the Avengers. You wanna take that away, Senator? You want to call us monsters and freaks? Go ahead and see who comes to save you next time you need it.”

He knew he was going too far. The people gathered seemed pleased enough with his statements, but he could see the detractors, those who’d come to protest them. Saving the city hadn’t been enough for some, and the Avengers had become convenient scape-goats for the very situation that they’d nearly died trying to end. Boynton had led the charge to blame them to cover the loss of life and damage. The guy was an ass, through and through. Tony didn’t think about what he was doing, the
political implications, the consequences to his company and its already strained relations with Congress. “Are you suggesting the Avengers require no supervision simply because we need you?” a reporter from CBS asked. “Isn’t that the very crux of the Senator’s argument?”

Tony was getting tired and frustrated. “I’m not suggesting anything. I’m telling the esteemed Senator, and anyone else who comes after us, that we’re not going to lay down and take it. We’re here to protect you, but don’t make us protect ourselves from you. Captain America has laid down his life for this city, for this country, more than anyone I know. How many times has Senator Boynton?”

“Surely you can appreciate people’s concern,” another reporter insisted, shaking her head in disgust at his seeming ignorance and conceit. Her objectivity was decidedly lacking. “Captain America was targeted specifically. These terrorists even said this was a warning to our country. Mr. Stark, don’t you think the American government has a right to investigate this?”

Tony paused a moment, wondering if he should be so bold to tell these people what he really thought. But he imagined Pepper’s unhappy eyes, thought of the work he was making for her by being so confrontational, and he released a slow breath. “I don’t know. And, you know what, I don’t care. What happened doesn’t matter. You want the truth of it? There’s evil in this world, in our galaxy, threatening us every day.” White faces and wide eyes appraised him, as if acknowledging the fears that had been borne from the Chitauri invasion somehow made them more real and more palpable. “There are violent men, crazy men, aliens and gods and who knows what else… And I don’t think questioning how we manage to defend ourselves gets us anything.”

“So your stance is that the Avengers should be immune? Above the law? Is that what you mean, Mr. Stark?” The disgust in the voice of the man questioning him was more than enough evidence of his opinion on the matter. He wondered what he had done to piss the media off so badly. Hell, he was giving them their goddamn answers. And the very public display of the rollercoaster of eccentricities that was his life sold more papers and advertising space than any other story in the world.

He ignored all that and tried to be calm. This was about the Avengers, his team. His family. Not about him. “My stance is that I’m trying to do what’s right. If we’ve made mistakes, I think we’ve paid for them.”

“Not you, Stark!” snarled someone from the crowd. “Captain America!”

“What, are you gonna make a point of what happened to him, too?” Tony shouted back.

“What do you know?”

“How can you protect us when you let this happen to yourselves?”

“We want to see Captain America!”

Everything was rapidly degrading. Tony shook his head, trying to calm the distressed crowd. “Listen, I know Steve Rogers. He doesn’t want this attention. He doesn’t want doubt. He’s a true hero, your hero, the best good guy there ever was, and he’s not going to be brought down by this.” People quieted, murmuring. Hesitant to hope, but only at first. Tony raced on. “He is going to get up, shake it off, and keep fighting. That’s who he is. So I suggest we not look a gift horse in the mouth. This is the truth, I swear to you. He’s alive, he’s going to be okay, and we’re going to be here, together as a team, to protect the earth.”

Now the crowd really roared, shouting “America! Captain America!” and “Stark!” and “Avengers!”
so loud that Tony wondered for a moment if it would shake the foundation of Stark Tower. He smiled like the sun and waved to the fans, and they cheered louder and longer. *Yeah, you assholes, he thought smugly. Listen to that. You're not bringing us down. Not one of us.*

The fallout from his press conference was widespread. He figured it would be, but he was not at all sorry about it. Washington was in a fever of condemning and blaming and politicizing. Pundits were immediately speculating that Boynton’s efforts to “restore America” would prove unpopular, if the reaction to Stark’s speech were any evidence. However, fear was a powerful tool, and if enough people could be convinced that the Avengers were a threat, Tony felt a pretty strong mob mentality might sway their supporters to the other side. And Pepper was scrounging to prevent a catastrophe; she’d been on the phone nearly constantly since that morning, floundering to deal with the problems in Stark Industries as they arose. As with most things he did and said, as with his life in general, people either loved or hated him. The tolerant, the *ambivalent*, were few, and everyone else was given to extremes. So the stock went up and down. And people decried or applauded him. He didn’t care, except that it caused her stress. Nothing in life was ever easy.

And it wasn’t just Pepper. Not long after he’d returned to the thirty-third floor, JARVIS had informed him that Fury was calling. Tony had tried to ignore it, but the man had been damn persistent, hacking his mainframe and overriding JARVIS’ control of the phone lines. Fury was angry, to say the least, demanding to know what the hell he thought he was doing. They had argued. Tony defended himself, and Fury called him a moron for making a bad situation worse. Tony, in turn, accused the director of not having their backs *yet again* and letting the freaking US government make enemies out of the only people in the world willing to defend them from the unimaginable. Fury irately reminded him that SHIELD had many surprising bedfellows with a hell of a lot of power under their manipulative little finger tips, the sort that could make problems like legislation calling for their disbandment disappear. The bigger issue was that he had opened his “stupid ass” big mouth and blurted out, for the whole world and who knew who else to hear, that the Avengers were down their leader. At least before the scourge of the universe might have held back, not knowing how weak the Avengers really were, wondering if Captain America was alive or not. Now they all knew he was injured and damn well *out of commission*. Tony had the decency to be a little ashamed at that, but he’d only joked that at least he hadn’t mentioned Hawkeye’s bout with a knife and a gun and pneumonia. Fury had skewered him with a glare that would have melted most people and told him to keep his mouth shut and *make this go away*.

Well, he couldn’t make it go away. And he still didn’t regret what he said. Not one damn bit.

When he entered the double penthouse, Thor was the only one there beside Steve. The captain himself was in a troubled sleep, breathing quickly through his nose, covered in sweat and battling another nightmare. “How’s it going?” he asked nonchalantly, tossing the bag of antibiotics that he had collected at Bruce’s request for Clint from one hand to another.

Thor looked up from Steve’s bedside. He didn’t beat around the bush. Tony hadn’t known the Asgardian long at all, but he appreciated Thor’s directness. In a world teeming with bullshit, it was refreshing. “You have done well to defend our honor,” he said. “You spoke strongly and truthfully. It is the highest mark of a warrior’s virtue to stand beside a fallen brother in the face of criticism.”

“Bullshit criticism,” Tony clarified.

Thor turned worried blue eyes back to Steve. “It is unfortunate humanity remains so divided, even within your own nations. On Asgard, there is but one king, the Allfather, and his word is just.”

Tony grunted, folding his arms over his chest. “Yeah, well, we humans have been arguing about
who gets to make the rules since the dawn of time. Don’t think it’s going to end anytime soon.”

“Battle is made more difficult by internal strife,” Thor sadly commented.

“No kidding.” The demigod didn’t seem amused by his snarkiness, so Tony gave a small, apologetic grin. Thor closed his eyes wearily then and sagged in his chair. God or not, he seemed utterly bent with fatigue. It was a picture of his teammates that Tony was getting rather tired of seeing. So much so that he made an offer without really thinking it through first. “Why don’t you take a break? I got this for a while.” Thor rubbed his hands down his face. He was doubtful for a moment, but the press of exhaustion was obviously worse. Tony was fairly certain the other hadn’t left Steve’s side since they’d returned to Stark Tower the night before. “What? I can hold his hand if he starts crying.”

Thor looked away, and Tony couldn’t be certain if he was angry or simply upset. “I should not rest while he cannot,” he murmured, his pained blue eyes focused on Steve’s taut form. “He suffers without reprieve.”

“Loyal, but stupid. You should rest,” Tony returned.

Thor sighed, reluctant still. Tony wondered if people punished themselves for perceived sins as mightily on Asgard as they did here. He was beginning to realize his teammates were quite good at swallowing guilt and pain like so much poison, bottling it up until it burned the soul and scarred the heart. He was good at it himself. “His nightmares are worse. I cannot calm him.”

The high from the press conference was pretty quickly falling away. “Does he wake up?”

“Yes, at times,” Thor answered grimly. “When he does, I tell him stories of my many victories in Asgard to distract him from the pain. Asgardian customs are not so different from your own, in truth. He seems to enjoy tales from my youth.” Unlikely. I bet that would put anyone to sleep. “But at times I fear he is still unable to parse reality from his memories. He often screams and becomes greatly agitated over his friend. The one named for a stag.” Thor mistook Tony’s worried expression for confusion. “A large male deer. It is an unusual name, I agree.”

Tony muttered, “It’s a nickname. Something you use to address someone you care for.”

Thor’s brow furrowed. “He does not seem to hold much affection for this person.”

“Just hold tight for a sec. Banner needs this, and then you go and rest.”

Thor nodded wearily after a moment, perhaps a little confused himself by the sudden change in topic. He slumped in his chair, and Tony saw the desperation flash in his eyes. A wish that for the next few minutes (or however long Tony was gone) Steve stay sleeping.

Swiftly he made his way to the other room. He found Bruce leaning over Clint’s bed and Natasha passed out on the couch in the living area. “How is he?” he asked quietly, not wishing to startle the other man or wake Romanoff.

Bruce turned. If he’d slept, Tony couldn’t tell; he appeared about as tired and unkempt as before. But there was calm in his eyes again. “Holding his own,” Bruce said. Clint didn’t look it. His face was sallow, his eyes sunken. He looked like he was disappearing right before their eyes. “His vitals are okay. And the fever has stayed down. But his breathing still isn’t great. Did you bring the antibiotics?” Tony handed the other man the bag of drugs. Bruce took it with murmured thanks and hung the pouch on the pole beside Clint’s bed and connected it to his IV. “Stay here a minute? I sent some cultures to New York Presbyterian this morning.” Banner pulled his cellphone out of his
pocket and thumbed through the menus as he headed for the door. He caught Tony’s hard, betrayed glare. “What? You’re not the only one with friends you trust. I’m trying to keep him out of the hospital, but we need help.”

“I know. Sorry.”

Bruce’s had expression softened. “Hopefully they could identify the strain of pneumonia. He’ll send over some more targeted drugs if they can.” That was something, at least. Despite the magnitude of Steve’s injuries, restoring Captain America’s serum enhanced metabolism was enough to set him on the road to recovery. Clint didn’t have that magic cure, that panacea for all physical maladies. Tony turned back to Hawkeye’s beaten body and felt guilty anew that it had come to this.

“Hey,” Bruce called from the door. “It was good to hear you stand up for us.”

“Somebody had to,” Tony said after a beat, managing something of a grin for Banner.

“It helped me remember why we do this. It hasn’t been so easy to since they took Steve.” Bruce sighed, struggling for a moment with his thoughts. “And thanks for what you said earlier. It… it’s terrifying to be on the brink.”

Tony smiled genuinely. “Yeah.”

“Anyway, back in a few.”

Tony sighed and sat in Bruce’s vacated chair. He pulled out his phone and spent a minute answering a couple of emails from Pepper about business issues. Then he checked the news and found his statement to the reporters was still the biggest story. “Captain America Alive” read the top headline on CNN. “Stark Confirms Captain America’s Rescue” proclaimed Fox News. And there were others.

“Rogers Will Return.”

“Avengers: Heroes or Unhinged?”

“Who Watches the Watchers?”

“Iron Man Burns More Bridges: Boynton Responds.”

“Monsters and Maniacs? Who are the Avengers?”

“You’re an ass.” Tony looked up from his phone. Clint’s watery eyes were open to slits, regarding him hazily. An oxygen mask was strapped over his mouth and nose, misting every time he breathed. He looked incredibly, miserably, and mortally ill.

“And you look like shit, but I won’t hold that against you,” Tony retorted, turning back to his phone and trying not to let on how much Clint’s haggard appearance frightened him.

Clint turned his head slightly on the pillow, his eyes spilling tears in a glistening track down his temples. “Who… who the hell do you think you are?” He could barely manage to breathe enough to get the words out, panting desperately. Tony was about to advise him to shut up and concentrate on more important things (like not fainting from oxygen deprivation) but Clint was already wheezing out some more words. There was a hard, angry glint in his eyes as he settled a vicious glare on Tony. “You act – act like you own everything.”

“Mostly true.”
“And everyone!”

“I can only hope.”

Clint grunted and shook his head a little. “Someone needs to... needs to kick your ass. Knock you
down.”

Tony shook his head, bothered by the fury he saw in Clint’s grimace. “What’s ruffling your tail
feathers?”

Clint licked his lips. His voice was muffled by the mask and garbled by his own weakness, so it was
difficult to understand him. “You had no right to speak for Steve. No goddamn right. You
promised he’ll come back.”

Tony couldn’t believe he was hearing this. “You don’t think he will? You don’t want him to?”

Clint coughed deeply, shuddering in agony as his lungs strained and rebelled against him. Tony
shook his head, but the archer was already babbling more nonsense. “Course I want him to. But
you had no right to promise. He’s not a fucking machine. Maybe he won’t want to get up. Maybe
he’ll want to stay down.”

“Seriously? Barton, listen to what you’re saying.”

“Maybe the pressure’s too much. Maybe it hurts too fucking much. You ever think about that?
How much it hurts to come so close to death? It hurts.”

“We’re talking about Steve, right?”

“Maybe he’ll be scared. Maybe even if he gets past the pain, the memories will be worse than the
pain ever was, like a scar that never heals right and never fades away. He almost died. You don’t
just get over that.”

“You can. You will. I did.”

“You didn’t have anybody promising you would,” Clint snapped. He was growing exhausted, but
still he kept arguing. He was out of his goddamn mind. “You didn’t have anyone promising you’d
be the same person you were before.”

Something inside Tony began to ache in shame, maybe even regret. He shook his head, struggling
to remember exactly what had come out of his mouth that morning. The words tumbled around, but
he couldn’t really make sense of it, couldn’t recall what he’d promised the agitated crowd. “I didn’t
say that,” he finally declared, though his tone wasn’t so certain.

“You did. You said he’d come back. You said that was who he was, that he’d take it and get up
again.” Clint looked wild, angry in a way that didn’t make sense to Tony. “You made us no better
than them. All you cared about was making a point.”

Hurt lanced through him, hot and horrible. He suffered with it a moment, this terrible accusation,
and then the anger came, just as hot but welcomed because at least it filled this new and vacuous
crater in his soul. Clint had cut him deeply. Tony didn’t know why. He didn’t want to think it was
true – knew it wasn’t fucking true! – but he couldn’t entirely convince himself. But he tried
pretending he wasn’t upset about this. It was a good thing he could hear Bruce returning then,
because Tony honestly didn’t know if he wanted to throttle Barton or comfort him.

“You’re a moron,” Tony said softly. “If you wanna go at it when you’re better, fine; we can slug it
out a few rounds, if that'll make you feel like you’re ready to come back to this. But something tells me by then you’ll be crowing a different tune, when you get all this whining about pain and shit out of your system.”

Clint groaned. “I’ll kick your ass,” he promised.

“You can try, bird brain.”

Tony was up and out of there before Bruce could question him about the tension between him and Barton. He was down the hallway and into Steve’s room before he even realized he was moving. “JARVIS, bring all that crap from the street up here.”

“Sir?”

Exasperated, Tony flung his hands into the air and snapped hotly, “The flowers and whatever else people brought. Have the security guys bring it all up here. We could use a little redecorating with something to remind us why the hell we’re doing this.”

“Right away, sir.”

Thor rose at Tony’s entrance and nodded his gratitude before slowly and achingly moving away from Steve’s bed. Tony waited until he was gone and then paced the room, saddled with nervous energy that he couldn’t control, the pain and anger and grief swirling around and around in his head until all he could think about was how Clint was fucking right. He’d used Steve to make a statement. Granted, it was a different statement, a much better statement, than what the Red Dawn had said. But it really wasn’t all that different, in the end. He’d promised the world Captain America, and he’d had no right to.

_Bullshit_ , he thought bitterly as he sat in the vacant chair at the bedside. He stared determinedly at Steve’s sleeping form, at his young face and his broken body. “You’re gonna get up and get back out there. You know that, right? I know that. That’s why I said it. When things go to hell and the odds are stacked against us, _you_ make the right call and keep fighting. That’s who you are. You’re gonna make it through this even _tougher_ and _stronger_ than you were before. You know that?”

Steve didn’t answer.
Tony had a difficult time admitting things to himself. Case in point: it had taken the trauma of the last few days to force him to admit to himself that he sucked at admitting things to himself. He’d always had this trouble, and it mostly centered on his own failings, his own weaknesses, and his own fears. Like how he didn’t realize quite how afraid he was to be alone with Steve until he was alone with Steve. Granted, Thor had desperately needed the reprieve. The Asgardian had borne the brunt of Steve’s ordeal since they’d arrived at Stark Tower. Even gods required rest. Even gods had limits. For the first day of Steve’s unmitigated, uncontrolled, unstoppable suffering, Thor had never left his side, living each tormented moment as though it was his own. And now, about fifteen minutes into his own shift, Tony wanted out.

It wasn’t just that he was uncomfortable, or frightfully out of his own element. It wasn’t just that it was difficult, though Lord knew he was ill-equipped to be murmuring solace and holding hands at bedsides. That sort of giving, to share a burden as horrible and long-lasting as this one, required a level of patience and selflessness that he simply didn’t possess. That, at least, he had admitted to himself a long time ago. However, sitting with Steve brought it all to bear. Fifteen minutes after he’d assumed Thor’s spot in the chair beside Steve’s bed, the soldier had woken from his restless sleep. And now Tony was completely aware of just how difficult and unsettling this was going to be.

“Thor?” Steve harshly whispered, his eyes open to watery slits.

“Taking a break. I’m babysitting you for a while.”

“Tony.”

“The one and only,” Tony replied. Steve gave a shuddering cough, rolling over a bit and taking most of the sheets with him. His bandages looked freshly changed, and his face had the flush of a breaking fever. His jaw was covered in a light layer of stubble, and his hair, usually so meticulously combed, was wild and sticking up in a sweaty mess. “You’re looking pretty bad there, Cap.”

Steve winced and grunted. He stumbled around his words. “Sorry. Not everyone can be as stylish as you.”

Tony chuckled, relieved to hear Steve snipe at him a little, but he was becoming increasingly concerned about the other man’s tensing muscles. He knew before the first hoarse moan that the pain was coming on again. Knew it and hated it and wondered what the hell he was supposed to do. “Just relax, Steve. You can’t fight it.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Steve snarled, curling into himself as much as he could. He shuddered, gasping and groaning through tightly clenched teeth. Tony watched his hands ball into fists and squeeze the life out of the sheets. He wasn’t brave enough to touch the other man, not any more. Aboard the helicarrier Steve had been weak and barely conscious; his moments of awareness had been brief and delirious. He hadn’t had to worry about the captain pulverizing his hands or hitting him if he lost control. He’d seen the bruises on Thor’s hands.

Steve’s agonized whimpers cut straight to his heart. There were things he’d never wanted to see in his life. He hadn’t realized that Captain America suffering so acutely, so weak and beaten and destroyed, was one of them until the horrific scene was right before his eyes. He wiped his sweaty hands on his pants and floundered to do something, anything, to make this go away. “You want some water? I’ll get some water. Here. Hold on.” He scrambled to the glass pitcher atop the night
stand and poured some water into plastic cup. Jabbing a straw in it, he turned back to Steve’s writhing body.

He sat on the bed and helped Steve sit up a little. He was shocked and disgusted to feel the sweat soaking Steve’s shirt and the heat radiating from his skin. The soldier trembled, panting heavily, and took the offered cup. His movements were jerky and uncoordinated, but he managed to get the straw into mouth. He nearly choked on the first sip. Tony wanted to scream in frustration. But instead he said, “You can beat this. We’re gonna get you through this. I swear.”

Steve actually laughed. Outright and cruelly. The harsh sound echoed in the quiet room for a long moment, followed by painfully pounding hearts and labored breaths. Tony watched his teammate shiver, watched him waver, watched water drip from the tipped cup onto his lap. Steve didn’t care. He didn’t seem to even notice. “I should have died back there,” he said. “Here. I don’t know. Everything’s… I can’t get away. I want it to end.” In the vacuous silence, the soft proclamation was louder than thunder.

Tony’s mouth went dry. His emotions collided in a maelstrom he couldn’t understand and couldn’t control. So he settled on anger. “Don’t you dare,” he warned.

Steve glanced at him out of the corner of his half-lidded eyes. There was such anger and despair and utter hatred in his normally stoic and strong gaze that Tony could only fearfully wonder how deep the damage went. The man before him was nothing like the annoyingly moral, the annoyingly righteous, the annoyingly perfect Steve Rogers that he’d known only a few days ago. This new Steve looked away and moaned, turning to his side again and wrapping his uninjured arm around his chest. “It hurts too much,” he whispered.

Tony barely got the water cup away before it spilled again. “Yeah, I know,” he calmly said. “But you can beat this.” Repetition and insistence. Those were feeble weapons, and though the day was bright, it seemed very dark in the room. “See all these flowers?” He tipped his head toward the bouquets and balloons and wreaths that had been brought up from the street below. It was a dazzling array, a strange sight given the horrors they’d witnessed over the last few days. Miseries upon miseries, and the only consolation now were the hopes of strangers. Even Tony found that pathetic. But he went ahead, no matter how lame it was. “Those are from your adoring fans. There are hundreds of them down there, hoping you’re going to be okay. People counting on you to get back up.”

Steve didn’t look, squeezing his eyes shut and breathing harshly through his nose. He didn’t answer, either, and Tony realized that this approach, the added pressure of what everybody wanted and expected (and the promises he himself had made that Steve would deliver), was not helping. And he wasn’t sure how much Steve knew about what had happened, if he was aware the world had seen him in his darkest moment. Thankfully he didn’t ask, didn’t notice or care. Tony floundered for a moment, watching as Steve’s battle against the agony was rapidly shifting in favor of the enemy. “Look, tough it out, Rogers. It’s pain. It’s horrible, I know. But it’s not going to last.”


Steve choked out a cry and turned onto his back. He was trying hard to hold himself together, but the tears escaped the corners of his eyes and ran down his temples into his hair. He covered his face with shaking fingers. Tony’s heart clenched, and he wanted to bolt. But he didn’t. He summoned some courage and strength from somewhere and moved from the chair to kneel beside the bed. He grabbed Steve’s hand and pulled it away and held it in his own. His eyes inadvertently fell upon the fading bruises and lines and cuts on Steve’s wrist where he’d been bound. He felt fingers clenching,
shaking, fighting to control strength. Fighting not to hurt him. Tony felt sick and irate. “I won’t break.” Steve only shook his head, squeezing shut his eyes, and tried to pull his hand away. Tried to keep himself whole. “Dammit, Steve. Cry if you want. I won’t tell anyone.”

Steve gave a laughing sob. “You would.”

Tony managed a little smile and shrug. “Not right away. Blackmail material needs to rest, to age, to ferment into the perfect tool I can use when I need it.” His attempt at levity fell flat. And Steve did cry. Tony didn’t know much about surviving trauma; his own dark experiences he’d overcome just by fumbling through them. But there was some drivel he’d heard time and time again. “Don’t let it control you.”

“Shut up, Stark,” Steve gasped. “It does. It did. I don’t know. I don’t know – nothing. I don’t know.” He was losing it. Tony saw it in his frightened eyes, the memories beating him, brutalizing him, fighting to twist his reality into things that weren’t real. A flashback or a waking nightmare. Tony wasn’t about to let it take him. Not without a fight.

He acted without thinking, because if he spent a moment contemplating what he was doing he would have lost his nerve. He tightened his grip on Steve’s hand. “Come on, Cap. Look at me. Talk to me.” That wasn’t enough. The terror in Steve’s eyes was deep and unyielding and wouldn’t release him easily. “Tell me some war stories. Howling Commandos and Captain America versus the Nazis. All the good stuff.”

Steve shot wide eyes toward him. Tony realized quickly he’d touched something strictly off limits so he changed the subject without a moment’s hesitation. “What about your parents?”

“Died when I was a kid,” Rogers said in a strangled voice. He was at least trying to pay attention to Tony’s question, but the question, Tony recognized immediately, was yet another bad one. No fond childhood memories. Was there anything good that had ever happened to Steve Rogers? He contemplated for a split second about asking him about Peggy Carter, but there again, that would only lead to complicated emotions and a sense of loss that Tony had no idea if Steve had even begun to come to terms with. What did that leave him? No stories about the war, nothing about his friends in the army, his parents, or the woman he’d loved…

“Tell me about my dad.”

That got Steve’s attention. His eyes gained a confused but focused glint. “Howard?”

“No. God.” Steve glared at him with all of the spite he could muster. “Of course Howard. Tell me about him. He used to talk about you all the time. Damn well bored me to tears.” Steve gasped and closed his eyes again, pain wracking his body and leaving him quivering like a leaf blown in too violent a wind. Tony got frustrated and moved closer, sitting on the edge of the bed and leaning over his teammate. “Come on. Tell me about Howard Stark.”

Steve languished a moment more, staring at the ceiling overhead and blinking rapidly as though to center himself. He breathed quickly, first through his mouth and then his nose, and then grew a little calmer. “He was an ass,” he finally gasped. “You’re a lot like him.”

At least he’s talking. “According to you, everyone with half a wit is an ass. Just so you know: I take it as a compliment.”

Steve gave a small, hoarse laugh. Then he grew quieter, his brow creasing as he thought. “He knew everything. He was smarter than anyone I’d ever met, maybe even smarter than Doctor Erskine. He… he was always dressed sharp. Stylish and suave. Rich, and he damn well flaunted it.”
“Well, at least I inherited all his good parts.”

“Carefree. Always chasing women, even Peggy. I, uh, I thought for a while that fondue was… That he was…” He trailed off, his eyes distant. But he didn’t finish that thought. “He taught me a thing or two about women because I was hopeless.” Was? “He never followed the rules. He was arrogant to a fault, but he got us out of a jam or two. Even flew me into HYDRA’s territory against orders.”

Despite himself, Tony felt just a little proud hearing Steve Rogers talk about his father. The Howard Stark he’d known hadn’t been so open, so friendly, so happy. The Howard Stark from his youth had been cold and calculating and uncaring. He’d lived his life thinking he was his father’s greatest disappointment. Even knowing now what his father truly thought of him, of the depth of his genius and his devotion, it was still difficult to erase the years of anger and bitterness. He couldn’t picture this young Howard Stark from Captain America’s war days, the brains of SSR, the hero in the background. He wanted to.

Steve’s soft voice drew his attention. “Once we were in France after we took out one of Schmidt’s teams looking to build a stronghold in Le Chambon. That was a little town trying to do what it could during the occupation, and Schmidt got wind of it. We went in, stopped HYDRA… And then the people threw us this party. All of us were crowded into this little tavern, drinking and dancing and celebrating, and your father went from dame to dame and charmed them all, going after any girl dressed nice who looked his way. He was drunk beyond drunk and having a helluva time, wooing the rich merchant’s daughters and all that. But there was this one girl… one of the serving girls. Her dress was stained and moth-eaten and she looked like she hadn’t had a good meal in days. For the working class, things were rough then. Real rough.” Steve’s voice faded, his eyes distant with the memory. “She watched Howard like he was someone amazing, something she’d never seen before. She probably hadn’t. Something other-worldly. Peggy… She thought your father was being such a bastard for treating every gal in the place to a drink and a dance and a kiss and never noticing this girl enamored with him because she wasn’t pretty and she was poorer than poor.”

Steve abruptly lost it then, moaned something Tony couldn’t hear, his body going taut in a blink of an eye. Tony spoke quickly. “Come on, Cap. Keep talking to me.”

The battle raged on for a moment. Rogers came back to him, much to Tony’s relief, breathing harshly and squeezing his eyes shut until the pain receded. Then he laughed. “Howard was a damn right bastard sometimes. But I swear, when the place was clearing and it was only a few of us left, he went over to that girl and gave her a dance like he had all the others, even though there was no music. Then he handed her his watch and every speck of money he had on him and told her he wished it was more.”

Tony ducked his head. “That doesn’t sound like him,” he muttered.

“Shoulda seen the look on Peggy’s face when I told her the next morning. She didn’t believe me, either.” Steve chuckled again. “But he always did the right thing when it really mattered, always tried to fix what he could and even what he couldn’t. He was a good man.” Blue eyes for once clear and calm turned to regard Tony. “Like I said, you’re a lot like him.”

Tony didn’t understand the soft words for a moment. Then he felt warm, felt a huge smile coming to his face and maybe even the sting of tears in his eyes. He covered his reaction with a jab, as he always did. “Are we bonding, Rogers? Because this touchy-feely bromance stuff just makes me all icky inside.”

This thing had been between them for months ever since the Chitauri incident, untouched, unexplored, festering with spite and lack of understanding and insults flung in a heated moment.
Tony was jealous of Steve, jealous that his father had thrown away his childhood to search for a dead man, jealous even more now that Steve had known Howard in a way Tony never had and never would. And Steve wanted to see the things he’d admired about Howard in his son, the closest thing he had to a link to the life he’d lost. Neither had found what they’d wanted. That sort thing brokered resentment.

All of the sudden, they were past it. In the midst of this misery, there was some semblance of closure. Unexpected, certainly, but welcomed, nonetheless. Another small smile graced Steve’s dried lips. “You wanted to know.”

“For your benefit, not mine.” At the moment, at least, the pain was far away and peace was possible. Steve was calm and almost contented and Tony was, too. “Well, go on. Tell me about fondue and how my dad taught Captain America how to charm women… or woman. Singular.”

Steve did, and Tony listened.

Thor had been right. Getting Steve’s mind off his injuries helped him tremendously, and after their talk he had fallen asleep easily. Tony had risen from his post, worn from the effort of keeping Steve continually engaged in their conversation and pulling him back when the pain grew stronger. He checked his email, briefly called Pepper (who immediately noticed the stress in his voice but gave up questioning about it), and snuck into the kitchen. He found some sandwiches that someone had ordered and grabbed two, wolfing them down quickly while chugging some soda. It was late afternoon, pushing dinnertime, and he was famished. The day had at once sped by him in a blur and crawled away painstakingly slowly. Needless to say, Tony was tired.

He returned to Steve’s room and was immensely relieved to find the other man still peacefully sleeping. He dropped carelessly onto the couch in front of the TV. His mind was whirling, stricken with too many contradictory thoughts and worries. Any catharsis he’d found in listening to Rogers tell him about his father and the war was immediately gone like it had never existed at all, and his mind inevitably went back to the press conference. Tony tried not to dwell. He flew by the seat of his pants, and when he did something, it was done. There wasn’t a way to undo it. Hell, there wasn’t even any point in doubting it. But he couldn’t shake Clint’s accusations. Couldn’t forget the shattered look in Steve’s eyes. He was goddamn sick of it all. “JARVIS, find me something to watch. Make sure it’s quiet.”

“Something to engage you or merely distract you?” the AI plainly asked.

“What do you think?” Tony coldly retorted.

The TV flickered on to some inane reality show featuring loud, rich women giving the entire wealthy population and an entire gender a bad name. He looked at it, but he didn’t really see it. Who the hell did Barton think he was? Giving him so much shit for what he’d said about Steve to the press and the people. What was he supposed to do? Just let everyone give up on Captain America? Let the monsters that had reduced him to a broken, battered, sobbing mess win in the end? And then just let Boynton and the assholes on his side rub salt into their wounds? He’d thought this through over and over again. Since the moment they’d rescued Steve, everyone had seemingly given up hope that it would be okay. First that he would live. Now that he could recover. It was ironic, and not in a good way, that Tony Stark was the one carrying Rogers’ flag, was the one trying not to give up when Sommers had and Banner had and Barton had and Romanoff just sucked everything up inside of herself so it was impossible to tell what she was thinking beyond the fact that it didn’t seem good… At least Thor seemed optimistic. The guy was a rock.

The women on the TV started arguing at some ostentatious dinner party, spitting and cursing and
nearly throwing things at each other, and Tony watched numbly. At least it was enough to draw his attention. The spectacle went on for a few minutes more, and then the show went to commercials.

JARVIS’ placid announcement echoed through the room. “Sir, I believe Captain Rogers is becoming agitated. His heart and respiration rates are rising.”

There was a loud cry behind him, and Tony jumped to his feet, effectively ramming his shin into the coffee table and aggravating his still healing body. He turned around and saw Steve struggling on the bed. In the blink of an eye, serene slumber had degraded into nightmare.

He stumbled to the bed, watching with wide eyes as Steve screamed again and curled into himself protectively. “What do I do?” Tony asked stupidly.

“Attempt to wake him, sir.”

“No shit! How do I do that?”

JARVIS had no answer. Tony didn’t know how healed Steve’s injuries were, and he didn’t want him to tear wounds or worsen his condition. Steve’s struggles quickly became more violent, his arm ripping away from his body as if to shove something away and instead sending the contents of the nightstand to the floor with a crash. Tony stood at the foot of the bed, uncertain of what to do, of where to even begin, staring at the mess of flailing limbs fueled by super soldier strength and justly fearing for his own safety. He contemplated calling Thor or Bruce or anyone for help.

“Stay away from me… Get away! No! No!” Steve’s ragged pleas made him feel even more helpless, and Tony paced nervously for a second. “Please… Don’t! I’m sorry…” His voice dissolved into tears. Sorry? What the hell reason does he have to be sorry?

“I tried. I tried.”

“No, Steve! Wake up!” Tony demanded, inching closer to the bed as Rogers calmed slightly. He shivered and sobbed piteously, pulling into himself again. Tony steeled himself and took his opportunity, lunging closer to the bed and grabbing Steve’s wrists. “Wake up! It’s just a dream. No one is hurting you.”

But Steve didn’t wake up. He flung himself backward, nearly taking Tony with him. “Bucky! I swear I tried! No! Don’t say that!”

Confusion assailed Tony, but he didn’t have time to think about it. It took all of his strength to restrain the captain. Steve wailed again, furiously demanding that the demons in his head not hurt him further. Tony had never felt so useless. “Steve! Listen to me! You’re having a nightmare!”

He climbed atop the bed and tried to pull the other man closer to him. “Stop. Stop! Damn it!”

Steve kept screaming, flinching, recoiling from Tony’s touch as though it burned him. Tony hated the thought that Steve couldn’t distinguish between him and the monsters in his dreams. But he persisted, not letting the other man push him away. It seemed ridiculous that he could overpower Steve. But nothing was right in the world anymore.

“Please, Bucky… Please don’t hurt me… Don’t do this to me!”

Tony’s blood ran cold. For a moment he lost his focus on what he was doing, too shocked and stupefied, and Steve knocked him off the bed. He banged his lower back into the arm of the chair and pain radiated through him, driving the breath from his chest. He recovered, gasping and growling and wondering what the hell was going on. He climbed back onto the bed and pulled Steve’s considerably larger frame to him. He laid himself over him, pinning him down. “Steve, it’s
Tony. Wake up. Get out of your head and listen to me. Come on. It’s Tony and you’re safe and whatever they did to you, it’s over.”

Steve gasped, sobbing and then wailing and then trying to get away. His eyelids fluttered and he fought against Tony’s restraining holds weakly. Tony considered slapping him to get him awake, but then he considered what Steve was dreaming about and decided that was a really bad idea. So he just held him down as he writhed and bucked and suffered through the nightmare. And when the soldier finally went limp beneath him, he leaned upward, pulling Steve with him.

Steve clung to him, balling his hands in Tony’s shirt. He choked on his screams, burying his face in Tony’s shoulder and holding onto him like he was a lifeline. Maybe he was. Tony hesitated a moment before embracing the other man, feeling slightly surprised that things had come to this. He rubbed his hands soothingly down Steve’s sweat-soaked back, feeling muscles bulge and strain and quake beneath his palms. “It’s okay. You’re okay. It’s okay.” He kept saying these things over and over again, but with every gentle murmur to the quivering, crying form in his arms, they felt weaker and paler and less and less true.

“It hurts, Tony,” came Steve’s strained whisper after many long moments filled with only quiet sobs and tender shushing. “Why did he do this to me? I tried… I swear to God I did.”

“I know.” He didn’t know. He didn’t know anything. Tony swallowed the pain in his throat. “Go back to sleep.”

“No.”

“You need sleep.”

Steve pulled away suddenly and curled onto his side. “I said no!” he stubbornly shouted, his voice strained by misuse.

Tony didn’t know what to do. He wanted to ask the questions burning on his lips, but he knew he damn well shouldn’t. Couldn’t. So he sat on the bed, looking away slowly as Steve turned away from him without another word. The silence that fell upon them was heavy, tense, and unbreakable. He kept wondering and hating that he didn’t know the truth, the ugly mess of it tormenting him. He couldn’t let it go. Bruce had realized this was more complicated from the beginning. And Thor had recognized it, too. Now it was undeniable. Something very dark and very dangerous and very twisted lay beneath it all, something that had made Steve Rogers believe his best friend, dead for nearly seventy years, had tortured him.

And all Tony could think was that he knew how to get his answers.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This chapter contains graphic depictions of torture. Read at your own discretion.

Fury was right.

Someone needed to know what Captain America had gone through.

And that someone apparently was him.

He needed to watch the video.

But Tony quickly realized that summoning up the courage and fortitude to actually do that wasn’t at all easy. He wasn’t normally intimidated or daunted or hesitant. But this… This was way beyond any of that. This was unthinkable. He couldn’t make himself imagine it, couldn’t make himself picture it. He was afraid. He couldn’t think, couldn’t concentrate. All he knew was the world was so dark and so heavy and he hated it all.

His composure was utterly shredded. He sat beside Steve’s bed, watching the soldier as he slept away the evening. Steve was fairly calm, but Tony was completely unable to shake the lasting vestiges of the nightmare from his mind. He should have left hours ago, but he hadn’t. He should have let it go. But he couldn’t. His mind spun and twisted and pulled the matter apart, turning it this way and that way and any way that would reveal the truth. He thought tirelessly and tenaciously, attacking it as he did every problem he encountered. It was a broken machine. It was a physics dilemma. It was a mathematical quandary, an equation that was out of balance, a variable that wasn’t properly defined or a line of code that wasn’t compiling. It was an anomaly, but he could fix it. He could figure it out.

But no matter how he struggled, how he manipulated the questions, he couldn’t get past the stark truth. He couldn’t solve this without knowing everything. This invariably led his spinning thoughts to the exact same place: back to that tablet locked tightly in his safe. The argument, the goddamn procession of logic, was becoming so familiar and his thoughts were whirling so rapidly that he was practically considering all parts of the issue at once. And it always came to the same conclusions. He paced, grinding his teeth, wringing his hands and then shoving them into his pockets and then folding his arms over his chest with unrelenting nervous energy. He moved from the chair to the window, from the window to the living area, from there back to the bed where he couldn’t make himself watch Steve sleep, and from the bed back to the window because at least he could distract himself with the view. But as he looked over the city, at the distant lights and peaceful activity, all he could imagine was the shock these people had endured, the horror they’d seen when that awful scene had dominated every TV in the world. Steve, bound and gagged and bleeding at the whims of monsters. There was more. His skin was crawling and his stomach roiled and he closed his eyes against the pounding in his head. His heart wouldn’t stop racing. Just those few horrific moments of Steve’s torture had been unbearable. And there was so much more.

Tony sighed and shook his head. He jiggled loosely, waving his arms, kicking out his feet a little, as if doing that could rid him of the horrible feeling molesting him. He heard a short breath and a
whispered word and turned back to the bed instinctively. Steve shuddered in his sleep, and Tony worked quickly to hush him and prevent his waking. The same pattern, over and over again. The same battle. The same pains and fears and undeniable truths. Keep him sleeping. Keep him peaceful. *It’s not real. It can’t be.*

For hours this went on. He was alone with Steve, alone with the horrors looming over him like monsters threatening from the shadows. Night descended, cold and once again plagued by a storm. The rain splattered against the windows like tears and distant thunder groaned like the sky was aching. The room was dark, and when the lightning flashed, everything looked different and bent and unfamiliar. Even Steve, curled in the bed and struggling anew against his captors. *I don’t have the right to know. No one does. No one ever could.* He held and talked and comforted Steve through another nightmare, this one worse than the last, and when it was over and the other man wept and then slept again, Tony knew he didn’t have the guts to watch.

He sat with that miserable realization for quite some time, numb and unable to piece together a coherent train of thought if his life depended on it. That was how the Black Widow found him, stiffly perched in the chair beside the bed. Pale and frazzled, clothes rumpled and hair in a disarray from driving his hands through it too roughly and too much. She looked more concerned over him than Rogers. “You okay, Stark?” she asked. It seemed like there was genuine care in her voice, but it was always hard to tell with her.

Tony composed himself after a beat. “Yeah, yeah. Fucking peachy.”

She wasn’t convinced, though he’d given her no reason to be. “What’s the matter?”

For a brief moment, he considered telling her everything. About Steve’s nightmares and Bucky Barnes. But mostly about the damn tablet torturing him from afar. None of the other Avengers knew about it. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if he told them so it became a burden made lighter by sharing. Maybe they would help him decide what do. Maybe he wouldn’t have to face this alone.

But he didn’t. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust them. He just didn’t want anyone else to be hurt. He could take a hit for the team. “Nothing,” he heard himself say. “Just tired.” At least that wasn’t a total lie.

Natasha still wasn’t sure, watching him with wary eyes. But she chose not to press the issue. “Then sleep. You’ve been here for hours. I can take over for a while.”

Tony left before she changed her mind. He should have asked her about Clint, but he didn’t. He should have warned her about Steve’s nightmares and his unhinged strength, but he didn’t. He couldn’t think about anything other than that damn tablet. He made his way to the elevator, his feet directing him because his mind had frankly checked out. And when he was safely inside, heading to the top of Stark Tower, he lost it. “Yeah, let’s all sit down and watch it together. That’s a great idea. I’ll make some popcorn, pass out some beer and candy… What do you want to watch, guys? I’m in the mood for horror, but I think ‘Hostel’ was a little too tame for me. Not gory enough or scary enough or real enough… How about ‘The Capture and Torture of Captain America’? That one’s awesome, two thumbs up… I can’t do this. I can’t. I can’t watch it. No way. No fucking way.” He sank against the wall of the elevator and put his face in his hands. “I’m not doing it.”

The ding of the elevator answered. The doors slid open and he pulled himself together and walked out into the penthouse. It was dark and he hesitated like he was utterly lost for a moment because he actually kind of sort of – never in hell would he admit it – was. JARVIS seemed to realize the unspoken. “It is 11:08 pm, sir. Miss Potts has already retired. She tried to contact you numerous times.”
Tony vaguely recalled feeling his phone vibrate in his pocket before. He pulled it out then and saw numerous text messages from Pepper. She had early meetings tomorrow morning on the west coast. He could tell she was looking for a way to get out of them. He’d hardly seen her all day, not since the disaster of the press conference in the morning, and he suddenly felt shame as thick as mud bubbling up inside him. He sighed and set his phone to the coffee table of the spacious living area. “Shall I have something sent up for you, sir? Dinner, perhaps?”

“No,” Tony answered. He didn’t think his stomach could handle anything. “I’m just gonna turn in.”

“That seems wise, sir.” Did JARVIS somehow know about the video? And of his decision not to watch it? And was that his subtle way of approving? It’s a computer. Get a goddamn grip.

He moved like a machine, mindless, unfeeling, uncaring. He kept everything tightly under wraps because he knew if he started thinking, he would start doubting, start wondering, and that would only dent his already battered resolve to not worry about this anymore. He took a burning shower, and afterward he wiped the steam from the mirror and looked at his face but didn’t really see it. Bad things prodded at the corner of his consciousness, banging at their prison. What he thought Steve had gone through. What he had in Afghanistan. He went to get dressed before the bad things escaped.

Then he slipped into bed. The satin sheets were cool, and Pepper was warm and soft. He spooned around her and possessively held her. She stirred slightly and then rolled closer to him. He relaxed finally, her mere presence lifting the misery from his mind, and he closed his eyes and breathed her in and tried to let it all go. It was for the best. “You okay?” she murmured into his neck. “I was worried about you.”

“Yeah,” he said without hesitation. “I am now.”

She was contented with that and fell back asleep, her soft, even breath caressing his throat. He closed his eyes and tried to follow her, tried to match his ragged breathing to the rhythm of hers, tried to calm the rattle of his heart and clear his head. He managed for a little while, slipping into that place between wakefulness and slumber where things didn’t quite make sense but you didn’t really mind. But the deeper layers of unconsciousness never came to him. The pale light of the arc reactor kept him up sometimes, and tonight its trigger for insomnia was only compounded by just about everything else. Its persistent glow bled through the seal of his eyelids until he couldn’t stand it anymore. But he refused to wake up, even though he wasn’t quite asleep, because then he might start thinking again. He pulled the comforter higher to obscure the reactor and told his brain to shut the hell up over and over again like a goddamn chant. He sighed because that didn’t work either. He fidgeted until he realized he would wake Pepper with his restlessness. He drummed his fingers on the mattress and gave up on keeping his eyes shut in this futile charade, looking angrily into the shadows overhead. He couldn’t sleep. He wouldn’t sleep, no matter how badly he needed it and how much his body ached for rest. He knew Steve wasn’t sleeping. Somehow he was certain even though there were ten floors between them and no possible way he could be sure. As if the afternoon had bonded them somehow.

And the minute his mind drifted to Steve, he knew he was kidding himself.

Tony closed his eyes and sighed and hated Captain America and himself and the Avengers and SHIELD and the whole goddamn world that had conspired to bring them to this point. The last few hours had been utterly futile, all the time he’d spent trying to find a way to figure out what had happened to Steve in all of its awful detail without watching the video. Trying to convince himself that it wasn’t necessary, that it wasn’t the right thing to do, that he couldn’t and wouldn’t do it and that was right because this wasn’t any of his business and if he were in Steve’s place, he wouldn’t
want anyone to see that. And it wasn’t even so much that he was sure it was right, or that it was his business or his duty or whatever placating nonsense that might make it seem like it was okay.

He was Tony Stark. He didn’t do patience or control or not knowing. He was impulsive and self-absorbed and too smart to ever be satisfied with half an answer. So the minute Fury had handed him that tablet, this path had been set and he had been fated to walk it. Maybe the damn bastard had counted on that. It didn’t matter why; that was the point. He was Tony Stark, and his curiosity was insatiable.

As carefully as he could, he untangled himself from Pepper’s peacefully slumbering form and slipped soundlessly from the bed. Then he padded on soft footfalls to the den adjacent to the bedroom, using the pale, blue glow of the arc reactor to guide him. His heart was pounding by the time he stepped inside. “JARVIS, lock the door. Turn the lights on.”

The AI complied and the room flooded with soft illumination. Tony winced as the ache in his head rose sharply. Everything was so still, so quiet and serene, and he didn’t want to break it. But he did, stumbling to the far wall where there was a small bar. He knelt and pulled open the lower right cabinet. “Unlock it,” he ordered. The safe opened. There it was, right where he’d left it. Tony sighed, buffeted by such a storm of incomprehensible thoughts and emotions. But he still grabbed it. It was sleek and cold in his hand.

He went to the desk and sat in the chair, turning the tablet over and over in his hands, running his fingers along the smooth edges. His mind was blank. There was nothing left to think about, really, and for him to have nothing to analyze and over analyze was saying something. He’d come this far. He couldn’t turn back now. So he finally set the wretched thing to the desk above the data port. “JARVIS, get whatever’s on this onto the mainframe in a secure area. And then wipe the disk.”

A second later, the AI chimed, “Finished, sir. The file is encrypted with SHIELD codes. I believe I can break them.”

_of course you can_, Tony thought. _Fury would have made sure of it_. “Do it.”

It was quiet. Tony knew JARVIS had completed his task. The hesitation was a purely human trait. Of course JARVIS would be able to figure out what was in the file, what Tony meant to do. The computer was brilliant; Tony had programmed it to be. “Sir, are you certain you wish to view this? It cannot be… unwatched.”

“No, I’m not sure,” Tony admitted. “But I need to. Play it. Volume 50%. And if you so much as get a hint of anyone coming this way, shut it off.”

JARVIS knew better than to argue with him. The video player interface appeared out of the air before him over the desk, and in its center the file was loading. He blinked, and it was playing.

And he was watching.

The timer ran in the bottom of the screen. 2012-09-26 08:58 am. The warehouse flickered onto the screen. It was dark and shadowy. The camera shifted wildly for a moment, likely from someone’s adjustments, before settling. There was murmuring in the background, not in English. Then silence. There were things that hadn’t been noticed before, boxes in the background, dirt on the ground that was composed of rusted metal grates and metal slabs. Chains hanging from the ceiling. Ruddy light in the background. Maybe this wasn’t hell, but it damn well resembled it.

The stillness dragged on for too many long minutes. Agonizing, miserable moments filled with wonder that perhaps nothing was going to happen, perhaps there was something wrong with the
video camera or the file. Horrendous moments spent riddled in apprehension, in waiting for the inevitable. And even though it was expected, the shock when it finally happened was brutal.

There were muffled shouts. A door slammed open somewhere off screen. The camera swung in that direction, and a nauseating blur of motion and color dominated the picture for a moment. Whoever was holding the camera focused on the mess of men coming through the double doors in the rear of the room. There were more than a dozen of them, all dressed in black and brown and gray, most bearing automatic weapons and handguns. It was difficult to see through the tangled mess of arms and legs at first, the struggle chaotic. It was obvious the men were trying to pull someone inside the room, someone who was significantly stronger than they were. Chains were rattling. Men were laughing and yelling.

The crowd abruptly fell away with a cacophony of shouts and curses and cries of rage, and the camera got its first true glimpse of the prisoner. Steve had already been stripped of his cowl and boots and gloves and uniform top, the protective Kevlar of the Captain America suit gone, so that he was clad in only his pants. Blood ran down his bare skin from where he’d been shot in the shoulder. It looked like the bastards had already gotten a few other shots in, if the bruises along his chest were any indication. But even as bound and gagged and injured as he was, Steve was not submitting. He rammed his shoulder into one of the men, sending the thug flying ten feet across the room to hit the opposite wall with a bone-breaking crunch. Others rushed in to restrain their catch, but Steve was too fast. He leapt, pulling his legs up tight to his chest and swinging arms that were bound behind his back to his front. He moved like lightning, kicking at one man, knocking down another with a sweep of his fists. He tried to pull his hands apart, to break the metal cuffs binding him, but they wouldn’t give. Dismay crossed his face, blue eyes wide, and the men threw themselves on him. He was vastly outnumbered, so escape was impossible. A chain was wrapped around his throat from behind and Steve cried out, struggling with the weight of the man on his back, choking, and then he was rammed and brought down to the floor. Fists flew. Boots slammed downward. A gun went off, and there was a hoarse yelp.

It was difficult to see for a moment. The men worked to haul their subdued prisoner forward, closer to whoever held the camera. The chain was tight around Steve’s neck, strangling him, as he was dragged along the ground. Another length of chain was looped through the manacles. Somebody stepped in front of the camera, so for a moment there was only an out-of-focus view of black fabric. Rustling and harsh words and more jangling. The Red Dawn set up their horrific little scene in a few minutes.

Whatever was obscuring the camera moved away. And this was it. The beginning of it all.

Steve stood. His arms were held above his head, secured to something the camera didn’t show. As long as he kept his feet beneath him, his weight wasn’t completely on his shoulders or his wrists. That wouldn’t last, as much as his escape attempt couldn’t have possibly succeeded. The horrific conclusion of this story was already written, immutable. So there really couldn’t be hope, even as hearts desperately strained for it. Blood dribbled down his face from a blow to his temple. He’d been shot again, his left bicep weeping crimson down his arm. His ankles were bound together. He was already filthy.

The prisoner glared, the men guarding him backing away with their guns and malicious eyes trained upon him. For his own part, Steve was doing an admirable job of looking strong and dangerous, despite his helplessness. His eyes were narrowed in rage. He stood very still and watched his captors with an unspoken promise of furious retaliation. He was formidable and unpredictable, and the others knew it and kept away.

At least, for the moment. The door creaked open and shut again. The man in the suit entered,
emerging from the bloody haze in the rear of the darkened room like a snake. Another man followed him, carrying a small metallic case. The cameraman moved to gain a better vantage of their leader’s approach. Well-groomed, rich… There was a maniacal, vicious, evil glint in his eyes as his eyes devoured the sight of his prey. “Captain America,” he eventually greeted.

Steve’s nostrils flared and he tried to stand a bit taller. His eyes were icy. The man smiled an oily smile, displaying two rows of perfectly white teeth. “Welcome to our little show. You are its star. I hope you don’t mind that. I’ve noticed you’re not as comfortable in front of cameras as some of your friends are.” The man chuckled.

There was the heavy clinking of chains and machinery. Whatever apparatus that secured Steve pulled him upward slightly, just enough so his toes barely touched the floor. He grimaced and grunted. “In pain, are you? Wondering, perhaps, just how it is your body, normally so resilient to damage, is not enduring as well as you might have wished?” The second man, who was something of a mouse compared to the others, approached with a syringe he’d probably procured from his case. He uncapped it. “You are not invincible, Captain. Underneath the gifts you were given, you are as frail and subject to the discomforts of physical injury as the rest of us mere humans. It is thanks to an old enemy of yours that we were able to render you so damageable. HYDRA did most of the work for us.”

Steve eyed the approaching needle fearfully, shaking his head and struggling fruitlessly. His feet had no purchase against the ground, so there was horrifyingly nothing he could do as the man walked closer, jabbed the needle into his flank, and depressed the plunger. He backed away, leaving Steve trembling. The man in the suit grinned as he approached. The other men came closer, too, like demons slinking in from the shadows, and Steve slipped back to the ground again. He tried to angle around, tried to see them nearing him, but they were too many and he couldn’t protect himself. “Here you are no super soldier. Here you can bleed. Here you can hurt.” Something flashed in the background, and then Steve gave a wrangled yelp as it struck his back and he lurched forward. “Here you will die.” The man’s eyes narrowed hatefully. “I want the world to see how much you can take before you do.”

The beating continued. It was a metal pipe of some sort, slamming into Steve’s back over and over again. And the man in the suit went on, watching dispassionately as he lectured. “They call you their hero, their legend. The first Avenger. They made you to be a symbol of America’s might and purity during the last great war, to represent everything good about your country. Pathetic, truly, and misplaced in these times. And the United States… It is long past the hour of its defeat. Its enemies are vast and powerful. Its superiority wans in this new era. A red dawn will rise, and you and your nation will fall.” Steve grunted, fighting to remain standing as blow after blow battered him. The cameraman zoomed in on to catch the ruby glint of blood running to the floor. The men who held the chains around Steve’s neck pulled them tighter every time he fell forward, effectively strangling him. “Notice this, Captain. We took you without magic weapons or an army. You Avengers want to stand between the world and its enemies. Well, it must be a bit embarrassing to be brought down by mere men when you triumphed over gods and aliens.”

Somebody laughed. A shadow passed before the camera, a great hulking brute, who stepped up to Steve, balled his meaty hand into a fist, and rammed it into Steve’s exposed midriff. Steve’s face crumpled in agony and he gasped, the plaintive whimper muffled by the gag. His face was red and he jerked mindlessly. The man in the suit shook his head in apparent disgust. “I must say, Captain, that I’m rather disappointed. I expected more out of you. Let him breathe. He can’t die already.”

The chain went slack and Steve sagged, greedily sucking in breath after breath. He wavered for a moment, the men backing away, and then grabbed the chains above him with both his hands and yanked as hard as he could, the muscles in his arms bulging. Whatever had secured him utterly
snapped, crashing to the floor with a loud thud behind him, and he whipped the chain around, taking
the twisted hunk of metal with it and crashing it into the men to his left.

“Restrain him! Stop him!” The man in the suit shouted orders in another language, vilely and
furiously.

The soldiers lunged at Steve and brought him down. Bones cracked and one fell away, his neck
snapped. But there were too many. The doctor with the needles darted into the fray. The camera
tipped and then went to black.

The picture came back, but now the time read 2012-09-26 11:46 am. The camera was out of focus,
but it quickly adjusted itself. Steve hung limply from the ceiling again, the entirety of his weight on
his wrists and shoulders. There was indecipherable murmuring. Then whoever held the camera was
moving, making a slow circle around the unconsciousness prisoner. When the mess of Steve’s back
became visible, it was unwatchable. Then the camera zoomed in on Steve’s lax face. He breathed
raggedly through the blood-stained gag. Somebody slapped him until he woke up. Blue eyes
steeped in pain and fear darted around, and he fought to stand and relieve the awful pressure on his
arms and the strain on his lungs.

“I underestimated your strength, Captain.” The man in the suit was not in the picture, but his voice
held enough of a threatening presence. “I assure you it will not happen again. Now let’s continue
before your friends find you.”

Steve’s eyes widened in a wild show of emotion, and he shouted and yelled, but it was muffled and
unintelligible. He fought anew, but his panicked struggles earned him nothing. The torture resumed,
this time without fanfare or taunting or hesitation. It was brutal and unrelenting. They came at him
with pipes and bats and fists covered in brass knuckles and chains. It went on and on, and Steve
made a valiant effort to stand against them, to take it without faltering, to be strong in the face of so
much pain. But he was hindered by the drugs coursing through his veins and the mounting pressure
on his chest, and finally a particularly hard blow across his abdomen drew a loud cry from him. The
men were encouraged by this, and they made certain with sadistic abandon that this was only the first
of his screams.

For hours they destroyed Captain America. They soon became exceedingly efficient in allowing
Steve enough of a repose to ward off the press of unconsciousness before going at him again with
exacting patience. It was a gruesome, violent pattern. The cameraman allowed no reprieve to his
audience, catching every moment, every detail. Every blow that broke bones. Every strike that drew
blood. Every scream and moan and breathy, muffled plea for the misery to cease. It never did.
Eventually the captors grew frustrated when their captive lost the ability to struggle against them.
The physical damage was too severe, and Steve was barely breathing, unable to stand enough to
present the men much of a target. The puddle of red beneath his feet was large and disturbing, and
the men abruptly let him down into it with a rattle and a heavy thud. He lay there, not moving, eyes
shut against the agony and horror. One of the men laughed and drove a boot into his temple and
then the camera shut off.

2012-09-26 5:12 pm. Steve was still lying where he’d fallen, a crumpled, battered form covered in
his own blood. A dozen men stood over him, one holding a pail of water. They exchanged some
rough, brief words and few infuriating chuckles before upending the pail over their helpless
prisoner. Steve came awake with a short breath and a cry, but he was barely given a moment to pull
his legs into his chest before they resumed their attack. He tried to scramble away, but he couldn’t,
as hurt and bound as he was, and there was nowhere he could go. They had him completely
surrounded. Three of the men hauled him to his feet, and Steve vainly tried to push them away, but a
knife found its way into his belly and he sagged in their grips after a howl of utter agony. The man
who’d stabbed him grabbed the hilt and yanked it upward and out, and Steve screamed again. They beat him. The camera circled around the group, trying to get a good vantage, but it was difficult. It didn’t matter. The coarse laughter and the sound of flesh pounding flesh and Steve’s weak cries were enough. They dropped him and rained blows from above. It might have been an actual planned attack or simply an instinctive attempt to protect himself, but Steve lashed out with his bound feet and caught one of the men in the leg. There was the crack of something breaking, and the torturer stumbled backward, screaming and holding his inverted knee. The men retaliated. They pulled Steve’s legs out from under him and held him down. Then one of them approached with the metal pipe. When they broke his left leg, he screamed louder than ever, struggling with all the strength he had left. The camera went black again.

The picture returned. Five hours had passed, twelve hours total since the Red Dawn had dragged its catch into the warehouse. There was very little recognizable left of Captain America. He lay on the dirty floor, trembling unconsciously. He didn’t move, though his ankles were free of their bindings and his hands, though manacled together, were unsecured from anything else. Were it not for the weak, shuddering rise and fall of his chest and the fresh blood running from his innumerable injuries, he looked dead. Should have been dead. In twelve hours they had taken one of the strongest, most resilient men in the world and reduced him to a hobbled, bruised, bleeding body on the ground, too weak to escape even though the option had presented itself. That was their goal, to proudly proclaim how very low they had brought America’s first hero, and it was undeniable.

The little man, the supposed doctor, came forth from the shadows around Steve’s crumpled form and jabbed a series of needles into the fallen soldier’s arm. He never resisted, never moved as the doctor pulled the gag from his mouth and poured water down his throat to keep him living. Then there was nothing for many long minutes, the once frantically shifting camera hauntingly still, as still as the man they’d tortured to within an inch of his life. There was no need to show anything further. The message was abundantly clear.

2012-09-26 8:19 pm. They were hurting him again, but without fists and boots and knives. Steve laid on the floor, shivering, trying to curl into himself thought his body was too broken to manage much. His eyes were open wide, blinking, not seeing. At least, not the truth. He was mumbling, lost in waking nightmare. Suffering from a hallucination, fueled by drugs and trauma. Trapped in memory, it seemed, as he hoarsely cried, “Everybody get back! Somebody get on the horn to Phillips and get us the hell out of here. They’re gonna have us surrounded… Too many. Too many!” He screamed, crying for men who’d died ages ago, reliving battles long ago decided. “Gotta get out… No! No!” He covered his ears, like bombs were falling, and tried to protect his head. The man with the camera came closer, a few of his buddies muttering and laughing before laying a vicious kick into Steve’s stomach. He spat up blood, turning on his side. The dreams went on and on.

“Don’t leave me… Peggy… Please… Please…”

2012-09-26 11:03 pm. The man in the suit stood over the prisoner. He looked disgusted. “I believe there’s someone here to see you, Captain.” He nudged the unmoving body with his foot, but there was no response. He looked toward the camera and nodded, and then his soldiers came out from the sidelines again. A few trained their guns on the unconscious captive, and others came to lift to the prisoner to his knees. Steve’s head lolled limply against his chest. The man in the suit stood before him, shaking his head, before deckling him sharply. The slap was resounding, Steve’s face ripping to the side. “Wake up, boy. I said someone is here to see you.”

The man in the suit stepped aside then and another man came from the direction of the door. The camera barely caught a glimpse of him. He wore black combat gear, the sort a special ops soldier might sport. He had shoulder-length brown hair, dark eyes, and a severe face that might have once
been friendly but was now only calm and malignant. A long scar stretched down the side of his right cheek from his eyebrow to his jaw. Most noticeable, however, was the metal arm where his left one used to be. Everything about him exuded something very dark and twisted.

This new figure loomed over the prisoner. “Hello, Steve,” he quietly said.

Steve did nothing, said nothing, for an excruciatingly long moment. His eyelids fluttered and he struggled to lift his head. Blue eyes mired in pain finally focused on the man standing over him. His mouth fell open limply, dried blood covering his chin and fresh blood seeping from the corner of his lips. He shook his head weakly in confusion. “Bucky?” The mysterious man grunted. The muddled expression on Steve’s face grew more intense. He blinked like that could clear his vision. “It’s… No. It’s not possible. You can’t be real. I saw you fall. I saw you fall! You’re not real!”

Steve’s last word escalated into a wail when the man dug his boot into the open stab wound in his belly. Keeping his weight on the injury, the man leaned down and grabbed Steve’s chin and lifted his head so their eyes met. “That real enough for you?” he snarled.

Disgusted, he shoved Steve away into the restraining arms of the soldiers behind him. Shrouded in shadows, he folded his arms over his chest and nonchalantly watched the prisoner suffer. When Steve recovered enough to look back at him, the man shook his head. “You seem surprised to see me. Why’s that, Steve? Thought I was dead, right? Didn’t even send out a search party after you lost me. Gave up without too much of a fight, for being such a goddamn hero. Gotta like that. You go down in the ice and snow and they search for you for seventy years. They find you, thaw you, and then you’re off saving the country again. They throw you a goddamn parade. Me? Nobody even looked for me.”

“Bucky, I tried. I—”

“Shut up!” the man roared, and he hit the helpless captive across the face. Blood flew from Steve’s newly damaged lips, and he struggled to turn back. “You think I want to hear your excuses? You think I care?”

The terror in Steve’s eyes was undeniable. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. Any doubt that this man was not his long-dead friend was obviously gone. He was trapped in the horrific moment. “I’m so sorry, Bucky!”

Another slap, this one even harder than the last. Steve coughed violently, red splattering from his mouth to the floor. “Didn’t you hear what I said?” the man snapped. “But, then, you always liked getting your face smashed in. All the times I saved your ass. I should have let them beat you to a bloody pulp. I would have, if I’d known how badly you’d betray me.”

Steve was silent, tears filling his eyes. He shook his head but couldn’t seem to form words. The man went on. “I never told you back in the war how much I resented you. There you were, this scrawny, good-for-nothing kid, and somehow you managed to become Captain America, the golden boy of the US army, this hero that suddenly everyone respected and admired and adored. The broads were fawning over you, over you, like you were some gift from God. If they’d only known what a pathetic piece of shit you had been, they wouldn’t have loved you so much. I knew. But nobody looked my way. I couldn’t live up to the standards you set. They turned you into what I should have been, and I became you.”

“Bucky, I cared about you. I never stopped. You were—” He stammered and fought to quickly correct himself. “— are my best friend. Please, don’t do this!”

“Don’t do what, Steve? Remind you that you left me behind the minute they strapped you to a table
and built you? I was never supposed to be your sidekick.”

“You’re weren’t!”

“I was,” hissed the man, towering over Steve like some monumental threat. “And like the sidekick, I wasn’t important to the story. At least, not enough for you to save me.”

“You don’t know how hard I tried,” Steve insisted weakly. “I tried, Bucky. I swear to God I did. But HYDRA was moving against the world, and they wouldn’t let us keep looking for you. I know they’re just excuses, but you have to believe me! You’re like my brother! I tried to save you!”

“Maybe if you’d just let me handle it,” the other seethed. “I had him on the ropes. But you had to sweep in and save the day and it all went to hell from there.”

“No,” Steve whispered. “No!”

The man leaned low and close to Steve’s face. “You let me fall. You let me die.”

“Please don’t say that…”

“Why not? It’s the God’s honest truth.” He rose then, admiring Steve’s pale face and teary eyes. The angry set of his jaw and the hurt plastered all over his bruised countenance. “You should have looked for me. But you didn’t. And HYDRA did.” The corner of the man’s mouth quirked into a rueful smile. “When I woke from my long, long winter, they gave me a far better purpose than being your soldier or your friend ever was. They didn’t even know what they’d started. And they gave me a chance to get my vengeance.”

“Bucky, no. Please…”

“I gave you to your enemies, Steve. I showed them the tools they needed to bring you down.”

Tears leaked from the corners of Steve’s eyes, cutting through the dirt and blood on his cheeks in glistening trails. He said nothing, defeated. He didn’t even seem to notice when the man drew a combat knife from his hip sheath, the blade long and silver and jaggedly serrated. He dropped to a crouch again before the prisoner. The knife flashed wickedly in the meager light. “I’ve carried this hatred inside me for so long. It consumed me. Ate me alive, and I let it. And now it’s come to it. You can die knowing it was me who broke you. You can die knowing I was the one that betrayed you, just like I died knowing you let me go.” The knife moved to Steve’s cheek, sliding gently down his skin, leaving a new track of crimson as it did. Steve was trembling, his eyes wide in abject terror. The blade traced down his heaving throat and his chest. “Want to know something else, Steve?”

Steve squeezed his eyes shut and looked away, weakly raising his bound hands and trying to push the man back. But he couldn’t, and those steel fingers wrapped around the back of his head and cruelly fisted his hair and made him turn back. “You deserve everything they’ve done to you. Every minute of it.” Steve choked on a sob, barely breathing. “Because no matter what they do you, it’s never going to compare to how much you hurt me.” The man paused then, his murderous grip on Steve loosening slightly. His glare seemed to soften, and a hesitant moment crept by. “But even still… I’ll do you a small favor. I’ve always had to take care of your sorry ass, and old habits die hard.” The knife went down deep into Steve’s right thigh. Steve screamed hoarsely, deeply, with every bit of breath in his damaged lungs. His hands immediately went to the blade embedded in his leg, his fingers shaking uncontrollably. The man pushed the knife into the hilt, and Steve nearly lost consciousness. “If you’re lucky, you’ll bleed to death before they have a chance to kill you.” There was a loveless kiss pressed his to brow, and then the man stood, yanking the blade free. He looked down in satisfied pity. “See you in hell, Steve.”
Steve couldn’t breathe, couldn’t speak, couldn’t move. He sagged forward, vainly covering the wound in his leg as it spilled his life onto the floor in a river of red.

The bloody knife was handed to the man in the suit. “He’s all yours.”

A sick smile, a nod, a word of thanks. Then a slew of orders. The other men moved in quickly, securing the prisoner again though there was no fight left in him. Steve was hauled upward, left to hang by his arms. Blood ran down his bare feet, spilling on the floor. He sagged in his bonds, silent tears dripping down his face.

The man in the suit approached. He wiped the wetness from Steve’s cheek with the pad of his thumb, fake compassion plastered all over his face. “No need to cry, Captain. You’ve nearly played your part. You have just one thing left to do.” He took the cloth that hung around Steve’s neck and stuffed it back into his mouth. “When the time comes, beg for your pathetic life. You can do that, can’t you? Beg so that the world sees the fate of those who stand against us. And then the Red Dawn will at long last fulfill its destiny.” He smiled and patted Steve’s cheek and stepped away, shouting to his men. And then, for a moment, everyone else was gone, preparing for the final act.

Silence. Unbreakable, it seemed. And then a soft sound. A weeping moan. And another and another, sobs that signaled a crushed spirit. They were weak, all a battered body and broken mind could manage. Steve cried miserably. It was not something anyone was meant to witness, this shattering of his soul. But even in this he was allowed no mercy. The man who held the camera gave an amused grunt. And then everything went black again.

It came back on to a familiar scene. The conclusion. 2012-09-27 12:01 am. The soldiers beating their captive, a man who’d long since been brutalized beyond the point of struggling, beyond the point of screaming, beyond the point of even enduring. His motionless body crashing to the floor, the origin of every wound now dreadfully clear. And then the man in the suit, the monster. “Behold, Americans. Behold your beloved Avenger!”

“JARVIS, shut this off.”

“Sir–”

“Shut it off!”

The video winked away, and Tony was back in Stark Tower. Alone. The night was vast and heavy and black despite the lights around him. He stood in his chair, breathing heavily, dizzy and lost and reeling. His heart was thundering and he couldn’t think. He couldn’t do anything but stand and feel and waver. His lips were moving. He wasn’t sure how he’d managed it. “Nobody ever sees this, do you understand? Put it somewhere. Lock it up and throw away the goddamn key.”

The frantic words echoed in the empty office. A silent moment followed, seemingly infinite. The echoes of hell tormented, the ghosts of things violent and vicious and horrible. He could scrub at his eyes, but he could never erase it. Never forget it. Never.

“What will you do now, sir?”

He ran, stumbling from the desk, coughing and covering his mouth. JARVIS realized what was happening immediately and unlocked the door as Tony stumbled through. The lights flickered on in the bedroom, illuminating his path just in time as he frantically staggered to the bathroom. He reached the toilet and skidded to his knees, retching violently. He clung to the porcelain as his stomach was intent on inverting within him, bile burning his throat and tears filling his eyes. The nausea was overwhelming, his damaged chest and abdomen screaming in pain at the torture.
It seemed to go on forever before he was empty, and still dry heaves plagued him. Finally, finally, it was over. He sagged against the bowl, pressing his sweaty forehead to the rim. The cool surface leeched the heat from his skin.

“Tony? Tony! Oh my God, what’s wrong?”

He cracked open his eyes at the sound of Pepper’s worried call, leaning up only slightly as her thin, cold hands touched his sweaty back. She tried to pull him up a bit, but he was leaden, a dead weight in her arms. He didn’t have the energy to even help her. When a wad of toilet paper was pressed to his lips, he snapped from his lethargy. Weakly he took at it and wiped at his mouth, somehow finding the strength to prop himself up a bit. Then he sagged back into Pepper’s embrace. She didn’t understand – how in the world could she? – but she hugged him tightly as the pain became too much and he sobbed into her shoulder. “What happened? Tony? You’re scaring me!”

He couldn’t explain it to her. He swore to himself then that he never would, no matter how badly he needed the comfort. There would be no easing of this burden, least of all at her expense. But everything seemed to crush him, and the images wouldn’t stop, playing over and over again in his mind’s eye like they had been burned into the fabric of his soul. “Don’t ask,” he moaned, snuggling as deep as he could into her familiar warmth as if that could erase the ice stabbing into his chest. He buried in his face in her neck and squeezed his eyes shut as tightly as he could. “Just don’t. Please.” He knew if she did he wouldn’t be strong enough to lie.

“Tony…”

“Please.”

They sat there for a long time as he cried and she held him. She never asked again.
Chapter 15

Soft, white light cradled him. He wasn’t really dreaming, but he wasn’t quite awake either. He was just lost to peace, to nothingness, to a soothing balm in an otherwise cruel and unforgiving world. He stayed in the tender embraces of silence and emptiness, where darkness couldn’t touch him. He was where he loved to be. In Pepper’s arms. In Iron Man. In his lab. Lying on the floor, laughing because he’d nearly killed himself. Nobody else would laugh about that, but he did. A blurry face loomed over him. Blue eyes steeped in worry. “What the hell did you do to yourself, Stark?”

It was Steve. “It blew up in my face.”

“Yeah, I see that. You should have been more careful.”

“Should’ve could’ve would’ve. You need to lighten up.”

“You’re gonna hurt yourself, Tony.”

“Too late, but it’s all good. I won’t do it again.” You can’t unsee it. Can’t unwatch it.

He laughed louder.

“Tony?” The light grew brighter and brighter and then painful. He realized that happened because he’d opened his eyes. The agony in his head was so bad for a moment that he couldn’t see. Then he blinked and blinked until the world stopped spinning. Above there were blue eyes steeped in worry. They looked down on him, framed by pale, perfect skin and strawberry blond hair. Pepper. She smiled slowly, relief shining in her gaze, but it was nothing compared to the magnitude of her worry. Her fingers tenderly wove their way into his hair. “You should go back to sleep. It’s only been a couple of hours.”

Tony grunted, trying to clear the persistent haze from his eyes. He grimaced against the pounding in his head. He licked his lips, trying to moisten his mouth (which tasted godawful) enough to speak. “What time is it?” he croaked.

“A little after eight. Sleep, Tony. You need it.”

He couldn’t now. The minute the clouds in his head dissipated, it all came rushing back. Steve’s nightmares. Steve’s captivity. Steve’s torture. It rushed through his thoughts in a sick, twisted blur of blood and screams and cruel, cruel laughter. His brain throbbed, the memories driving venomous claws into him and ripping and tearing until he wondered if he was going to be sick again. It was all there, lingering like a bad dream. Like a phantom that would never cease haunting him. Can’t be unwatched. He laughed again. Sadly. Bitterly.

“Tony?”

He’d drifted away on the unsettled waves of his mind, and Pepper’s soft, concerned voice drew his wayward attention. He opened eyes he’d again squeezed shut against the nausea and pain. “I’m up,” he declared, blinking repeatedly again and shaking his head. “I’m up.”

Pepper helped him sit up from where he’d collapsed in their bed after puking his guts out earlier that morning. He leaned forward and gingerly swung his numb legs over the side, bracing his elbows on his knees and driving his hands into his hair. He massaged the ache pulsing behind his brow with a shaking sigh. Pepper patiently sat beside him, rubbing a loving hand up and down his back. She didn’t speak, just gave him this moment he so desperately needed to pull himself together. He finally summoned the will to lift his weighty head and look at her. She was already showered and dressed
in simple gray slacks and a pink turtleneck. She looked pretty and pure and he couldn’t stand the sight of it because it seemed so wrong for him to look at her and touch her given what he’d seen. But he did. He took her slender hand from her lap and held it between his own before kissing it and kissing it and holding it to his face. “Tony, what happened?”

The question that she’d thankfully never asked last night had been poised on her lips since he’d opened his eyes. Now it was out in the open, dangling before him impatiently despite the calm tone in her voice that suggested she didn’t need an answer. Everything pushed up against his lips, the ugly stain on his spirit begging to be scrubbed away, but he couldn’t speak. He felt… tainted. Like the world was totally out of balance because he was in it. He was not who he was. Dirty. Traitor. “It finally got to me, I guess,” he said. Tears came unbidden to his eyes, but he wouldn’t cry again in front of her. He wouldn’t let himself be that weak, that willing to share this misery with her. She didn’t deserve that. “We fucked up, Pepper. We fell right into their trap, and Steve… He’s never going to be who he was.”

Her eyes widened. “You don’t know that,” she said softly, frightened by his solemn certainty. He did. Now more than ever. Now that he knew the very depths of what Steve had endured. Of what had been done to him. Everybody had been saying it, fearing it, and he’d stubbornly kept denying. He’d been a fool. Just opening the door that small crack let a flood of unwanted things to the forefront of his mind. I’ve noticed you’re not as comfortable in front of cameras as some of your friends are. Here you can bleed. Here you can hurt. Here you will die. I want the world to see how much you can take before you do. No need to cry. Beg so that the world sees the fate of those who stand against us. You deserve everything they’ve done to you. I gave you to your enemies.

“You can die knowing I was the one that betrayed you.”

“Tony, please tell me what’s wrong. I know it’s worse than you’re letting on. Whatever it is, we can face it together.”

He pushed it all back down and locked it up. It was poison, and he damn well knew it, but he wasn’t going to make anyone else drink it. “I’m fine. I just… let’s go.” Nervous energy saturated him right then, and he was up and heading toward the bathroom even as the room spun and his body sluggishly stumbled.

Pepper sounded even more worried (he hadn’t thought that was possible) and confused. “Where?”

Tony stared at his haggard face in the bathroom mirror, at the sunken look of his hollow eyes and the shadows ringing them, at the paleness of his skin and the mess of his hair. Get a grip, Stark. Pull it together. The urge to act, to do something to get past this, was suddenly overwhelming. “I need to see Steve.” His voice was blatantly unsure of that. “I just… I need to make sure he’s okay.” This was completely contradictory, because as badly as he felt he needed to assure himself that Steve was here and recovering and not chained up and bleeding to death anymore, he was afraid to face him, afraid that everything was going to be so completely different with no way to turn it back. Most of all, he was afraid that he was just another face that had hurt Captain America, because he’d seen that goddamn video, and no matter what Fury had told him or he had told himself, it had never been his to watch.

The ride down the elevator was silent and tense. There was a wall between them that Tony both hated and appreciated. Hated because he’d finally learned to let down his defenses with her, finally learned to completely trust her, and now he was hiding again. Appreciated because he needed to hide. He tried to tell himself that this was the selfless way, the noble way, and not just the chicken shit way. He could tell she was hurt and not buying his lies.
He’d showered, shaved, dressed in some khaki pants and a black long-sleeve shirt with Def Leppard scrawled across its front. He looked clean, but he was anything but. He looked normal, but he was anything but. He felt like he was so radically different from the man he’d been last night, changed and not for the better. He felt like he had after Afghanistan.

His thoughts were straying toward something he didn’t want to touch. So he grabbed Pepper’s hand and spoke to her for the first time since he’d emerged from the bathroom. “When this is all over, let’s go away. Screw SHIELD. Screw Stark Industries. You and me and a private island and a private butler and champagne and sunsets and lots and lots of sex.”

She smiled a little. “That does sound nice,” she responded, drawing little circles on his knuckle with her thumb. She didn’t sound convinced, like she wanted to say more but wasn’t going to.

“You think it’s running away?”

“I think you’re you and running away is a classic Tony Stark response to bad things,” she answered. She didn’t say it angrily or wearily or meanly. She just said it because it was true and she was one of the few people who could cut through his bullshit. “You’ve all been hurt badly. That’s not going to go away overnight or heal easily. And ignoring it isn’t going to make it better.” Tony wanted to argue, but he couldn’t find the words.

However, Pepper was also an enabler. “But none of you is a paragon of mental health. So if you want to escape, we’ll escape.” She smiled tenderly at him. “Last I checked, we don’t have a private island.”

“I’ll buy one.”

“You most certainly will not. I can hear the collective groaning of the board right now about your latest show of irresponsibility and extravagance during tough economic times. What will the stockholders think?”

“To hell with the stockholders.”

She rolled her eyes. “Nice.”

The elevator dinged and revealed the thirty-third floor. It was quiet and seemingly empty. “Sir,” JARVIS said, “Doctor Banner, Ms. Romanoff, and Lord Thor are in the kitchen.” It was comforting to hear that calm, even voice, unchanged and unemotional. JARVIS was the only other person (or computer, but the AI acted enough like a person that Tony could just go with it because it made him feel better) who’d seen what he’d seen. He suddenly felt less alone.

“Thanks, JARVIS.”

They made their way into the kitchen and found the three Avengers gathered around the shining, dark oak table, quietly eating. Behind them the massive flat screen TV was playing the morning news. No one was really watching. At their entrance, Bruce smiled. “Good morning.” He seemed unusually upbeat and fairly rested, all things considered. In fact, they all did.

Tony eyed them suspiciously, even jealously. “Did we wake up to find out this was all just a bad dream or something?” he asked.

“I wish,” Bruce said, taking a sip of his coffee. “Come on and eat. We had the cooks send up some breakfast. Sorry if it was too forward of me.”

Pepper shook her head and waved away his concerns. “No, of course not.” She left Tony’s side
and sat at the table beside Natasha like she wasn’t just a normal woman sitting down with a master assassin, a man who transformed into a humongous green rage monster, and a demigod to eat. She grabbed a gleaming porcelain plate and set to filling it with steaming scrambled eggs, a scoop of fresh fruit salad, and some buttered toast. She poured a cup of coffee. “Here, Tony.”

The thought of eating made his stomach roil. “I’ll pass,” he said.

“You alright?” Bruce asked. There was that damn worry in his eyes again.

Tony didn’t answer, tried to ignore the question. “I’m gonna go check on Steve.”

Those gathered at the table seemed surprised. It was a rather strange thing for him say, as Tony Stark didn’t worry and didn’t fret and most of all didn’t let things get to him. This only heightened their concern over him, eyes darting about with unspoken questions poised on their lips. “He’s fine, Stark,” Romanoff quietly said after the uncomfortable moment escaped them. “He’s been sleeping. Slept most of the night even. Barton, too.”

Well, that explained their rested appearances. And he stuck out like a goddamn sore thumb. The scrutiny of their gazes was torturous. Natasha might have meant what she said to ease his worries, but it only heightened them. Sleeping meant dreams. Dreams meant nightmares. Would she lie about it because he looked weak and white and like he’d been through hell and back? And could they know what he knew? Suddenly their open, worried looks seemed accusatory. Who the hell was he to keep this to himself? They were Steve’s friends, his teammates, maybe the closest thing Steve had to a family. They were just as much entitled to know the truth as he was.

“Tony, what’s the matter? You look…”

Bruce didn’t finish at Tony’s withering glare. He was really tired of the question. “I’m fine, alright? Just had a bad night. This hasn’t exactly been easy on any of us. I just want to see Rogers, okay? Just want to make sure he’s okay.”

His voice was rougher and sharper than he intended. Thor stopped shoveling eggs into his mouth and regarded him. He, too, seemed worried. “Do you think some new ill has befallen him? When I left him only a few moments ago, he was peaceful.”

“No, no,” Tony answered. “It’s nothing. It’s nothing, alright? Don’t worry. Just… I’ll be right back. And then I’ll eat. I’ll be right back.” He was rambling, and then he was out the door and into the hall and furious with himself. How the hell are you going to keep this under wraps when you act like that? his mind growled. You’re weak. You’re a goddamn coward. So fucking useless. You deserve everything they’ve done to you.

“You deserve everything they’ve done to you.”

“Shut up,” he hissed to his own thoughts. He wasn’t given to self-doubt or self-pity, and here he was wallowing in it all because he’d watched a damn video. He hadn’t even lived through that hell, and he was turning his world upside down. He needed to get his ass in gear and pull it together. He’d been telling himself that all morning, and so far, he’d utterly failed at it.

He’d reached the door to Steve’s temporary room before he’d even realized he was walking. Then Tony sighed, stilling his hand after he grasped the knob and wondered how he was going to face Steve now. He had no plan, no idea, no thought, even, that was worth a damn. So he just opened the door before he lost his nerve.

Steve was standing beside the bed, looking hurt and lost. He turned at Tony’s entrance. He was hunched over, his damaged arm wrapped around his damaged chest, pale-faced and wide-eyed. The
loose hospital gown he was dressed in hung open, revealing the bandages yet covering his body. Shock shook them both, and a seeming long while passed filled with only Steve’s ragged breathing and Tony’s thundering heart. Hazy blue eyes met brown. Suddenly the hell that had become their worlds seemed fairly distant, something that could be overcome, ignored, conquered maybe. “Rogers, what the hell?” Tony finally gasped, ripping from his stupor. He sprinted across the room, racing around the bed, as he saw Steve’s knees fail him. He was at the other man’s side just in time to catch him as he started to go down.

Tony helped him sit on the bed, and then Steve collapsed against him. Tony made some pretense of staying close to support him, but it was just a farce and he gave up trying to be strong in the face of his relief. He hugged Steve as tightly and fiercely as he dared, feeling warm flesh and strong muscles and solid bones beneath his hands. Tony closed his eyes against the sting of tears as he laughed. His heart felt like it was about to burst from his chest. “Damn it, Steve. What the hell were you doing?”

Steve hesitantly wrapped his arms around Tony, his hands clenched in the other’s man shirt. He didn’t answer right away, his breath rough and shaking. “I don’t know,” he finally admitted, pulling away. He didn’t meet Tony’s eyes, like he was ashamed or afraid or both. He wiped at his own. “Didn’t want to lie around anymore, I guess.”

That seemed like a good enough reason. Tony watched Steve as he gathered his composure and dropped his hands from his unshaven, pale face and looked at the bright sunshine streaming in from outside. The billionaire didn’t want to stare, but he was doing it anyway. He could still see where the bruises and cuts had been on Steve’s face, but they were greatly faded to faint lines and yellowish, purplish marks. The slash on his throat was thin and didn’t resemble a killing wound. He sat, bent and trembling, his left leg held slightly extended as if he couldn’t bear to bend it all the way, his hand pressed to this right thigh where he’d been stabbed. He was still in a great deal of pain; that was obvious. But he’d gotten above the worst of it, past the delirium. Barely a week after the trauma he’d endured, he was standing. He was recovering. He was healing.

Tony grinned like a fool, joy blasting away the lingering vestiges of despair. “You made it, Cap.”

Steve finally met his gaze again. The corner of his mouth quirked in something that could have been a smile. “Yeah,” he quietly answered.

“Feeling up for a walk?”

The short trip out of the room and down the hall and to the kitchen was slow and arduous and more than once Tony thought this was a pretty stupid idea. But they made it. He pushed open the doors to the kitchen, and the occupants turned at the sound. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Captain America. Down but definitely not out for the count.”

The reaction was immediate and elated. Thor was the first to Steve, devouring the distance between the breakfast table and the door in seemingly two gigantic strides. He laughed merrily, engulfing Steve in his wide arms with tears on his cheeks. The others were quick to follow, crowding and flooding the increasingly uncomfortable soldier, Natasha embracing him and whispering a few short, private words in his ear. Tony never thought he’d see the Black Widow so tender. Pepper came next, pressing a kiss to Steve’s cheek and wiping away her happy tears, hugging him carefully and tucking his head down to her shoulder. Bruce was last. The smile on his face was a mile wide. “You shouldn’t be out of bed,” he admonished gently, darting a weak, accusatory glance at Tony before drawing Steve into his arms as well and patting his back. “Don’t look at me,” Tony retorted defensively. “He was out of bed when I got there.”
Steve pulled away and managed a real smile. “It was his idea to come see you guys.”

Tony pierced Steve with a mock glare. “Tattle-tale.”

Romanoff pushed one of the larger, plusher chairs from the seating area adjacent to the breakfast table closer so Steve wouldn’t have to hobble much further. Thor was quick to take Steve’s weight, easing his unhurt arm around his shoulders and helping him walk painfully slowly to the seat. Steve winced with every step, trying to favor his left leg, but it didn’t seem to matter too much considering how badly injured he’d been. Everything probably hurt. “How do you feel, my friend?” Thor asked as soon as they settled Steve into the chair.

Steve was gasping a little, a wince permanently affixed to his features. “Sore,” he answered, looking up at them with surprising clarity in his eyes. “And really stiff. And pretty tired.”

They all knew he was lying, that he was in significantly more pain than he was letting on, but none of them called him on it. It was enough that he was awake, that he was free of the torments he’d suffered the last couple of days. That he was walking and talking was a miracle enough; any other man would have been dead.

Pepper came with a glass of water, which Steve took with shaking hands and a murmured “thanks”. He took a slow sip, the team gathered worriedly around him and watching intently. He smiled a little again. “You guys look like I’m gonna fall apart or something. I’m okay,” he insisted at the long and concerned silence.

Nobody had the guts to call him on that, either. He sighed a little, maybe frustrated, turning his gaze to the glass of water in his hands. Tony saw his eyes drift to the marks on his wrists, and he quickly looked away. “It’s alright, Steve,” Bruce said, having not missed the tensing of Rogers’ shoulders either.

“No,” Steve said, shaking his head. “I mean, yeah, it is. But I just… Thank you. All of you. You got me out of there. Saved my life.”

He probably had no idea how difficult it had been to do that, how very close he’d come to dying. Dealing with the aftermath of what he did remember would be arduous enough. Tony could only hope Steve never learned the truth about those dark, desperate hours aboard the helicarrier. He’d probably feel guilty for worrying them all so badly, the dumb, self-sacrificing idiot.

“Don’t thank us,” Romanoff said evenly. Her eyes betrayed how deep her guilt ran, the guilt she was trying to keep from her voice. “It was our fault they got you in the first place. My fault. I should have double-checked the intel, confirmed the sources… I’m so sorry, Cap.” She tried to hold it together, but her eyes glistened wetly and she averted her gaze to hide her shame. Tony wondered how many times she’d apologized to Steve and Clint over the last few days. Probably every minute of every hour she’d spent alone with them. And she wasn’t the only one burdened with fault and wracked with guilt. Hearing her shaky words brought Tony’s own feelings back to the surface, only he wasn’t brave enough to speak. Not now.

Thor was, however. He knelt before Steve and set a strong, comforting hand on the Captain’s pajama clad knee. He lowered his eyes, genuine shame and grief turning his voice rough. “And I must apologize as well, for I failed you when you had great need of me. Perhaps had I been with you…” He didn’t finish, looking down in shame.

Steve didn’t placate them with meaningless forgiveness. Romanoff didn’t want it, and Thor wouldn’t be appeased by it, and he was smart enough to realize it. Instead he reached up and grabbed Natasha’s arm and squeezed it reassuringly and smiled weakly at Thor. “They wanted me.
One way or another, they would have eventually gotten me.” His eyes gained a hard angry glint, his jaw tensing. Tony thought it was just a mask, because he saw fear in Steve’s eyes. “You killed them all?”

No, they hadn’t. Tony was damn sure of that now, and everything he’d sworn before had been one long lie. But he couldn’t say that, either. And he wondered why Steve was asking, if he was remembering the man who had claimed to be Bucky Barnes and fearing that the bastard was still out there. “Yeah. They’re dead,” Bruce answered. “Believe me, it wasn’t enough.”

Steve sharply looked away. Suddenly everything shifted and he appeared trapped and riled and barely in control. It was difficult to determine what he was thinking, aside from the fact that all of it was distressing him. Tony was frustrated at that; he considered himself pretty adept at reading people, but he didn’t know what was going through Steve’s mind. If he was angry or afraid or grief-stricken or what. It was ridiculous to want it to be clear; for God’s sake, the man had only been grounded in the world around him for less than an hour, and who knew how long his tenuous grasp on reality might last given the enormity of the damage done to him. Tony had seen firsthand how deeply the Red Dawn had scarred Steve’s psyche. He probably didn’t know what he was thinking, what he wanted. Tony recalled the dark hours after Afghanistan as one huge mess of jumbled memories and tangled emotions, a storm of confused thoughts that still at times troubled him.

“You yearn for vengeance,” Thor surmised. “It was your solemn right, and it was taken from you. Your justice can never be served as it was done by others. I am sorry. It was not our blood to spill.”

“No,” Steve said quickly, stopping Thor before he went on any further. “No, that’s not it.” He didn’t ever say what it was, though, instead stumbling over his words. “… I’m not sure what I remember and what I… But I think you were all there, carrying me through this.” He looked up again, solemn and grave. “Anchoring me. I don’t know if I…” He didn’t finish, his eyes shining again.

“Don’t worry about it, Cap,” Bruce said. “We weren’t going to let you go.”

Natasha moved behind him and set her hands comfortingly on his shoulders. Thor kept his fingers tightly on Steve’s knee. “Thank you,” Steve said, giving them a shaky smile.

“Hey,” Tony said, “you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us.”

Steve smiled again, and then his eyes drew a little distant. Not distant. Focused beyond them. Tony followed his gaze toward the TV, which had been completely forgotten. Tony’s blood ran cold as he saw the color drain from Steve’s face. Splayed across the screen was the morning news, recapping yesterday’s events concerning the press conferences in preparation for coverage of Congress’ session that morning. Normally this wouldn’t warrant national attention, but the Senate Armed Services Committee was holding their highly televised inquiry into the abduction and return of Captain America, as promised by Senator Boynton. Tony had heard about this the night before and had completely forgotten about it. He didn’t expect that it would all commence so quickly, but politics knew no decorum or patience. The anchorman was recapping the story. At the moment, he was blabbing on about the committee’s intent to subpoena him. He’d forgotten about that, too.

And the news media, in its love for sensationalism, was replaying the video from the Red Dawn like the nation needed a reminder of what this was all about. They were replaying Steve’s torture right before his very eyes.

“JARVIS, shut off the TV!” Tony snapped furiously. The AI did so instantly, but the damage had already been done. Steve looked away sharply, and the glass shattered in his hand. Bloody water covered his lap.
“Oh, Steve,” Pepper said, pushing closer to Steve and grabbing his shaking hands in her own like there was no blood and no mess. Natasha rushed find a towel in the kitchen.

Steve was barely breathing, stiff, every muscle taut and unyielding. Thor took Steve’s hands from Pepper, glancing to the slight woman with a warning in his eyes that she should not place herself in harm’s way. They had no idea if what Steve had seen would prompt a violent reaction, and Thor was the only one in the room who could likely handle Steve’s unbridled strength. “Steven, my friend, do not let this trouble you. You are here. You are safe,” he promised softly and calmly. Pepper was up and away then, running likely to the medical storeroom to find bandages.

Finally Steve reacted, releasing a breath he’d been tightly holding in a long, wavering sigh as he quivered. He tried to ball his hands into fists, but Thor held his wrists and Bruce calmly flattened his fingers so that he wouldn’t drive the shards of glass sticking from his palms any deeper into his skin. Tony winced. Steve turned, turned and looked at him. “Everyone saw it. Everyone knows,” he said softly. He closed his eyes. “They got their show.”

“They didn’t get a fucking thing,” Tony retorted.

“The flowers,” Steve said miserably.

“Everybody saw, yeah, but all they did was fire up our fans. That’s it,” Tony insisted.

“You’re lying, Stark,” Steve said.

Natasha came back with ice and a towel. Carefully, with gentleness that belied her deadly reputation, she pushed her way in between Thor and Bruce and wiped the fresh red from Steve’s cut hands. She pressed the ice where she could to relieve the pain. “Easy, Cap. Don’t worry about that now.” Her voice was so completely calm that further frantic emotion seemed impossible in its wake.

“Listen to her,” Tony said, catching Steve’s icy eyes and returning with a firm look of his own. “She’s right. Whatever’s going on out there doesn’t matter. Forget about it. Just concentrate on getting better. That’s what you need to do. All of this shit can wait. It doesn’t matter. I promise.”

Steve wasn’t satisfied, averting his angry eyes. Pepper came back with supplies to treat the wound. “Let’s just take care of your hands, alright? Then you need to go back to bed. You shouldn’t be up yet. You’re healing, but that toxin is still in your system. It’s going to take time,” Bruce reminded as he took the sterile tweezers that Pepper brought and set to pulling the glass out of Rogers’ hands. “Hold still. This will hurt a little.”

Steve did hold still. Completely goddamn still, like a statue. Like the world had disappeared and he had gladly let it go. Thor held his hands open and steady, and Natasha mopped up the blood and collected the shards as Bruce pulled them free. He never moved, never spoke, never even reacted as Bruce extracted a particularly large piece of jagged glass from his right palm. He’s hiding, Tony thought, watching the scene with worry he wouldn’t admit and guilt he couldn’t deny. Broken. Defeated. He has no idea what they’ve seen. What I’ve seen.

Bruce made short work of cleaning the numerous cuts and applying antibiotic salve to them. Then he dressed the wounds with sterile pads and wrapped gauze around the soldier’s hands, thick and tight and protective. Just as he finished, Steve finally seemed to come back to them. “Where’s Hawkeye?”

The unexpected question hung in the air, heavy and horrible. No one knew how to answer it, so no one did, uncertain glances shared among them. Maybe Steve just hadn’t noticed until then that one member of the assembled Avengers was missing. Maybe he just hadn’t found it within himself to
Tony jumped in, trying yet again to be assertive and not add more fuel to the fire. “He’s fine, Cap. Took a hit. He’ll get back up.”

Steve shook his head like he didn’t understand. He probably didn’t. And he wasn’t satisfied with Tony’s brusque answer. Tony could hardly blame him. He sure as hell wouldn’t be satisfied with it. Being coddled and protected and having every choice stripped from him. It would be infuriating. He’d already had his body stolen, his mind stolen, and his dignity stolen. “How bad is it?” Steve demanded, looking at Bruce and trusting the other man to give him a real answer.

Banner hesitated. “He’s going to be alright. He got hurt when we were trying to find the people who made the toxin they injected you with. But he survived and he’s alive and he’s on the mend.”

Steve looked betrayed. “I want to see him,” he said then. He was trying to stand, but his weakened and battered form failed him and he slumped back in the chair. The others swarmed him, worried about the wince that claimed his face, arguing that he shouldn’t strain himself like this, that Barton was fine, that this wasn’t necessary and he needed to rest and not further stress his healing injuries. Steve wouldn’t have it. “I said I want to see him. Last I checked, I was your captain. So help me up. Now.”

The anger in his commanding tone stilled their calming hands and left no room for objection. They seemed surprised. Tony had stayed back with his arms crossed over his chest. Then he sighed. “You heard the Cap. Come on.”

“This is madness,” Thor muttered quietly to Bruce as the two of them helped Steve stand. The demigod was greatly worried, his eyes filled with weighty fear that this would not end well. That this was not at all what Steve needed. Steve stood slowly and with a small cry of pain he couldn’t restrain. His arm that had been dislocated he clenched to his chest, and his other was across Thor’s mighty shoulders.

Natasha was there to take his elbow. “Steve, you don’t have to do this.”

His face was covered in a sheen of perspiration that made him seem younger and weaker. “Yes, I do,” was his winded response, and then they were going.

Pepper looked at Tony when they were out the door. Blood covered the expensive chair, ruining the fine upholstery, and the marble floor glistened in a pink puddle. “Tony, help him,” she implored as she took a discarded blood-streaked towel and dropped it to the floor. Steve had plenty of help surrounding him right now, but Pepper hadn’t meant it that way, and he knew it. Then she knelt to wipe up the mess. She didn’t need to do that. They paid people to do that. But she wanted to help, and she couldn’t. Tony wasn’t sure any of them could.

He walked to Clint’s room. His feet moved him, because his brain had checked out again. He was too goddamn tired, too worn, and every time he closed his eyes images from the video, made so much more poignant by the dichotomy of Steve’s sudden and remarkable recovery, tortured him without reprieve. He caught up with the others, struggling to keep it all under control, before they reached Barton’s room. And then they went inside.

It was quiet. The shades were drawn. Clint lay still in the bed, sleeping, an oxygen mask still secured over his mouth and nose. He seemed peaceful, the pain gone from his face. His cheeks were rosy, flushed with a fever that was losing its strength. When they reached the bed, Steve pulled himself away from Thor and Romanoff. He swallowed thickly, trembling, his eyes never leaving
Clint’s body. He limped closer to the bed by himself, his steps shuffling and uncertain. But he didn’t fall. He kept himself strong, kept everything contained like a good little soldier. Like a captain checking on his fallen man. Tony wanted to scream.

Steve reached Clint’s bedside, his eyes unreadable as they analyzed the scene before him. The silence was so oppressive. “Is he gonna be okay?” he finally asked.

Bruce came to stand at Rogers’ side. “Yes,” he answered firmly. “It was serious, Steve, but he’s going to recover. I promise you.”

Steve gave a short, harsh breath, shaking his head. “This should have never happened,” he said. “Never. How… How did things get so bad?”

“Steve,” Tony said, knowing where this was going and wanting to stop it before it got there. There were no answers, so there was no use searching for them. He’d been looking ever since they’d returned from the botched mission, and all he had to show for it was pain and frustration. “Don’t do this to yourself. Barton’s gonna make it, okay? What happened happened and it can’t be changed so don’t feel guilty. Nobody wants you to. He damn well thought you were worth it. We all do.”

Steve looked like he’d been punched. “No.”

“He will get back up, and so will you.”

The moment they’d all been dreading came. Steve’s face crumpled and he wavered on his feet. Thor was quick to grab him before he fell and ease him into the chair. The god’s hands lingered on Steve’s arms, reluctant to let go, as the first of the tears escaped his tightly closed eyes. He shook with barely restrained sobs, shook and fought and struggled. Tony felt horrible for watching him start to break apart yet again. Everything now was in context. Such miserable, vicious, horrible context. “It’s alright,” Bruce softly promised. “You can let go.”

But he didn’t. Stubbornly, he held on, wavering a moment more with tears dripping down his cheeks to his blood stained lap. His lips quivered; Tony watched him worry them with his teeth, fighting adamantly not to cry. “No,” he said, drawing in a shuddering breath. “I’m okay. I’m okay.”

And that was that. He needed release, but he stopped himself from having it.

There was a groan from the bed. Natasha left Steve’s side and turned to Clint, leaning over her fallen partner. She brushed her palm with that same aching tenderness across his sweaty brow as he turned his head a little. “Clint?” she said.

“Heard the Cap…” came a mumbled, sleepy response. Barton’s eyes opened warily. “You here, Rogers?”

Steve raised his head. “Yeah, Barton,” he answered with a hoarse voice, “I’m here.”

Clint’s dry lips twitched into a smile. Tony wondered if he’d been faking all along, choosing now to “wake up” and dramatically assure Steve that he was going to be okay. Clint was a sneaky jerk sometimes, so Tony didn’t put it past him. At least this was better than the all-consuming depression he’d last heard spewing from Barton’s mouth. “Good. We’re a team again.”

Steve gave a weak smile at that. But it didn’t last. “I’m so sorry.”

“What the hell reason do you have to be sorry?” Clint rasped, coughing raggedly after. He fought to still the paroxysm, but he was too weak to do much other than ride it out. When it was over, he
smiled again like it hadn’t happened. “Been worse off. Getting better. So it’s all good.”

His optimism was a welcomed (but probably forced) change. He was saying what Steve needed to hear, and Tony knew it, and he was pissed off that Barton could be such a lousy hypocrite. Steve grabbed Clint’s hand firmly, wiping unshed tears from his eyes. Natasha moved then, putting her hand over theirs with a firm nod and a small smile. Thor followed, and then Bruce.

Tony hesitated only a moment. This wasn’t his sort of scene. But he needed to do this, because they were the Avengers, and they’d almost lost their captain. That was bigger than him and whatever misgivings he had. So he put his hand on top of the group’s. “You mess with one of us, you mess with all of us, right?” he said softly, putting on a brave front. He knew that was true. They’d made damn sure of it.

“Right,” Bruce agreed strongly.

Natasha nodded.

“We stand together,” Thor affirmed, looking among his teammates. He rested his other hand on Steve’s shoulder. Steve said nothing, but he truly smiled. It wasn’t much, but maybe it was a start.

The moment felt surprisingly good and strong and right. Tony was surprised at that because he hadn’t been expecting it. Clint coughed again. “Now if we’re done team-building, I need some sleep. Welcome back, Cap.”

Steve didn’t say anything to that, either, watching emptily as Clint’s eyes began to slide shut. Natasha offered him a reassuring nod before turning to Barton, calming his ragged coughs with a hand to his heaving chest. “You need sleep, too,” Bruce declared. “Let’s get you back to bed.”

They had Steve up and out of the chair a moment later. He didn’t protest, limply allowing himself to be directed, hardly putting forth any effort in walking beyond a shuffling gait and remaining upright. Tony watched in confusion and concern, unsure if his malaise was due to exhaustion or depression. It was probably a mixture of both. The three men got Steve back to his room. He stood near the bed as Bruce helped him tug off the blood stained pajama pants and change into a clean pair. The hospital gown was traded for a white t-shirt Pepper had had brought over from Steve’s room days ago. If Steve was at all distressed by the mess of wounds and bruises and bandages he undoubtedly noticed, it was well hidden. He watched Bruce check him over with detached interest, like it wasn’t his body that had been so badly injured. Thor dutifully helped him dress, and then they tucked him back into his bed.

Steve looked crushed then, afraid to sleep maybe. Probably. “It’s going to take time, Steve,” Bruce said compassionately. “Nobody can bounce back from something like this, not even you. You’re going to need to take it easy for a while. You’ll heal, but it’ll be slower than normal.”

“I’ll be okay,” Steve said again. His eyes were drooping shut. He was exhausted.

“I know you will,” Bruce responded confidently. “Sleep.”

A moment later, Rogers was out. Thor released a massive sigh as he leaned back from the bed. He folded his muscular arms across his chest, darting glances at Banner and Stark. “In spite of how he has suffered, he seemed remarkably in control of himself,” he commented hopefully.

Tony closed his eyes wearily and shook his head. “The first stage is always denial.”
A week passed like it was nothing. It was surreal, almost as if this had all been some elongated bad dream. None of it had ever happened. Tony could convince himself of that sometimes. It felt good to do it, but no matter how nice it seemed, it wasn’t true.

In these last seven days since Steve had finally struggled free of his delirium, he’d made remarkable physical progress. It was astounding, really, that the same man who’d nearly bled to death, who’d suffered from acute septic shock and cardiac arrest, who’d languished for days in the miserable, crushing hands of fever and nightmare and agony, was up and walking around like these horrors basically had never befallen him. For the first few days, he’d used crutches. Now he was tall and strong again. For the first days, he’d slept most of the hours away. Now he was hardly sleeping at all. He’d insisted soon after returning to the world that he didn’t need care anymore, that he could move back to his own room. Which he did, even if Bruce and Tony weren’t entirely convinced that he was ready to be on his own. Thor was cleverer than either man gave him credit for as he “moved in” into the suite across the hall from Steve. He’d never said why, but they all knew the reasons. Actually, Thor had become Steve’s new best friend. The demigod wasn’t making a show of it, had made no announcement that he was going to stick with Steve just in case. He just did it, and Steve didn’t seem to mind his new (well, his second) six foot shadow. They ate together. Sat together. Chatted together, but never about anything of any importance. Thor had millions of stories about Asgard, each as boring and involved as the last. Tony rolled his eyes every time he saw him boisterously, loudly, and excitedly regaling some tale of his homeland to Steve and whoever else unfortunate enough to be within earshot. It wasn’t because he loved bragging. Thor was trying to fill the void with something, anything, to distract Steve from the nightmares and memories and flashbacks.

The flashbacks were the worst, at least the worst of what the team saw. They generally came of two flavors, and Tony honestly couldn’t decide which he hated more. Steve had become withdrawn, quiet and burdened, but there were times he just seemed to completely pull away. He’d sink into himself, trapped in something only he could see and hear and feel, and whoever was with him simply had to wait out the awkward, difficult silence and stillness until Steve managed to get himself free of it. The amiable man who wore an easy smile and got embarrassed at bad sex jokes and reacted to this new world with wonder… That man was gone. Dead, maybe. Tony hoped not. Even though nearly all his wounds had healed, his captivity was an open, bleeding, gaping hole in his soul, swollen with unshed tears and pent up fury. The second kind of flashback more plainly revealed how deeply Steve was suffering, when something small and innocuous and seemingly irrelevant spawned a waking nightmare. In a blink he’d be back there, screaming and suffering and spitting fire or sobbing. The more fragile, the more human of them backed away after Bruce once got knocked once into a wall and nearly let the “other guy” out of his cage. Thor was the only one of them who could help Steve calm down. And then they all tried to talk to him, to get him to talk about it, but he never did, avoiding their prying gazes and worried words with a rushed apology. He’d run and hide his tears, hide his hurt, and they were all plenty weary of it after only a few days.

So this went on. The fact that they were all together all the time made it all that much more inescapable. Nobody left Stark Tower aside from Pepper, who was still incredibly busy dealing with the fallout from the press conference. She’d gotten the company lawyers to stall Boynton and his lackeys from subpoenaing Tony, but they’d told her it was only a matter of time. And she’d worked with the few allies they had in the press to try and turn the media’s attention somewhere else while Steve suffered through this. The memory of how he’d looked when he’d seen the footage from his ordeal had really stuck with Pepper, and she was doing everything she could to make sure it never
happened again. She was frightened of it all, though she did an admirable job of hiding it. But Tony didn’t think she’d spoken to Steve since the mess in the kitchen all those days ago. He was fairly certain she was afraid to be alone with him.

At least Barton was on the mend. His breathing had finally improved enough to ease Banner’s worries. He had a wicked cough and was as weak as a kitten, but every day he seemed better than he had the day before. Natasha was with him constantly, easing him into the liquid diet that Bruce started him on and that he complained incessantly about, helping him through his first wavering steps, generally playing nursemaid with remarkable patience and compassion. Every time Tony called her on it, she shot him a glare that suggested pain and punishment if he went any further. She, too, seemed to be avoiding Steve. And Steve avoided them both, clearly not comfortable with what had happened to Clint on his behalf. The entire mess was miserably tense, and nobody seemed to know how to fix it, or even wanted to try.

Tony was sure it was a disaster waiting to happen. But he didn’t know how to stop it.

And he couldn’t keep his mind off that damn video. He still hadn’t told anyone about it, and he had no plans to. For the first couple of days, he’d managed to keep his curiosity under control. He’d been busy with Pepper on trying to protect himself from Congress, and when he wasn’t caught up with that or with Steve, he holed up in his lab and tried to delve into work. He had a dozen different devices and inventions that were in various states of development. He tried to sink into the familiar comfort of designing and building, tried to lose himself in wires and equations and blueprints. But he couldn’t. At least, not for long. It was always there, in the back of his mind, and if he let himself sit still for too long it caught up with him. More than once JARVIS had prodded him onward in his work when he’d drifted off in his unsettled, unsatisfied thoughts. He knew where this was going; he knew himself, even if everybody thought he was blind to his own faults. He would never be able to let it go, because it was something he didn’t understand. That was what had led him to watch the video in the first place. The questions tumbled around his head, frustrated and unabated. Two days after Steve was on his feet he couldn’t stand it anymore. He locked down his lab, had JARVIS revoke even Bruce’s entrance codes, and took a deep breath.

Though he’d promised himself he wouldn’t, Tony watched the video again.

At least he didn’t puke the second time.

And then he watched it again. And again. After a while, it started not to faze him. In the corner of his mind where he stuffed things he’d rather not think about he wondered what it said about him, that he could watch his teammate’s brutal torture now without getting sick, without his eyes filling with tears, without his heart pounding or aching. He was on a goddamn mission. He needed to know, and to learn what he wanted, he needed to be strong.

Bullshit. But it made him feel better.

His questions pertained to who the hell had come in Steve’s darkest, weakest moment to break him. Tony focused on the part where the man who claimed to be Bucky Barnes came to torment Steve. He watched it over and over and over again, until his eyes hurt and he saw it in his sleep. He had to figure this out. If it was somehow possible that that man was Barnes… He had to know.

Which was why he was yet again locked in his lab and watching.

“JARVIS, is that the clearest shot of him that we can find?” The holographic workstation in front of him was cluttered with open files and documents and stills from the video.

“I believe so, sir,” JARVIS answered. Tony sighed and slid his hands into the air and drew the
picture closer and larger. It wasn’t a great shot. This fucker had really hid himself from the camera. Tony wondered if it was intentional. This was a shot of the man who would (could) be Barnes rising and turning after stabbing Steve in the leg and leaving him to bleed to death. The camera had caught the entire exchange from the side, and the man’s ragged brown hair had covered most of his face most of the time. This was the only instance, when the cameraman had back away a little and tracked the motion of the man as he stood and looked away from the prisoner. His head was still ducked and shadowy, but it was the best they had.

Tony stared at the picture. The anger and evil radiating from the man seemed palpable, even though it was no more real than a figment of air. It made him uncomfortable to look at it, but he did, closely. Scrutinizing the image for some sort of clue. The man’s face was comely, with high cheek bones, a square jaw covered in dark stubble, and cold, brown eyes. Other than the scar he was fairly nondescript. Could have been anyone, really. Except for the metal arm. That was fairly unique.

“Well, he looks like he’s in his thirties. So that makes it unlikely this is really Barnes. He’d be, what, in his nineties?”

“Nearly ninety-five, sir,” JARVIS supplied.

“Yeah, so way older than this. The technology to keep someone alive in cryostasis didn’t exist back then, at least not to keep someone going for seventy years. It hardly exists today.” The only reason Steve had survived had been because of the serum and good fortune that the impact of Schmidt’s plane into the ice sheet hadn’t killed him. Barnes wouldn’t have been so endowed or so lucky. “If someone was trying to build a cryostasis chamber powerful enough for that, we would know about it,” he reasoned.

“I have checked manufacturing, processing, and shipping logs of companies that produce the necessary components to maintain such equipment for approximately the last fifteen years. I have found nothing to indicate any legal acquisition of these items beyond those purchased, developed, and maintained by CryoTech.” Tony knew the CEO of CryoTech, the world’s largest company dedicated to developing cryostasis technologies. Stark Industries regularly did business with them. He was a fairly decent guy. Tony didn’t think a highly illegal, highly difficult, highly immoral undercover mission to revive a nobody soldier from World War II so that he could show up at the opportune moment to break Captain America would be their cup of tea.

“What about illegal acquisitions?” Tony asked.

“I will not be able to search effectively without breaking into restricted computer systems,” JARVIS reminded.

Tony wasn’t sure he wanted to go there yet. He was fairly certain he could hack into the Pentagon undetected, but he knew if he did get caught, there would be hell to pay. Senator Boynton and his merry crew of assholes would have a field day if they found out he’d gone snooping in the government’s secrets. And he wasn’t sure he could hack into SHIELD. Since he’d cracked their systems during the mess with Loki, they’d upped their security. They’d probably gotten even more careful after the Red Dawn had gotten its hands in there as well. All things considered, he probably could get in, but they’d surely know about it. Then they’d want to know why. He still didn’t know if Fury had watched the video of Steve’s captivity, but if he had, the master spy was probably investigating the same questions he was. Maybe it would be best to come clean.

Maybe. But he still didn’t trust SHIELD.

“How about the arm? Got anything on that?” he asked.
JARVIS paused and the image zoomed in on the only clear shot they had of the fake arm. It was steel, maybe, sleek and powerful-looking with a star upon the shoulder. “Unfortunately, without additional information, there is no way to determine if the prosthetic is real.”

“A bionic arm like that would have a hefty price tag on it. It articulates way better than anything I’ve seen. If that’s real, it didn’t come from the usual places.”

“Integration with the nervous system to such an extent would require procedures that go beyond today’s technology. I can begin to collect information on companies or independent sources with expertise in biotechnical engineering, but it will take some time without more direct evidence by which I can narrow the search.”

“Don’t bother right now.” If they couldn’t determine how Barnes survived, or if that arm was real, they could focus on the bigger (and probably more fundamental) question: was this man actually him? “Are there any pictures of Barnes we can compare this to?”

“Checking.” JARVIS worked for a quick moment. Then a slew of images appeared to Tony’s left. He stared into the man’s malignant eyes a moment more before turning to the new data. He thumbed through them. Most were poor quality. None of Barnes before he joined the army. None, in fact, before he’d become a Howling Commando. There was a shot of the group of soldiers, Steve’s men, gathered outside an SSR base in France. It was dated later in the war. It was strange to see Steve like this, fighting with other soldiers, with men who weren’t the Avengers. Tony thought the man who stood next to Rogers could be Barnes, but when Tony tried to magnify the old image, it became too grainy to make out clearly. He sighed, frustrated, and shoved it away. There were other similar shots, SSR’s photographer catching the Howling Commandos at varying points during their missions, but none had a good, clear shot of Barnes that could be magnified to get a better idea of his features.

One of the images was a video, an old, grainy film of Steve and his men preparing for a mission. They were in the back of a truck or some such, pouring over a map, Steve giving orders. The camera caught a glimpse of his compass, of Peggy Carter’s picture pressed into the lid. But Barnes? Again, there wasn’t much to be found. Just a profile of what Tony assumed was him, sitting across from Steve and looking at the map. Tony grunted, irritated. He tried to manipulate a few stills that JARVIS extracted from the old black and white feed, but to no avail.

There was probably only one person alive who had any idea of what Bucky Barnes looked like back in the war, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to ask him.

“This is hopeless, JARVIS. We’ve got nothing to go on,” he declared, sitting back in his chair and rubbing his forehead tiredly before swinging his arms around like pin-wheels to get some circulation moving in his sore shoulders and back. He sucked an energy drink dry and tossed the can to the waste basket. It clanked off the rim and hit the floor. He sighed. He needed to go back to the beginning. “What do we know about this guy anyway?”

“James Buchanan Barnes was born on March 10th, 1917, to Daniel and Winifred Barnes in Shelbyville, Indiana. He was the oldest of four children, a skilled athlete, and a steady student. After his parents moved to Brooklyn in 1921, he met Steve Rogers during their first year together at school. They were very close friends. He enlisted in the United States Army in December of 1942. That spring he received basic training at Camp McCoy in Wisconsin. He became a sergeant and was deployed to the Italian Front as part of the 107th Division in April, 1943. He saw limited action in the European theater until the skirmish with HYDRA’s troops outside Azzano on September 22nd, 1943, where he and much of his unit were taken prisoner and held in captivity until Captain Rogers rescued them on October 3rd.”
Tony nodded. That was the mission his father had often talked about, the mission where Captain America went from being an icon to a hero. “This is interesting, sir. According to Captain Rogers’ report and limited medical logs kept at the time, Barnes was treated for severe dehydration and minor abrasions after his rescue. The treating physician noted there were strange markings covering his body.”

Tony spun himself in his chair. “Interesting, but strange could mean anything.” Literally. The guy had been a captive of the Nazis and HYDRA, and there was no shortage of sadists and wackos in that company. “This doctor note anything else? Anything more specific?”

“No.”

“Then keep going.”

“Sergeant Barnes joined Captain Rogers as part of the Howling Commandos. He participated in their campaign, which lasted the duration of the war, to destroy HYDRA’s installations in Europe. He was lost in action in the Alps on March 1st, 1945 during a mission to capture Doctor Arnim Zola.”

Tony knew all this. He’d read the file. “His body was never recovered?”

“No,” JARVIS answered. “Captain Rogers led a mission into the mountains to attempt to find him. However, the Howling Commandos were summoned to London as escorts for Zola as he was transferred to SSR’s maximum security installation and he was forced to abandon his search.”

Tony sighed. There wasn’t much information to be had. “That fall… Is it even remotely possible that he could have survived?”

The AI paused for a moment. “Unlikely, sir. Although the exact location of Barnes’ death cannot be ascertained, I have determined the height of the cliffs along the railroad line for miles around the area where their mission is thought to have occurred. On average the descent was more than three hundred feet.”

“Three hundred feet turns the human body to mush,” Tony said. “He was probably dead before he hit the ground, so why the hell do you call that unlikely?”

JARVIS paused again. “I believe the expression is ‘anything is possible’, is it not?” Tony cocked an eyebrow at that, stopping his spinning chair to look again at the face of the man who’d claimed to be Bucky Barnes. He tried to get a feeling from that, but he didn’t, other than whoever this person was, he was probably dangerous. “Of course, there is also the precept of Occam’s Razor.” When all things are equal, the simplest explanation is often the correct one. “The Red Dawn sought to break Captain Rogers’ spirit. They could not assume physical pain would be enough to bring him to the point of begging for his life, even with their toxin inhibiting his resilience. There would be no better way to increase their chances of success than to wield Captain Rogers’ worst nightmare against him.”

“You think he’s just an actor,” Tony surmised. “He sure seemed to know an awful lot to be an actor.”

“Actors follow a script, sir.”

Tony grunted. “It would be the sort of pathetic, evil shit these people loved. Fucking theatrics.”

“Yes. Captain Rogers’ medical file indicates that he was subjected to numerous potent...
hallucinogenic and mind-altering compounds in addition to the chemical that reduced his metabolic rate. Those serve little purpose unless they meant to influence his perception of reality.”

JARVIS made a good point. Maybe the hallucinations and waking nightmares alone might have pushed Steve over the edge, but the Red Dawn would have covered its bases. They wouldn’t have come all that way and not been sure they could go the distance. They had in every other instance. Not stupid. Not sloppy. Cold and calculating.

And they were certainly low enough to do something so heinous as to hire an actor who looked a little like Bucky Barnes to give Captain America hell before killing him.

“The simplest explanation,” Tony mused, his eyes drifting over the stills from the video. It was inconceivable that Bucky could have survived the fall from the train in the Alps. It was inconceivable that he could have lived for seventy years and not aged. It was inconceivable that he was alive and furious enough with his best friend to arrange his kidnapping and torture just so he could gloat. It was entirely likely that these men had orchestrated this whole charade to cut right to Rogers’ heart, to strike at his spirit, just to get him to beg in front of the camera with nothing of his body and his mind and his dignity left. It was entirely likely they’d doped him up on drugs and hired a goddamn actor to make him believe something that was impossible.

Tony’s blood boiled.

“Sir, Doctor Banner is outside the lab. He requests that I allow him to enter.”

It took Tony a minute to regain his calm. Then he released a long breath, the images surrounding him disgusting and enraging him enough that he couldn’t bear to look any more. “Get rid of all this crap and let him in.”

The AI complied, and Tony tried to look busy with other things as the door opened and Bruce came inside. The scientist’s eyes were full of confusion as he approached. “Why was the door locked? My codes didn’t work.”

“I just… wanted to work alone for a while,” Tony explained, making a point not to look up from the pile of wires and microchips. “What’s up?” He hoped the change in topic didn’t seem to suspiciously abrupt or dismissive.

“Fury’s on the line. He wants a meeting.” Bruce scrutinized him. “You alright?”

Tony stood, his body complaining as he did. “Yeah. Let’s go hear what the one-eyed wonder has to say.”

Thor’s booming voice could be heard down the hall. Tony winced at the echo in the corridor, sharing a worried, irritated look with Bruce as they reached the conference room. Things were obviously going well already.

The two men stepped inside the large conference room, the huge windows to the left of the shining black table revealing a gray, windy day. The splattering of rain to the panes and the twisting of the clouds was nothing compared to the storm inside. Thor stood at the end of table, staring furiously at the image of the Director of SHIELD. His blue eyes were smoldering, every hard line of his body tense. “I will not be party to this, Fury. You dishonor our team!”

Natasha stood down the table some ways, dressed in black jeans that hugged her curves, a blue blouse, and a leather jacket. Her arms were folded across her chest, and she didn’t look pleased. Seated in a conference chair in front of her was Clint. He’d donned a gray sweatshirt and
sweatpants, and his pale face was haggard and worn and definitely not healthy.

Rogers was absent. “Why is sicko here and not the Cap?” Tony asked.

“Fury wants to do this without him,” Natasha explained evenly. “I think he’s sleeping.”

Thor turned, having noticed the entrance of the other two men. “Stark, Banner, you must agree with me that we cannot speak without our captain. He is our leader, and his input is of great value.”

On the screen, Fury looked irate. He shook his head, his single eye sweeping over the Avengers. “Nobody is suggesting Rogers’ input isn’t valuable,” he countered.

“Then there is no reason he cannot be here!” Thor yelled, and Tony winced. If Steve really was sleeping (doubtful), the racket would undoubtedly wake him up despite the five floors between them and this would all be a moot point. Thor seethed, his eyes alight in protective ire. “His sense of self-worth dangles by a thread. He has suffered greatly, and all control of his body, mind, and spirit was wrested from him. We will do him further damage if we treat him with such similar disrespect.”

Tony had to admit Thor’s logic was pretty sound. But Fury wasn’t buying it, which meant whatever he had called them about concerned Steve and was serious or upsetting enough that having him here was worse than lying to him. Fury spoke slowly, like he was trying to explain what should have been obvious to a bunch of kids. “Rogers needs time to recover, and we can’t spare it, so, yes, I’m asking you to be a team without him for a moment.”

Thor wouldn’t back down. Tony was tempted to tell him to cool it, but he trusted Fury about as far as he could throw him, and he wasn’t sure Thor was in the wrong. “We are not a team without him. I will not betray him. He is my captain and my friend. How do you think he will feel if he learns we have conducted this council without him?”

Fury’s eye flashed. “How do you think he will feel if he finds out he’s become a liability?”

That stilled the room. The Avengers were quiet, surprised or maybe even mortified. Bruce stepped closer, shaking his head. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?” he demanded hotly.

Fury seemed weary, then, and burdened. If he wasn’t such a manipulative son of a bitch, Tony might have felt sorry him. Might have, but probably not. “Look, we’ve gathered some intel that various terrorist and hostile organizations around the world are interested in the toxin that took down Captain America. Now that they know he survived—” Fury glared at Tony specifically. “—all sorts of madmen are out on the black market trying to buy either the toxin itself or the means to reproduce it.”

The silence in the room turned heavier and more ominous. “Seriously?” Tony said, not wanting to believe what he was hearing and not wanting to believe he had caused it. Is this goddamn nightmare ever going to end?

Fury was irritated. “Yes, seriously. These people aren’t exactly being quiet about it. We picked it up on numerous channels. Our agents out in the field are scrambling to keep track of who’s offering what.”

“So we didn’t get all of the Red Dawn then,” Clint surmised, looking piqued and aggravated.

“Unfortunately, no.”

“You have failed yet again,” growled Thor. The ire in his eyes was nothing short of terrifying.
“I didn’t say a damn thing about the poison. Who the hell tipped all these jackasses off about this?” Tony hotly demanded. “Did you forget to take out the trash, Nick?”

“Blame us if that makes you feel good about yourself, Stark. Lord knows that’s the only thing that’s ever important.” Tony saw red and would have kicked the shit out the man if he’d been more than a holograph and not safe hundreds if not thousands of miles away. Bruce’s restraining hand on his shoulder was the only thing that stopped him from spouting off every insult he could think of. “I don’t want to argue about this. That doesn’t solve anything. We have a serious situation here. We’ve had people trying to trace the Red Dawn for days now, and we’ve got a money trail to the Middle East and Russia and dozens of other satellite terrorist organizations. Something has got all these groups working together. Something big, and we don’t know what. But whatever it is, it’s a lot deeper than just some terrorists trying to make a point by kidnapping Captain America.”

Tony had known this, had feared it, from the beginning. These monsters were well-funded, smart, and strictly evil. They had hands in things long forgotten, in HYDRA’s work and ancient grudges, and that sort of power wasn’t random. Maybe they had smaller ambitions of making their violent point to the world, but whoever lay behind them, putting money and knowledge into their vicious little hands, had loftier goals.

“The point is: we don’t know if there’s more of that toxin out there. We don’t know if all the information about how to make it burned with that lab. And we don’t know what the moles in our organization might have leaked before we got them. So this is a serious problem.” Fury sighed, and his tone turned gentler. “We can’t let Rogers out with the Avengers with this floating around out there. It’s too risky. He could get himself or someone else killed.”

It seemed premature to be worrying about that. Steve was in no shape to return to duty, and that was that. But Tony knew Fury was right. If the bad guys of the world or (heaven forbid) the galaxy got a hold of the drug that could take down Captain America, Steve would be a liability. Getting hurt and then getting up again like it was nothing was one of the things that made him so strong, so formidable. A shield between the evil and the innocent. And that shield couldn’t function if he couldn’t take the hits.

They all came to the same miserable understanding. Then Natasha turned her guarded blue eyes to Fury. “So what do we do, Director?”

Finally it seemed like they were all on the same page. Maybe they were in the wrong to hide this from their captain, but Fury was right: Tony couldn’t fathom the sort of psychological blow this would do to Steve’s already damaged self-esteem. Post-traumatic stress disorder didn’t really cover this. “Agent Romanoff, I need you to go back to the Middle East and track whoever tipped you off about the botched weapons sale. We’ve gotten some information that ties back to old Soviet interests. That’s your territory. Those people are definitely tangled up with the Red Dawn, but if this leads back to something bigger, we might be able to get some information from them. At the very least they might know who else has the capability to produce the toxin. We need to know how serious and widespread a threat this is.”

Black Widow looked hesitant, sparing Clint a short glance that spoke volumes of why. Nobody missed it. Especially not Barton. He gave her an equally brief and tiny nod. Then she settled Fury with a steady gaze. “Understood, sir. I’ll leave immediately.”

Fury turned his gaze to the others. “In the meantime, we need to try to head them off at the pass. Doctor Banner, is there anything we can do to make a permanent solution? We can’t rely on the Cap taking the time to swallow some pills before he runs out on the battle field.”

The scowl that had seemed permanently plastered on Bruce’s normally placid face loosened slightly
as he thought. “I don’t know. I’d likely have to find a way to change the serum to get it to protect his cells from the sort of molecular binding the toxin uses. That was the key to defeating it.” He sighed, folding his arms over his chest and tipping his head to the side. “The serum fundamentally altered his DNA. I don’t think Erskine realized that the serum wouldn’t just become a part of Steve. Steve has become a part of it. That’s why it’s been impossible to reproduce it. It’s fused with his genetic code, so it wouldn’t be just a question of modifying the serum. We’d need to modify him.”

Fury’s expression was unreadable, save for the determination in his eyes. “Well, do what you have to. You are the world’s foremost expert on this.” Yeah, Tony thought bitterly, and look what that’s done to him. For all the good Project: Rebirth and the super soldier program had done the world (and there was no need for debate – it had done massive good), there’d been a hell of a lot of collateral damage. “Help him, Stark. I need you two to do something about this. The technology is in the open now, and we can’t pull it back.” What was unspoken was painfully clear. They needed to find a way to fix this. Whether or not Steve could overcome the trauma was sadly only part of the problem.

As long as that toxin was out there, Captain America was vulnerable.
Tony loved science. He *rocked* science, made millions with science, kicked ass and took names and wooed women with science. But, at that moment, science sucked. Science was utterly failing him.

Bruce and he had turned the R&D workshop on the thirty-eighth floor into a genetics laboratory. They’d spent three days so far chained to lab benches and computer stations and had nothing to show for it. They’d worked tirelessly, endlessly, only pausing to make some effort to wash and change their clothes and eat and rapidly consume more caffeine. They were both exhausted, even after taking six hours to get some sleep the night before. The only redeeming quality of this mess was that he’d completely (well, mostly) forgotten about the enigma of Bucky Barnes and the video. He’d become so engrossed in this problem, so enthralled with really flexing his mental muscles, that he’d managed to let the frustration and grief and anger go. It was like a weight off his chest, even if it wasn’t really off his chest and was, in fact, compounded by additional weight from another difficult and demanding problem. But at least he wasn’t alone in this one.

Bruce leaned back from the large touch screen before him, rolling his head to ease stiffness. Tony rested his chin on his fist and watched the schematic of Steve’s DNA rotate on the screen before him as JARVIS crunched through some simulations. “This is hard,” he complained. “Kinda like trying to install some new features onto a little black box. Dunno what’s inside. Dunno how it works.”

Banner grunted. “Well, nothing worth anything is ever easy. You know that.”

Tony didn’t appreciate that comment. “I could do without the insurmountable odds aspect.”

“We’ll figure it out,” Bruce said, though his voice didn’t sound as confident as his words.

Tony shook his head. “Not likely,” he muttered, tipping too far back in his chair and rubbing his eyes. Fury had sent over all of SHIELD’s files acquired from SSR on Project: Rebirth. They had Bruce’s notes on his own (failed) attempts to recreate the super soldier serum as well as Doctor Erskine’s notes and Howard Stark’s notes. But nothing painted a complete enough picture to totally understand *how* the serum worked. Even with such brilliance behind them, it was difficult to piece together the nuances of how the serum had bonded to and fundamentally altered Steve’s cells to enhance his strength, his senses, his metabolism and constitution and cognitive capabilities. Tony was initially surprised at how little help Erskine’s logs were. The German scientist had had a fairly rudimentary understanding of genetics (which was remarkable when Tony thought about it since DNA hadn’t formally and officially been discovered until another ten years after his death). So even he couldn’t completely explain how the serum amplified what a man was within, how it could turn a sick, weak boy into an infallible warrior. He’d had a few theories, some of which were potentially true despite their generic underpinnings, but even his genius had been limited by the technology and state of biological research at the time.

Frankly, Tony wondered if Steve would still have gone through with the project if he’d known how much of it had been guess-work. But then he remembered this was *Steve*. Of course he would’ve.

And now, seventy years later with all the marvels of modern technology and medicine at their disposal, it was still freaking guess-work.

Their urgency was really the product of their own fears and their own wish to *fix* this as quickly as possible. They had time. At least, he hoped they did. He still couldn’t admit to himself that his own actions had caused the evil of the world to rally against their fallen leader. He still defended himself, if only in the safety of his own head where the criticism was significantly less vocal, because how the
hell was he supposed to know these scumbags and assholes would be aware that a knife to cut
Captain America’s Achilles heel had been invented by other scumbags and assholes? As far as he
was concerned, SHIELD was as much at fault as he was, if not more so, for letting this whole
situation occur in the first place. Sure, his attempt at damage control had blown up in their faces, but
he wouldn’t have needed to do it if SHIELD had done their fucking jobs. Still, he felt incredibly and
miserably and unabashedly guilty, the shame of having watched the video and delved into Steve’s
private horrors notwithstanding. Tony hated guilt and wanted to remedy it as fast as possible before
he got caught. It was goddamn childish, and he knew it, and he didn’t care one bit. And he had
immediately realized that finding a way to render Steve immune to the toxin was only half the
problem. Getting Rogers well enough to go back out and fight was just as important an issue, and
they were frankly not close to solving either.

One thing at a time, Tony told himself, but he wasn’t a moron. Life rarely worked that way.

The doors to the lab swished open, and the two men turned to see their visitor. It was Barton. He
walked into the room slowly, still limping quite significantly from the yet healing stab wound to his
side. He was pale but better. His eyes were clear at least. Tony really hadn’t seen him (or anyone
aside from Bruce) much the past few days. He wasn’t sure what Clint had been up to since Black
Widow had left on her mission. Tony would never openly admit this (ever) but he was worried
about Natasha. He never had been before, but she was alone out there with dangerous villains and
ruthless monsters, the sort that had brought their team to the brink of collapse. He knew she could
take of herself better than anyone, but these people were soulless. Hell, he worried when Pepper left
the building, and she had a slew of bodyguards and Happy with her and the Avengers were a mere
phone call away. Clint was probably just as worried and just as unwilling to confess to it. “Find
anything?” he asked as he made his way over to an empty chair.

Bruce looked like he wanted to get up and help him, but he didn’t. “Not yet,” he answered glumly.

Barton swung around in the chair with a little wince. “What’s the hold up?”

Tony could have laughed at the other man’s ignorance. “The hold up is that nobody really
understands how the serum works. So trying to change how something works when you don’t
know how it works is a little difficult.” His tone was pretty condescending, but Clint didn’t seem
fazed by it.

Bruce rolled his eyes a little at Tony’s frustration. “I’ll spare you the details. Basically Steve’s DNA
is far more complicated than a normal person’s. The doctors on Project: Rebirth thought the Vita-
Rays they flooded him with would stimulate muscle growth, and they did, but they did a helluva lot
more than that. They caused the serum to fuse with his genetic code on a molecular level. His DNA
is still inherently human, but it’s like he is: advanced and enhanced. He has more genetic material
than a normal person, all of which fosters his abilities, but this is unlike anything we’ve seen and we
don’t have anything to compare it to. We don’t know where the serum begins and where he ends. It
makes trying to figure out which genes do what quite a puzzle.”

Clint squinted, trying to follow this. “I thought you were gonna spare me the details,” he grumbled.
“What about your own DNA?”

Bruce looked a little uncomfortable. “You mean my failed attempt at recreating the serum with
disastrous results? Yeah, not going there.”

The archer shrugged. “Sometimes you can figure out how something works by looking at it when
it’s broken.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Since when did you join the genius club? I don’t recall sending you an
Clint glared at him. He was generally a pretty cool customer, level-headed and difficult to rile. Generally. The last couple of weeks had tested that, and he looked like he wanted to kill Tony, but he didn’t, and Bruce was rambling away. “Somewhere in his DNA there’s a gene – or, hell, probably multiple genes – for reproducing the serum. His body constantly replenishes its own supply. That toxin didn’t just reduce his metabolic rate. It shut this gene off somehow, and if we can find out where and what and how, it would give us a place to start.” Bruce’s eyes were clouded in thought as he stared again at the mystery. “But I don’t know. His DNA is so completely altered that I don’t know where to start, and I’m sure as hell not going searching by testing the toxin on him again to take a closer look at what it’s doing on a genetic level.”

The thought silenced them. Clint was the first to speak after the long, uncomfortable minute. “You guys want to take a break?” he asked then. “It’s lunchtime. Thought we could get some food and watch a movie.”

The offer came so completely out of the blue that Bruce and Tony only stared at each other dumbly for a minute. They had a mountain of work. But more than that, even though they were a team, they didn’t do things like hanging out over pizza and beer and catching a movie together. They were all damaged, loners and far from the picture of normalcy, and none of them dealt with feelings particularly well. They might have had camaraderie on the battlefield, but off it?

Barton was a sneaky son of a bitch. “What’s going on?” Tony asked.

Clint sighed. “You guys have been holed up in here for days. You don’t know how bad he’s getting.”

“Steve?” Bruce asked.

Clint rolled his eyes in exasperation. “Yes, of course Steve. Who the hell else?” Bruce and Tony shared looks. They were both ashamed, because they had been working constantly and not paying attention to how things outside the lab were going. What they were doing was terribly important, but it was also a little selfish to turn a blind eye to how things were deteriorating. Truth be told, Tony had noticed, the few times he’d seen Clint and Steve and Thor. He’d just made himself ignore it.

Clint scrubbed his hands through his spikey hair and then rubbed his eyes wearily. “He needs help. Badly. It’s all getting worse, the memories and flashbacks. Yesterday we’re having breakfast, and Thor’s going on about something – I don’t know – and then Steve’s eyes just glaze over and then he’s screaming and we’re trying to calm him down but he’s too damn strong. I think he got freaked out about the knife on the table.” Tony stiffened, a dozen horrific images of knives slashing and piercing and stabbing Steve’s flesh, of Bucky driving his knife into Steve’s leg, rushing through his mind in a blur. “This is happening all the time. And when he’s not freaking out about something, he’s a goddamn statue. He’s pulling it all into himself, not smiling, not talking.”

“He talks to Thor,” Tony pointed out, trying to sound more helpful than he knew he was being, trying to sound like this wasn’t just denial.

Clint gave him a withering look. “He talks to Thor because Thor lets him forget. Hell, he helps him forget. He’s trying to get Steve to ignore everything that happened to him, and maybe that was okay in the beginning, but it sure isn’t now. It’s not helping. He’s just enabling, and Steve is going along with it because it’s much easier than the alternative. He needs help.” Clint said these last words slowly, firmly, and carefully for added emphasis. It was above debate. Then he sighed again, and the weariness was obvious on his face. He was sick and exhausted and burdened by it all. “Look, I know we’ve all got our demons. We’ve all been through hell, lived through shit that would kill most
people, and what happened to the Cap is probably the worst. But even I know that this isn’t healthy. Pretending like this didn’t happen isn’t going to make it so it didn’t happen. He has to talk to someone. He won’t listen to me.”

The three men were silent then. Bruce felt the need to fill the void. “I’m sorry, Clint.”

The stress this had put on Clint was clear, but he didn’t want apologies. “We need to get him to open up, so I thought if we all went in on this together, kinda ease him into it, maybe it wouldn’t be so hard on all of us.”

“An ambush?” Tony remarked. This was a bad idea. He could feel it.

Another glare. “Fine. Stay in here with your project and let him destroy himself.”

“No, no,” Bruce quickly said, trying to ease the tension. “No, you’re right. We need to help him.”

Clint sniffed, seemed paler and weaker and even more bent with exhaustion. He coughed then. “Sorry.” It quickly escalated into a fit of hacking, and Bruce was at his side instantly with a steadying hand and a bottle of water. Clint rasped for breath for a moment, flushed and sweaty, and then he downed half the bottle in seemingly a single gulp. “Sorry.”

“No problem,” Bruce said. He looked at Tony while Clint remained hunched and panting and trying to gather his composure. “A break sounds great, right?”

Tony didn’t think so, but he didn’t argue. *Out of the frying pan and into the fucking fire.*

Not only had he gotten dragged into this *really bad idea,* but he also got saddled with the job of getting their target to agree to their surprise attack. He protested as Clint and Bruce went through the pretense of this little party being about anything other than luring Steve out from his shell. He argued, whined, as they had JARVIS order pizza and pick a movie for them to watch. He got angry and demanded that Thor do it, because at least Steve trusted Thor now that they’d gotten so chummy. But the demigod had remained stiff and unyielding and pretty furious on the couch, grinding his teeth together. The tension had been thick and awful and Tony was pretty sick of it all by the time he threw up his hands and told them all to go to hell. “He’ll listen to you, Tony,” Clint insisted. “We’ve tried.”

“What the hell makes you think he’ll listen to me? He doesn’t even like me half the time.”

Exasperated, Clint needled Tony with a vicious glare. “He knows you’re smart. And he knows you won’t coddle him.”

Thor tensed and shot Hawkeye a glower of his own. “I have *not* coddled him.”

Clint’s expression softened. “I know,” he said in a lower, easier tone. “Just… come on, am I the only one that sees this as a major problem? He looks like he hasn’t slept in days because I’m pretty goddamn sure he hasn’t. Are we only a team in battle?”

Nobody answered him. Clint turned away and started coughing again. Every time he got agitated (which had been fairly frequently over the last few minutes), his lungs rebelled against him. Bruce shook his head, troubled and uncertain, and looked at Tony. “You know what he’s going through.”

That pushed Tony over the edge. “What? It’s not like there’s a fucking torture-survivors club. It’s not like we have weekly meetings and t-shirts and pot luck dinners and gather around to talk about our feelings. I don’t know what he’s going through.”
“Well, you’re the closest person we have,” Clint returned vehemently. His eyes were watering from choking so badly, and he sucked down another sip from another water bottle. “We’re not asking you to even talk about it. Just go get him and convince him to come join us. That’s it. If we all go, he’ll clam up. And if Thor or I go, he’ll know he doesn’t need to listen. And Banner’s not pushy enough, no offense.”

Bruce shook his head. “None taken.”

Tony glared at the three of them. He was pretty much cornered, and the stubborn bastards wouldn’t let him escape without acquiescing. He knew a losing battle when he saw one (sometimes – well, hardly ever, but he didn’t feel like arguing anymore). “Fine. You guys are assholes. And if this turns to crap, it’s all on you.” He didn’t wait for them to say anything further, storming from the living room where they’d gathered for this monumental and futile act of stupidity. “JARVIS,” Tony snarled, “where the hell is he?”

“Captain Rogers is currently on the balcony outside of his suite.”

Tony slowed his angry pace at that. An irrational and frightening image passed through his overactive imagination. He didn’t want to think about it – about Captain America hurting himself or worse – but he was worried. Steve was obviously in a very dark place, and though Tony tried to convince himself that he was just working himself up over nothing, he couldn’t shake the pervasive nervousness electrifying his body. He picked up his pace again to a harried walk.

He reached Steve’s suite and found the door unlocked. He stepped inside, glancing around at the immaculate seating area and bedroom and bathroom, and realized for the first time that if he hadn’t known Steve was living here, he would’ve never noticed his presence. The sliding door to the balcony was open, letting the warm October air inside, and Tony quickly made his way out.

Steve was indeed out there, but he wasn’t anywhere near the railing. Tony heaved a huge sigh of relief to see the other man sitting against the building and then felt like a moron for fearing what he had. Steve didn’t notice him immediately, staring out over the city with a distant look in his eyes. He wore a blue long-sleeve shirt and jeans, and a sketch book lay open beside him with the pencil idly resting atop the pages. He hadn’t drawn a thing. Though Steve was pretty private about it sometimes, he’d seen the other man sketch before. He was really talented. Tony had never seen him leave a page so utterly empty.

Feeling mightily uncomfortable, Tony cleared his throat. He didn’t want to startle Steve, never thought he could startle Steve, but the soldier seemed so far away that he wasn’t sure he’d noticed his entrance. “Hey,” Tony said.

Steve turned and settled empty eyes on Tony. He didn’t seem to focus for a long, worrying moment. Then, like he’d known Tony had been there all along, he said, “Hi, Tony.” He went back to looking over the city. He sat cross-legged, and Tony couldn’t help but notice that he had his hand on his right thigh, right over where he’d been stabbed.

“Leg bothering you?” he asked.

“Hmmm? Oh, no. No, it’s alright.”

Didn’t seem to be with Steve intent on compulsively rubbing a hole through his pants. But Tony didn’t press it. He hesitated awkwardly for a moment, watching Steve’s motionless form except for his damn rhythmic massaging of his leg, wondering how the hell to broach the topic. Then he got frustrated and just went for it. “So we ordered some pizza. You wanna come have some, maybe watch a movie?”
Rogers didn’t answer right away. The breeze swept up over the balcony’s railing and brushed through his perfectly combed hair. Then he sighed and looked down and maybe realized for the first time that he was rubbing his leg and clenched his hand into a fist to stop himself. “That’s okay. You guys go ahead.”

Tony sighed, folding his arms obstinately over his chest and leaning against the door frame. “Come on. We ordered a ton of food, and Thor can’t possibly eat it all. We need you to pull your share. Besides, you look like you could use it.” He did. He didn’t think it was possible for Steve to look this… rundown. The dark lavender bags under his eyes were ridiculously large but the rest of his face was white and drawn. He didn’t know if the soldier had actually lost weight but he certainly seemed smaller. Weaker.

Barton was right. He really did need help.

“I shouldn’t,” Steve finally answered.

“Why the hell not?” Tony snapped irritably. “Don’t be a dumbass. Shut up and come on.”

Steve didn’t respond, didn’t move. Then, much to Tony’s surprise, he stood, wiping off his pants and bending down to snatch up the empty sketchbook and unused pencil. Tony couldn’t help but be proud of himself, though he did his damnedest not to seem relieved or excited or even the slightest bit pleased. They went back inside, Steve tossing his things to his perfectly made bed, and then they were heading to the common area where the others were waiting.

Bruce, Clint, and Thor also made an admirable effort of not appearing overly relieved or surprised as Tony walked inside with Steve in tow. Bruce smiled warmly. “Hey. Just in time.”

Four boxes of pizza were arranged on the granite table, and one of them had set five plates. Bottles of beer were open and ready, and Thor was already grabbing a steaming slice. He placed it on a plate that was way too expensive and nice for pizza and handed it to Steve. Steve stared at it warily for a short second before looking just as apprehensively to the gathered Avengers. Then he smiled a little and took the plate and sat at the table. Thor glanced at Tony, gave a curt, appreciative nod, and then handed Clint a plate with pizza as well.

Soon after they were all seated and eating. To call the scene awkward would be something of an understatement. They were superheroes, warriors and soldiers and assassins and scientists, but none of them were given to stupid sentiments and making chit-chat. Tony kept glancing at Clint, hoping the archer would start talking about something – it was his goddamn responsibility because this had been his shitty idea. But Barton just ate and drank and looked around uncomfortably at the rest of them like a kid realizing he was in over his head and he needed the adults to bail him out. That was maybe just Tony’s annoyed perception, because he did finally start talking. “Did I ever tell you guys about Budapest?”

Thankfully, that ended the uncomfortable silence. The archer went on some long and drawn-out tale about his mission that had ended in a firefight and an international mess that had nearly cost Romanoff and him their lives (but Clint seemed more annoyed with their jeopardized cover). Thor thankfully chimed in after that with a few more stories from Asgard, about three warriors and some lady warrior (Tony forgot their names the second Thor mentioned them), and Steve smiled at a few of the funnier parts. But he hadn’t relaxed, even as Thor regaled them all with the time he and Erik Selvig had gone to a bar together and his friend had gotten fall-down drunk before Thor had even become slightly tipsy. Midgardian brew, he claimed, was far less potent than the celebratory beverages of Asgard. Bruce suggested, purely for the sake of science, that Steve and Thor should go head to head sometime to see who could drink more. Thor seemed highly interested, but Tony thought it was only for Steve’s benefit. The soldier smiled a little but didn’t really say anything as
Thor laughed and clapped him on the back in a brotherly show of affection.

At least he’s here. He’s eating. Tony didn’t know when the hell things had gotten this bad, bad enough that the world’s strongest heroes were worried about one of their own and his eating and sleeping habits. This was a screwed up situation if there’d ever been one.

After lunch (Steve really hadn’t pulled his weight – due to his enhanced metabolism, he usually ate about as much as Thor did, but he’d hardly had more than a single slice) was finished, they headed over to the sitting area. Bruce and Clint were discussing movies, seemingly engrossed in the conversation, but everybody was acutely aware of everything Steve did. Every long breath, every distant look, every nervous shift of his body. Everything was suspect. If their captain hadn’t been so out of it, Tony was sure he would have kicked all their asses for their meddling and prying. It had taken the others and JARVIS some doing to select a movie; Tony knew it was going to be hard. They couldn’t dare put on anything too serious or too violent (given how easily Steve was having flashbacks), and they wanted something that would actually interest him, something he could follow given his limited knowledge of pop culture for, well, the last seven decades. They’d settled on The Day the Earth Stood Still (the old one), because at least he had a frame of reference for sci-fi (having pretty much lived through it). Tony hated this movie, but he kept his mouth shut and just accepted the fact that this tense, awkward, awful misery was his life for the next ninety minutes and sat on the sofa beside Bruce, holding his beer bottle to his knee. Clint and Thor sat with Steve on the longer sofa, making a point not to make of point of practically surrounding him like he might escape. Like he was a caged animal. Tony had to admit the analogy was not far from the truth.

The movie started on the huge TV suspended on the wall across from them. Bruce tried to ask Steve about movies back in the 40’s as the opening sequence played, and Steve had offered the barest of answers. Apparently he’d met the lead actor in the movie during the war. Apparently he’d met a lot of famous people during the war when he’d been part of the USO show. Clint looked jealous when he mentioned Marlene Dietrich and Bette Davis and Jimmy Stewart and the Rockettes. After that everybody was quiet, abandoning any effort to pull Steve from his shell. It didn’t matter much anyway. He was so exhausted that about fifteen minutes into the film, he was asleep.

They sat there, stiff and uncertain. Then Bruce helped Clint to his feet and Thor stood as well, and together they slid Steve down so that he was laying on the entirety of the couch. “This did not go as I had hoped,” Thor confessed, looking down sadly at Steve’s slumbering form.

“At least he’s sleeping,” Bruce said. “And he ate.”

Clint limped to a vacant chair and sat with a grimace. He buried his face in his hands and then raked his fingers through his hair. He sighed. “This can’t go on. Stark, you gotta talk to him.”

Tony had about had it with this whole fruitless endeavor. “I thought it was enough for me to just get him,” he retorted hotly. His eyes flashed a warning that Barton probably saw but just ignored. “I don’t know what to say to him. I got back from Afghanistan and buried myself in work. I had Iron Man. I had a company to run.”

“You got through it.” Bruce said softly, darting his eyes from Tony to Clint and then back to Tony again, like he wasn’t sure what side of this argument he wanted to be on.

Tony gritted his teeth. “You don’t just get through it. I still have nightmares and flashbacks sometimes and it’s been three years. I carry around a fucking glowing souvenir from hell with me all the time. I can’t shut it down, can’t take it out. Maybe I turned the darkest parts of my life into something great, but that doesn’t make the darkest parts any less dark. You don’t get over it. It’s not like one day you wake up and, hey! The world’s a great place again and the cold sweats and terror and memories are gone. It’s not like that.”
“I know that,” Clint retorted. “I’ve been hurt, too.”

“Tony, it’s alright. If you can’t do it, it’s understandable,” Bruce placated gently.

The situation was escalating, and they all knew it. “What happened to all your woe-is-me shit, Barton? What happened to falling down and not getting back up? Seems to me like you’re the one pushing him now.”

Clint’s hazel eyes shone with an unspoken threat. The last shreds of his patience, normally so inhumanly endless, were wearing away. “I’m not trying to make myself feel better by spouting off promises I can’t keep and had no business making.”

“Stop.” Thor looked to his teammates, his jaw clenched. “Fighting among ourselves accomplishes nothing. We cannot help him when we tear at each other’s wounds.”

There’d been friction between them all one time or another since they’d been brought together. They rubbed each other the wrong way, got under one another’s skins. Steve with his ridiculous no-nonsense morals. Tony with his brilliance and arrogance. Clint was a bit of a loner and played things cool and close, but because it was hard to get a rise out of him, Tony tried that much harder. Thor was loud and hot-tempered. Natasha could be so cold and vicious when she wanted to be; it was hard to ever know what she was thinking, when she was really being true and sincere. And Bruce just went along for the ride, because that’s what he did, what he’d learned to do. That way he never got upset, never pushed or argued. He was always afraid that if he made waves, the waves would reflect back at him even stronger and he’d lose control. Working together wasn’t easy during the simple times, and things had never been this dark and stressed and difficult before.

They were reaching a breaking point. They all knew it. But it was like a goddamn train wreck; nobody could do anything other than let it happen.

Tony was furious and stepped closer to Barton, standing over the chair with fire in his eyes. “It’s so easy to sit in judgment over everyone else, huh? To stay up high where you can be safe and under cover and pick off your shots. Get out there and fight for real for once. Get out there and be exposed, take the hits, and then see how easy it is to hang back while things go to shit and people get hurt.”

Clint’s hand balled into a fist. He rose with surprising grace given his injuries and stared knives at Tony. “At least I don’t make it about me,” he seethed. “Fury was right. All you care about is you. The whole goddamn world is now gunning for our captain because you had to open your big mouth and flaunt yourself in front of everyone. If he gets hurt again, it’s blood on your hands.”

“I did what I had to,” Tony returned. “I stood up for him. For us. So fuck you, Barton. You think I don’t know there’s blood on my hands? You think I don’t care?”

“You have a helluva way of showing it!”

“Hey, hey,” Bruce said as calmly as he could manage. He tried to step in between them, desperate to diffuse the situation. “Let’s not do this. Keep it down before you wake him up.”

“He is our captain, so let him handle his own problems,” Tony demanded, pointing toward Steve’s sleeping form on the couch. “If he wants help, he’ll ask. He’s goddamn Captain America. He can take it.”

Thor shook his head. It was fairly surprising that the short-tempered demigod had kept his cool thus far. If the tightening of his jaw and the tension in his shoulders were any indication, his composure
was rapidly deteriorating. He glared at Clint. “You would have us do nothing while this world slanders our names and breeds dissension? There is no bravery in submission to an idiotic and ill-favored cause.”

Clint shook his head. “Standing in front of everyone and spouting off all the crap he did is only going to cause more grief. Now Congress will investigate. They have to. Tony made it personal, and they won’t back down now. What the hell is gonna happen if they call Steve to testify? He’ll do it. He’s too much of a boy scout not to. What the hell happens then, huh? What happens when everybody wants him to get up and he can’t?”

“Who are we to decide what he can and can’t do?” Bruce asked. He glanced between his feuding friends. “Just because his body heals fast doesn’t mean his mind will. We need to give him a chance, give it—”

“Time. Yeah. You’re like a broken record,” Tony said, and Banner flashed angry eyes at him. “Steve won’t have to testify. They won’t drag any of us down there. I’ll stop it. I’m rich and I have friends in high places.” Clint didn’t look one bit convinced. Frankly, Tony knew it was a load of bullshit. He couldn’t stop what he’d started.

“It is madness to expect those who guard your realm to defend themselves from your own governments. The weak and foolish never protect their own interests,” Thor returned, trying to keep his voice low and darting worried eyes to Steve. “That is why there are kings.”

“I’ll make sure to tell the Armed Services Committee that,” Tony muttered darkly.

“Is everything a joke to you?” Clint snapped.

“Yes,” Tony answered smartly. “Are you laughing? You should try it. Might help you get your head out of your ass every once in a while.”

Bruce was looking more and more frustrated and less and less like himself. “Stop it,” he demanded. “Get a grip, guys. This is pointless. This doesn’t help anyone.”

“You don’t get to screw everybody else. You can damage yourself all you want, make an ass of yourself and ruin your own life, but you don’t get to speak for us. Got it, Stark? The only one of us who gets to speak for the team is Steve. He’s the only one I listen to. So shut up. Shut up.”

Tony glared at Clint. He had nothing left besides anger, and he let it course over him, hot and rough and demanding. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the little, nagging voice of reason he was an expert at ignoring told him that Bruce was right. Fighting wasn’t going to solve anything. If they didn’t stand by each other, nobody else would. But he was, after all, an expert at ignoring the little voice. “So this is it, bird brain. You want do this now. It’s not too bright to pick a fight when you’re as bad off as you are. I don’t even need the suit to knock you on your ass. You don’t want to get up again? Fine. It’ll be my pleasure.”

That was all it took. The fist Clint had clenched tightly at his side for the last few minutes swung upward. Tony barely dodged in time and prepared to return a punch. However, Bruce was there, pushing Barton back into the chair, and Thor grabbed the billionaire’s hand so tight he knew the god was exerting all his self-control not to break his fingers. “Enough!” roared Thor. “You act as children!”

They all stood still, breathing heavily, glaring and hating and hurting. Suddenly what should have been a calm and quiet and comfortable afternoon had dissolved into the unraveling of their team. And as was the wont of bad situations, this one only got worse.
“Shit,” moaned Tony as Steve suddenly thrashed on the sofa with a wrangled cry. The super soldier turned quickly, swinging arm in a defensive move, and smashing it down into the coffee table as he fell to the floor. The table was crushed by the impact, beer sent flying as bottles tipped and shattered. Thor wasted not a moment, releasing Tony to rush to Steve’s side. He followed, barely avoiding getting kicked as Steve screamed and screamed and curled into himself on the floor.

“No!” Steve cried, pushing Thor away as the other tried to grab him. “Get away from me! No! No! Don’t you touch me!”

“Steve, it’s not real. You’re dreaming!” Bruce insisted. Thor won the battle, getting himself behind Steve to wrap an arm around the other man’s heaving chest. The horror went on, Tony and Clint watching helplessly, shame twisting their features, and Bruce and Thor tried to wake Steve up. It wasn’t working. Thor held tighter and tighter, and Bruce grabbed Steve’s face between his hands. His eyes were squeezed shut, but that didn’t stop the tears from escaping. “Come on. Listen to me. It’s Bruce. You’re safe. You’re safe.”

“Peace,” Thor implored, trying to be calm even though Steve’s struggling was causing him a bit of pain and distress. “I have you. Peace.”

But there wasn’t any. Maybe there would never be any. Tony didn’t know, but as he watched Steve writhe with a nightmare for the first time since the night he’d watched the video, he couldn’t help but doubt. Steve arched his back, his mouth open in a soundless scream. He gasped and fought and shook his head. The whispered words were barely discernible, but Tony could hear them because he’d heard them over and over again, watched this terrible moment play out countless times. And then Steve grabbed his right leg and wailed hoarsely. He was squeezing his own flesh so hard that maybe the pain was real.

Tony suddenly couldn’t stand it anymore. He shoved the remains of his coffee table aside and crouched beside Bruce. He laid his hand over Steve’s atop his right thigh. “Wake up, Steve. Stop it. This isn’t real. It’s not real! Wake up!”

And he did. With a strangled cry his eyes opened and he lurched upward, and Thor let him go. Steve pulled away instantly, scrambling from the demigod’s embrace and Bruce’s and Tony’s hands, fleeing up onto the couch. Wide eyes filled with terror and tears glanced around wildly. He didn’t know where he was. “You’re safe,” Bruce promised, watching in tense concern but not making a single move closer. “You’re safe.”

Steve looked around for another long, horrified minute. Then he buried his sweaty face into shaking hands and groaned and trembled. “God,” he whimpered.

The Avengers looked at one another, guilty and helpless and disturbed. But Tony couldn’t stand this anymore. “You know it’s not real,” he said. The others might have thought he was talking about the nightmare, and he was, but specifically he meant Bucky. “It’s not real. It’s not. You know it.” Steve didn’t answer, breathing heavily. His hand went to his leg again, rubbing and rubbing. Anger and dismay allowed Tony no other option. He couldn’t bear to see Steve grabbing at the long healed wound in his thigh like it was new and fresh and the source of all his trouble. He wanted to help. He needed to help. So he just spoke, because he was desperate and frazzled and he wanted this to be over, and talking was what he did when he didn’t know what to do. “You lived, right? They didn’t get what they wanted. They tried to break you, but they couldn’t. They tried everything to ruin you, but they couldn’t. They got desperate. So nothing they did was real. Nothing. It was all just some sick joke, some plot they made up to hurt you. They were just out to turn everything you love against you. They knew pain wasn’t enough. They knew it. They knew how to hurt you, how to pour salt in your wounds. But it didn’t matter. You didn’t fail. It wasn’t real. It wasn’t him.”
It was silent. Then Steve slowly lifted his head, pulling his left hand from his teary face. His right hand stopped rubbing. He stared at Tony, stared with narrowed eyes. Dawning understanding claimed him, and Tony’s blood turned to ice water in his veins. “You saw,” he whispered.

Tony’s mouth hung limply open. *Oh, shit.*

Steve’s expression of shock and fear and shame and *hurt* turned into fury. He clenched his right hand into a fist. “You son of a bitch,” he said venomously. “How the hell… You god damn son of a bitch! How did you know?”

Tony’s heart thundered. He couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think of what to say. His tongue was a useless, repulsive lump in his mouth. “Steve, I – I–”

Steve was up and over the back of the sofa in one quick vault. He glared at them, at all of them, but particularly at Tony. “Stay away from me,” he snarled. And then he was gone, stalking away from the mess with his hands balled into fists and the hard lines of his muscles tight with rage, without ever looking back.

They stood silently. The movie was still playing in the background. Tony closed his eyes against the embarrassing burn of tears, feeling like the world was spinning but it was just that he was wavering on unsteady feet. He sank onto the couch before he toppled over.

“What the hell just happened?” Clint asked dumbly.

“Tony?” Bruce said. He laid a supportive hand on Stark’s shoulder.

They were all looking at him, waiting for him to explain. There was no point in hiding. They wouldn’t back down; he could see it in their determined eyes and worried expressions. They wouldn’t let it go. And he couldn’t lie. God damn it, he couldn’t lie about this. He didn’t have it in him this time. He couldn’t suffer in silence anymore. The horrors he’d seen were banging on the cage in his heart until the door slammed open and it all came pouring out like black, thick filth.

“They filmed the whole thing.”

Silence again. Some stupid part of him hoped that would be enough, that the others would draw the right conclusions so he wouldn’t have to confess anything further. But they didn’t. “What? Who?”

“God damn it, the Red Dawn. They filmed the whole fucking thing. Fury gave the footage to me before we left the helicarrier. Told me that someone needed to know what Captain America had gone through.” Tony gave a humorless laugh. “I got to be the lucky bastard.”

They still didn’t get it. At least not right away. Bruce’s face was fractured in surprise and anger and growing understanding. “You… you watched it? You watched… Jesus, Tony.” He sat, too.

Thor was pale. Confusion left him speechless for a long moment. He shook his head. “I do not understand. How could you… We are a team.” His lack of comprehension quickly turned into anger. “How could you not tell us?”

“I don’t know,” Tony groaned. He sighed and leaned back and threw his arm over his eyes. “I just… I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. I don’t know. I’m a moron.”

“You didn’t want anyone to get hurt,” Bruce repeated incredulously. “Damn it, Tony. What the hell were you thinking? Steve… What did you expect he would think? You betrayed him.”

“No,” Tony returned, shaking his head. The hurt grew so strong he could hardly stand it. His heart ached heavily in his chest. He wanted to run and hide, but they had trapped him. Trapped *him*, not
Steve. Everything was upside down. “No, I didn’t. You don’t know what they did to him.”

“And you do. And you shouldn’t.”

“Jesus! What the hell did you want me to do? Throw it away? Ignore it? You want someone to help him, but just so long as none of the gory details come out? What, so we don’t have to feel guilty about how low they brought him? You guys are unbelievable.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” Bruce responded hotly. “I know you. You couldn’t let it go. You had to watch it, had to understand it. It kills you not knowing.”

“You had no right,” Thor angrily announced. He loomed over Tony, looked about ready to throttle him. Tony almost wished he would. “He will not trust us now. How can he?”

“You shouldn’t have made this decision by yourself,” Bruce added. He was flustered and shaken. He, too, obviously felt betrayed. “You can’t do this stuff, Tony. We could have helped you. We had a right to know. We had a right to decide as a team what to do.”

He lost his temper completely. “You want to watch it? Huh? Fine. JARVIS, decrypt the damn thing—”

“No!”

“—and put it some place accessible. There, watch it all you want.”

“Tony, that’s not the point!”

But Tony didn’t care. He wasn’t listening. He was up and walking then, getting away. Running away. The guilt drove him, faster and harder and deeper. Guilt and shame and fear. Punishment. And he deserved every minute of it.
By the time Tony realized he had to talk to Steve, he was rationalizing everything. That was what he needed to do, what he wanted to do. What he always did. The press conference had been necessary. Telling the world that Captain America was alive and would fight again had been necessary. Watching the video had been necessary. Barton was goddamn moron. They all were, and they were weak, and he kept convincing himself of that even though the thought felt wrong and self-serving. He’d been strong and done the right thing, what needed to be done. And, yeah, things weren’t simple or easy. And he’d made a mess, but tough decisions led to tough consequences. He was apparently the only one who realized that.

But he wasn’t stupid. Tough consequences. “JARVIS, where did Steve go?”

“Captain Rogers is in the gym, sir,” the AI answered. Tony downed his fourth glass of whiskey, leaning into the bar in his penthouse. “I must warn you. The video feed indicates he is greatly agitated.”

Of course he was. Tony sighed. He’d fled somewhere private after the disaster at lunch and tried to calm himself. He’d managed to, but only because he had alcohol. One shot and he stopped shaking. Two shots and his anguish seemed distant and controllable. Three and a pleasant buzz dulled the pain and slowed his racing thoughts until he could stand himself. He probably shouldn’t have, but at least he wasn’t as angry or hurt as he had been. And he’d had enough that he felt ready to go do what he needed to do.

He took the elevator down. Though he wanted to, he never made it past that singular thought: he needed to talk to Steve. This was part of his responsibility, his burden for having watched that video, the role he had to play. As much as it bothered him, he knew Barton and Banner were right. He was the only one who could do this. He tried to think but to no avail; his brain was completely failing him, numbed by exhaustion and anger and alcohol. So that was all he had, the realization that this was necessary and he was the one who had to do it. The funny thing was, as he walked steadily to the gym, he found he didn’t care that he had no plan. He didn’t know what the hell he was going to say, and he didn’t give a damn. He’d wing it. He could do that.

He didn’t hesitate, stepping inside the large, empty room. It was loaded with expensive exercise equipment, now all still and silent. There were private workout rooms and a sauna and showers, complete with a whirlpool hot tub. The biggest and the best. Tony knew even without JARVIS telling him that Steve wouldn’t be here, surrounded by finery and technology. In the back there was a sparring room with a small boxing ring. Tony went straight there. He could hear the sound of fists pounding before he even stepped inside. Sure enough, Rogers was there, pummeling the hell out of a punching bag. He stepped lightly on nimble feet, working himself hard, covered in sweat. His eyes were narrowed, his jaw set tightly as though he was grinding his teeth, his wrapped fists flying. He seemed totally engrossed, but he knew the minute Tony entered.

The glare he sent Stark’s way was piercing. He looked down, stopping immediately, breathing heavily. Tony said, “I don’t think Banner cleared you for physical activity.”

“What do you want, Stark?” Steve demanded hotly. Part of the wrappings on his right hand had come loose, and he expertly undid the tape and readjusted them.

Tony shrugged, jabbing his hands into his pockets. “Want the truth?” he asked. Steve glanced at him again, chest heaving. He resumed going at the bag with a vengeance. The chain attaching it to the bars above rattled with the force of his blows, the poor thing battered relentlessly. Tony almost
felt pity for it with every pulverizing, punishing strike. “I’m not sorry.”

“Why the hell did you do it?” Steve asked roughly, beating the bag even harder.

Tony shrugged. “I’d give you my bullshit answer, but something tells me it’ll just piss you off.” Steve didn’t look at him, which only confirmed Tony’s suspicions that lying or placating or sugar-coating wasn’t going to do it. “I was curious.” It sounded horrible to say it, and he expected Steve’s wrath, but the soldier went on punching like the words meant nothing. Maybe they did. Maybe it didn’t matter why. It was done. “And someone needed to know.”

Steve stopped at that. “No,” he said, looking over his shoulder to saddle Tony with another baleful glower. “No one needed to know. You had no right to decide that for me. I didn’t want anyone to see that, least of all you.”

“Why? So you can hide it all and pretend like it didn’t happen? What does that get you, Rogers?” The other man didn’t answer, resuming his work-out. Tony watched the muscles of his arms flex and twist and bulge as he swung at his target with such power and hatred and rage. “You think beating the shit out of that bag is going to make you feel better?”

“Yes,” Steve snapped, pausing again. “Now go away.”

Tony grunted and came closer. He could practically see Steve’s temper fraying and control waning. “That’s an honest answer, at least. Your first in days.” Steve winced. “I thought you were supposed to be strong. You know, take it all and get back up and keep fighting, right? That’s why they chose you. I know what Erskine saw in you. Courage and strength of character and all that… The serum didn’t make those things. You had them before, so when the bad guys took away Captain America, Steve Rogers was still there. But it didn’t matter that you survived. You’re going to let them beat you. You’re a goddamn coward.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about it!” Steve roared, leaving his fighting stance and rounding on Tony.

“I know everything about it,” Tony corrected. “I saw what they did to you. You want to pretend it didn’t happen? That’s the coward’s way.” Steve looked away, his body shaking. Tony felt shame bubble through him that he was saying these things, and a touch of fear, to be honest, because Steve was obviously on the brink already and he was pushing him over. This was cruel and rough and wrong, but he didn’t know how else to handle it. They’d tried compassion. They’d tried enabling. They’d tried ignoring and helping. None of that had made a difference.

Clint hadn’t wanted him to coddle Steve. Well, he wasn’t.

Steve didn’t answer at first. His eyes were filled with a wild display of unrestrained emotion. Pain finally dominated. Pain and fear and defeat. “Leave me alone, Tony,” he said tiredly. “I can handle this myself.”

“Yeah, ’cause that’s working so great for you. Handling it yourself. You’re really winning the war there, Cap. If pride and self-pity don’t kill you first.” He poured every bit of sarcasm he could muster into the words. He was so frustrated and angry it wasn’t all that hard.

“Just back off!”

Tony grabbed his shoulder and yanked him toward him. Steve stiffened and tried to pull away. Tony only tightened his grip, balling the other man’s sweat-soaked t-shirt in his hand. “No, you don’t get to escape. Not this time. The man my father gave away my childhood for, the man he
spent his life searching for while I grew up alone and bitter and unloved, that man better be better than this! You’re Captain America. Not giving up is what you do. You’re supposed to be all about strength and bravery and determination! Yet they smack you around for a few hours and put on a little show for you and you shut everything out and hope nobody sees you cry?”

Steve blanched. “Let go.”

“Make me,” Tony retorted angrily. He tightened his grip. “You wander around like a fucking zombie, like they sucked out your soul, or at the very least your will to fight. What happened to that scrawny kid that didn’t know when to quit? My father loved him so much that he didn’t even love me at times. Huh? Is he dead?”

“Let go of me,” Steve warned again. Now he grabbed Tony’s hand and was trying to push him away.

“Make me.”

Steve did. His grip on Tony’s hand turned painful, his fingers pushing into Tony’s flesh in just the right away to send agony arcing up his arm to his elbow. He released his hold unwillingly, his nerves tingling and his useless digits unfurling in a spasm and Steve shoved him back. Before he had a chance to speak, he was flung away, punched in the cheek. The force of it sent him sprawling back onto the mats where he skidded a few feet before coming to rest on his side.

The room was silent. Tony could barely move for a moment, his face throbbing to the beat of his thundering heart, dizzy and surprised. He hadn’t actually thought Rogers would do it, even though he’d been pressing and pushing. He blinked tears from his eyes and tasted the bitterness of blood. He leaned up, pressing the back of his hand to his bleeding nose. Steve stood, his chest heaving, looking down at him like he didn’t know what to think and how to feel. His right hand was still a fist at his side.

Tony spat a bloody mouthful to the mat and clambered unsteadily to his feet. “Good. I’d rather see you fight than give up. I’d rather you be angry than depressed.”

“What the hell does it matter?” Steve said, turning away like he hadn’t just unceremoniously knocked down Tony Stark. “What does it matter what you want? Or what I want? It doesn’t. It just matters that I’ll be okay. I’ll be okay.”

“You’ll be okay? God, Rogers, I thought you were a moron when we met but stupidity apparently increases exponentially as a function of time spent as a whipping boy.” The glare came again, stronger and brimming even more with a threat. “Look, I normally don’t buy into all the psycho-babble bullshit, but I’ll make an exception because this whole thing is really starting to get on my nerves. I know what this is like. I was kidnapped. I was tortured. I nearly died. I have it all: scars, flashbacks, nightmares, a helluva unending case of PTSD. I think they called it shell-shock back in your day. I know. So don’t give me this ‘I’m okay’ and ‘it doesn’t matter’ bullshit. You’re not okay and it does matter. And lemme be the one to break it you: you’re never going be ‘okay’ again.”

Pain fractured Steve’s stern face and he looked away. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Don’t fucking turn away!” Tony snapped. “I want to talk about it. It’s a part of me, and like it or not, I’m way too involved now to let you crumble in front of me and not do anything. I watched your video. I watched them beat you and stab you and break your bones and hurt you bad enough that it literally made me puke.” Steve sunk down to his knees then, putting his hands to his temples like he could block out the words. Block out the memories. Tony wouldn’t stop. “I watched them bring you so low that I actually wished you would die because I knew it was going to be horrible for
you to live.”

A long moment passed filled with only Steve’s harsh breathing. Eventually he got control of himself and lowered his hands and sighed. “It’s always got to be about you,” he said. He leaned back onto his heels and dropped his head to his chest. Defeated. “If you saw, then you know what happened.”

“Yeah,” Tony said, “but don’t tell me that you actually believe it.”

Steve didn’t answer. He looked up, met Tony’s hard brown eyes with his watery blue ones, and Tony realized that Steve did believe it. All of it. Barnes being alive. Barnes orchestrating his abduction. Barnes putting him in the hands of those animals. Barnes tormenting him and blaming him and stabbing him. Barnes leaving him to die. He believed everything.

“It wasn’t real,” Tony insisted. He didn’t think about his own doubts, the hours he’d spent investigating the possibility. “It was a fucking lie, Steve. Don’t give into it.”

“How do you know?” The question was small, timid. Frightened.

“Because Barnes is dead. You saw him fall.”

Steve looked away, and the fluorescent lights caught the wet tracks on his face. “Maybe there’s a chance.” He didn’t finish.

Tony couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “A chance? A chance to what? Apologize? Make it right? Damn it, Steve, it wasn’t him!” He stepped closer and grabbed the other man by the shoulders and hauled him to his feet. Steve could have struggled but didn’t. “And even if it was somehow your dead friend who sold you to the Red Dawn so they could make an example out of you for the entire world to see, why the hell would you want to make amends? I know you like being the good guy, but for fuck’s sake, Rogers, he tried to kill you.”

He’d angered Steve again. Tony liked anger, preferred anger. Anger made sense. Anger helped, contrary to what people thought. The soldier batted him away. “You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Frankly, Tony didn’t. This he couldn’t understand. Nightmares and flashbacks and scars he could. Feeling weak and useless and helpless he could. Having your dignity ripped from you… He knew all about those things, had battled them and lost to them and defeated them time and time again. But being betrayed on such a fundamental level and still feeling as though it was his fault? That was something he’d never comprehend.

Steve sank back to his knees once freed of Tony’s grip. He looked at his hands in his lap, wrapped and protected. Hands that hadn’t stopped Bucky from dying. Hands that had tried in vain to hold the blood into his body as it had poured from his leg. Tony could see the despair in Steve’s thoughts, could practically taste his tears, and he wanted none of it. Not anymore. “Get up.” he demanded. Steve didn’t answer and didn’t move. Tony lost his patience. “God damn it, Cap, you can’t be this weak! Get up!”

That won him a violent reaction. Steve pushed him away roughly, his eyes flashing with a traumatic memory that he was barely keeping at bay. “Get up and fight me. Come on. I betrayed you and you know it. I watched you at your darkest moment. I saw everything and you’ll have to live with that. Your personal nightmare, and I know every fucking detail. So get up and smack me. Fight me. Stop taking hits and start dealing some of your own. I know you want to.”

Steve did get up. But he didn’t rise to the bait. “Get away from me.”

“Coward.”
That did it. Steve snapped, and his fist went flying into Tony’s jaw. The billionaire fell back, the world spinning violently overhead. He seemed to fly forever before he roughly hit the ground, his brain crashing into bone as his head struck the mat. Steve was on top of him in a flash, straddling him, pushing him down under the bulk of muscles and strength and uncontrolled fury. He had a hand around Tony’s neck, choking, and his fist was raised to strike. One blow and he could crush Tony’s skull.

Gasping, Tony lay still. His head was pounding. He couldn’t breathe. He’d gone too far, too far, and he knew it and deserved what was about to happen. The cracks in Steve’s psyche… he’d dug his hands in there, clawing with his nails, and ripped and ripped…

But Steve never hit him. Tony chanced opening his eyes and saw the soldier looking down on him in a daze. He was covered in sweat and shaking, but his expression was unreadable. Slowly he lowered his fist. Slowly he leaned back. And slowly he got up. He was gone without another word. The door to the room slammed shut behind him.

Tony weakly rolled onto his side just in time to avoid choking on a mouth full of blood. He lay there, trembling and fighting the press of unconsciousness for a long time. Then he weakly murmured, “I guess I had that coming.”

Of course JARVIS answered. “I believe you did, sir.”

Pepper was furious with him. She was doing an admirable job at hiding it, but Tony knew her too well not to notice. That set of her jaw. The smoldering look of disappointment and admonishment in her eyes. He hated when he disappointed her, but he was so damn good at it. Too good at it. Sometimes he wondered why she put up with all of his crap.

“Tony, what were you thinking?” She pressed an ice bag to his jaw where a fairly horrendous bruise was starting to form. She shook her head. As upset with him as she was, she was also pretty worried. He hated worrying her more than disappointing her. “He could have really hurt you.”

“He didn’t,” Tony answered, brushing aside her concerns with a swipe of his hand. That was mostly true. At least, he thought so. He had been able to get up and get his sorry butt all the way back up to the penthouse where he’d run into Pepper on her way back from the afternoon’s meetings. If he’d been badly hurt, walking would have been out of the question. That was always how he gauged things. Needless to say, Pepper had been shocked to see him stagger into their bedroom bloody and wheezing.

Now she had him seated on the toilet in the bathroom, working on trying to ease the swelling in his face. “You don’t know what he’s thinking,” she reminded him as she dabbed at the blood from his oozing nose. “You shouldn’t have pushed him.”

Tony grunted. He knew that. Knew it as it was happening. But still he had done it.

“Why?” She shook her head, kneeling in front of him and wiping anew at his bloody face. “Are you trying to punish yourself?”

He wanted to look indignant at the mere mention of that, but he knew it was certainly part of it. “No. I just wanted him to do something other than hide from it all.”

Pepper looked unhappy. “Tony, he needs time,” she said. “Not everybody just plods through their problems like you can. Not everybody can just bury themselves in work. Not everybody can just get back up.”
“I did,” he said, swishing his tongue around his mouth as a flesh bit of blood seeped from the cuts inside his cheek and his damaged gums.

“I know.”

“He should be stronger than this.” He was trying not to be afraid, not to be disappointed.

“Just because he’s down now doesn’t mean he’ll stay down,” Pepper reminded. She was still angry, but her expression had softened. She’d seen how bothered he was, how frustrated he was, how hurt he was. And it wasn’t just bruises and blood. It was that he couldn’t fix this. “Give him a chance.”

The irony was not lost on him that he’d said the very same things to Barton. He had always done a poor job at taking his own advice, drinking his own medicine.

There was a knock at the bathroom door, and then Bruce tentatively stepped in, a first aid kid in hand. At seeing Tony, his face fell into a grimace of disappointment and worry. And, like Pepper, he was angry. Not furious, but enough that it was pretty obvious, and that was saying something in Bruce’s case. Tony sighed and glanced at Pepper irately. “Why did you call him?”

She didn’t answer. “I think his nose is broken, Bruce.”

“Yeah, looks that way.” Banner knelt in Pepper’s spot after she stood and folded her arms across her chest. He grabbed Tony’s chin less than gently and stared into his eyes.

“Ow! Hey!”

“It’s not terrible. And no concussion,” Bruce declared.

Tony snapped, “I could’ve told you that.”

“What the hell were you doing, Tony?” the other man sharply asked. He dug in the kit for the things he needed to treat Tony’s damaged face. “You could have triggered a flashback. Steve might have killed you if he lost control.”

_God, they’re like the same person._ “He didn’t. That was the point. I tried to make him let go so he could start dealing with this, but he didn’t. I screwed around with something and it blew up in my face, as usual. So there. I fucked up again.”

“Yes,” Bruce answered. Tony glared daggers at his friend, wishing for a moment that Bruce would give him the same empty, shallow assurances and platitudes that he offered everyone else. But he didn’t, because Tony didn’t need them. “I was sure things couldn’t possibly get any worse than they were.”

The three of them were silent for a moment. Then Pepper sighed. “Well, since everybody is already miserable, I might as well just say it. My last meeting today was with our lawyers.” Tony closed his eyes. His face was throbbing. His back was throbbing. Everything hurt again. And he knew what was coming. “They can’t delay it any longer. You’ve been subpoenaed by Congress, Tony. You need to be in DC Friday morning to testify before the Armed Services Committee.”

Bruce paused in his ministrations. “Okay, I stand corrected.” A tense moment of silence crawled by, and everybody seemed trapped by it, locked in an exhausted and defeated stasis. Finally Bruce resumed examining Tony’s face. “What are you going to say to them?”

“I don’t know. The truth,” Tony muttered bitterly.
Bruce looked surprised. “The truth? As in the real truth?”

“A fake truth wouldn’t be the truth, would it? I don’t see a choice. If they catch me in a lie or trying to be evasive, they’ll crucify us. If Boynton is half the prick I think he is, he won’t care one bit about what really happened. He’s just using this to bring us down.”

“Why?” Pepper asked, mortified and angry. “Why are they doing this? Why make enemies of the Avengers?”

“Because they can’t control us.”

A slow sigh escaped Bruce. “You can’t just tell them the truth. There are things about this Fury won’t want public. Pretty much everything, in fact.”

Tony couldn’t keep the spite and irritation from his tone. “Well, when they feel like it, SHIELD can swoop in from the shadows and make this all disappear. In the meantime, I’ll get my ass handed to me in front of Congress and a grateful nation.”

Pepper’s phone rang. She sighed, grabbing it from where she had set it on the bathroom counter, and checked the caller ID. Then she looked even more stressed. “Like trying to run through a minefield,” she muttered. “Hello? Yes, John. No, we’re not releasing a formal statement tomorrow morning. I don’t care—” She stepped outside and closed the door.

Tony’s shoulders slumped. He carefully wiped fresh blood welling from his nose with a towel before readjusting the ice pack on his cheek. Bruce was watching him with worried eyes, pulling his hand away from his face to examine the blossoming bruise on his jaw. “Look, I’ll think of something,” Tony promised, because the silence was too painful and Bruce’s doubt seemed too strong. “I’m resourceful. I always do, right? Right. I can think of something.”

“They can’t—”

“They won’t. Short of raiding this tower with the army, the air force, and the marines and dragging us out kicking and screaming, they are not making Rogers testify. Or anyone else. And they won’t have the guts to try. Not with the publicity this has already gotten. I’m the only one they have leverage against, and I made myself a convenient target.” He knew that now more than ever. Maybe, in a way, it was noble. Taking another hit for the team. “We failed the Cap once. Won’t do it again.”

Bruce nodded. He didn’t seem completely confident in Tony’s assertions, but he didn’t pursue it any further. Tony sighed, wincing against the pain, as Bruce continued to check him over. Eventually he had to ask, because he couldn’t stand not knowing. “Did you watch it?”

Banner answered without hesitation. “No.”

Tony winced. “Did the others?”

“I’m not sure, but I don’t think so.”

Tony felt smaller and weaker and more miserable than he thought possible. “So I’m the only sick bastard who couldn’t let it go.”

Bruce shrugged a little. It was obvious he was still angry about it all, but it was smoldering ashes rather than a raging fire. That was a good thing, but it didn’t ease Tony’s guilty conscience. “I don’t think… seeing that will help anything. Maybe before I might have. But you knowing is enough. And given what that’s done to you… I don’t know if I could take it, anyway.”
Tony didn’t answer that. Some part of him had hoped his teammates would succumb to curiosity or an ardent desire to understand, just as he had. Some part of him hoped they’d want to fix this as badly as he had, so they’d be willing to share the horrors he’d seen. But they hadn’t. The rational, selfless part of him knew that was for the best. That was why he hadn’t told anyone about the video in the first place. But it still hurt to know he was alone in this. Alone in knowing the awful truth, and alone in Steve’s hatred.

“How do you do it?” he asked wearily. “How do you stay so calm in the face of all this?”

Bruce worked quietly a moment, pressing gently about Tony’s swelling face in search of internal damage. The world tipped and the agony was so sharp he wanted to cry. “I keep telling myself that rage doesn’t help. Losing control doesn’t help. I’d rather grieve than be angry.”

*Grief is better than rage.*

No, Steve had it right. It was best not to feel anything at all.
Chapter 19

The Capitol building was bustling with activity. It was the day before the weekend, so people were rushing through their morning business with a last push of energy and interest. The halls were busy, packed with members of Congress and their assistants. Everywhere there was chatter, talk of things from the day’s mundane tasks to matters of national security and prosperity. The low hum of conversation was civil and pleasant, despite the seriousness of the debate that often occurred within the chambers where the nation’s representatives convened. The mood was calm, eager for rest but not so much as to ignore the importance of duty.

Everything was serene except the meeting hall where the Senate Armed Services Committee was about to begin its hearing. There the air was tight, crackling with tension and even a bit of dismay. Fifteen of the twenty-six members where present, gathering around the crescent-shaped table at the room’s head. Each had their assistants, as well as secretaries and advisers, gathered around them. The gallery of the room was filled to the brim with reporters and cameramen and bloggers. This was among the largest meeting halls in the Capitol, and even it was not sufficient to accommodate all of the media and audience gathered. People spilled out in the hallway, desperately trying to squeeze their ways inside and closer, standing on their toes and murmuring excitedly. It was disturbing to see the crowd gathered for this event, but more than that, it was mortifying how utterly oblivious the senators were in what they were doing. How they were, in fact, no better than the men they claimed to be investigating. They were putting on a public show, a spectacle, and all to make a point.

The Avengers must be held accountable.

“This is crap,” Tony muttered, looking out over the gathering crowd with dread and disgust. He winced and regretted it as the expression pulled at the still healing bruises on his face. At least the swelling around his nose had diminished to the point where he looked semi-normal. He’d resorted to make-up again, but this time the damage was more noticeable.

He hated coming to Washington. He only ever did it because of something like this, a subpoena or some such legal nonsense compelling him to do something he didn’t want or say things he shouldn’t say. “ Isn’t there some last minute miracle you can pull? Wave your magic wand and make it all go away. You know, something. Can’t I take the Fifth? They always do that in the movies.”

Peter Slinger, one of Stark Industries’ numerous in-house legal counselors, didn’t seem terribly amused by his tone. “I wouldn’t recommend it,” he said, tapping an expensive pen against the top of an expensive leather briefcase before straightening an expensive tie. He was an empty suit in Tony’s opinion. If he was worth what they were paying him, this mess would never have happened. “You can’t use the Fifth Amendment to protect yourself from testifying. It’s a shield against self-incrimination only. This is a fishing expedition, and hiding only suggests you aren’t telling the truth. So tell the truth.”

I can’t tell the truth, you moron. Slinger didn’t know that, didn’t know a damn thing, really, other than that Stark Industries’ interests were not necessarily aligned with Tony’s. Cooperation would produce less issue for the company, in all likelihood, as any fiction between Tony and Congress usually made conducting business with the government’s support and blessing (let alone working with the government itself) exceedingly difficult. That was why Pepper had insisted Tony bring his own lawyer, one Stewart Manning, who Tony considered equally inept as Slinger because the man had yet to really prep him on what he should say. “Be succinct. Don’t use ten words where three will do. Don’t antagonize them. Give them as much of an answer as you can without directly answering their question.” It really shouldn’t have surprised him that he was getting conflicting
legal advice. Every stereotype about lawyers was completely true in his opinion.

Manning sat beside him at their table, watching the senators get settled in their places with a no small amount of animosity, like he was sizing up his enemies. Like he was the one trapped in the hot seat. “You’re entitled to invoke your Fifth Amendment rights at your own discretion. Your recent activities with the Avengers were on foreign soil but that doesn’t mean anything you might have done is outside US jurisdiction. And what happened in Manhattan is still recent enough to be on the forefront of everyone’s minds. If I were you, I’d err on the side of caution, Mr. Stark. Being forthcoming might only damage your cause in the long run.” Tony was tempted to inform the arrogant ass that he had no idea what his cause was, what the Avengers had done against the evil of the world only to be persecuted for it, but he didn’t. Pepper laid a hand on his shoulder from behind him and stilled his tongue.

“Please, Mr. Stark, you can certainly defend yourself. Just… be mindful that your words have implications beyond this hearing.” Tony’s last appearance before this committee last year was obviously fresh in Slinger’s mind. He was trying to cover his ass and the collective asses of the managing board of Stark Industries. The only thing Tony cared about was protecting his friends, his family. Protecting Steve. The board and his company and the United States government could all go to hell.

Once they had tried to take his suit and had failed. He’d be damned if he let them take anything or anyone this time.

Whatever more his lawyers might have wanted to say was quieted by the meeting coming to order. The people behind him in the gallery hushed; the media representatives and those civilians lucky enough to garner a seat inside the room quickly found their places. Even the raucous mess at the doorway and in the corridor beyond softened in anticipation. They didn’t even bother trying to close the door. It was a media circus.

Tony grasped Pepper’s comforting hand on his shoulder one last time, offering her what he hoped was a strong, reassuring grin before turning to face his interrogators.

Senator Stern, Chairman of the Armed Services Committee, was about the same as Tony remembered. Humorless. Conceited. Condescending. Reeking of false interest in and concern for the average man. He glared at Tony, clearly gearing up for a rematch. He’d been embarrassed when he’d tried to compel Stark to relinquish Iron Man to the government and even further humiliated after he’d been forced to present Tony and Rhodey their medals after the incident at the Stark Expo. This was his chance for redemption, but Tony would be damned if he let the bastard get it. Boynton in all of his fake sincerity and fake nobility and fake everything sat next to Stern. It was only his humble opinion (well, not so humble, but then none of his opinions were), but these two were a pair of assholes of the worst sort, the scourge of decent politicians everywhere (he was sure some existed somewhere, trying to do what was right for the country instead of what was right for themselves). Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum. If he wasn’t so nervous about what the hell he was going to say he’d laugh at that.

Stern made some sort of show at glancing at his laptop like he didn’t know the morning’s agenda, like he didn’t know the man who sat before him. “This meeting will come to order,” he called into his microphone, and the rest of the murmurs and quiet discussions ceased. “We convene today to continue to hear testimony regarding the abduction and rescue of Captain Steven G. Rogers, also known as Captain America, in Iran on September 27th, 2012. The purpose of this investigation is to ascertain the magnitude of the threat the terrorists responsible for this act pose to the United States and to determine what, if any, role the Avengers, the so-called ‘superhero’ team involved in the decimation of Manhattan three months ago, had in causing or amplifying, directly or indirectly, this
threat to our nation’s defense.” Tony’s head was spinning just trying to follow Stern’s blather. “To that end, this morning we will hear testimony from Anthony E. Stark, owner of Stark Industries, pilot of the renegade Iron Man suit, and supposed member of the Avengers.”

“Are you trying to start off on the wrong foot, Senator?” Tony sniped, trying his best to look wounded. “Supposed member? So-called superheroes? Come on; let’s call it like it is. I am Iron Man, and I am a superhero.”

Most of the crowd broke out in deafening applause. There were a few detractors present, more than Tony cared to count; apparently Boynton’s anti-Avengers campaign had succeeded in drawing out the assholes and wackos. Stern looked annoyed as the cheering died down. “This is a very serious inquiry, Mr. Stark. Considering Captain Rogers is your teammate, I would think you’d have a little more respect.” The comment cut deep. Tony wanted to belt the guy, but instead he balled his hand into a fist in the leg of his Valentino suit under the table. “Now, before we begin, I would like to establish some basic facts regarding–”

“You didn’t ask me if I had an opening statement.”

Stern seemed as though he didn’t understand for a second. “What?”

Tony shrugged a little and then leaned forward, folding his hands together on the shining table. “My opening statement. You didn’t ask me if I wanted to make one.” He could feel Pepper’s disapproving eyes boring into the back of his skull, but he really couldn’t help himself. Really.

Boynton and Stern shared an irate glance before the latter sighed, greatly put upon. “Alright, Mr. Stark. Do you wish to make an opening statement?”

“Now that you mention it, yes. Yes, I do. Thank you. I just want to say that I’m honored, yet again, to be unwillingly hauled before our illustrious government, so aptly represented by you fine folk of the Senate Armed Services Committee. But seeing as how we’re all busy with actual matters of actual importance, I thought I’d just speed things along. So here we go. Yes, I’m still single, but intimately involved with someone. Sorry, ladies. Hey, GQ? Making a note? And, yes, the Stark Expo will be even bigger and better next year and will feature some things that you won’t believe.”

Stern was furious but trying to school his face into a tense but appropriate show of irritation. “Mr. Stark, this is ridiculous–”

“Yes, Star Trek is better than Star Wars, especially since the last few movies sucked. Come to think of it, the last few Star Trek movies sucked, too. Guess the jury will remain out on that one. Team Jacob! Right? No? Not worth the debate. No, the StarkPhone 3 will not be out before the new iPhone because, hey, there’s really no competition so why even let the little nerds over at Apple think there is. Yes, I’ve taken up boxing. As in having my faced boxed in. Started running my own Fight Club, actually. Yeah… not sure I was supposed to talk about that. Whatever. Yes, I prefer boxers–”

“Enough, Mr. Stark, or we will vote to hold you in contempt.”

Tony stopped. He closed his mouth and did his best impersonation of obedience. Inside, he was shaking with nervousness. “Just trying to help. You did invite me here to talk about me, right? Because that’s all I really know about and all everyone cares about, really.” People laughed at that. He hoped with him, not at him. Normally he wouldn’t doubt.

Stern waited until the room quieted again, purposefully torturing Tony’s nerves and elongating the silence to heightened Tony’s shame. It was working. “As I said, we would like to establish some
basic facts concerning the abduction of Captain America, so we’d like you to explain what happened, sir. CIA Director Clemens yesterday indicated the Avengers were involved in thwarting some sort of sale of nuclear grade warheads from a Russian extremist group to a fairly unknown organization known as the Red Dawn. Can you confirm this?”

Tony had seen most of Clemens’ testimony on TV yesterday. The guy was a windbag and hadn’t done a very good job at hiding the fact that the CIA hadn’t known much of anything about the circumstances surrounding Steve’s kidnapping. He’d been flustered and embarrassed, promising repeatedly to strengthen the US intelligence network across the world so as to better prepare the nation with stronger and timelier information. He had no idea how ill-equipped they were compared to true master spies. “Yes, I can confirm that.”

“Who sent you on this mission? What was its goal?”

Tony hesitated a moment, leaning back in his chair a little and making an effort to seem nonchalant. “Well, to stop it. I thought that was fairly obvious. And we sent ourselves.”

Boynton shook his head and cut to the chase. “Isn’t it true that the Avengers are the strong arm of the shadow organization known only as SHIELD?”

SHIELD’s existence had come into general knowledge after the Manhattan incident. It had been fairly difficult to deny, what with the wreckage of one of its quinjets in the middle of the city and two of its agents duking it out alongside some fairly famous and infamous faces. In addition, although Fury had been careful and conscientious about it, SHIELD had put forth great effort to aid with the clean-up, mostly under the guise of acquiring any remaining Chitauri weapons and vehicles and limiting the access other organizations had to the alien corpses strewn about the city. It had been a massive undertaking, probably the largest single concentrated effort SHIELD had ever made, with hundreds of agents involved, including Barton and Romanoff. Hell, even Tony and Steve had pitched in here and there. That sort of thing was difficult to cover up, but as the country buzzed with the news of the Avengers, SHIELD’s involvement had been mostly ignored. Mostly.

So Tony wasn’t sure how to answer. He didn’t know how entangled SHIELD was with the US government, but it most definitely was, probably on levels about which these two yahoos knew nothing. He settled with ambiguity. “On occasion, we do collaborate with SHIELD.”

“Can you elaborate on that?”

“No, I can’t.”

“No, or won’t, Mr. Stark?” Boynton demanded irately.

Tony was getting frustrated. “It doesn’t matter. Let’s just say that we went into Iran briefed with SHIELD intel to stop this weapons sale and leave it at that.”

“No, that’s defeating the purpose of this inquiry.”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Listen, who sent us there doesn’t matter. You want to talk about the capture of Captain America. Let’s talk about that, because I’m not at liberty to discuss the Avengers’ alleged dealings with the alleged spy organization SHIELD. No, we are not their ‘strong arm’. No, we are not their bitches, to put it in the parlance of our times. They present information to us, and we, in turn, decide for ourselves whether or not to act.”

“By ‘we’, you mean the Avengers, correct?” Boynton said.

Tony rolled his eyes. “No, I mean my army of clones and me. Of course, the Avengers! And
whether or not I have an army of me-clones? For me to know and you to find out.”

“Once you interrupted the weapons sale, what happened?” Stern asked.

Tony cleared his throat a little and tried to stall, but all the eyes and ears of the hall (and probably the country, since this was being broadcast live on C-SPAN and every major news network in all likelihood) were glued to him, waiting for him. “There was no weapons sale. It was a trap.”

“A trap to capture Captain Rogers?” Boynton pressed.

His anger was getting more and more unmanageable. “Yes.”

“How is it that they managed this?” Stern asked. “Special weapons? Bioweapons? Is it more than rumor that Captain Rogers boasts extraordinary healing capabilities?”

Tony knew he was walking through a minefield. “You could say that Steve Rogers is fairly resilient, yes.” He wasn’t about to open his mouth and reveal anything further to their potential enemies who were probably watching this. “This was a weapon designed specifically for him.”

“In what way?”

“He’s not exactly a normal human, in case you haven’t noticed. None of the usual things do much to stop him.”

Stern shook his head slightly. “What’s the nature of this weapon?”

Tony judged his next words carefully. “Biochemical,” he eventually said.

The room hushed slightly. He didn’t understand why. Would it have been less frightening if he’d said something else? “You’re being rather evasive, Mr. Stark,” said another of the senators. Barbara Cullen from California. He knew Pepper and the board of Stark Industries often tangled with her on any number of issues. “Surely you can appreciate the Committee’s concern. What exactly did this weapon do to Captain America?”

Again, not something he would ever reveal. But he knew he needed to answer. “It made him damageable. You saw the video.”

“Is there any possibility this weapon can be turned into a WMD?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Tony quickly answered. That had been a plan of HYDRA’s during World War II. Poison and break and kill Captain America. Turn their weapon into a tool to bring down the Allies. They hadn’t had the technology to make that a reality. As far as Tony knew, Bruce and the SHIELD agents working with him had found no evidence in the old HYDRA reports and documents that the toxin would even work on the average person; they hadn’t been able to actually produce it, so naturally they hadn’t been able to test it. So he wasn’t technically lying. And he wasn’t about to hand any sensitive information regarding how the toxin could be produced or rendered inert to the US government or any other organization. As much as he didn’t trust SHIELD, if the day ever came where a biological weapon or any weapon capable of producing mass destruction was wielded against humanity, he knew Fury would stop it by any means necessary.

“But it is possible,” Cullen insisted.

“Anything’s possible,” Tony returned.

“Mr. Stark, do you or SHIELD possess further information regarding this weapon?” Stern asked.
“What sort of information?’’ I can do this all day.

“Any sort of information, Mr. Stark, on what this weapon is, how to defeat it, and how much of a threat it poses the United States and her allies,’’ Stern clarified. “The Committee would like an answer to this question.’’

“The Committee can’t always get what it wants. Welcome to the real world, Senator.” The room erupted anew in murmurs. Stern was enraged, as was Boynton, and most of the other members of the committee appeared to be in various states of anger and surprise at his outright gall in denying them. “Look, I’m not going to answer this question. So move on.”

“This is a matter of national security, Mr. Stark. We can compel you to release this data,’’ Boynton threatened.

“Like you ‘compelled’ me to hand over Iron Man?’’ Stern flushed further. “This is a matter of national security. If this information falls into the wrong hands, Captain America’s life will be at stake. He can’t defend you if he’s hurt or dead.”

“Do you consider the United States’ government to be the ‘wrong hands’?’’ Boynton asked venomously, trying to trap Tony.

“I consider anybody with interests other than burying the damn thing forever the wrong hands,’’ Tony answered.

“Captain America is a national treasure and a living legend. Of course we have his best interests at heart.’’

Tony shook his head and leaned forward. “Nope. Not if you’re holding this so-called inquiry into the darkest hours of his life in front of every camera you can find hoping that every media outlet in the world will put it on every TV so everyone can see it. That sound familiar to you, Senator?’’

The ire in the eyes of Senator Ballard, an elderly man from Vermont, was deep. “I pray you are not suggesting, sir, that the United States Senate, acting in the best interests of this country in protecting our national defense, is exhibiting the same level of brutal disregard for Captain Rogers’ well-being as the men who tortured him.’’

Again, he felt Pepper’s eyes burn into him. “No, no, of course not.’’ The lie was sour on his tongue.

“Were you aware that this Red Dawn faction intended to broadcast the video of Captain Rogers’ suffering?’’ Stern asked.

“We were as surprised as you were,’’ Tony answered. At least that was the sad truth.

“Was this their intent? To show the world what they had done?’’

“To show the world that Captain America could be defeated, yes,’’ Tony said. Then he sighed. “The more we talk about this, the more we investigate and study and play that damn footage, the more they get what they wanted. Why don’t you people ever get that?’’ He made a point to glance behind him at the damn cameras and reporters.

“Are you certain they had no ulterior motive?’’ Cullen asked, drawing his attention back to the committee. “Interrogation perhaps?’’

“Please. They tortured a man who spent the last seventy years on ice for government secrets? What the hell do you think he could tell them? Radio codes from World War II?’’ Cullen had to grace to
look rebuked. “No, the Red Dawn wanted to make a point. That’s it. They wanted to threaten, to turn a symbol of our strength against us. That’s it.”

“You’re sure of this, Mr. Stark?” Stern said.

These people were goddamn morons. “Yes! Didn’t you watch the damn video?” He could feel himself getting worked up, could feel his control eroding from his clenched fingers. He pushed away the images that prodded at his attention, like vicious little flashbacks to a hell that wasn’t even his own, and tried to hold onto his calm.

“This so-called Red Dawn was an unknown before this fairly intricate and massive attack on our nation’s sense of security. Who were they, Mr. Stark?”

Tony grunted. Those dark brown eyes, that calm face, that jagged scar… Barnes. Or not. HYDRA. He wasn’t sure. Terrorists and maniacs and violent sadists. But it didn’t matter here. He couldn’t even begin to explain who these people were. “We still don’t know.”

“They’re all dead, as you proclaimed to the press last week. Was your rescue of Captain Rogers simply that, a rescue, or was it a chance to exact some vengeance for the loss of your teammate?”

Tony squinted wearily and tipped his head. “What are you getting at, Senator?”

“That you slaughtered the Red Dawn without much consideration that they held potentially valuable information about terrorist networks, information vital to this country’s war on terror. The US and her allies are fighting to keep the world safe from these sorts of violent rogue groups. Did it occur to you that interrogating these men might lead to other terrorist cells or even larger threats?”

He didn’t really care. “No. You can’t exactly hold back the Hulk when he gets going.” Stern looked irritated. “Hey, we screwed ourselves as much as we screwed you. So there. We didn’t discriminate at least.”

“What do you mean by that?” Boynton asked tersely.

Tony wondered if he’d said too much. “I mean that we needed information as badly as you did to help Captain Rogers. Even worse. His life was in the balance, and we got sloppy.”

“Careless?”

He closed his eyes momentarily and thought of Clint bleeding to death in his arms as he flew as fast as he could manage to the helicarrier. He thought of Steve suffering through seizures and cardiac arrest in a violent battle for his life. He thought of the assassins, the moles, the danger. He thought of all the days of suffering that had preceded this one and all those likely yet to come. “Yes.”

“So even you admit that you mishandled this entire situation,” Boynton said.

Tony knew he shouldn’t admit a damn thing, but his guilt rose sharply, the same damn guilt that had been plaguing him since the moment they had lost Steve, and he was having a hard time mustering a lie. “We did the best we could.”

“Do you think, Mr. Stark, that the Avengers are above the law?”

The room was silent. Tony’s heart was pounding. He hadn’t been expecting this, even though he knew that was at the heart of their contentions. He wasn’t ready. “That’s a loaded question, Senator Stern.”
Stern’s lips quirked into a smug smile. “Indeed it is. But answer it anyway, because it’s pertinent to what we’re here to discover. As an Avenger, do you believe that you are above the laws of this country?”

Tony opened his mouth, trying to think, but his brain had suddenly turned to mush. He could feel pressure pushing on him, constricting his chest until he couldn’t breathe, slamming into his head until he couldn’t think. He sighed and managed to speak. “Laws are fine. They tell us where to park, when to pay taxes, what days we get to take vacation and have barbecues—”

“Mr. Stark,” Stern said, and that damn triumphant look never left his face.

“Laws are supposed to be good. Necessary. But they get used and abused by people. People tend to screw everything up. If doing the right thing in the face of bad laws and manipulative assholes constitutes being above the law… Then yeah, I am.”

“So you condone vigilantism.”

“I condone standing up and doing what you can to work for a better world. To protect people and peace. You wield laws like a weapon, not a shield. I won’t stand idly by and do nothing when I can help. None of us will!”

“Senator Boynton has contended that the Avengers speak for our country without permission. You do see that your actions in the world might be ill construed by our allies and might also antagonize our enemies.” Cullen’s cold voice and cold eyes were troubling. The woman was incapable of sympathy.

“You people don’t get it,” Tony snapped. He felt like things were rapidly spinning from his control. He wanted to slow down, to spend a moment contemplating and considering his words, but his riled emotions wouldn’t permit that. He was a quick-thinker and a quick-talker and they knew it. It occurred to him that they would probably use that against him, like this was some sick game of wits, and it occurred to him it was probably better to surrender or face contempt than continue this ridiculous debate. But he couldn’t stop. He couldn’t back down. “This isn’t just about the United States. This is about the world. Do you think the Chitauri landed on our planet just to dominate our country? Do you think they would have stopped there? You talk about my arrogance and my carelessness. You’re deluding yourselves.”

“But your consider the possibility of these situations that you Avengers supposedly save us from perhaps could be of your own making?” Boynton countered. Tony blanched, not wanting to hear the rest of this nonsense and knowing he had no goddamn choice. “Would this biochemical weapon have been developed had Captain Rogers not allied himself with shadow organizations and rogues?” He was tempted to tell the lot of them that the weapon had first been planned when Steve was a member of their own damn army and patriotically fighting their own damn war, but he never got the chance. “Would this Red Dawn have decided to make such a symbol of him, a symbol of brutality and cruelty that scarred the lives of millions, had he not chosen to make himself a symbol of the Avengers?”

“But his warning went unheeded. “Would the Chitauri have invaded in the first place if not for Thor and his argument with his brother? Countless lives have been lost on the account of this so-called hero, a creature who has unabashedly brought the problems of his own world onto our own!”” Tony could only hope that Thor wasn’t watching this. With Mjölnir he could be down to DC in a matter of minutes, and he knew the demigod wouldn’t be able to manage half the restraint he was at the
moment. And that wasn’t saying much. “And Doctor Banner. How many millions of dollars of
damage has he caused to private and public property? The infamous Black Widow and Hawkeye,
fugitives and criminals who are wanted dead or alive by the CIA for countless unauthorized
assassinations of foreign persons of interest who could very well rally enemies with the power to
strike our nation. And let us not forget the disaster at the Stark Expo last year when dozens of
armored robots designed by Hammer Industries and modeled after your suit wreaked havoc and
destruction. Not to mention the ensuing battle where you and your buddy, Lieutenant Colonel
Rhodes, nearly devastated an entire city. The name of the armored suit you made for him says it all.
War Machine. That is what you are, what you do.” Tony gritted his teeth. “Would any of these
catastrophes have occurred without the Avengers?”

He shook his head. “No.”

The crowd came alive with low murmurs and then louder shouts and then a cacophony of noise.
“Quiet,” ordered Stern. “Quiet, or I’ll have the gallery emptied.”

Tony went on, undaunted. “No, Senator, they would not have occurred. But they wouldn’t have
been stopped, either. You’re asking us to take responsibility for the evil in the world, in the
galaxy… We won’t do it. We make mistakes, do things we regret… But we fight together for all of
you. These monsters and maniacs come after our world. They kill and maim and hurt and burn, and
they want you suffer. But we stand in their way. We get them back for everything they do to
threaten you. We avenge you.”

There was cheering and a lot of it, but Stern wouldn’t be dissuaded. He was red in the face, trying to
maintain control of his own hearing. Tony felt strong for the first time since he’d sat down. “If you
won’t answer for yourselves, then answer for SHIELD. I want to know who they are, Mr. Stark,
and who they work for. I want to know what they know and how they know it.”

So that's their end game. “This was never about Rogers, was it? You want SHIELD. You want
what they have: access to intel. Access to weapons. Access to us.”

“SHIELD is a rogue operation that owes allegiance to no country. They have control over the
world’s largest spy and communications network. They have resources that match the world’s
superpowers. They brought the Avengers together and unleashed you as a weapon that not even
they can fully control. You yourself said so. If they can’t, someone must. This is a threat we can’t
leave unaddressed,” Stern said.

“Mr. Stark, no one disputes that the Avengers have done good, but you must admit that, even in the
short months between this event and the Chitauri invasion, the collateral damage has been
extensive,” Senator Ingalls said, some middle-aged woman from Alabama.

“You guys seem to dispute that pretty adamantly, and I don’t have to admit a damn thing.”

“Mr. Stark, you are here by subpoena. I want to know the truth. What is SHIELD?”

“I can’t answer that question.”

“Who are they?” Tony shook his head, shrugged like he didn’t know. “You are a citizen of the
United States, Mr. Stark. Please do not lead us to infer that you owe some higher allegiance to
foreign organization.”

“Are you accusing me of treason, Senator? Didn’t think you had that in you.”

The audience was getting loud again. The situation was deteriorating. Stern knew it. The people
gathered to view this hearing weren’t showing much support for the committee’s stance. Tony was infinitely grateful and proud of that, that despite all the bullshit, people still saw the truth. But the senator wouldn’t give up on his quest to make an ass of himself. “If it comes to that, buddy, I will be the first in long line of accusers.”

“Don’t think so,” Tony said. He stood, gesturing to the fired up gallery. “Am I right, everyone? Right?” The room erupted in applause. People clapped and cheered and waved. Tony imagined the support was spreading all over the country. He smiled a dazzling smile, the one he always used to win over the crowd, the one they loved. Pepper had a hand pressed to her forehead and her head ducked like she was ashamed, but he could see the corner of her pink lips curled in a grin. “You people know what you want, right? Who do you trust? Some corrupt empty suits out to protect their own interests or earth’s mightiest heroes?” People cheered louder, many standing themselves despite the security guards angrily yelling over the din. “Thought so. Yeah, Senator, I don’t think you’ll have a lot of support on any measure to call us traitors.”

He turned back expecting a response to his jab but instead saw someone dressed in an expensive dark suit leaning down to whisper something in Stern’s ear. As the senator listened, his eyes widened and his face, once pinched in anger, became slack and pale. The stranger leaned away and slipped into the crowd of assistants and advisors.

Stern shook his head a little at Boynton’s annoyed, questioning glance. Then he leaned close to his microphone and said, “The meeting is adjourned.”

Just like that, it was all over. Tony couldn’t help his confusion. “Wait. What? Huh? That’s it?”

“You’re excused, Mr. Stark,” Stern declared quickly, and then he was up and out of his chair and almost running away with a slew of other senators and assistants chasing him.

Tony couldn’t believe what he was seeing. But his mouth was running, even if it didn’t make sense. “Okay. Thanks for the fun! Nice talking to you! I’d say I’m looking forward to next time, but I think I’m still under oath. Or not? I don’t know. Later, asshole.”

Shock and confusion at the sudden conclusion of the hearing reverberated through the room. The stunned reporters were scrambling to act like they were ready, stumbling to say something meaningful. The security personnel were working to clear the room like this was normal.

Tony turned around, smugly grinning. He couldn’t help but be intensely, enormously, outrageously proud of himself. “Was it something I said?” he asked innocently.

Slinger shook his head, glancing at Manning incredulously. “What the hell just happened?”

Pepper grabbed Tony’s hand and pulled him away. “I don’t care. Let’s just get out of here.”

Of course the press was crowded on the steps of the Capitol building, waiting like vultures. The minute they exited they were attacked. “Mr. Stark! Mr. Stark!” Lights flashed. Video cameras were pushed closer and closer. Microphones were jabbed in his face. “Mr. Stark, do you consider today a victory?”

Tony was feeling too high to be truthful, and the truth was he didn’t know. But he smiled again and raised his arms in a show of strength and power and triumph. “Every day where I’m not arrested or forced to hand other people my stuff is a victory.”

“How is Captain America? When will we see him?”
“Will he testify if he’s called?”

“Cap’s doing fine. Sends everyone his best. He’ll be back out with us soon.” *In for a penny, in for a pound.* Pepper pinched his arm and he winced.

The flashes were blinding, the media and paparazzi coming closer and closer. “Mr. Stark, do you truly believe the Avengers are above the law?”

“Was the Senator correct to say that the Avengers have caused most of the recent disasters?”

“Can you tell us more about the weapon used against Captain America?”

“Mr. Stark, what are your plans now?”

“Our plans,” Pepper interjected, sneaking in front of Tony to stand between him and the microphones, “are to finish a few errands around Washington and then return to New York. I believe Mr. Stark has said enough for today.” The flash of her eyes challenged him to challenge her, but he wisely said nothing else as security made a corridor for them through the throng of people to the waiting limousines on the street.

“You couldn’t resist, could you?” Pepper hissed into his ear as they quickly walked.

He grabbed her hand and squeezed and he suddenly felt weak and afraid. “I try.”

“I know,” she said.

Happy was there, opening the doors to them as the media circus behind them raged. But before they could slip inside the sleek, black limo, there was a call from behind them. “Mr. Stark!” Tony was tempted to ignore it at first, assuming it was another reporter or some such with another inane question. But the voice sounded familiar, and he stopped and looked.

It was Hill. She was dressed in a black business suit that hugged her body in all of the right places. Her calm, serious blue eyes analyzed him, and her stern face was unreadable. “A moment.”

Tony felt his stomach tie into painful knots again. He really should have had breakfast. He grasped Pepper’s arms gently and pulled her into a quick kiss. “You go ahead,” he said. “I’ll catch up.”

“What? Who is she?” Pepper asked concerned.

“Friend of Phil’s.” He walked quickly to the other limo, nodding to Hill even though he was fairly afraid that agents armed with automatic weaponry would swoop out from hiding places he never knew existed and manhandle him should he not make a quick enough entry into the other limo. Thankfully, that wasn’t necessary.

He slid inside. Hill entered after him and someone shut the door and they were driving. Fury sat across from him. “Why am I not surprised?” Tony asked, eyeing the Director of SHIELD warily. “And do you ever wear anything else?”

“You played a dangerous game today, Mr. Stark,” Fury said. Tony couldn’t tell if he was angry or not.

“So did you, letting me go on like that. What the hell? Wait until the last minute much?” Tony shook his head. “Do you guys have a drink? I could really use a drink. Felt like I was being roasted alive in there. *Alone.*”
“You weren’t.”

Tony couldn’t help but glare. “Don’t tell me…” Betrayal twisted his innards. *God damn it. I’ve had it.* “You too? Jesus, does everybody have to make a fucking statement out of this?”

Fury shrugged a little. “You told the world what we couldn’t, Stark. We needed the message.”

“Well, glad to be of service. Tell me next time, asshole.”

They were silent then. Tony was tired. Tired of being used and abused. He wanted to go home. “How is he, Stark? Really?” Fury asked.

The billionaire sighed, wanting to believe Fury didn’t care, that all he wanted was his leader, his team captain, and that wasn’t *true* concern in his voice and *real* sympathy and fear in his eye. “He’s hurting.”

“Can you get him back?” Fury kept his voice level and solemn, but there was desperation under it all.

“I don’t know.” That was the God’s honest truth.

Fury released a long breath, leaning back into his seat. The crinkle of leather on leather was obnoxiously loud. He looked troubled, even more than normal. “Let’s hope you can. This was just the beginning, the tip of something truly evil.” He wondered anew if the master spy was aware of what Bucky Barnes (if that man truly was Bucky Barnes – he still was no closer to solving that mystery) had done to Steve. He wondered anew if he should tell Fury and punt this problem to a higher power. Maybe SHIELD had come to his rescue today, but they hadn’t done it for him or Rogers. They were looking out for their own best interests. He reminded himself of that and kept quiet. “There are things on the horizon, Stark. Dark things. Evil men. It’s only going to be a matter of time before they move against the world.”

“What sort of dark things? Come on, Fury, I think I deserve to know the truth.”

Fury clasped his hands in his lap and glanced only once to Hill. The stoic agent was the one who answered. “The truth is we don’t know. But terrorist cells and rogue government factions across the world are coordinating in a very unsettling way. This is going to go beyond what they did to Captain Rogers. We’re not sure what or when, but the writing is on the wall, so to speak.”

“Someday soon the call is going to come out for the Avengers to assemble. When that happens, I want the Cap out with you, leading you like this never happened. Like this didn’t knock him down.”

“You’re all unbelievable. The whole fucking lot of you. He’s not some fucking symbol!”

“You’re all unbelievable. The whole fucking lot of you. He’s not some fucking symbol!”

“For better or worse, he is,” Fury corrected. “You started all of this. The minute the government morons started flapping their lips, you were up there, telling everyone that Steve Rogers will get back up. At the time, it didn’t seem like a smart promise. But it is. I want to world to know today and every day that there are people willing to stand up for it. And I want our enemies to know *today and every day* that the Avengers will never give up.” The limo slowed to a stop. “That only works if he’s whole again, if he puts the trauma behind him and picks up his shield and goes back out. Not afraid. Not hesitant.”

“That’s a tall order,” Tony snapped angrily. “We’re doing the best we can.”

Doors opened, and Hill slipped gracefully out. Fury held Tony’s gaze a moment longer. “Do better.” Then he was gone, too.
The car smoothly started to move as soon as the doors slammed shut. Tony sat still, shaken by it all, the enormity of the burden on his shoulders, on all of their shoulders, pushing him down, down, down...

“Where to, sir?”

The driver snapped him out of it. He gritted his teeth, glanced out the window at the blur of fall colors on the avenue trees. “Doesn’t matter,” he answered. “Anywhere but here.”
Chapter 20

Stark Tower was deathly quiet. Tony wearily brushed aside the greetings of the security personnel in the foyer, lifting his sunglasses to his forehead as he strolled through to the elevator. He stepped inside and set his overnight bag to the floor of the lift with a thud. “Take me home, JARVIS,” he ordered.

“How was your trip?”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“Weather.” The elevator sped upward at remarkable speeds, but it wasn’t fast enough for Tony. All he wanted to do was find some dinner, take a shower, and sleep. Pepper had dragged him to a few company meetings in Stark Industries’ satellite offices in DC after the hearing at the Senate. She hadn’t asked him to do anything, simply sit and keep his mouth shut and feign interest as government officials and company officials duked it out to reach some sort of agreement on funding and sanctions for some of Stark Industries’ newest clean energy projects. He knew why she’d wanted him there; he was unpredictable and powerful, a fact made even clearer by the hearing, and she wanted both sides of the negotiation to know he wouldn’t tolerate bullshit. Thankfully, they had brokered some sort of agreement easily, probably due to his presence as the higher-ups and lawyers in his company had conceded some things to avoid his wrath and the government had done the same. Pepper was silently grateful, which made it worth the torture (almost), but it had served to sour his mood even further. And it had delayed his return to New York a few additional hours. Pepper had gone directly to Los Angeles to attend to some business affairs, which had been made possible by the progress achieved at the afternoon’s meetings. Therefore, he’d been alone the whole flight, left with nothing to do in the private jet other than stew over everything. He’d tried to work, to think about the toxin and how to render Rogers immune to it. He tried to busy himself, but it was useless. It was Friday night, and he’d rather be doing something, anything, other than coming back to the mess in his home.

He darkly contemplated how his life had gotten so screwed up. He could hardly remember the years when all he’d cared about was having a good time, when he was larger than life and damn proud of it, when girls and parties and money and tinkering had been the essence of his existence. Everything had been simpler then, and he was tempted with his present bad mood to bitterly long for that lack of responsibility, but he shamed himself for even thinking about that. He knew he was a better person now, for all the pain he’d endured. He was better because of Iron Man. He was better because of Pepper. And he was better because of the Avengers.

But he was pissed off about too many things to find much consolation in that. When the elevator stopped, he walked out, carrying his bag and praying he didn’t run into anyone on his way to dinner and shower and bed. Unfortunately, even though the tower was huge and inhabited by only a handful of people, his plans were doomed from the get-go.

Thor was the first one he found, probably because the demigod had practically been waiting for him outside the elevator. His massive form was tense, his blue eyes open with worry. He wore jeans and a button-down maroon shirt. Though he couldn’t very well wander around in a cape and battle armor and wielding a freaking hammer, Tony wondered when the hell he’d become so… domestic. “Stark, your magic voice informed me of your return,” he said, standing in between Tony and the hallway that led him to salvation.
Damn you, JARVIS. I swear I’ll make you pay for this. “Whatever you want to say to me, big guy, it needs to wait.”

“It cannot,” Thor stiffly declared, easily jumping in front of Tony as the billionaire attempted to side-step him. It was pretty childish and futile to even try; Thor could manhandle him in a second. “I fear I must soon return to Asgard.”

The solemn announcement took him aback. Tony stopped trying to escape and gave Thor his full attention. Suddenly he felt irrationally afraid. Thor had been such a constant source of strength throughout this entire awful ordeal. When they had all faltered, Thor never had. He had remained steadfast in his courage, unwavering in his support, and adamant in his devotion. He had held Steve through the worst of the pain, and even if his attempts to help the soldier forget his trauma were not the wisest course, it had at least been an attempt. It had at least been something to help Steve, something that none of the rest of them had really managed. Thor’s unassuming, undemanding, gentle presence was undoubtedly a source of comfort for Steve even more. He couldn’t leave.

Tony fought the rising panic that twisted his innards. “What? Why?”

The demigod looked frustrated and ashamed. “I am prince, and my father is king. It is my duty to serve our realm. Should he summon me, I must answer.”

“And he summoned you?” Tony asked, not quite understanding but knowing bullshit when he saw it.

Thor looked away, grimacing as though caught in something of a lie. “He has not, as of yet. He will not, knowing how very deeply I care for all of you and how much aiding you in your time of need means to me. Still, I have lingered here many days and I cannot deny my father and my people my services when they are not needed here.”

Dawning realization left Tony troubled and strangely desperate to appease Thor’s insecurities. Normally he wasn’t given to that much care for the emotional well-being of others, but this harrowing experience was teaching him anew about teamwork. Friendship. “What happened?”

Thor hesitated as though embarrassed by his own weakness. Tony figured that was probably the case. The demigod was accustomed to power, to ease of action and quick thought and the simplicities of battle. This was a tangled knot of difficult complications that required care and acceptance of limitations. Thor wasn’t terribly well-endowed with patience; Tony could understand that, because he wasn’t either. “I fear I can do no more for our captain. Steven has completely withdrawn. Banner spoke to me of your… attempt to pull him from his pain by enticing him to fight, and I offered to spar with him. I believed a worthy opponent, a true chance to test his physical prowess against an equal, would aid him in recovering his damaged sense of self-worth. At the very least, I prayed it would allow him to… What is it you Midgardians say? Vent his anger.”

“No luck there I take it,” Tony surmised, feeling slightly absolved (though he wouldn’t admit it now) that Thor had thought his approach of goading Steve into release merited a second try.

Thor shook his head sadly, irritation and frustration shining in his eyes. “No,” he said. “Steven can be most stubborn when he so chooses. We fought, but he refused to truly engage me. He claimed his wounds still troubled him, though I cannot see how that could be true. When I purposefully presented opportunities for him to strike at me, he did not take them.”

Somehow Tony wasn’t at all surprised that Thor would let Steve win just to get him to stop pulling his punches. And he wasn’t surprised that Steve hadn’t taken the advantage. Thor wasn’t the arrogant warrior everyone assumed; he wasn’t above taking a beating and losing so as to aid his
friend. And Steve wasn’t a moron; he wouldn’t be so easily manipulated. Tony still had the bruises to prove that.

“Since then, he has not spoken to me. I have repeatedly tried to seek him out, but he refuses my presence. Politely, of course. He uses decorum and manners as a shield. I had not realized until now that Steven has many shields. He does not seem to realize that he swallows poison every time he does not speak to us of his troubles.”

“He does,” Tony said. “He’s just being a goddamn idiot. He’s just being himself.” It was true. Steve had been raised in an era where men didn’t cry, where men were expected to be strong and hide their troubles, and times had changed, but he hadn’t. That was who he was, this symbol of perfection, the epitome of it, in fact, and becoming Captain America had just reinforced who he was and who he had been taught to be. It was also sadly ironic. Everybody wanted Steve to just get back up, to take what had been done to him and shake it off and keep going. And that was exactly what he was trying to do, and nobody was happy about it.

“Be that as it may,” Thor said softly, “I cannot reach him. I cannot help him. Nor can I help you, as I know nothing of what must be done to protect him from the toxin. Therefore, I should return to where I can be of some value.”

“No. Come on, we need you.” Tony could hardly believe he was doing this. Stroking the ego of a Norse demigod. But when he really thought about it, Thor was entitled to his moment of weakness. They all had been. And he was eager to provide some solace, even if it seemed ludicrous. The thought of losing Thor was too depressing to do anything else. “I know the Cap seems like he’s not getting better. But he will. I know. I’ve been through this myself.” It was odd how talking about his own suffering was getting so much easier. He’d always locked it up, a secret he never shared for fear of it and for shame of weakness, but now it didn’t seem like such a stain on his spirit. “I know how it is. You act like you don’t want help, like you don’t want people around you, but you really do. You really do. So stay. He wants you here. We need you here.”

Thor said nothing for a long moment, holding Tony’s gaze with his own. Then he sighed and offered half a grin and clapped Tony on the shoulder far too roughly. The billionaire nearly toppled to the floor, but Thor didn’t seem to notice. He never did. Oblivious, but his heart was always in the right place. “Thank you, Anthony. You have shouldered the burdens of leadership with remarkable grace in difficult circumstances. We have all faltered at times, but you have carried us. You are stronger and wiser than any realize.”

“Story of my life,” Tony said, hiding how touched he truly was with sarcasm. “You want to get something for dinner?”

The demigod’s sullen expression immediately brightened. He’d never known Thor to turn down food. “That sounds most pleasant. I would be honored join you.”

“Figure out what you want and let the magic voice know.” Tony smacked Thor on the arm as he passed and tried to escape before the other man continued the conversation. He really wanted that shower. He really wanted bed. He wanted to eat, but not with anyone. Still, he would, because Thor looked like he needed company, and he was a nice guy. Really.

He didn’t get very far before he was spotted again. This time it was by the second to last person he wanted to see. Barton was in one of the many, massive living rooms that lined the hall between the elevator and his bedroom. He was sitting on the couch, clad in black pants and a black t-shirt, working on rotating the shoulder where he’d been shot aboard the helicarrier. Tony assumed it was some sort of physical therapy Bruce had prescribed to restore movement. If the wince and sweat covering the archer’s face was any indication, it hurt like hell. But despite all that, Clint noticed
immediately as Tony tried to sneak past the entrance. “Wait, Stark.”

Of course, getting past Barton’s notice would be impossible. The guy was black ops, a spy and a master assassin. The archer looked to him to make sure he’d stopped, and Tony sighed, pivoting to face the other man. Clint stood from the couch fairly gracefully; if he hadn’t been aware of how badly hurt and how sick he’d been, Tony might not have known, might not have noticed the barely perceptible wince and limp. Clint reached the door, eyeing Tony placidly. Clearly he had something to say, but he wasn’t sure how to say it or if he wanted to at all. “JARVIS said you were back.”

Tony wasn’t in the mood for games, and he was becoming increasingly irate with his personal assistant who operated with way too much discretion. “Back and hungry and tired. What do you want, Barton?”

The archer hesitated a moment more, the considerable muscles of his arms shifting as he folded them across his chest. It usually was a confrontational stance, one that Tony was tired of seeing, but this time he thought it was borne from nervousness rather than anger. “I’m no good at this, so I’m just gonna say what I’m gonna say.” He sighed and met Tony’s gaze and held it. “You were right.”

Truthfully, the minute Clint had called him over, he’d had been sort of expecting this. Nonetheless, he was surprised. Barton didn’t seem to be the type to often admit he was wrong. Tony knew that personality fault well; it was common in people who were rarely, if ever, wrong. Tony was about to offer up some sort of smart-ass retort, but Clint continued before he could. “What you did in front of the press… It needed to be done. They don’t own us. I, uh… I wasn’t too keen on you speaking for Rogers. Or for me.” Clint gave a little, sheepish shrug. “But you said what needed to be said. And not just to the media or the Senate or anyone who was listening. It took guts to do that. And it took guts to watch that video so that the rest of us wouldn’t have to.”

Clint never said if he watched it, and Tony didn’t ask. It didn’t matter anymore. Instead, the archer just met his gaze again and sighed gently. “I’m sorry.”

Tony couldn’t help but feel a little warm. But he was too tired to manage much more than that. He wanted to. It was ironic that Barton had finally come to understand and accept his motivations just when he was the least sure he’d done the right thing. Still, some part of him wanted to be strong for Clint. It wouldn’t do anyone any good to see him doubt his choices when those choices had shaped their path ever since they’d rescued Steve from the Red Dawn. “You’re welcome.”

“I didn’t thank you,” Clint said without heat.

“I know. But you mean it.” Tony gave him a knowing smile, at which Clint rolled his eyes a little. “How’s the shoulder doing?” he asked, trying to change the subject, glancing down at the still bruised, still bandaged, and still tender area.

“I’ll be fine.”

“Good. Hear anything from Romanoff?”

A look of concern crossed Barton’s face. He didn’t even try to hide it. “She doesn’t usually check in. But she contacted me to let me know that she’s safe.” He seemed more bothered by the fact that she had called than anything else. It was admittedly uncharacteristic, which begged the question of her motivation. Was she simply worried and desperate for contact with the rest of the team given what had happened? Or was something more sinister and dangerous going on? “I contacted SHIELD and tried to press Hill yesterday, but she was her usual unresponsive self. They’re keeping us in the dark.”
Tony nodded glumly, having experienced the tight-lipped, secretive rebuttal to his questions first hand in DC. What Fury had told him was troubling, to say the least. And it royally pissed him off that he and the other Avengers could be called upon at any moment to protect the world from who knew what without any information. Evil was gathering, madmen and psychos, and they were going into it all blind. They were being kept blind by the very people asking them to fight. It was ridiculous.

But he was too tired to get into it. In fact, he just wanted some semblance of normalcy. It wasn’t typical of him to care about that sort of thing, but for some reason, given how worn and weary he felt, he was prepared to surrender to a craving for simplicity. “Dinner. Go find our resident lightning god and coordinate what you want. I’m just going to get cleaned up.”

Clint nodded, and Tony turned to leave. The billionaire gasped as his butt was unceremoniously smacked, staggering forward slightly and glancing over his shoulder. Barton smiled smugly and lowered his foot. “There. Consider your ass officially kicked. Now we don’t need to duke it out, right?”

“That doesn’t count, cheater.” He made a show of rubbing his sore back-end for a moment and then offered Barton a mock glare before continuing on his way. He sighed once he was far enough away and headed onward, casting it all aside and dreaming of the hot, scalding spray of his shower and soaking until he couldn’t feel anything. He dreamed of filling the vacuous hole in his belly with some real food; skipping breakfast and lunch hadn’t been wise, especially in light of the day’s stress and length. Something hopefully delicious. He probably shouldn’t have left the choice to an Asgardian warrior with no concept of Midgardian cuisine beyond junk food and a man too practical and pragmatic to pick something gluttonous. As he stepped into his suite, he decided he didn’t care.

His bag hit the carpet. In the chair before the flat screen TV, Bruce sat, obviously waiting for him. “Okay, what the hell? I just want to take a freaking shower!”

“JARVIS let me in. Said you were on your way back from JFK,” Bruce explained, like that was somehow an excuse for blocking Tony’s way yet again. “Looks like you gave them hell.” He tipped his head toward the evening news playing on the TV, where an anchor was chatting with a Congressional correspondent about that morning’s meeting of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Tony had heard it all already, had watched pieces of the video of himself a few times with no small amount of satisfaction. Stern had canceled the inquiry into the abduction of Captain America, simply telling the surprised press that the committee was “pleased” with what it had learned. The sweat beading on the bastard’s face and the fear in his eyes was infinitely enjoyable, along with Boynton’s flustered abandonment of his legislation to disband the Avengers. Typical asshole politicians, trying to do damage control, pretending that they’d been “taken out of context” or “misconstrued”. He was amused to see them scramble to cover their asses, but pleasure at their pain only took him so far. It was a victory, to be sure, but Tony really didn’t feel like a winner.

They were even displaying some sort of poll the news network had conducted suggesting that a whopping 80% of the country approved of the Avengers, and even more felt safer knowing the Avengers were protecting them. Tony wasn’t type to be consoled by something so stupid and subjective, but seeing those numbers pop up on the screen was like sweet redemption. “Would you look at that,” Bruce commented, shaking his head a bit in surprise. “You won them over.”

Tony grunted, euphoria fading as quickly as it had come. The comment reminded too much of less than flattering things that had often been said about him in the past. Narcissism. Arrogance. Selfishness. “That wasn’t the point,” he crossly said. “And I didn’t do a damn thing. Fury descended like the finger of God.”
Bruce shrugged a little. “No reason to be bothered by it. It’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

Tony really didn’t know anymore, and he didn’t want to talk about it. “Is there something you wanted?”

Bruce smiled, not put off by Tony’s ire. “I figured it out,” he said, rising from the couch. Tony didn’t make sense of that for a moment, staring at his friend with muddled eyes and a sluggish, detached mind. And then he realized. “Well, I think I did.”

“How?”

“Barton had it right,” Bruce said. “You might want to reconsider not sending him an invitation to the genius club.” Tony gave him a withering look as he walked stiffly to the bar and poured himself a drink. He downed it in a single gulp and hoped the burning in his throat would warm him through. “I took a look at my own DNA and I think I’ve isolated the gene sequences that confer cellular resistance. That led me to designing a gene sequence that would inhibit transmission of the toxin through the lipid bilayer. We can maybe introduce a new gene and then reproduce the sort of reaction the Vita-Rays produced to cause his DNA to splice with the additional code. After that, the serum will do the rest. JARVIS, can you bring it up?”

In a flash, the news disappeared from the screen and in its place Bruce’s plans appeared. Tony glanced at the data, at the DNA sequence that Bruce had designed, at the ingenuity of it all. He didn’t often admit his limitations, but he would never have been able to come up with this. It was brilliance. “You still got it, old man,” Tony said, shaking his head and not bothering in the slightest to hide his amazement.

“I don’t know if it will work. And it’s going to require basically redoing Project: Rebirth. Can you rebuild your father’s old machine?” Bruce asked, standing beside Tony in front of the plans and schematics.

“Yeah,” Tony promised. “I think so.” Suddenly it occurred to him that this could be it. This could protect Steve from ever facing the sort of hell from which he’d barely escaped. He’d never have to worry about that toxin, or anything like it, again. Captain America would be safe. Captain America would be invulnerable, just as Erskine and Howard Stark had envisioned. Relief brought a smile to his lips, a real smile, for the first time in days. He felt exhilarated. “I think you’re right. This will work.”

“Only one way to find out,” Bruce said.

“Here.” Tony jogged back to the bar and poured Bruce a drink and handed the shot glass to his friend. “Something worth toasting.”

Bruce smiled but seemed hesitant, like a premature celebration would jinx it all. “Shouldn’t we wait until after?”

“Nope. Cheers.” They tipped their glasses together with a clink and drank. Tony looked up at the plans again, his mind already whirring and running and spinning with plans to build a new version of one of Howard Stark’s greatest inventions and best legacies. It would be an improvement, of course, and far more efficient and directed. But he was getting ahead of himself. In the morning. Shower. Dinner. Sleep.

“JARVIS, get this ready for work first thing in the morning,” he ordered, and the images winked away. He turned to Bruce. “Figure out what you want for dinner. Thor and Barton are waiting. I don’t suppose we should bother Captain Crabby-Pants?”
That was how quickly and coldly the good cheer vanished. Bruce’s good mood sunk visibly. He sighed slowly, turning and setting his empty glass to the bar. “Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to ask. He’s been holed up in his room the last couple of days. I’ve had JARVIS keep an eye and ear on him, just to be on the safe side.”

“Well, Brucey, spying? I didn’t think you had it in you.”

Banner didn’t respond to his ribbing. It was clear he was worried. They all were. “I wish his mind was as easy to fix as his body,” he said sadly. “And this wasn’t even that easy.”

Tony didn’t want to think about it, but it was true. All of this, destroying the Red Dawn, defending the Avengers, stopping Stern and Boynton, finding a way to permanently defeat the toxin… It didn’t amount to anything if Steve couldn’t rise above what had happened to him. “One thing at a time,” he said firmly. “I’m just going to get cleaned up.”

He didn’t wait for Bruce’s response, heading off to his bedroom, quite determined not to be bothered again. He wasn’t. Not by the Avengers who needed him, and not by his own miserable thoughts that threatened again all too easily. His mind was blissfully, unusually empty, untroubled by the maelstrom of thought and emotion that had plagued him for days and days. He stood in his shower, a shower the size of most people’s bathrooms, and burned himself alive. It felt damn good, the scalding spray beating against his skin and soothing his taut muscles. He lingered far too long, feeling for one, single moment that nothing was demanding his attention, that there weren’t problems to solve or things and people that needed fixing, that there was no Red Dawn or Bucky Barnes or any of it. It was a hellish nightmare that could be washed away.

He dressed and looked at himself in the mirror. His jaw was bruised pretty badly, the angry purple and red splotch covering most of his lower cheek. His broken nose was healing, but it was still fairly swollen and enflamed. For a moment a flashback taunted him, where he stood on the helicarrier after nearly being strangled to death in Steve’s room in the infirmary by the Red Dawn’s assassin. That, in turn, led his mind to Afghanistan, to the arc reactor in his chest, to Yinsen and the Ten Rings and Obadiah Stane. But he stopped there. He wouldn’t let that touch him again.

Down in the dining room, the others sat, waiting for him. Unfortunately, Steve wasn’t among them. Without him and Romanoff, it felt strange. But at least somebody had opted for food other than pizza, and an array of gourmet Szechuan cuisine lie upon the table. For the first time since coming home, Tony silently thanked JARVIS; this was his favorite, and the others wouldn’t have known that. He greeted the Avengers with a nod and sat and filled his plate and grabbed a bottle of beer. The others did the same, and they ate for quite a while in a companionable silence. It was the sort of quiet that didn’t ask to be broken, and that was just as well because nobody felt quite strong or brave or sure enough to do it. Idle palaver was hardly the sort of thing they wanted, so they didn’t bother.

Eventually Bruce started talking about his plans to inoculate (if such a term could be applied to a scientific procedure this radical and novel) Steve against the toxin. Apparently he hadn’t told the others. Tony was fairly impressed, leaning back and enjoying both his dinner and the slow, simple explanation he offered the utterly clueless Thor and the slightly less clueless Clint. They seemed to understand the basics of what they intended, though Thor was slightly concerned about the dangers of their as of yet untested procedure. Bruce couldn’t offer him anything other than statistical and scientific assurances and his own belief that their plans would work without posing any risk to the Captain. The point was clear, even if they didn’t like it: Steve couldn’t go back out there and fight and be their leader if he was in danger.

This, of course, led to Barton’s suspicions that SHIELD was hiding something from them. And since they were on the topic of being lied to, Tony decided not to lie himself and told his teammates
everything that had happened between him and Fury in Washington. Obviously the Director of
SHIELD was being obtuse, but it was the reason behind his customary cryptic attitude that was so
disturbing this time. Tony didn’t like Fury, didn’t trust him, but he didn’t think Fury would hide
something serious from them. Why lie now, when Rogers was down? Why leave them hanging
with murky threats and ill-defined dangers when the core of their team was weak? It didn’t make
sense, and the others agreed. The discussion cast a definite shadow over the remainder of their meal.

They were nearly done eating, sipping at their drinks and picking at their almost empty plates and
chatting idly about other, less important things, when Clint sat up abruptly in his chair. “Cap!” he
said, his eyes widening in surprise. Tony twisted in his chair to look behind him.

Much to everyone’s surprise, Steve stood in the doorway, dressed in jeans and a gray t-shirt. He
appeared well enough, aside from the dark bags under his eyes that suggested he still wasn’t
sleeping. He looked as shocked to see them as they were to see him. “Oh. I didn’t – JARVIS told
me there was some dinner, but I thought…” What he was trying to say was clear. He’d thought
they’d be gone, so he’d slipped from his self-imposed exile to get something to eat. Tony had to
smile despite himself. The clever AI had managed to get Steve in the same room with the team,
something the rest of them had utterly failed at doing since the disastrous lunch a few days ago. He
ruefully made a mental note to pat himself on the back later for programming JARVIS to be such a
sneaky bastard.

“Hey, it’s okay. Come on. Sit down.” Bruce was trying not to sound too eager or surprised but
failed spectacularly.

“No. No, it’s alright. You guys were talking, and I don’t want to interrupt.”

“That never used to bother you,” Bruce said, twisting the top off another beer bottle and offering it to
Steve. “You used to have an opinion on everything all the time. Usually the right opinion, and we
usually needed to hear it. Remember?”

Steve faltered and didn’t move from the entranceway. He looked terrified, even though he was
trying fervently not to show it. He looked like he’d been caught. Caught and cornered and
memories from the last time they’d talked were festering among them all. “I’ll be bad company.”

“No, Cap. Come on. Sit. We want you to,” Clint insisted.

“You’re already done eating,” Steve lamely stated. His excuses were becoming desperate.

Thor had already been filling a plate with *everything* they had left in the cartons and containers, and
he set it to the table at an open spot. Bruce handed down the beer bottle, which the demigod took
and placed beside the plate. Still, Steve made no move to come closer, even as his eyes darted
hungrily to the inviting plate of food. Tony lost his patience. “Rogers, ass in seat,” he snapped.

Steve’s blue eyes shot to him, like he hadn’t realized Tony was there until that moment. His open
face, so full of trepidation and discomfort, suddenly became utterly unreadable. “I didn’t know you
were back.” *You must be the only one,* Tony thought, annoyed. Steve stood a little taller, and anger
crept into his icy eyes. Anger made him clench his jaw. Anger rapidly ripped away any chance that
he would come any closer. Anger and hatred directed at Tony.

The silence that followed was unbreakable. The other men watched, unmoving and uncertain, as
Tony and Steve stared at one another. Everything that was unresolved hung in the moment. And
everything was unresolved. Tony found strength he didn’t know he still possessed, not looking
away despite Steve’s unwavering, baleful glower. He proved to be more resilient. Or at least
stupider and more stubborn. Steve finally gave up on their ridiculous contest. “Thanks,” he

There wasn’t anything genuine in his words. At least, Tony didn’t hear anything. And Steve clearly felt badly for the spite in his own voice, if the heated blush on his cheeks could be trusted. He sighed, breathing slowly then as though he was trying to keep himself in check. “Thanks,” Steve said again, gently and more controlled.

“You’re welcome,” Tony said, keeping his own tone level.

Steve looked back, not quite sure what to think. His eyes softened slightly. “And I’m sorry for hitting you. Are you okay?”

Finally he was asking. Three days after the fact. “Of course. I’m invincible,” Tony said without a touch of mirth or sincerity.

“Ohay.” Before anyone could say anything further, Rogers was gone.

The awkward silence returned. Just like that, any semblance of camaraderie was gone. Thor grunted, something dark and frustrated and worried claiming his eyes. He grabbed Steve’s plate and began shoveling food into his mouth. “This must end,” he muttered, staring angrily at nothing.

Nobody else spoke. Clint and Bruce darted worried looks between themselves, making a pointed effort not to stare at Tony. For his own part, Tony didn’t know what to feel, so he contented himself with drinking his beer and ignoring everything. The others weren’t blaming him. They pitied him. And they pitied Steve. They wanted to help but didn’t know how. And that made Tony more alone than ever.

They all parted ways after that. Thor stalked away without another word; what he thought was all too obvious. They could never function as a team like this. His frustration was palpable, frightening even. Barton suddenly seemed wounded and ill again, muttering a terse, tired “good night” before limping away. Bruce looked like he wanted to say something, but whatever it was, he kept it to himself. “First thing in the morning, right?”

“Yeah,” Tony said.

“Alright. Get some sleep.”

Tony wanted to. That had been his plan from the beginning. Shower. Dinner. Sleep. It hadn’t gone the way he wanted. Over the last couple of weeks, nothing had. He dragged himself back to his bedroom, feeling fairly low, and slipped into some pajama pants and climbed into bed without much preamble. Then he tried to let go, to embrace the weariness that seemed so deeply set in his bones, but sleep was an elusive bastard yet again. He lay there, smelling Pepper on his pillow and on his sheets and missing her acutely. He sighed, blinking away the annoying stinging in his eyes.

He’d taken care of them. Who the hell was going to take care of him?

“Is something wrong, sir?” JARVIS’ calm tone filled the bedroom, shattering the heavy silence.

“Is anything right? You’re an ass, by the way. I created you to help me, not… do what you did today.”

“I am trying to help you,” JARVIS softly insisted.

“Then help me. Tell me what to do. Tell me how to fix this.” Tony couldn’t keep the desperation from his voice.
Silence. Tony waited, but he didn’t really expect an answer. JARVIS was smart, but the AI was not God. There were bounds to algorithms, limits to logic. Even more than that, there was no answer to give, and that was very much the core of the problem.

Then JARVIS said, “It is as you said to Doctor Banner, sir. One thing at a time.”

In the long run, that meant nothing. It wasn’t a solution. It wasn’t even a plan. In that moment, however, it was exactly what Tony needed to hear, and he fell asleep.
Tony really hated it when people went over his head. This was a perfect example: two days into their rushed project of rebuilding Doctor Erskine’s most successful experiment, Bruce decided it was rather immoral and unethical to continue their work without telling Steve about it. That was a blatantly stupid idea. Certifiably idiotic. He was rather surprised an intellect the quality of Banner’s would come up with a thought so utterly brainless. Bruce actually wanted to tell Steve that they were trying to recreate the procedure that had made him into Captain America. Steve, who had hardly been seen or heard from since dinner two nights ago, who seemed to be withering away into nobody and nothing, who couldn’t string a truthful sentence together if his life depended on it, who couldn’t stand the mere sight of Tony… Steve would never agree to what they were doing. And they’d decided to embark on this scientific endeavor without even telling him why. Thor had been right all those days ago. Steve had been betrayed enough without adding the fact that his team had made yet another decision, and one that so fundamentally and vitally affected him, without his knowledge or input.

No, getting Steve’s blessing for their project was about the dumbest idea Tony had ever heard, and he had absolutely no qualms telling Banner just how he felt about it. Of course, Bruce was quick to counter him. Steve finding out was inevitable; they couldn’t very well perform this procedure to immunize him against the toxin without him knowing about it. That was utter nonsense. And the longer they waited to explain the situation to him, the more it would hurt him. Tony didn’t doubt that was true, but knowing Bruce was right didn’t make telling Steve now seem any more palatable. He knew why Bruce was feeling this way. They were almost finished. Bruce had nearly perfected (as much as he could given the myriad unknowns of the procedure) his additions to the serum, and Tony had all but finished his recreation of his father’s machine that had transformed Steve more than seventy years ago. Perhaps it would all seem much less traitorous if they told Steve now rather than after their work’s completion. Tony didn’t think anything would make it seem less traitorous, so there was no point in giving Steve the chance to shut them down. They’d argued and debated, both too strained and tired to realize it was probably six of one and a half dozen of the other. And Tony had left, proclaiming childishly that he didn’t care what they did anymore. He’d gone to his workshop, frustrated and desperate to turn his exhausted mind onto something inane for a while. He chugged some scalding coffee, eaten a bowl of cereal, and tinkered a little. And then he’d gone back.

Steve was there, and Bruce had told him everything.

God damn it.

The silence in the room was brutal. Rogers immediately saddled Tony with an icy glare, the ferocity of which nearly sending Tony right back out of the lab. But he refused to back down. He was tired of his guilt and shame, even if he deserved them. He was tired of shouldering the responsibility (and blame) for everything. He was fucking tired of it.

The Red Dawn had taken out their captain, and somehow Tony had been charged with the responsibility of leading the team. He’d never asked for it. He’d never wanted it. And he was ready to throw in the towel.

Bruce winced as he glanced at Stark. “Sorry,” was all he sheepishly said. “Thought you’d be gone longer.”

The aching, blistering quiet returned after Banner’s soft apology and lame excuse. Steve folded his arms over his chest and never looked away from Tony. Every hard line of his muscular form
radiated barely contained wrath. Tony had been on the receiving end of Steve’s anger a lot since they’d met, and he was still intimidated by it. There was just something fundamentally wrong about disappointing Captain America. Captain America. I don’t even know if that’s who he is anymore.

“Well, Capsicle, what do you think? Since you’re in on the dirty little secret now.” Tony strode across the airy room, the morning sun blasting through the windows and making everything much damn brighter than it deserved to be. He pulled the cover from his invention. Composed of sleek metal and polished plastic, the chamber he’d built was designed to flood its occupant with the same levels of radiation that had caused the initial reaction of the super soldier serum with human cells. It was far more efficient; the energy of the Tower’s arc reactor would be more than sufficient to power the chamber. It was also infinitely safer. Tony could adjust the radiation levels significantly to the millirad. Every time he delved into his father’s work, he was newly amazed by the depths of the man’s brilliance. He was also a little surprised that Project: Rebirth had worked at all, considering how dangerous and uncontrolled it had been.

He ran a hand appreciatively down the smooth surface of the chamber. In spite of all of this, he was proud of what he’d done. He turned back to Steve. “Bring back memories?”

Steve wasn’t amused. “Who the hell do you think you are?”

Tony gritted his teeth and angrily covered the chamber again. “I’m the guy trying to save your life. I’ve been trying for weeks. You could show a little appreciation.”

“Appreciation?” Steve retorted, his eyes widening. “You went behind my back and did this. You didn’t even tell me that it needed to be done!”

“We’re just trying to protect you, Steve,” Bruce said calmly. He looked like he hadn’t envisioned this conversation unraveling like this. For all his smarts, Bruce could be a goddamn moron sometimes. “We didn’t want you to have to worry about this. We don’t even know how much of a threat it really is.”

“Natasha went to find out, didn’t she,” Steve said. It wasn’t a question.

“You weren’t bothered enough to ask when she left, so what does it matter now?” Tony snapped. He grabbed a few tools from the tray beside the chamber and resumed working on the power converters that would interface with the Tower’s electrical and computer systems. He still saw Steve’s guilty wince, saw the soldier avert his eyes to his feet momentarily, and felt irrationally and cruelly pleased for having hit him hard enough to hurt. Steve couldn’t stand another member of the team endangered because of him, and they all knew it.

Tony felt his control slipping away, and he didn’t care to try and hold on anymore. “You haven’t been bothered enough to do much of anything recently, Cap. You hole yourself up in your room, pretend that nothing exists. That we don’t exist. That nothing happened.” The clanking of his tools against the delicate machinery got louder and rougher. “Well, you know what? I don’t care what you think. We’re building this damn thing and you’re getting into it and it will work and when it does this whole fucking nightmare will be over. If you want to continue with this little fantasy of yours that you weren’t kidnapped and tortured, fine. I’ll be done with it. You can go on your merry fucking way.”

“Tony…” Bruce said softly, a grimace permanently affixed to his face. “It’s alright.”

“No,” he sharply said, glancing over his shoulder. “It’s not. Not until he—” At that he jabbed his spanner toward Steve. “—stops acting like living is a lost cause.”
Steve flushed with a mixture of embarrassment and rage. “You don’t get to judge me,” he said lowly. “I’m not the one who couldn’t keep my goddamn curiosity to myself.”

Tony slammed the wrench to the floor with a loud, reverberating clank. “At least I cared enough about you to put myself through watching it,” he retorted hotly. “At least I’m trying to help you. But I should’ve known better than to put that much effort into trying to save someone who doesn’t want to save himself.”

Blue eyes flashed furiously. “You think I don’t want to save myself?”

“I think you’ve shut down. You’re just going through the motions. I know. I did it myself. And you know what? It doesn’t help. Every one of us has told you that, and you don’t listen. Want to know the definition of stupidity? Doing the same damn thing over and over and over again when you know it doesn’t work and hoping every time that this time will be different.”

“That’s the definition of insanity,” Bruce wearily corrected.

Tony shot him a withering glare. “Whatever. Same difference. Point is that isn’t going to make you or anyone else feel better.”

“You don’t know a damn thing about what I feel,” Steve insisted.

“Maybe I do and maybe I don’t.” Tony needled Steve with a firm, forceful gaze. “It doesn’t matter. If you don’t want to talk to one of us, fine. I don’t really care anymore. But you need to talk to someone if you ever want to beat this. I have a whole list of the best therapists in the world. I can get you anyone you want. Hell, I’ll even pay for it. Just stop with this bullshit and get help!”

The shout echoed through the room. Steve looked as though he’d been physically struck. And Tony couldn’t stop himself. The anger he’d been bottling up for days, for weeks, that had barely escaped when they’d fought before was veritably pouring from him. “You don’t get to piss all over our decisions after the fact because you were too scared or hurt or angry to tell us what you thought when we wanted to know. We’ve been trying for weeks to get you to talk, to help you, to get you back on your feet. I’m sick and tired of trying. You want to be our captain again? You want to be in on the tough choices? Then act like it. Take the goddamn reins, because I don’t want them anymore.”

It was immediately obvious he’d gone too far. Steve’s expression shifted quickly from anger to hurt to grief. But, in a show that was becoming all too fucking familiar, he steeled his face and the tears were gone from his eyes in a blink and he sucked it all back inside. Choking down the poison. “I’ll do whatever you need,” he said in an emotionless, empty, dead voice. He was gone before either of them had a chance to respond.

They were still for a while, the ghosts of the argument lingering in the quiet. Bruce crumpled into his chair, taking off his glasses and setting them to the desk before rubbing his hands down his face. He sighed, pressing his fingers into a steeple before his mouth and shaking his head in a small, sad motion. He looked at Tony. The billionaire expected a reprimand for his behavior and harsh words, but there was none coming. “Sorry,” Bruce apologized again. “You were right.”

“I always am,” Tony responded. He tried to go back to his work, but he couldn’t. The frustration was too much, and he couldn’t concentrate enough to even get his hands to stop shaking. Angrily he tossed the wrench back to the desk.

“He’s too afraid to let go,” Bruce said. “Too afraid of being so weak in front of us.”
Bruce didn’t understand as Tony rushed by him on the way out the door. “What? Where are you going?”

“I have to return some video tapes.” At Bruce’s dumbstruck expression, he stopped in the doorway for a second. He couldn’t force himself to smile. “Always wanted to use that line.” Then he was gone.

Tony didn’t need to ask JARVIS where Steve was this time. He went straight to the soldier’s room and found the door securely locked. “JARVIS, open it.” Nothing happened. Tony got even more frustrated. “I own this building, and I own you. Now open the goddamn door.” He heard the satisfying click of the lock deactivating, and he pulled open the door and slipped inside.

“Get out of here, Stark.”

The gruff voice came from the other side of the couch. Tony stepped around the perimeter of the living area and found Steve sitting cross-legged on the floor, his back pressed up the expensive leather sofa. At Tony’s soft approach, he turned watery, furious eyes upon his visitor. The pain Tony saw there was very raw and very much on the surface. “I said get the hell out of here!” he roared.

“No!” Tony said. “No. Maybe you give the orders on the battlefield, but you don’t here. I’m not leaving until you talk to me. I lied earlier. I do care that you don’t want to confide in any of us. In me. It fucking hurts. Maybe we didn’t start off on the best of terms, but I’d like to think that we’re past all that crap. I’d like to think I’m your friend. No, I don’t think it. I am your friend, and last I checked you don’t have too many. So let me help you.”

Steve looked away quickly, wiping at his eyes. “I don’t need help.”

“Yes, you do,” Tony insisted. “Stop lying to yourself. You don’t have to do this alone. I did, and it sucked, and you deserve better than that. So stop. Let it out before it eats you up inside and there’s nothing left.”

“No,” Steve said quickly, shaking his head. He was visibly trembling, tears pooling in his eyes. Tony felt more uncomfortable now than he ever had in his life. He was terribly ill-equipped to do something like this, but fate had put him in this position for a reason. He didn’t typically draw strength or solace from that sort of logic, from trust in forces beyond those he could see and measure and understand and manipulate. But he was willing to, just this once, for Steve. Because Bruce and Clint and Thor (damn them all) were completely right. Steve needed him, who he was under all his sarcasm and narcissism and clever wits.

That left him no other option. He would do whatever was necessary to end this. “Talk to me,” he said sternly.

Steve shuddered. “No, I can’t. I can’t.”

“What are you so afraid of? That we’ll think less of you if you cry in front of us?” Steve didn’t answer but flushed with shame and looked away again. “We won’t, but that’s not it, is it? At least not all of it. Are you afraid of going back out there when everyone in the world saw you at your weakest? When I saw what happened to you? Probably, but I don’t think that’s all of it either. I know what it is. You’re afraid that Bucky is out there somewhere, hating you and plotting his revenge.” Steve closed his eyes. “That’s got you scared to death. Hiding from it isn’t going to
make it go away. You need to face it.”

“Please go away,” Steve begged. “I don’t need your help!”

“Yes, you do! And I’m going to help you, whether you like it or not. Fucking hell, Rogers, it wasn’t real!”

Steve choked on a ragged sob and veritably tried to pull his huge frame into itself and sink into the couch. “It was,” he moaned. “I see him all the time... Every time I close my eyes, he’s there, and I can’t let it go. I failed him. I let him fall. I killed him, and I turned him into what he was. He hated me enough to...” He couldn’t finish. “He fell, and I didn’t do anything to save him.”

“Oh, bullshit,” Tony retorted. “You didn’t do a damn thing because that wasn’t Bucky Barnes. Deep down inside you know that. You’re just confused.”

Steve lifted his head from his hands. Still the tears hadn’t fallen. “How do you know? How can you be sure?”

“Because it’s impossible,” Tony said with all the confidence he could. “Because I looked at him and only saw the lies. This was their plot, their purpose in manipulating you. To bring you to the very edge with all the pain and suffering and then unleash this lie upon you to kick you over. You just don’t remember because you were beaten and drugged to hell.” Steve winced, doubt and dismay filling his eyes. “You didn’t know that, did you? They had you doped up on all kinds of hallucinogens. Why the hell would they do that if they weren’t gonna try to trick you into seeing something that could never be real?” Steve didn’t answer. Tony could see the wheels turning, the first hints of contemplation crossing the other man’s distant face. But with a blink it was all gone. Tony knew this was going to be the hard part, but it was why he had come. It was what he knew needed to happen, as difficult and traumatic as it might be. “You need to see it. You need to see it and prove to yourself it wasn’t him.”

It didn’t matter that Tony wasn’t sure. It didn’t matter that there was probably no way they could know for sure. Steve needed to be sure. One way or another. And he needed to overcome this if he was ever going to heal.

Steve’s mouth fell limply open when he realized what Tony intended. He shook his head, unable to manage a word. His face was white and his eyes were wide. Finally, he stammered, “No. No.”

“You need to.”

“No!”

“JARVIS, put it on. Right now.”

“Sir, I do not believe this is wise,” came the AI’s response. Even JARVIS’ calm tone was tinged with hesitation and uncertainty.

“Tony, you can’t do this. I can’t do this!”

“Yes, you can. JARVIS, do it.”

“Sir, I must protest—”

Steve lurched to his feet and shoved Tony back. “I said no, god damn it! Get the hell away from me! Get out!” His eyes were wild with terror and rage, barely restrained. Tony wondered if he was about to end up on the floor again, knocked senseless for his audacity. He wondered if Steve would
hold back this time. But he wouldn’t back down. This is what he had decided, what he knew was correct course, and nothing was going to stop him. If Steve hated him forever after this, he’d bear that burden to make this right.

“JARVIS, put it on!” Tony exclaimed.

The huge TV screen across the living area winked to life, and the video came on right where Tony had last stopped watching it. Right as the man who would be Bucky Barnes stepped into the camera’s view. Tony turned his gaze to Steve, watched as his already white face paled even further, watched as his eyes widened and but still the damn tears held fast. As the video played, the lines spoken between tormentor and captive loudly filling the vacuous silence of the room, he never looked away from Steve, far more interested in his reaction than what was transpiring on the TV. He knew it all by heart anyway. It had been permanently etched into the planes of his mind, a memory that he knew would never fade. He had compulsively poured over these few minutes of footage, infuriated and disgusted over the puzzle that he couldn’t solve. He had dissected and analyzed and ripped the hell out of the horrid little scene on his quest for the truth. He was beginning to wonder if it even mattered, because he’d spent all that time working and searching and thinking and obsessing about this, and he had no answers.

Now when Steve needed an answer more than anything else, all he could do was make him watch and let him come to his own conclusions.

And Steve was watching. Stone-faced. Not even glancing at his beaten and bloodied form on the screen. Like his eyes were seeing but he’d built walls to keep what was flooding his senses from reaching his heart or his brain. Tony knew about that self-defensive mechanism, because he had done it, too, when the flashbacks and memories and nightmares from Afghanistan were too strong. It had its place and time, but this wasn’t it. “Watch it, Steve,” he said.

Tony’s soft command broke through the soldier’s haze, and he looked at him as if he was surprised, as if he’d forgotten Tony’s presence all together. The sort of concentration required to watch one’s own torture and then ignore every horrid detail of it, of keeping back the slew of unwanted memories and sensations, was pretty significant. And when that concentration was broken, Steve had nothing left to protect himself.

The dialogue flowed, unrelenting and malicious. It seemed sick and new and twisted, made so by watching Steve’s tortured face as the younger man watched himself. “You don’t know how hard I tried. I tried, Bucky. I swear to God I did.” Steve flinched and nearly looked away as though he was ashamed of his own excuses.

“No,” Steve whispered. “Please…”

“You let me fall. You let me die.”

“No, I didn’t! I swear I did everything I could!” Wide blue eyes filled with terror and pain darted to Tony as though seeking understanding or forgiveness or support, but Tony didn’t – couldn’t – do anything and the scene went on. The knife, wicked and dangerous. Steve’s eyes were glued to the glinting blade as it slid along his skin. He couldn’t look away when the tip trailed down his face and his throat and his chest, drawing red. He knew what was going to happen – they both did – and he couldn’t look away.

“I gave you to your enemies, Steve. I showed them the tools they needed to bring you down. I’ve
carried this hatred inside me for so long. It consumed me. Ate me alive, and I let it. And now it’s come to it. You can die knowing it was me who broke you. You can die knowing I was the one that betrayed you, just like I died knowing you let me go.”

“I didn’t let you go!” Steve hoarsely shouted. But nobody noticed, save Tony. This couldn’t be changed. None of it could be.

“You deserve everything they’ve done to you. Every minute of it. Because no matter what they do to you, it’s never going to compare to how much you hurt me.” Uselessly Steve shook his head. Tony’s heart thundered as he watched, feeling both wretched and relieved. He saw the storm building in Steve’s eyes. It was coming, violent and sundering, and Tony couldn’t stop it now if he wanted to. Part of him definitely wanted to. Part of him was just plain curious. But most of him just wanted this to be over, for Steve to find release, by whatever means necessary. He’d weather the storm. “But even still… I’ll do you a small favor. I’ve always had to take care of your sorry ass, and old habits die hard.”

Then it happened. What had become the very symbol of how deeply Steve had been wounded. How deeply he had been betrayed. The knife flashed violently as it sunk into flesh, and the captive trapped on the screen screamed. Steve in real life choked on his breath, his hand flying to his right leg and tightening in his pants, like there really was pain and blood – so much blood, and he couldn’t stop the flood – and if he was at all surprised to only feel solid flesh and dry cloth it didn’t register on his agonized face. “If you’re lucky, you’ll bleed to death before they have a chance to kill you. See you in hell, Steve.”

“JARVIS, hold it.” The video suddenly and nauseatingly came to a halt, right at the spot where the man who claimed to be Bucky Barnes was the most clearly visible. Tony knew this was the place, the only place, because he had watched this so fucking many times and pulled it apart from so many angles. He looked to Steve, saw his white face and teary eyes and shaking stature, saw the palm still clenched desperately over the long-since healed injury to his leg. “Look at him, Cap.”

Steve didn’t. When the video froze and the face of the man was revealed, his eyes shot immediately away in terror. The substance of his nightmares was looming before him, terrible for its abrupt clarity. Steve had had a vantage of the scene that the camera could never portray. He’d been the victim, staring right up into the face of his tormentor, but who knew what the drugs and the blood loss and the physical duress and the trauma of the hours of torture preceding these moments might have twisted his mind into seeing? The monster who seemed so human, so plain and unremarkable with brown eyes and brown hair and that seemingly malicious scar… Maybe Steve only remembered a true monster, the worst sort whose features and characteristics were blurry and already washed away by horror. Like the mind sealing a memory too painful to ever recall.

And looking at that face held so uneasily in stasis upon the screen would free the beast.

“Look, Steve,” Tony firmly ordered, stepping closer to Rogers as if to threaten him into compliance with his mere approach. It worked. Frightened blue eyes, still laden with tears, glanced at the image. “Is that the same Bucky Barnes you remember? Look at him, good and long and carefully. You’ve got Bucky’s image burned into your brain. I know you do. Is this him?”

Another tense moment crept away before Steve summoned the courage to stare at the man’s face. To really look, as Tony had demanded. Tony waited anxiously, not certain of what the other would say but praying that this man wasn’t his long-dead friend somehow resurrected. Somehow brought back to exact vengeance. He wanted answers, yes, but more than this, he wanted the right answer, because the thought of Bucky Barnes out there was more than disturbing. The power behind the sort of evil that could have saved Barnes from almost certain death, that could have kept him alive
without aging for seven decades, that could turn him against a man he’d once loved like his brother… That was terrifying.

And Steve looked. He narrowed his eyes, visibly shaking as he forced himself to analyze the face frozen on the screen. The silent moment lasted a seeming eternity. Then Steve shook his head. “I – I don’t know,” he softly said.

“You have to know,” Tony insisted, trying to keep his frustration and impatience under wraps. “You’re the only one who can.” He didn’t want it to seem like he wanted to know, that he needed to know, that maybe the future of what the Avengers would face in this world was riding on Steve’s answer. Steve didn’t need that additional pressure. But he couldn’t help himself. “Look at him, Steve, and tell me if that is Bucky Barnes.”

“I don’t know!” Steve shouted angrily. “What the hell do you want from me? I can’t do this. I can’t do this!”

“Look in his eyes.”

Steve turned back, mouth limply and helplessly open. He did what Tony asked, staring again at the malicious face on the TV, staring and fighting to hold to himself. His breath was coming faster and faster, his frame bent and trembling. “No,” he finally whispered. Tony chanced stepping closer, not wanting to interfere now that Steve was finally seeing the truth. But he didn’t think anything could stop this now. The first of Steve’s tears escaped, sliding down his cheeks unabashed, and for the first time he was too distraught and distracted to try to hide them. Tony saw the emotions finally breaking free. Saw that the long-fought war between Rogers’ composure and the trauma was now coming to the climactic moment. “No, that’s not… That can’t be him. I saw him fall. I saw…”

And then his tenuous grip on everything just snapped. Steve grabbed the closest thing to him, the baseball nestled in the glove on the coffee table in front of the couch, and hurled it as forcefully as he could at the TV. The baseball struck, shattering the screen into a million glimmering fragments, and the impact knocked the entire unit from its mounts. It crashed to the floor, a hole ripped through it, but the baseball continued fairly unabated, slamming into the wall behind the TV and puncturing through the drywall like it was paper. The sound of the destruction was loud and shocking. And then the debris settled, and that horrible face was gone.

Steve fell onto the couch, raking his fingers through his hair, sobbing roughly. “God damn it,” he moaned hoarsely. “God damn them! How could they…” He squeezed his eyes shut, but the flood of tears continued. “Bucky… I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” He was apologizing again, but this time Tony had a feeling it wasn’t because he had let Bucky fall during the war. It was because he had believed a lie, that he had let himself be tricked into thinking that his friend could have ever hurt him so badly. He was mourning the orchestrated damage done to his memories rather than mourning a real betrayal.

Steve cried, his entire body quaking with the strength of his sobs. Broken. Defeated. Tony knew that sort of pain, knew how deeply it ran and how long it lasted. It was devastating. He knew where this road went now, how the scars never quite healed, how he never felt safe or whole again, how hard it was to trust and how alone he was. He knew the deep, deep degradation and desolation that shattered a soul and how difficult it was to never spread that sort of darkness onto anyone else. What he said before when they’d fought in the gym wasn’t exactly true, as borne from frustration and anger and depression as it had been. They would never be okay, no. Not okay as in completely recovered or completely at peace. Not okay as in forever escaping the memories, the nightmares, the damage to their spirits. But they could rise again. He had. In some ways, he still was rising, and he knew he would always struggle to keep going. And he knew Steve could rise, too, no matter how
far down he’d fallen.

Tony sank gently to the couch beside Steve, feeling uncomfortable as the soldier completely and utterly lost it. The sound of his cries was gut-wrenching and heart-rending. Tony had spent years juggling with his guilty conscience. He knew he had never deserved what had happened to him those three months in Afghanistan, but there were still times when he irrationally considered it his punishment for living his life so wildly, so callously. For arming both the good and bad men of the world with weapons with no shame or accountability. The torture he’d suffered at the hands of the Ten Rings was his punishment. The shrapnel in his heart was punishment. But Steve? When the hell had Steve Rogers ever done anything to deserve what had happened to him? He felt the uncomfortable stinging in his own eyes, but he blinked it all away, because the last thing Steve needed was to see Tony Stark cry.

The awkward moments dragged by until Steve’s pain was quieter and less violent. Tony swallowed through the lump in his throat and nudged the soldier’s bent body with his elbow. “Hell of a pitch there,” he said as lightly as he could manage. “Maybe you should quit this superhero shit and make millions playing baseball.”

Steve didn’t answer, his head tucked to his chest and face buried in his hands. He was still shaking, alternating between driving his fingers roughly through his mussed hair and scrubbing at his eyes. Tony felt sick just watching. “It’ll be okay,” the billionaire swore softly. The useless, pathetic, uncharacteristic words were out of his mouth before he even thought to speak. This wasn’t him. Bruce was the one who offered empty, placating lies. Thor was the one who had strength and comfort to give no matter the truth. Clint, in all his pragmatism, could deliver fake solace with the best of them when he needed to. And Natasha was a master as telling other people what they needed to hear. Yet the need to fix this again trumped Tony being himself. “It will be okay.”


Something inside Tony ached viciously at hearing Steve Rogers, the man with the plan, the backbone of their team of misfits and loners and hotheads, utterly give up. “Don’t say that,” Tony said through clenched teeth. “Don’t you ever say that. You don’t get to quit. You’re Captain America. Don’t let them beat you. Maybe they broke your body and damaged your heart, but you can still win by never surrendering to what they did to you.”

“You don’t believe that,” Steve hissed. He finally lifted his head from his hands. His eyes were bloodshot and still filled with tears. His cheeks were red and raw. He didn’t look at Tony, staring instead at the remains of the TV. “You didn’t before, and you don’t believe now. You’re just saying it. You of all people. Don’t lie to me. Enough people have.”

“You don’t believe it before,” Tony conceded. “But I do now. They kidnapped you. Tortured you. Took your strength from you. Made you think your best friend was back to condemn you. They did all of that, tried to bring you to the absolute lowest, tried to get you to beg for your life in front of the world. And you didn’t. You didn’t give them what they wanted. You fought them to the last. I know what that takes. I built Iron Man when I should have been building missiles. They tortured me to build their weapons. A goddamn car battery was keeping me alive. I know what it takes to defy when every part of your body wants you to just obey so the pain stops.” Steve looked at him then, looked and was really listening. “I know what it takes. So, yeah, I do believe you can get back up. I did, and I’m not half as strong as you.”

Steve seemed heartened by that for a moment, but it didn’t last. Tony was well aware of the perverse whims of this hellish misery. The soldier’s face crumpled, and he sank into the couch, sobbing
anew. He didn’t even bother to try and hide his weakness now. “Bucky,” he whispered. “How could I be so weak? He wouldn’t…” He couldn’t finish, sinking again into the memories. Tony didn’t try to stop him, simply letting him go, letting him cry, letting him vent all of his pain and guilt and anger and grief he’d been hiding these last couple of weeks. It all fled him on every shaking breath, the filth washing away in a torrent of tears. Tony never imagined this moment, that he would be here, sitting against one end of the couch while Steve sat at the other end and trembled and cried, lost in his own world. He never imagined that he would be the one to witness their captain completely coming apart, that he would be the one to pick up the pieces. But it made sense, he supposed, that it would fall to him. Howard Stark had helped to forge Captain America. Tony would help forge him again, hopefully into something even stronger.

Nobody had helped him forge Iron Man. Nobody had eased the pain of Yinsen’s death. Nobody had helped him overcome the betrayal when he learned Obadiah Stane had hired the Ten Rings to kill him. It had hurt to face these things alone, and he hadn’t even realized how much until Pepper and Rhodey had grown closer to him and tried to ease his miseries and balance out the damage after the fact. He wouldn’t wish that on Steve. No way in hell.

He remained still, summoning a wealth of patience from who knew where, waiting and waiting until Steve’s exhaustion finally started to overcome his anguish. The fury of his sobs lessened, and the damn shivering that had plagued him since Tony had come into the room ceased. He relaxed into the couch, breathing slowly and evenly. For a long quiet time, Tony wondered if Steve had dozed off. “I’m so sorry, Tony.”

“About the TV? Don’t care. Or about this? Because if that’s what you’re apologizing for, don’t bother. You needed it.”

“No, I should have never…”

“Shut up, Steve. You’re worth it.”

They didn’t speak again for a bit, long enough that Tony started to wonder again if Steve had dozed off. “Do you think that he really felt that way?” The halting, whispered words, pushed together as though Steve would lose his courage partway through the question, were hardly audible.

Tony didn’t understand at first, but the realization that Steve was asking about Bucky came to him in the soft silence. “I don’t know,” he replied. “I didn’t know him. But if he was half the man you are, he would never fault someone else for things beyond anyone’s control.”

“He was more than I ever was,” Steve said. I doubt that, Tony thought angrily, but he didn’t say it. “He was strong and confident. Had a way with the ladies. But he was kind, too. Always made it a double date even though no dame would ever be caught dead with me. He didn’t care. He stood up for me when no one else ever did. Took care of me when my folks died. He never did it out of pity.” Steve groaned around a sob, struggling to keep his voice even. “Thought I was so stupid for never backing down or running away from anything, but he never realized that I couldn’t. Not if I wanted to be like him.” Another shuddering sigh. He turned slightly, draping a muscular forearm over his eyes. “I… I hate it here sometimes. I hate that I’m alive and all of them are dead. And then, when I… when I let the past go and try to live here and now with you and the others, enjoy it and embrace it … I hate myself for moving on.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Tony said dismissively.

“Maybe this is all some sort of punishment for surviving,” Steve whispered.
Tony didn’t know if he meant what he had endured at the hands of the Red Dawn or if meant the lasting suffering of living beyond his captivity. It didn’t matter, because it was all bullshit. “Stop blaming yourself for things you couldn’t prevent. Christ, Cap, you’re not perfect. You can’t save everyone. And right now you need to save yourself.”

“If not it’s not punishment, then what is it? Why did it happen?” Steve demanded, flashing red-rimmed, wild eyes at Tony. “You act like you know everything all the time. Maybe you do. So why? Why?”

That desperate gaze implored him for an answer. He didn’t like the weight of it all, his anger and discomfort and frustration mounting. “I don’t know!” Tony snapped. “You think there’s an answer for why these things happen? There isn’t. Don’t even bother asking because you’re just wasting your time. No one knows. Not me or God or anyone. Nobody ever answered me when I asked after Afghanistan. Shit happens. Horrible shit that tests you. You either let it break you or remake you. Which one are you gonna do?”

“I wanted to die.”

“I know. But the only thing that matters now is this: do you still want to?”

Silence. Tony’s heart was anxiously pounding. He was afraid of the answer. “I don’t know,” Steve whispered. “I… If Bucky died thinking I betrayed him…” A fresh sob broke from his throat. “I don’t know.”

“Well, you got a problem. That man wasn’t Barnes, so everything he said was a fucking lie. But if it’s got you doubting, the only one who can fix that is you. I can tell you over and over that it wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t your fault. But I can’t make you believe that. I can’t make you believe this was all fake, that they fucking hired someone to impersonate your friend and twist your emotions and memories against you when you were at your weakest. I can’t make you believe anything. That’s the point, Steve. No one can make you believe a lie.”

Steve was silent. Crying, if the pace of his shallow breathing was any indication. “They tried to get at your soul, and they didn’t. You think Barnes stabbed you, left you to bleed to death. But it wasn’t him. And you didn’t die. At least not back in that hellhole. But you can bleed out now, if you let this rip you to shreds. Or you can patch yourself up and keep going. I can’t make that decision for you any more than I can make you think what I think. I know I wanted to. I tried to.”

Tony tentatively moved closer. He didn’t know what the hell he was doing. Just the distance between them suddenly seemed too far, too cold, too painful. He debated for a moment and then laid his hand on Steve’s leg. “Come on, Cap,” he said softly. Steve turned watery eyes toward him, battling another round of sobs, fighting to hold it back. “We need you. Don’t let this bring you down. Please.”

There wasn’t an answer. Tears bled from tightly closed eyes, and he sank deeper into the plush cushions of the sofa. Tony said nothing, keeping his hand pressed to Steve’s leg just as Steve himself had when he’d been stabbed, just as Bruce had outside that warehouse. Keeping the life inside. Eventually Steve’s ragged breathing grew calmer and more even. Tony looked, and this time he truly had fallen asleep.

It was quite a while before Tony willed himself to move. His body ached as he stood. His head was pounding and felt stuffed with wool. Everything was bright and blurry and saturated. He released a long breath, stretching stiff and tingling limbs, and went to Steve’s bedroom. He pulled the satin comforter from the bed and returned to Rogers’ slumbering form. He draped the blanket over Steve’s body, tucking him in with care and tenderness that he idly found surprising. Steve’s eyes
were tightly closed, his head pillowed on the arm of the couch, his body tucked into itself for warmth and protection. Tony didn’t see much peace on the reddened, tear-stained face. He didn’t know what else to do, so he sat again and tried not to think, tried not to wonder if forcing Steve to find some sort of release had done more damage than good.

“Sir.” JARVIS’ voice cut through the heavy silence like a knife.

Tony jerked from a light doze, blinking rapidly and leaning up. “What? What?”

“Director Fury is on the line.”

Tony braced his elbows on his knees and buried his head into his hands and tried futilely to massage the ache from behind his eyes. “Not now,” he grumbled irately.

“Sir, he claims it is urgent,” JARVIS said.

“Don’t care. Not now.”

“He is calling for the Avengers to assemble.”

Tony snapped to awareness and glanced at Steve, still passed out beside him. “Damn it,” he harshly whispered, and then he was up and out the door as fast as he could run.
“JARVIS, get everyone up here,” Tony ordered as he sprinted through the hallways of Stark Tower.

“Right away, sir. I assume ‘everyone’ does not include Captain Rogers.”

“You assume correctly. And tell them to put some goddamn gas on it!”

The thirty-fifth floor had been redesigned as a sort of command center. In the wake of Loki’s attack on Manhattan, Tony had started to play with the idea of Stark Tower becoming the home of the Avengers, and so he’d had dedicated this floor to operations, equipped with telecom feeds to SHIELD and links (legal or otherwise) into every AV network in the world that he could get into. The holographic stations winked to life the minute he stepped inside. Some displayed the status of the Tower’s systems (which were all operating nominally, of course). Others were rotating through the various US and international news networks, trolling for any disturbances. Others still were linked into Homeland Security, the Department of Transportation, and the Energy Department (it was a good thing Congress hadn’t discovered that he’d hacked them; that would have gone over real well at the hearing). It was a veritable supercomputing center scanning the world for threats in real time, analyzing and assessing and predicting.

“Shall I put Director Fury through, sir?” JARVIS asked as Tony slid into a rolling chair. The AI’s calm voice echoed through the room; despite the wealth of data being projected, there was hardly anything inside the command center save for one central conference table and a slew of chairs. Everything was holographic.

“Hold your horses. What’s happening?” Tony trusted Fury less than he ever had before, so he wanted to know as much as he could before talking with him. He knew he should have been concerned with whatever serious threat the world was facing, but he could only think about Steve. He could only worry about Steve. They needed to protect Steve. And he couldn’t do that unless he knew what they were up against, truly knew, instead of being manipulated or used to other ends. Fury had burned him before (probably more times than he knew), but he’d be damned if he let it happen again.

JARVIS ran through his report, rapidly displaying the pertinent information on the screen before Tony. “I have no information concerning any international or domestic threats to the United States or its allies. The DHS, the CIA, and the FBI have reported no suspicious activity in the last twenty-four hours. In addition, NATO has not indicated any substantial terrorist threats. There is no sign of mobilization of any military forces, friendly or otherwise, in Europe or the Pacific. My data is, of course, limited concerning the Middle East and other hostile regions. SHIELD will be able to provide greater insight into the situation.” That was the entire problem. They needed SHIELD as much as SHIELD needed them, and it really and truly sucked to have to depend on someone he didn’t entirely trust.

“What about the final frontier?” he asked, glancing at the images to the right.

“There are no signs of disturbances as reported by NASA’s satellites.”

“What the hell is going on?” Tony swiveled in the chair and saw the other Avengers entering. Bruce looked extremely worried, and his pinched expression grew even more so when he saw Tony. Before the billionaire could answer the question, Bruce said, “JARVIS said Fury was calling for us.”
Clint glanced about quickly. He was calm as ever, but Tony didn’t miss the flash of worry in his eyes. “Where’s Steve?”

“What happened?” Banner asked.

There wasn’t time for anything but the truth. “Cap’s down,” Tony said.

Thor’s face tightened in concern and anger. “What is the meaning of that?” he demanded hotly, glaring at Tony irately. Ever since dinner the other night, the demigod had become increasingly foul-tempered and frustrated about the entire mess. His patience had been wearing thin; they all were finding it more and more difficult to deal with each other given the stress and trauma.

Tony sighed. “He let go. Finally. Now he’s sleeping, and he’s in no shape to fight, so let’s close ranks. Whatever this is, we need to face it without him.”

There was no argument, no debate. Tony expected – feared – there would be. The Avengers locked gazes with one another. Clint’s jaw tightened, his eyes determined. Thor nodded, and all at once the anger was gone from his face. Bruce sighed, not out of irritation or disquiet; it was a cleansing breath, an acceptance of what needed to happen. Of what was for the best. And Tony looked to them all, because unless they stood together now, everything would fall apart. The team needed to function without their captain. They all understood, and they all agreed. “We can do this,” Hawkeye said lowly and with certainty. “Right?”

“Right,” Bruce affirmed.

“We can and will,” Thor said.

“Connect us to SHIELD, JARVIS,” Tony ordered, standing and turning to face the large screen once more.

Fury’s stern face immediately appeared. Predictably, his eye narrowed into something of an intimidating glare when he quickly analyzed the group before him. “Where’s Rogers?” he demanded. Tony couldn’t tell if the man was angry or disappointed, but it seemed like a combination of both. And worried. Definitely worried. That didn’t bode well for any of them.

“He can’t come to the phone right now, but I’ll take a message,” Tony answered shortly. It seemed ridiculous to expect Steve to be there, ready and raring to throw himself into danger, this soon after everything that had happened. This soon after Tony had told the Director of SHIELD that Steve was hurting and defeated and lost in himself. But here the man was, doing exactly that, shamelessly and without regard for anyone or anything. Tony couldn’t help his spite, even as Fury frowned and his scowl deepened. “He’s sitting this one out. We can handle it.”

He sounded surer than he felt. Truthfully, he didn’t know what the Avengers were capable of doing without Captain America’s steady hand and guiding voice and Black Widow’s silent, deadly power. He hoped the four of them would be enough. Fury, thankfully, chose not to pursue the matter of Steve’s absence any further. If he had his doubts, he didn’t say them and didn’t show them. “We have a serious situation. We received word from Agent Romanoff that a hostile faction has launched numerous aircraft in Turkey. We lost contact with her shortly after receiving this message, but we’ve been able to confirm that a variant of the Soviet Antonov AN-124, somehow outfitted to achieve far greater speed, is on a course for the US coast, specifically New York City. The transport is being accompanied by nearly a dozen drones, also modified to fly much faster. ETA has them inbound in about thirty minutes.”

No one spoke. It seemed unbelievable that this was happening. Perhaps this was the sort of
mundane mission they would have faced had the Red Dawn never captured Captain America. An unknown, probably dangerous force was headed directly for a heavily populated civilian target, and it needed to be stopped. But inexplicably this mission felt more dangerous, more uncontrollable. They were going in blind and without the man who glued the team together, who they all trusted and respected beyond any doubt.

Clint shook his head. “What’s the payload, sir?”

“Unknown,” Fury responded curtly. “Unfortunately, Romanoff wasn’t able to tell us before we lost contact with her.”

“Where is she?” Clint asked sharply, his expression controlled but his eyes betraying his worry and his ire.

“We don’t know, Agent Barton.” If Fury was at ashamed about how very little SHIELD once again seemed to know about anything, it wasn’t obvious. At least he was frustrated. But admitting that once again a member of the Avengers was imperiled while SHIELD ineptly floundered in its lack of control and information? Never.

“And who the hell is behind this?” Tony questioned shortly. “Or don’t tell me. You don’t know.”

“We don’t have time for this. Stark, I need you to intercept that transport and find out what the hell is on there. The rest of you will hold in reserve to contend with the situation if the hostile reaches the Manhattan.”

“Contend with the situation.” Bruce shook his head incredulously, the disgust and disbelief plain on his face. “What do you expect us to do if this is some sort of WMD?”

The thought was chilling. A nuclear bomb or biological weapon striking New York City would be devastating. More than eight million people could die, not to mention the catastrophic damage to the city and the fallout to the surrounding areas. And that was assuming their target was that limited. There were plenty of other populated and strategic targets on the eastern seaboard. “Let’s pray that it’s not.”

“Don’t you think you should call for an evacuation?” Tony demanded. “You want to leave this to chance?”

“And risk mass hysteria? We don’t know what we’re dealing with! We need information first and foremost, and Iron Man is the best equipped among you to ascertain the nature of threat. Then we can respond. I’m already in touch with the federal and state governments, as well as the NYPD, FDNY, and the National Guard. If the moment comes to evacuate, we’ll be as ready as we can be.” Fury took a deep breath. “But I’m hoping it doesn’t come to that. I’m hoping you can make sure it doesn’t.” He turned his gaze to Tony. “Go as fast as you can, Stark. The rest of you get ready. There’s no time.”

Fury’s image disappeared. The four Avengers stood still for a moment, uncertain and fearful of the situation before them. The thought that they could do anything to stop a WMD was laughably impossible. But they were the Avengers. They specialized in impossible.

“Suit up,” Tony ordered, “and meet at the helipad.” Then they rushed out. Bruce went with him as they ran to the elevator. “JARVIS, get the Mark VII ready.”

“Already working on it, sir,” came the AI’s voice as they sprinted inside the lift. The elevator burst to life, automatically taking them to Tony’s secured workshop where the various implementations of
“Can we really do this without the Cap?” Bruce asked quietly. He respected Tony too much to question the brash decision he’d made in front of the others. They couldn’t afford any sign of instability, of disunity, when they now needed to act and act rapidly to stop this unknown threat. But Banner wasn’t sure and with good reason. It wasn’t just that Rogers was their leader, the only one of them that they would all obey. It wasn’t just that the friction among them all had worn them down, had strained their faith in themselves and each other. Steve was Captain America. He had a mind for battle, for strategy, for the correct course of action when the choices were few and the moments most dire. He knew how to protect people, how to defend civilians while destroying the enemy. That was exactly the sort of thought process they needed now.

And it wasn’t even just that, though all those concerns were frighteningly valid enough. Bruce was afraid. The Hulk listened to Steve. He didn’t listen to anyone else.

“We have to,” Tony said, trying to comfort Bruce though he didn’t have much confidence, either. “If he loses it out there….” What he didn’t say was painfully obvious. They couldn’t rely on Steve when he was like this, too fragile and vulnerable and broken down, and that meant it was too dangerous to involve him. They had no idea how he might function (or not) in the heat of battle where one moment of fear or hesitation could lead to death and disaster.

Bruce wasn’t happy, but he drew a deep breath and centered himself. Maybe it wasn’t right to yet again be making Steve’s decisions for him, but there were bigger things at stake than their leader’s battered self-esteem and damaged heart. They had to remember that. And they did, so they didn’t talk about it again. The doors to the elevator opened and Tony charged out. The workshop was at the end of the hall. He rushed through the work area, tools and various elements of his suit strewn about, until he reached a larger, open area. There all the versions of Iron Man stood idle, like silent soldiers that were never at ease, waiting. The Mark VII was on the central dais, and when Tony stepped closer, the robotic arms slid from their hiding places in the ceiling and floor and immediately began transferring the suit to his body. The familiar weight of the armor on his arms and legs was distinctly comforting; after all the hell he’d endured, it was a relief to feel power, to have that sort of impenetrable protection adorning his body. The robots danced a very intricate and choreographed show, and in a matter of seconds, Iron Man’s chest plates enclosed his torso and hooked to the arc reactor. The helmet closed over his head, and everything inside came alight.

JARVIS’ voice flooded his helmet, and the AI quickly displayed a brief rundown of Iron Man’s various systems. “The suit is operating perfectly, sir. All systems ready.”

Tony hardly paid attention to the readouts, squeezing his right hand into powerful fist, intensely relieved by the power and protection he felt. He turned and regarded Bruce. “Want a lift?”

The semi-circle of alcoves holding his suits began to rotate, sliding gracefully and quietly away. Bruce looked impressed as the clear blue midday sky appeared, the Tower veritably opening to the New York City skyline. “Nice. Just have this installed?” he commented as he stepped closer and braced his foot on top of Tony’s boot.

“I needed a real entrance to my secret lair,” Tony quipped mirthlessly. He grabbed Bruce around the waist and held tight before activating the suit’s thrusters. A breath later they were outside in the cool autumn air, flying high alongside the shining surface of the Tower. They reached the top, and Iron Man thudded against the helipad. Bruce stepped away.

Thor was waiting, dressed in his battle armor and customary red cape, Mjölnir clenched tightly in his right hand. His bearded face was tense, his eyes glittering in a hunger for battle but reluctance, as well, likely out of concern for Steve. If any of them was to argue against acting without their
captain, Thor was the most probable dissenter. But he said nothing, only offering Tony a firm nod. Hawkeye was there as well, making the final adjustments to his bow and quiver. Tony wasn’t sure he was physically ready for the rigors that undoubtedly lay before them if this turned into a skirmish, but he wasn’t about to question him. He sure as hell wouldn’t want to be questioned himself. He didn’t know what Steve would have done, but he found he didn’t care too much. This was what he was doing. “You stay down. Got it? Find a high spot and keep under cover if it comes to a fight.”

Clint tipped his head, not appreciative of the advice, but he wisely chose not to argue. He wasn’t blind to how weak he was, how he was still recovering. “Got it.”

“Stay here,” came Iron Man’s voice. “JARVIS will cue you in. Hopefully I can stop this before it even starts.”

The others were none too pleased with this arrangement, but they simply nodded. Tony didn’t waste another second, firing Iron Man’s thrusters to full power and launching from the roof of Stark Tower. He careened into the sky, not caring for a moment that all of New York could probably see his hasty departure, and propelled himself south eastward. “Talk to me, JARVIS,” he said as he reached the ocean in a matter of seconds, pouring all of the suit’s resources into its flight systems. He could reach almost Mach 10 if he tried. And he tried.

JARVIS had apparently patched him through to Fury. The Director’s worried face appeared in the upper left of this field of vision. “Stark, we’ve got the transport on imaging now. I’m sending you the coordinates. Hurry. This thing is moving like a rocket. It’ll reach the harbor in fifteen minutes.”

Shit. That’s less time that I thought.

“If that plane is loaded with anything that could pose a widespread threat to the city, bring it down by whatever means necessary.” Not useful. And not comforting. “We’re scrambling fighters as we speak, so you’ll have backup in a matter of minutes.” Also not useful.

“What about the drones?” he asked, glancing at the coordinates. The plane was more than halfway across the Atlantic. It was flying like a bat out of hell, if the satellite tracking data was true.

“Likely for protection, so expect a firefight.” Tony gritted his teeth at yet another statement of the goddamn obvious. It didn’t matter. In seconds he’d reach the transport, and everything would become clear, for better or worse. He forced even more speed out of the suit, cutting through the blue of the sky and the fluffy clouds. Iron Man’s targeting system picked up the drones long before he saw them, but Tony didn’t slow his approach until he performed a wide arc to align himself alongside the transport.

It was a massive, hulking beast of an aircraft, painted dark gray with no insignia or identifying markings so it was impossible to determine from where it hailed with a cursory glance. Being a former weapons designer and contractor, Tony knew a thing or two about this model of Russian transport plane, and he knew there was no way in hell it could generate the amount of power to reach these airspeeds, let alone structurally withstand the forces involved. This whole thing suggested a singular purpose: delivery, at any cost.

“Sir, I am detecting a SHIELD transponder from within the transport,” JARVIS said. The image of the plane in front of him immediately decomposed into a structural blueprint as JARVIS localized the signal. Tony, however, could only afford the schematic a glance before the drones noticed his presence. They abandoned their escort, pulling away and converging on him. “I believe it may be Agent Romanoff.”
“That’s nice!” Tony said gruffly as he banked to avoid the first salvo of enemy fire. The drones appeared to be equipped with pulse guns of some sort, short laser bursts that whizzed past him as he barely dodged. He rolled, lifting his hands to shoot behind him. One drone exploded. Tony dipped, missing another barrage of shots, and then dove to draw the drones away from the ship. From his shoulders he launched a slew of mini-rockets, and a couple more of the drones were struck, but most avoided his assault. It didn’t matter. “Here comes the cavalry,” he murmured, noticing the approach of the SHIELD jets from the southwest.

“Indeed, sir.”

“Let’s lay them out.” Tony turned sharply, JARVIS helping him control the thrusters to maintain speed as he abruptly changed course. He fired haphazardly at the drones as they shot at him, but he mostly concentrated on leading them to slaughter like good little sheep. Eight jets screamed past him and then engaged the drones. Tony whirled in the air, coming to a halt and hovering and aiming his palm repulsor rays at the drones closest to him. The white beams shot out, blasting the drones, but his attack proved costly as one of their shots struck him in the chest plate. He lost control for a terrifying moment, the sky a dizzying, nauseatingly blur of blue and white as he spun. He righted himself and ground his teeth in anger.

“Sir, I suggest we leave this to SHIELD and contend with the larger problem,” JARVIS advised.

Tony was already on it, hoping the slew of drones were sufficiently occupied in the dogfight raging below him as he raced higher, back toward the transport. “You guys got this?” he demanded over the SHIELD communications link which was now cluttered with the fighter pilots shouting.

“We have it, Mr. Stark,” assured one of the pilots.

Tony sincerely hoped so, but in his experience, nothing ever went according to plan. “Can you get me through to Romanoff?” he asked JARVIS as he again flew alongside the now unprotected ship. Black Widow being aboard certainly complicated matters. He could have simply blown the plane from the sky, but not without sacrificing her life, which he wasn’t about to do.

JARVIS spent a second attempting to secure a signal and then the communications link was open. “Romanoff, can you hear me?” Tony asked. The transport had no windows on its massive fuselage, so it was impossible to see within it, but Tony glanced along the sides anyway. He ducked clear of the two gigantic engines and sprawling wing and headed toward the cockpit. There were windows there, of course, but from his determination, the pilot and co-pilot seats were empty. He glanced at the readouts JARVIS was showing him. There was only one life sign in the entire aircraft, which was odd, to say the least. He hoped to God it was Natasha. “Romanoff, it’s Stark. Talk to me.”

There was a loud crackle of static. “Stark, this is Romanoff.” There was very audible relief in her voice. It mirrored what was pounding through Tony’s heart. “We haven’t got much time.”

“What the hell is going on?”

“I’ll explain later,” came the curt response. “You need to get in here and figure out a way to shut this down. The plane’s flying by remote command, but nothing I’ve been able to do has stopped it or even slowed it down. I’ve been trying for more than an hour.”

That explained the lack of pilots and the drones. But boarding a plane flying at more than a thousand miles an hour seemed dangerous at best and absolutely crazy at worst. “Great idea,” Tony snidely remarked. “Any suggestions on how to do that?”

“I can’t control anything from here,” Romanoff declared. The small blip of her biosigns was moving
toward the cockpit. She sounded frustrated and a tad bit frightened, which was saying something for her.

Tony’s mind whirled, desperately twisting the problem around for a second. Then there was an explosion against his back, and he nearly plummeting as the suit briefly lost power. Iron Man floundered, tumbling from the sky, falling for a horrifying long moment before Tony overcame the pain and vertigo and managed to right himself. He shot back upward, firing at the few drones that had returned. Damn it! A read-out showed him the SHIELD pilots weren’t faring as well as they had promised. He engaged in some evasive maneuvers as he was showered with enemy fire, dodging as best as he could. He flew in a wide arc, circling the transport with the drones hot on his tail.

He quickly realized there was only one way to get inside the transport. “Find an oxygen mask,” Tony ordered, “and brace yourself!”

“What?” Natasha cried, but anything else she might have said was swallowed by an explosion that roared over the audio link as Tony’s rounded on the plane and fired a very confined repulsor blast at a non-vital section of its fuselage. The shot punched a hole straight through the steel and aluminum and the other materials of the bulkhead, debris blowing away at incredible speeds. Tony immediately barreled through the opening he’d made and JARVIS threw all of Iron Man’s power into controlling his considerable momentum as he flew inside. He hit the deck of the aircraft with a mind-numbing, vibrating clang before sliding across the floor, spraying sparks as metal scraped roughly over metal. Finally he struck the other side of the fuselage.

The drones immediately disengaged, unable to continue their assault without endangering the very thing they had been sent to protect. Tony would have patted himself on the back for hitting two birds with one stone, but everything was going to shit too fast. He saw the countdown JARVIS had presented in the upper right of his control interface. There was a little more than eight minutes left until they reached US airspace.

Alarm klaxons were wailing and red lights were frantically flashing as the plane violently depressurized. Tony staggered to his feet, shaking his head a few times to clear the dizziness. He’d landed on some sort of platform behind the cockpit. Natasha emerged from the empty command center, wearing an oxygen mask she’d thankfully been able to find somewhere (considering this transport appeared to be rigged to fly remotely, it was lucky safety equipment was available at all). She was dressed in her customary combat suit. She looked unharmed, a fact for which Tony was extremely grateful even if he’d never admit it and there was no time to show it. “Where?” he demanded, staggering forward to gingerly grab her arm.

She said nothing, pulling him toward the area behind them. The wind howled through the vacuous fuselage as it was sucked violently out the hole. The air rushed past them, sucking at them, trying to drag them and everything else not bolted down or otherwise secured out of the aircraft. They made their way to the cockpit. The controls were far more technologically advanced than what was typical of this type of airplane. Sleek consoles were filled with flashing touch screens, each displaying the status of the aircraft’s systems. Natasha was correct; the transport was flying itself. One monitor was displaying encoded commands in real time, the gibberish of characters flashing across the screen. “JARVIS?” Tony prompted.

“It appears to be a satellite uplink,” the AI responded. The feed, already expertly hacked, appeared on the display inside Tony’s helmet so he could see the quickly transpiring commands closer. Hacked, but not decrypted. They were unintelligible.

“Any idea on how to get in?” Tony asked, checking the more tangible flight controls when analyzing
the software proved futile.

“Working, sir. The encryption is extremely complicated.”

Tony grabbed the main flight controller and tried to turn it, but it wouldn’t budge, and Iron Man’s enhanced strength would only break it. He fiddled with a few other knobs and buttons hoping to force the plane to slow and descend, but Natasha was completely right. Nothing was responsive. He shouldn’t have wasted his time. Surely she’d already tried every damn knob, dial, switch, and button. He turned to her. “What the hell is this thing carrying?”

It was difficult to hear her over the noise from the damaged hull and the alarms wailing. “I don’t know! Something extremely important!” They turned, abandoning the locked controls and useless consoles, Iron Man bounding after Black Widow as she rapidly led him back to the cargo area of the gigantic plane. Tony thundered to the end of the platform that overlooked the belly of the beast and then fired his thrusters to fly down. Natasha leapt behind him, lithely landing like a cat before rising and following him across the lower deck. A series of sleek silver capsules lined either side of the bay, each as large as a bus. They were all identical. Tony examined one quickly, hovering alongside it and finding the casing without markings or any obvious access points. “I couldn’t find out what they were planning!” Romanoff admitted. “It took me days to just get inside the factory!”

“Factory?” Tony said.

“HYDRA! This is somehow connected to the Red Dawn. I tracked a lead from the biomed lab there.” Tony felt his spirits plummet. Anger rolled over him, and he turned back to the capsule. Natasha shook her head, her hair blowing wildly in the depressurized cabin. Her breath misted on the oxygen mask she wore, the canister slung over her shoulder. “By the time I knew they were moving something big, it was too late. I barely snuck aboard!”

There was little to detect from the outside appearance of the capsules. They were tapered at one end into a rocket propulsion system with stabilizing fins protruding from each side, much like a missile. He didn’t want to think about that. “JARVIS, talk to me here!” he shouted, glancing again at the ominous countdown.

“Sensors are scattered by the shielding, sir. However, I am not detecting any nuclear or biological components.” The thought was at once comforting and distressing. It certainly resembled some sort of sturdy, speedy delivery system for something capable of mass destruction. And there were twenty-four of them, by Tony’s count, twelve in each row. Frustrated, Iron Man dropped to the deck with a clank and lowered himself to a crouch to examine beneath the capsule where it was braced on numerous steel stands. The bottom was as nondescript as the top, yielding no answers save for a small inscription in black letters near the curved head of the device. **AIM-DB-001.** A model number? He checked the adjacent capsule and found it to be numbered as well, only one higher. He was becoming increasingly certain these weren’t bombs. But if they weren’t bombs, then what the hell were they?

He wasn’t sure New York wanted to find out, even if his own curiosity was piqued. He needed to get Romanoff off this plane so they could shoot it out of the sky before it ever had the chance to strike.

It seemed as though fate intended to make that happen for him.

The plane abruptly dived. Natasha cried out as she was flung to the curved ceiling more than thirty feet above them, the forces of the plane’s radical descent overcoming gravity in an instant. She struck the top roughly, Tony nearly following but he managed to fire Iron Man’s thrusters in time to avoid striking the metal above. He was well acclimated to the sorts of abuse rapid aerobatic
maneuvers put on the human body, but the surprise of the sudden jolt made the pain and the
uncomfortable sensation of his stomach trying to leave his body through his back that much worse.
“JARVIS!” Tony screamed as he went over to Romanoff, grabbing her flailing form and holding her
tightly against him.

“The plane is descending at nearly one thousand feet per second,” the AI calmly responded. “I
cannot stop it.”

It stopped itself. “God damn it,” Tony groaned, grasping Natasha as firmly as he dared when the G-
forces rapidly reversed and they fell. He immediately stabilized their descent, avoiding a violent and
likely fatal collision with the deck plating. The harrowing hell had lasted only a few seconds. He set
Romanoff to the deck, checking her over quickly. “Are you alright?”

She nodded, shaking, wiping at an oozing laceration at her hairline. “We have to get out of here!” she
shouted.

Tony never had a chance to agree. There was a loud rattle. He saw the satellite feed rush through a
series commands so quickly that it was a blur on his screen. Suddenly his infrared sensors detected a
rush of energy in the propulsion systems of the capsule in front of him. A quick glance down the
line and across the cargo bay revealed they all were exhibiting the same warming. And the rattle
increased until it was a violent vibration that nearly shook them from their feet. “What is this?”

Natasha shouted, grabbing onto Tony’s arm again to steady herself. She’d pulled her gun from her
holster with her other hand, glancing around wildly although they were alone. The quaking ended as
abruptly as it began, leaving the two Avengers confused and unsettled. “Stark, what’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” Tony confessed tightly. A quick look to the countdown made him grit his teeth.
Less than four minutes. “JARVIS?”

“I am detecting some structural instability,” the AI responded.

The vibrating came again, strong enough to knock Romanoff down. Tony dropped down
defensively beside her. She was nothing more than a sack of vulnerable flesh and bones inside this
flying death trap. “Ya think?” he snapped. “What’s causing it?”

Perhaps flying at such high speeds was finally destabilizing the aircraft. Perhaps the dive had
damaged it. Perhaps he’d misjudged his shot into the fuselage and hit something vital; obviously this
plane was greatly modified from its original state. “Unknown, sir. However, the cause is most likely
internal and self-initiated.”

*Self-initiated.* The quaking rattled the very deck plates, the vibration potent enough to shake the
armor around Tony’s legs. Tony looked around helplessly, his mind racing and his heart pounding.
He had no idea what to do. Natasha stayed in a low crouch, her eyes betraying the fear that never
graced her firm face and taut body. She held her gun tightly. Tony highly doubted that would be
efficient enough to fight whatever was coming. This was happening, whatever it was, and it was becoming
increasingly obvious there wasn’t much they could do to stop it from here. He grabbed her hand and
held tight. “Patch me through to Fury. Now!”

“Stark, what’s the situation?” came Fury’s tense voice.

“I’m getting Romanoff out of here!”

“She’s unharmed?” Fury asked.

“Yes! When we’re clear, have your people blow the hell out of this thing! I don’t know what’s on
Suddenly the deck just disappeared. The fuselage completely fell away, and there was nothing but blue sky and clouds and the New York skyline in the distance.

It was pretty damn surreal. Tony watched with wide eyes, disbelief rendering his mind utterly incapable of rational thought, as the deck plating and bulkheads came apart from each other. It was as if every bolt, every screw, every bit of connective tissue of the plane’s innards just separated in slow motion. The massive engines winked out, the turbines slowing to a languid, lazy stop. The wings continued on their forward trajectory for a long, peaceful moment, flying still even as the body of the aircraft dropped away. And then they went down. It was serene, incredible, and utterly mind-blowing.

And he realized they were falling, too.

“Holy shit,” he whispered. The shock of it all had caused him to let go of Natasha and Natasha to let go of him, and he looked down to find the red-haired assassin tumbling away from him toward the sparkling water still hundreds and hundreds of feet below. He moved without thinking, angling down and firing the thrusters in his boots and reaching as far as he could. He grabbed her wrist a breath later and stopped their plummet.

She clung to him, shaken and terrified, but whatever they might have said was drowned in the sound of rockets firing. The capsules, now free of their confines in the fuselage, tumbled just a moment before their propulsion systems activated. With a burst of white light, they shot forward, streaking through the clouds and sky.

Toward New York City.
“Fury, the hostiles are live and flying!” Tony roared, pulling Natasha up firmer against him. “They’re incoming in less than a minute!”

There was a chaotic rush of orders over the SHIELD communications line as Fury and Hill relayed commands to the fighter pilots still airborne. Whatever jets that hadn’t been destroyed by the drones were scrambling to intercept, but they were too far away. Tony didn’t think anything could stop those missiles (or whatever the hell they were) from reaching the city. “Stark, do something!” howled the irate and maybe even panicked director. Tony could hear him calling for the evacuation, but it was too late. Too fucking late.

“Climb around me,” Tony said to Romanoff, who still seemed fairly woozy from their near death experience just seconds prior. She was dazed and ashen and struggling for breath. At this altitude (the trauma she might have suffered from her collision with the ceiling aside), hypoxia could render a person delirious or unconscious in a matter of minutes. She still had her oxygen mask, but any number of issues might have compromised her respiration. Tony was worried at her sluggish comprehension of his orders and her extremely uncharacteristic clumsiness as she tried to do as he asked. Impatient as those capsules rocketed away, he helped her slide to his back. “Wrap your arms around my neck. Tight. As tight as you can. Got it?”

“Yes,” came her gasping reply.

“Hang on.” Iron Man grabbed onto Natasha’s gloved hands where they were circling his throat and fired his thrusters. They descended and flew toward the distant city as fast as they could, as fast as Tony dared with Romanoff hanging onto him for dear life. “Thor!” he called, praying the other Avengers were ready and wired into the conversation.

“I am here,” the demigod’s steady voice responded. Tony could imagine them, Barton, Banner, and Thor, standing atop Stark Tower and watching to the west at the harbor where he’d flown not more than a few minutes ago. Watching and waiting and wondering.

“I need you in the sky. Light these bastards up! Hurry!”

There was no answer, but as Tony chased the capsules across the sky toward the city, he saw the gathering of dark clouds over midtown. He saw the bright flashes of lightning against the blackening sky, the bolts arcing along the malignant thunderheads like raking fingers. They converged on a small spot that was rising upward at unimaginable speeds. That spot halted its ascent and shot madly toward them.

Thor met the onslaught head on. Iron Man registered the building electrical energy in the sky as the god of lightning unleashed his attack. The capsules were obviously jacked into whatever remote system that had piloted the transport, as they scattered when the lightning flashed and reached toward them. *Fuck,* Tony thought furiously. *Unbelievable.* Thor rushed past one, driving Mjölnir into its side. The capsule was flung off its course by the crushing blow, its plating severely damaged. It tumbled into the ocean below. *At least they’re not indestructible.* But there was no time for Thor to attack each in turn. The city was directly before them.

“Stark!” Natasha screamed, and Tony snapped his attention from Thor to what was in front of him.
He ducked desperately, barely avoiding being struck by a flying piece of metal. More followed, flung from the capsules ahead of them as they began to shed their casings.

“Hold on!” he roughly said to his hapless passenger as he banked wildly, dodging the debris. He looked ahead and saw that the casings had fallen away to reveal racks of what looked like robots. He barely got a glance before the shining silver and black forms detached from their holdings, each tumbling briefly before engaging rockets in their legs and propelling across the harbor. There seemed to be six within each capsule. “Well, at least they’re not bombs,” Tony muttered, flying faster to maintain a hot pursuit.

“What the hell are they?” came Barton’s tense voice over the communications link.

“Robots, and I’m guessing not friendly,” Tony answered. He quickly did the math in his head. There were more than a hundred of these things, and he had no idea what they were capable of. “We need to contain this!”

The sky crackled furiously, the heavy, dark clouds rapidly gathering above Thor’s wildly spinning hammer. With a yell he unleashed lightening, the bolts arcing violently from Mjölnir and jumping across the harbor to strike the slew of robots. The electricity shot from one dark form to another, but none of them were destroyed. The ineffective attack did get their attention, however, and they abandoned their course toward the city to zoom upward at Thor. The demigod’s eyes widened in surprise and a touch of fear as the robots shifted their direction. Suddenly a slew of lasers were fired in his direction, and Thor dove deep toward the water to avoid the shots.

Iron Man shot past, cutting through the cloud of enemies and dangerous lasers as they sliced through the clouds at the retreating Thor. He caught a better glimpse of one of the robots. “JARVIS, analyze. What are we dealing with?”

“I cannot get a stable sensor lock with in this chaos. Sir, I suggest you take Agent Romanoff to safety. You cannot fight effectively with her on your back.” Tony was pretty goddamn tired of people stating the obvious, but getting Natasha to the city was easier said than done with the chaos around him. The robots followed Thor’s fast, evasive moves with disturbing precision even as the warrior launched lightening behind him to thwart them. Tony couldn’t spare his hands to offer much in terms of aid. Hell, there wasn’t much he could do period. Obviously these machines were far more interested in Thor than attacking the city. As he spent a precious moment considering it, he realized none of the robots had continued on their path toward New York. All of them were engaged with Thor over the harbor. Tony had a feeling if he attacked, they were also be focused on him. The airborne Avengers were vastly outnumbered; there was no reason not to have at least some of the robots begin the assault if their intent was truly to destroy the city.

A plan rapidly formed in his mind. “Fury, can you evacuate Central Park?”

“Why?” Fury asked, his voice tinged with surprise but a measure of calm at hearing the spark of an idea in Stark’s voice. “You want to bring this disaster into the city?”

“These things are interested in us at the moment. Let’s fight on ground of our choosing. Like not in the middle of the harbor where only two of us can do anything!” There was a pause. Tony sacrificed a little of his grip on Natasha to wrench his arm forward and fire at a robot that had cut low to shoot at a ferry in the river. His repulsor beam struck the robot in the shoulder with enough force to seriously disrupt its flight path, and the enemy crashed into the water. Two – no, five – others broke from their pursuit of Thor and careened after him. There wasn’t time to argue. Central Park was the closest thing they had to a wide, less populated area where the chance of civilian casualties and massive property damage were reduced. They had no idea what these things would do if they tried to pull them away from the city. Mission objectives: take down the Avengers. Destroy New
Killing the Avengers certainly seemed to be a priority. That was terrifying, but even without Steve’s mind for strategy, Tony knew they could use this to their advantage.

“Man of Metal, we cannot hold this!” Thor roared.

“Clear out Central Park!” Tony hollered. “Just do it! Get us open ground!”

“We’re on it, Stark,” Fury said.

One of the robots launched some sort of missile at a barge steaming rapidly across the harbor, and it exploded in a fairly sizeable ball of fire. Tony was too close, and the blast struck him violently. He lost control, spinning wildly, falling. “Shit, shit, shit… Shit!” Tony cried, angling around as he felt Romanoff’s legs loosen from his torso and her arms slip from his neck. He grabbed her wrist, and her fingers latched around his hand in a crushing grip. “Hang on! Just hang on!” The robots were turning their attention to the bridges before them. Tony launched every weapon he could while maintaining his hold on Natasha, desperate to stop the small group of hostiles from taking out the Brooklyn Bridge. He could see the people gawking, getting out of their stopped cars and watching the wild skirmish in the sky with wide eyes. Like sitting fucking ducks. “Thor, help!”

There was the sound of something very fast propelling by. The remaining SHIELD jets, accompanied by the Air Force, arrived just in time to direct the attention of the robots from the crowded bridge. A couple of the hostiles were destroyed, the unfortunate targets of the jets’ missiles, and Tony couldn’t help but breathe a sigh of relief. But there was not a moment to spare, because the situation was out of control. “We need to lead this party into the city. Thor, you with me?”

“Yes!” Thor shouted, and the crack of thunder was almost deafening. Smoke billowed across the Brooklyn Bridge and up into the clouds. Tony whirled, straining to maintain his grasp on Natasha, as another loud whoosh rocketed past him and Thor flew quickly upward to draw the remaining robots away. He shot up into the ominous sky, leaving a trail of rapidly condensing air as the dark clouds swirled and twisted around him.

Tony watched as pale blue light winked wildly behind the clouds, betraying the violence of the fight that was raging above him. He wasted not a second, shooting across the water alongside the bridge as quickly as he could. “Hulk, Hawkeye, get over to the park!” Tony ordered.

“Already on it,” Barton responded.

Natasha groaned, struggling to get her other hand up to reinforce her grip. “You sure this is a good idea?” she demanded as they flew over the southern areas of the city. By now the public was aware of what was happening. People were screaming in the streets, panicking to take shelter as yet again the Avengers were struggling to fight the monstrous threat facing New York.

Tony wasn’t sure of anything, other than he didn’t like playing leader one goddamn bit. “No. You got anything better?” She didn’t, or couldn’t, answer as they swooped through the maze of buildings toward Midtown. Ahead Stark Tower rose above the surrounding skyscrapers, and Tony wondered if maybe his assertion that they do this without Rogers was premature and stupid. But he stopped his doubts from ever becoming anything more than a tiny whine in the back of his mind. They could do this without the Cap. They had to do this without the Cap. If Steve came out and got himself or someone else hurt or killed… Maybe that was a trivial thing over which to be concerned considering the monumental danger facing every person in the city, but the strength and determination of Captain America had saved the world already. Twice. Tony didn’t even want to give Steve the chance to fail.
The green and orange and yellow expanse of Central Park appeared before him. “JARVIS, where are they?” A couple blips appeared on the screen as the AI traced their transponder signals. A breath later, Iron Man was hovering above the ground below Umpire Rock of Central Park and gingerly setting Black Widow to her feet. She staggered momentarily, ripping the oxygen mask from her face. As Tony settled onto the concrete, Barton and Banner ran up to them. The sounds of hundreds of sirens wailing disturbed the stillness of the autumn afternoon. Cops and firemen everywhere, rushing people away, forcing the fastest evacuation possible. The huge playground was thankfully already deserted. And not a moment too soon.

“Lord Thor is approaching with one hundred fifteen hostile targets in pursuit,” JARVIS alerted him. “He will arrive in less than one minute.”

“They’re coming, guys,” Tony said. “Lots of them. I don’t know much, other than they’re being piloted through a remote satellite signal. JARVIS is trying to decrypt it, maybe get in control of it or at least stop it. We probably should assume the shit will hit the fan long before we can crack it.”

Bruce looked perturbed. Clint eyed Natasha worridly, his eyes lingering on the gash on her brow and the way she stood slightly hunched as though straightening her torso was too painful and difficult to manage. “You okay, Nat?” he asked, grabbing her arm.

She didn’t bother with an answer. “Where’s Rogers?”

“He can’t fight,” Tony quickly and sternly answered before Bruce or Clint could speak. He didn’t want to risk being called on his decision-making, not when there was no time to change their course.

Natasha shook her head, a cool breeze raking through her red hair. She looked disturbed and exasperated, confusion filling her icy eyes. She’d missed all of the stress and trauma, the very deterioration of their team, over the last few days. If she was angry that no explanation was forthcoming, it wasn’t obvious. When she’d left, Steve had hardly been capable of rejoining the Avengers, so his absence likely wasn’t all that much of a shock. But she was concerned. And afraid. “Who’s leading then? And do we have a plan?”

The dark clouds rolled closer, and the rumble of thunder was louder and louder. Tony looked up and saw Thor darting through the blackening sky, the lightning storm following him. Laser bolts raced after, and then the swarm of robots, indistinct dots from this distance, descended, headed straight for them. They looked like a plague of locusts. “Save the city,” Tony said.

Then hell descended upon them.

Thor hit the top of Umpire Rock with an earth-shattering thud, the ground vibrating and cracking under the force of his impact. The robots followed, raining fire down, the laser bolts scorching the concrete beneath their feet as they scattered and dove to safety. Tony heard a familiar roar and saw a massive blur of green catapult from the ground beside him up onto Umpire Rock, grabbing at the first robots that landed. The machines lithely avoided the Hulk’s grasp, eliciting another enraged howl. Tony finally got a good look at their foes. They were more than seven feet tall, thin, skeletal beings composed of hard, sleek metal. Their arms and legs were unnaturally long, covered in plating and equipped with various hidden and interchangeable shooting and stabbing weapons if JARVIS’ scans were correct. Their chests were broader than their hips, gray and white and black, but without any identifying markings. They were strong, fast, and emotionless. Their glinting skulls were jawless (which was pretty damn hideous), and they had white, glowing eyes that rang of malice for being nothing more than lights embedded in steel. Tony had dealt with robotic soldiers before; the incident with Justin Hammer and Anton Vanko stealing his tech had pitted him against a slew of Iron Man clones. But these weren’t terribly similar to his own suit, not in design or construction, which meant someone else in the world was developing technology capable of doing what he did.
Goddamn HYDRA. That really pissed him off.

One of the robots sprinted toward him, unbelievably fast, and he twisted to avoid the swipe of its arm. He punched at it, slamming his fist into the chest plate with all his might, but it hardly even dented the metal. His next strike was caught, the sword like tool at the end of the robot’s arm effortlessly and rapidly retracting and shifting to form a hand that latched painfully around his wrist. Tony gritted his teeth, opening his palm and firing a repulsor blast at the robot’s face. It didn’t flinch, didn’t release its powerful grip, didn’t react at all so far as Tony could tell. “Tough fuckers,” he growled, shoving back.

“Indeed, sir. The plating around their torsos and heads blocks my scanners, so I cannot detect a power source.” Tony whirled, pulling the robot with him and trying desperately to block the blows from the other arm while wrenching his trapped limb away. “The metal is an unknown alloy of titanium, steel, iron, and other materials which I cannot identify. It is both unusually durable, lightweight, and flexible.”

Tony grunted, struggling as other robots approached. “Not helpful!” he shouted to JARVIS, firing his hand repulsor beam again and effectively slicing through the arm holding his wrist at the elbow. He kicked the robot away. Losing a portion of its arm didn’t even slow it down. Tony fired the thrusters in his boots, and Iron Man lifted above the burning trees, escaping the swipe of sharp metal and the grasping of crushing mechanical fingers. He gazed around wildly, trying to find the others. Thor was fighting like a madman, Mjölnir swinging powerfully in wide, silver arcs that smashed at the machines surrounding him. Even his heavy blows didn’t stop them, despite the damage they caused. The Hulk grabbed two robots and smashed them together, causing something of a small explosion that surprised the Avenger as he howled and tossed the burning wreckage away. Tony couldn’t see Natasha with all the smoke filling the park. And Hawkeye was in trouble. They had him pinned to the concrete, one of the robots having split its arm into two sword-like appendages that were driven into the ground around Clint’s chest. They were focusing on the injured archer, like they knew he was weak and fallible. Like they knew he didn’t have armor or superhuman strength or unstoppable rage. “Tell me how to beat them!” Tony roared as he dodged a slew of laser blasts and dove.

“They do not appear to have any obvious structural weaknesses, although as you have demonstrated their limbs are less reinforced at the joints,” JARVIS calmly explained.

“Would an EMP knock them out?” Tony asked breathlessly.

“Possibly, but it would need to be a significantly larger blast radius than your suit is capable of producing. I suggest that decrypting the satellite signal is the most certain way of defeating them. I am still processing the decryption algorithm. I estimate another 11.6 minutes are necessary to decode the remote commands, at which point I believe I can sever the connection.”

Another 11.6 minutes. They were outnumbered almost twenty to one against machines that seemed damn near impossible to kill, and JARVIS needed another 11.6 minutes? We’re fucking dead, Tony thought in panic as he fired a barrage of missiles into the group surrounding Barton, careful not to hit the wildly struggling archer on the ground. The explosion of the projectiles against the tough armor plating of the robots did minimal damage, but it did distract them from killing Clint. Tony slammed into the one pinning the other man, sending them both careening and crashing into the concrete. He recovered quickly, pouncing his boot into the head of the damn thing, hoping to snap its neck. No such luck, but he did seriously damage it. He bounded away, using additional thrust from his boots to reach Barton faster. Hawkeye had moved away and drawn an arrow from his quiver, which he nocked and fired as he rolled to a crouch. Tony couldn’t imagine that doing much good against the impenetrable armor covering the robots, but he was wrong as it struck home and promptly exploded
against the chest of the assailant closest to him.

The boom shook the ground and shoved their attackers back in a blinding show of fire and force. Iron Man took their distraction to his advantage and grabbed Barton, hauling him upward and off the ground in a heartbeat. “I told you to stay down!” Tony snapped angrily.

“And where the hell was I supposed to hide?” Clint returned, blood drooling down his forearms from where he’d been sliced when he’d been pinned.

Tony deposited him on the other side of the tallest point of Umpire Rock. “Here. Do your thing.”

“Gladly,” Hawkeye coolly responded, drawing another arrow from his quiver and launching it at a group pursuing Black Widow as she leapt from the side of the rocky hill and into the woods. Her only advantage against their foes was her speed and agility, and she was employing them in full force, racing into the pockets of trees surrounding them with a slew of robots following her. Barton’s shot was true, striking the back of one of her pursuers and unleashing a slew of darts that battered those adjacent and slowed them. One dart even lodged itself in the eye socket of a robot, disrupting it enough to cause it to collide with a tree and crumple to the ground.

The rest of Romanoff’s pursuers were struck by Thor’s flying hammer, which drove one of them into the ground with enough force to obliterate it. Mjölnir immediately flew back across the park to its owner’s outstretched hand, and not a moment too soon as the machines descended on Thor anew as though they sensed he was without his weapon. The Hulk’s roar seemed to shake the trees and rock beneath them as he launched himself up into the air. He grabbed the nearest robot and literally ripped its head from its body. More slammed into him as he fell back to the ground, shooting and punching and stabbing. Barton tried to pick them off, but most of his rapidly fired arrows only glanced off the robots’ protective plating.

“Sir, incoming!” JARVIS warned, and Tony turned and jumped into the air, rocketing up a few hundred feet with a half a dozen enemies in tight pursuit. A few arrows followed him, but Iron Man and his pursuers were well outside of Hawkeye’s range. Tony rotated his body to shoot downward, trying to protect himself, but the robots seemed to anticipate his aim and compensate. That was the entire problem. These things were highly intelligent, highly intuitive, and as fast, strong, and nimble as any of the Avengers. There were five behind him, spiraling after him, matching his moves point for point. He couldn’t shake them. He heard the sound of rockets launching. “Sir!” Red warnings flashed all over the screen before him. But there was nothing he could do.

The first missile hit. It exploded against his belly, and he lost power and thruster control. The second collided with his right arm, and that sent him spinning. The third knocked him from the sky. Pain burst behind his eyes, and suddenly he couldn’t breathe as the world rotated and tipped and twirled wildly and everything was a dizzying streak of red. He knew he was falling, but he couldn’t think enough to correct it. He couldn’t think at all, save for the fact that these bastards obviously had tech to disrupt his suit’s system. And then he struck the ground.

Agony overwhelmed Tony as he hit the concrete alongside Umpire Rock and skidded along the walkway quite a few feet before slamming into the railing of the bridge. Smoke was rising from his charred and damaged suit. He lay there, gasping, his screen rapidly filling with various analyses of Iron Man’s compromised systems and drained energy. The team was shouting, calling to him, but he couldn’t get the air in his lungs or his thoughts in order enough to answer. And the robots were coming again, the same ones (or different, it didn’t really matter) landing on the bridge around him and approaching rapidly. “I am having difficulty recovering some of the key systems,” JARVIS announced grimly. “Sir!”

Tony rolled just in time to avoid a foot ramming into him. The strike smashed through the concrete
where he had been. Iron Man was floundering, jerky and uncoordinated. Whatever they’d hit him with had shot the suit to hell. He managed to close his glove over the railing beside him and haul himself upward, but the robots were already on him. Tony gasped as he was hauled backward and pummeled repeatedly, a series of rapid punches crushing his midsection. The beating was merciless, and he struggled feebly against the assault but the hold on his shoulders was too strong. He heard more yelling over the communications link, something about Hawkeye being flushed from atop Umpire Rock and Black Widow being surrounded, but he couldn’t do a damn thing to help. He couldn’t even help himself.

Who the hell ever thought he could be a leader?

“Rerouting power,” JARVIS said, and the schematic of Iron Man lit up as energy was shunted to the areas that had been damaged. Suddenly he had much better control of his limbs, and Tony grabbed the next fist that came flying at him and crushed it. There were too many around him, however, and the robots shoved him against the railing until the metal warped from the stress. He fell backward, down into the cement well beneath the walkway. He landed roughly on his back, and they were on him in an instant. The assault continued unabated, and his suit was becoming more and more enfeebled by the damage. “Sir, you need to escape. Structural damage at 22%.”

“I’m trying!” Tony ground out. He kicked out, firing the thrusters in his boots. The blast warded off the robots for a moment and sent him scraping backward across the ground to hit the wall. The machines rushed after him, crawling and leaping and advancing like spiders. Their arms shifted and twisted, the sleek parts moving gracefully to reveal their laser cannons once more. They took deadly aim, and Tony knew they wouldn’t miss. And he knew he could never get away in time.

As if the seconds had slowed, he saw the energy arc down the mechanical arms. He saw it build, saw it blossom. Saw it race toward him.

But it never struck.

A blur of blue and red flashed before Tony’s eyes. The lasers burst against stars and stripes and the shield his father had designed to protect the world. “Get out of here!” Captain America ordered, glancing back at him with concerned blue eyes beneath his cowl and shoving back against the force. He pushed with all his considerable strength, the white beams striking his shield and bouncing haphazardly as they were reflected. Rogers looked back at him again as he dug his boots into the ground and fought his way closer to the robots. A few of the deflected beams fortunately hit their own masters, slicing through metal with a hiss. “Didn’t you hear me, Stark? I said go! I have this!”

Those few precious moments proved to be enough for his suit to stabilize itself. “Flight control restored, sir,” JARVIS alerted.

“Then fire it up!” Tony shouted, and he leapt into the air, his thrusters firing perfectly and propelling him away from the cement walkways. He looked back to see Steve finally force his way to the machines firing at him, or what was left of them. He batted away the first robot’s laser cannon and grabbed the already damaged torso and pulled it closer before ramming the powerful edge of his shield in between its neck and chest. It fell away, motionless and burning. He kicked at another, sending the towering foe crashing into the opposite wall with a crunch. Tony watched a moment more, his heart racing and utterly stupefied by relief and disbelief, and then he rocketed away in search of the others.

Steve was back. He knew that now with utter certainty, and the ice that had seemingly permanently lodged in his heart since their captain’s abduction was burned away with a rush of exhilaration and joy. Steve had pulled himself together, fought his way back from the darkness, defeated his despair. Steve was back. That was all he could think as he flew among the trees, firing at anything he saw.
with reckless abandon. *Steve’s back. Cap’s back. He’s back. He’s back!*  

*Thank God.*  

“Listen up, everyone,” came Rogers’ voice over the communications link. “We need to get this under control now before it spreads into the city.”

They were the Avengers in the middle of a serious crisis, so there was no time for celebration and they all knew it. But that didn’t stop the slew of elated comments and the Hulk’s triumphant roar.

“*Slava bogu,*” came Natasha’s winded whisper.

“Thank the Allfather!” Thor roared with half a laugh in his voice.

“Good to have you back, Cap,” Clint said breathlessly. “Need some help here!”

“Already on it,” Tony said as he spotted Hawkeye and Black Widow floundering near the abandoned playground against a horde of enemies. Romanoff was atop one, her legs wrapped around its neck as she twisted its head. Something snapped, but the machine didn’t stop, tipping over. She flipped herself backward, keeping her thighs tightly clenched around the machine and pulling it down with her. Clint was there, driving his combat knife into its skull, and the thing shook once and then shut down. But there were dozens more threatening. One grabbed Clint by the arm and flung him into the jungle gym. The archer hit the structure with a yelp and crumpled to the ground.

“Stark, help us!” Romanoff cried as she retreated to Clint’s fallen form, crouching over him protectively as the robots surrounded them.

Iron Man swooped down, took Natasha’s hand and grabbed Clint by the back of his vest, and launched upward again just as the laser beams cut through the jungle gym behind them and set it ablaze. He dodged more of those damn missiles, weaving through the sky as he flew back to the others. He landed near Steve and Thor, who were heavily engaged. The Hulk bounded from the trees to their left, one robot clinging to his back and another wrapped around his huge arm, beating and cutting him. More followed. Frustrated, the Hulk rammed himself into a tree, which succeeded in loosening the one robot from his body. The mechanical soldier exploded on impact. He reached back and grabbed the other, slamming it repeatedly into the ground, pulverizing it. Laser blasts exploded against the Hulk’s back, sending him down into the earth.

Tony set down, dropping Natasha to her feet and Clint to his knees, before he launched the more of his dwindling arsenal against the robots pursuing the Hulk. Steve’s shield flew past him to strike at those that had followed them from the playground, and Thor launched a barrage of snapping and crackling lightning. The Hulk screamed, ripping a tree from the ground and swinging it at the robots tormenting them. He cut them down and then threw the massive oak at another group. After that, he staggered to his team.

Clint wheezed on the ground, struggling to his knees. “We can’t do this much longer,” he gasped, reaching into his nearly depleted quiver for another arrow. Steve ducked, bringing his newly returned shield to bear as a spray of laser fire raked over the group. He protected Clint and Natasha as Tony brought his hand up to return fire. Mjölnir smashed into another assailant before careening back to Thor’s hand, but then the god was struck down by fire from above as their foes converged on them. Tony vaulted over to him, pulling him away to avoid the next deadly blast while the Hulk leapt and brought the firing robot down.

The Avengers stood close together, eyes darting, breathing heavily and wearily. “How many are
left?” Steve asked, glancing to Tony.


“JARVIS is hacking the signal controlling them. If he can get in, we can shut them down,” Tony said. “It’s our best shot.”

“How long?” asked Rogers.

“Another five and half minutes,” Tony said, glancing at the countdown JARVIS had posted.

“What are they doing?” Thor asked, wiping at his bloody nose and watching as the robots took the sky again and moved away from the burning mess of the park. At first, they flew high as a single, coordinated unit, much like a flock of birds. Then they began to separate.

Steve shook his head, stepping forward. “They’re going after the city. They’re trying to draw us apart.” He pivoted and faced the team. “This is the spot we’re going to defend. Iron Man, Thor, keep their attention in the air. Pull the fight back here to the rock and maintain a strict perimeter around this area. Black Widow and I will do the same on the ground. Hawkeye, you and the Hulk stay here and hold this position. Destroy as many as you can; you’ve got the strength, doc.” The Hulk’s dark eyes lost their maniacal glint for a moment, and then he gritted his teeth and clenched a gigantic fist and nodded. “Protect each other and the city. No unnecessary risks. We just need to hold out until JARVIS shuts these things down. Understand?” Everyone nodded, bolstered by Rogers’ calm and commanding voice. Steve nodded, too. “Good. Let’s do it.”

They broke apart. Tony and Thor took to the sky. He went west and Thor went east, but there were too many enemies racing to the buildings surrounding Central Park for them to contend with alone. There was screaming below, hundreds of police cars and fire trucks blockading the park. People were running for their lives as the robots dove and prepared to attack. “Fury, we could use some air support. Keep these bastards localized above the park!” Tony ordered, doing a quick rundown of Iron Man’s systems as he flew upward toward the dispersing robots. His suit was surviving, but he’d taken a beating. And he was running low on both energy and munitions. He could only pray it would be enough. “Tell your men not to engage unless they have to. Just evade and lead them back to us. These things don’t fuck around.” The last thing they needed were SHIELD jets dropping powerlessly from the sky, struck by whatever weapon had knocked him out earlier.

“Understood, Stark. What’s the situation?” Fury’s voice sounded significantly less tense, even though (in Tony’s opinion) the magnitude of threat hadn’t diminished much despite all the fighting they’d done. And he was pretty damn sure Fury had been able to watch the entire battle thus far somehow. But he was too frantic from everything that had happened to really care.

“We may have an in, so this could all be over in a few minutes. Just keep everyone away and get us some support!” He pointed both palms at the nearest group of robots and fired. His shot cut through the legs of one, and it fell from the sky with its flight system severed. The others turned at his approach, abandoning destroying the empty police cars lining the street. “Yeah, come on, you dickweeds,” he snarled, shooting a few more times as he hovered and waited for his opponents to come after him. “You have an appointment with Doctor Banner.”

He rocketed back to the park, banking hard to the left to narrowly avoid a salvo of laser fire. More of those damning missiles were launched, and Tony swooped low to use the trees to protect him. He deployed some chaff and hoped that would deter them because he didn’t know if his suit could survive another run-in with those weapons. In a wide arc he propelled around Umpire Rock, and the Hulk was there, jumping mightily from the top of the hill to snatch the robots from the sky. His
powerful punches sent them slamming into the rocky terrain below. A moment passed, and he had destroyed a half dozen of them.

Tony circled again, twisting and wildly maneuvering, he couldn’t shake the missiles. There was an explosion behind him, surprising him, and one of the projectiles dropped off his radar. He angled around and saw Barton rapidly loose another arrow, and it found its mark in the second missile. The archer shot down the third a breath later. “Thanks,” Tony said.

“Welcome,” Clint responded.

“The SHIELD jets are inbound, sir,” JARVIS informed him, and Tony flew upward again, noting that the Hulk was quickly dispatching the rest of the small group of hostiles he’d brought. He saw Thor land next beside the Hulk, Mjölnir a silver flash as it crushed the head of the robot closest to him. A proximity warning blared, and Tony looked upward in time to see six SHIELD jets streak through the smoky sky at an extremely low altitude. He followed them, catching a glimpse of blue and black as Steve and Natasha ran along the paths around Umpire Rock, leading those robots who’d landed elsewhere back to the Hulk. Their robot pursuers were literally leveling the trees around them with their laser blasts, but thankfully none of their shots hit either Rogers or Romanoff. Thor was there to aid them as they approached the rock, and Tony stopped watching as he climbed into the sky.

“Come on, fellas, let’s show these assholes who they’re missing with,” Tony said as he joined the jets in the dogfight raging above Central Park.

A few minutes passed filled with nothing but the strain and terror of battle. They lost one of the SHIELD pilots almost immediately, the wreckage of his burning jet tumbling down onto the park’s perimeter and nearly crushing civilians. Tony instructed the others to back off and merely contain the battle should the enemies stray from the engagement zone. Thankfully they followed his orders. The robots (reduced to forty-one now) had become sufficiently interested in the Avengers again, and their priority had become splitting their team and focusing their vicious attacks on those less protected. On those more human and thus easier to destroy.

Black Widow was losing it. Tony realized that as he thudded to the ground in front of her and took a hit that would have probably killed her had she been struck. And she would have been struck for certain. He wrestled with the robot, his own strength waning as the machine pinned him. Thor swung, and Mjölnir struck the robot on top of him and sent it spinning and flying. Tony struggled to his feet, standing over Natasha’s trembling form. Her face was cut in numerous places, and her black cat suit was torn on her left arm and thigh. He knew she was exhausted.

“Your armor appears damaged, Stark,” Thor declared, breathing heavily and staggering slightly as he recovered from their latest bout.

Tony couldn’t help but pant as well, JARVIS running through the latest systems update. It wasn’t good. Power was reduced to 29%. Structural damage was at 63%. He couldn’t take much more. None of them could. “Cap,” he called through the communications link, “we’re running thin out here.”

There was a worrying lag before Rogers responded. “Fall back!” came Steve’s gasped response. They didn’t need to be told twice. The line of robots swarming around them pressed closer, and Tony grabbed Natasha and pulled her into his embrace. Thor spun Mjölnir at his side and launched into the air, and Tony followed, rocketing low through the woods and along the walking paths back to Umpire Rock.

The Hulk was smashing, but even he looked beaten and weary. Captain America stood behind him,
doing his best to fight the dozen robots around them while protecting an arrow-less Clint. The gun Clint had drawn and was furiously emptying was doing nothing, the bullets deflected by the robots’ plating. The smoky air was leaden with desperation and mounting panic. “How much longer?” Steve demanded, barely catching a blow from one of their assailants overhead with his shield and pushing back with all his strength.

Tony cradled Romanoff protectively as he cut power abruptly so the robots would overshoot him, and then he dove downward to set her safely to the ground. “Two minutes, fifteen seconds!” He executed a wide round-house kick, knocking the machine reaching toward him to the ground. The dozens they’d left behind in the woods were already upon them, circling in the air and launching salvo after salvo of laser fire. The damn things were fucking relentless, and the Avengers were wearing rapidly.

Hawkeye slammed his boot down upon the chest of one of the robots that Thor had knocked over, holding it immobile for a second while the demigod kicked off the head. Even without that the body still struggled, springing nimbly to its feet and knocking Clint on his ass. Steve jumped down in front of him, blocking the laser blast with his shield just before it struck, sending the bolt back into the headless machine. It fell with a smoldering hole in its chest. Natasha helped Clint stand, but the archer sagged against her, holding his side where he’d been stabbed. “Don’t these things ever give up?” he moaned.

It was clear the two master assassins were finished. They’d been tormented and pursued constantly during the battle. Tony watched worriedly as Clint went back onto his knees, Natasha beside him, looking up with worried eyes. “What now?” she asked, shaking her head.

They looked up, seeing a good portion of the remainder of the robots circling a hundred feet overhead. The SHIELD jets attempted to engage them, guns blazing as they hovered nearby, but the bullets fell uselessly to the ground and it was too dangerous in such close quarters to use missiles. Their attack was met with deadly retaliation, the machines unleashing a concentrated spray of laser fire at the aircraft. One exploded in the air. The other spun wildly after one of its wings was almost evaporated. The pilot ejected, but the wreckage came tumbling down. “Shit!” Tony cried, throwing himself over Romanoff and Barton as the flaming mess struck just in front of them. The explosion was powerful and devastating, shoving the team back into the rocks behind. The Hulk had been the closest, and the shock wave tossed him like a rag doll into the hill where he struck and slid down. “Fury, get your people out of here!”

“One minute, nine seconds until decryption,” JARVIS stated calmly.

“What the hell are they doing?” Clint gasped, coughing in the oily smoke that blanketed them. Still, his sharp eyes were tracing the robotic army as it abandoned the melee and took to the skies. The Hulk lumbered closer, watching the growing menace above warily, but Steve’s hand stayed his attack. There were thirty-two robots left operational, and they were gathering above, circling like vultures. “What the hell?”

“Cap, we should get out of here,” Tony said, eyeing the swirling show in mounting worry. This didn’t look good.

“Thor,” Steve said, turning back to his team, “blast them.” He wasn’t about to throw away the opportunity to destroy their enemies now that they were conveniently gathered in a single spot. Tony normally would have agreed, but he had a hell of a bad feeling.

Thor wasn’t as quick to respond as he would have been, obviously greatly worn. But he nodded, clenching his jaw and lifting his hammer. He never got a chance to do much more. A blast from one of the assembling robots felled him, and he struck the ground roughly on his back, Mjölnir shattering
the concrete as it tumbled from his hand. Steve jumped over him, raising his shield and guarding him from the next shot. The blast reflected wildly and burned a hole into the rock behind them. “We need to get out of here!” Tony shouted again.

The Hulk glanced about in mounting dread. He looked afraid, and that was saying something. “Run,” he rumbled.

Steve pulled a grimacing Thor to his feet, the demigod grabbing his fallen hammer as he rose. “You’re right,” Rogers said. “Run!”

They did, but it was too late. Tony’s sensors detected the build-up of a massive amount of energy above them. He knew what it was without JARVIS’ useless assessment. They all did. “They are charging their cannons. By my calculations, if they concentrate their fire on your position, the blast radius will be more than five hundred feet.”

“How fucking long?” Tony snapped breathlessly.

“Fifteen seconds,” JARVIS dismally answered.

Fuck. He zoomed ahead, trying to clear the innumerable fallen, burning trees and debris from their path. Five hundred feet in all directions. A circle filled with the wreckage from their battle, with no easy escape. “And how long until you’re in?”

“Thirty-two seconds until signal decryption. I will require another few seconds after that to initiate the command to terminate operations. If it is successful, the result should be immediate.”

None of that mattered if they couldn’t get away. This was all pointless. He halted and turned to the others. “No time to run!” Tony shouted. “Somebody hitch a ride with me!” Unfortunately with Iron Man this depleted, he wasn’t even sure if he could carry anyone else. “Hurry!” He gestured frantically and grabbed Clint when no one moved fast enough.

“They will not allow us to retreat,” Thor said sullenly, shaking his head, his eyes wide with fear. He was right, and they all knew it.

“If we try to leave, they might aim that elsewhere. We can’t risk them turning this anywhere but here,” Steve said breathlessly.

“Ten seconds,” JARVIS announced.

“Have to try,” Tony argued. “We can’t just–”

“Stark, Thor, you guys take Romanoff and Barton and fly out of here,” Steve ordered. The hum of the guns charging above was growing louder and louder, an oppressive rumble that rattled the ground beneath their feet and the very air around them. “The Hulk can make it. I’ll stay and present a target.” His eyes were calm, so damn calm.

“No!” the Hulk yelled.

“Never,” Clint snarled, pulling away from Tony angrily.

“You’re fucking crazy, Rogers! You think we’ll leave you?” Tony shouted furiously. Leave it to Steve to be back to his old self-sacrificing nonsense right away. “We’re not losing you again, so let’s go! Now! All of us or none of us!”

Suddenly the hum vanished. Everything was eerily still. The Avengers looked up, alarmed and
mystified. The robots abruptly exploded. The shock knocked the team down as the sky filled with fire, the force of the detonation visibly disrupting the air in a rapidly spreading wave that shattered windows for miles and vibrated buildings. It seemed the entire city was rattling. Then it stopped, and all that remained of the robotic army that had nearly destroyed them was a gentle rain of ash.

Nobody moved. Nobody spoke. The incredulity of what had just occurred was too much, salvation simply too unexpected and too fantastic to permit coherent thought. Hearts pounded. Lungs heaved. Limbs shook. Soot fell slowly and peacefully from the sky. Everything, the ground, the trees, the clouds… Everything seemed to be burning. But the city was unharmed. And so were they.

Tony’s entire body ached ferociously. He struggled to lean up, retracting Iron Man’s face plate as he did so, coughing. Then he glanced around. Clint rolled onto his back, wincing. Natasha barely lifted her head from her arms only to let it sink back down. Bruce had quickly reverted to his normal self, and he pushed up to his hands and knees and looked dazedly around in relief. Thor tipped back his head and tried to control his breathing, Mjölnir resting idly on his thigh. And Steve pulled off his cowl, wiping dirt all over his sweaty face, panting. He caught Tony’s gaze and the smallest bit of grin curled the edge of his mouth.

JARVIS’ calm voice eventually crept over the communications link. “It seems the robots were programmed to self-destruct once they lost contact with the satellite. I do apologize for that. I must have miscalculated my time estimation.”

Tony closed his eyes and flopped back down with a grunt and a clank. “I’ll let it go this time, JARVIS.”

“Very good, sir.”

Chapter End Notes

Slava bogu. – Thank God.
Chapter 24

Four people had died.

However, there had not been a single civilian casualty. Not one innocent person had been killed, despite the catastrophic damage done to a large portion of Central Park. There had been no serious loss of life. Aside from the four SHIELD fighter pilots that had bravely given their lives for the defense of the city, everybody was safe.

Tony called that a hell of a victory.

The helicarrier was hovering in the Atlantic off the coast of Connecticut. Normally it would have been invisible to the naked eye and the best detection technology in the world, but there was simply too much traffic and activity to bother with secrecy. As usual, after the battle in Central Park had concluded, SHIELD’s focus had immediately shifted from defense to containment and clean-up. They had dozens of teams working in the park to gather the remains of the robotic army, trucks and helicopters ferrying what was found to headquarters in Midtown and the helicarrier. There wasn’t much, as any robot even somewhat operational had self-destructed when its connection to the satellite had been severed. This left only a heap of wreckage in the burned and battered sections of the park where the Avengers had fought, but the occasional detached robotic limb or other body part had been located among debris. In addition, SHIELD had a salvage unit combing the deep blue waters of the Atlantic in search of the remains of the airplane that had transported the machines to the city. Any information that could alert them as to who had created these mechanical monsters was, at the moment, a prized possession.

After the chaotic conclusion of the battle, Fury had dispatched a quinjet to collect the Avengers and bring them back to the helicarrier. They had complied without much of a fuss. When the jet had set down on flight deck, a medical team had been waiting. Sommers had been there to escort the weary team to the infirmary. There they’d spent a couple of hours being checked over and patched up. Clint and Natasha had been the most battered of the group, which, sadly, made sense given Clint’s previously compromised state and how very hounded and targeted the two assassins had been during the battle. They were fortunate, though. Clint had only some bad bruises and a slight concussion. Natasha’s collision with the ceiling of the transport had resulted in a few cracked ribs, which had been aggravated in the fight, but it was nothing that wouldn’t heal on its own with time and rest. Tony was fairly banged up as well, but his suit was in far worse shape than he was. For once he didn’t mind sitting and letting the nurses and doctors fret over him, dabbing at the cuts that littered his body, wrapping his sore chest and aching shoulder, bandaging his variety of contusions and scrapes. He was too damn tired yet again to be a pain in the ass. But this was a good tired. A triumphant tired. So he simply cooperated and watched as Sommers hounded Steve to let the doctor check him over. Rogers was, by far, the least injured of them, but Sommers was damn persistent that he be examined. It was almost like a mother hen recovering her lost chick. Eventually Steve relented, and Tony was relieved at that, even though he would never admit it. And when Sommers gave Rogers a clean bill of health, he finally let himself believe that they had won.

The other Avengers clearly felt the same, though nobody said as much. Nobody said anything, ignoring the fact that they were back in the infirmary where so many of their darkest nightmares had played out. Where they had almost lost Steve and Clint. Where long hours had been spent in fear and guilt and grief and pain. Nobody said a thing about the hell that had befallen them, about how everything had unraveled and their team had nearly been destroyed, both emotionally and physically. And nobody said that they’d survived it or that they had ended up back where it had all started, changed. Stronger. Bound together more than ever before.
It was all obvious. And now it deserved some measure of recognition, of celebration. They weren’t the types to really do that sort of thing, but they did it anyway.

Thor was the first to put decorum and propriety aside as he roughly embraced Steve, tugging the reticent Captain America to his chest. Steve hesitated, but only at first, and then he wrapped his arms around his friend. Bruce was there, hugging Steve as well despite his aversion to personal contact. It was the first time Bruce smiled, truly smiled with no reservations or lingering doubts, in a long time. Natasha followed, the deadly assassin making no effort to hide her relief, as she, too, let down her guard and enveloped Steve in a very tender show of affection. Then Clint, even as sore as he was, was giving Steve a firm handshake that turned into a brotherly hug.

Tony smiled. He nudged Rogers playfully on the shoulder, feeling ridiculously proud of himself, of all of them, and happy. “You made it, Cap,” he said.

Steve smiled, too. Really smiled. There was still darkness creeping about his gaze, but it was deep and distant, far removed from here and now. “Yeah. I did.”

Their captain was back. They were a team again.

After that, Fury summoned them to the bridge. Dirty and bruised but no worse for the wear, the Avengers stepped out into the helicarrier’s command center to a standing ovation. It was really an unusual show, something Tony would never have believed unless he had been there in the flesh to see it. The agents and technicians all rose from their seats and clapped and cheered like unrepentant fans. Even Hill smiled and looked embarrassed for having done it. “Alright, everyone, quiet down,” Fury demanded, calling over the din. The bridge immediately shifted back to business, silent and stern. Fury gestured to the conference table, where they sat gingerly and wearily.

The Director of SHIELD looked firmly at Captain America and then smiled. He seemed relieved and proud and pleased with himself. Like he’d known all along. “Good to have you back, Cap,” he said.

Steve glanced to his teammates, leaning back in his chair slightly. He was filthy (they all were) but aside from that, a few scrapes, and the persistent dark circles around his eyes, he looked on the surface like the same man who’d left the helicarrier a month ago to stop a weapons sale on a routine mission in the Middle East. “Glad to be back, sir.”

Fury nodded, his face switching effortlessly into a taut expression of seriousness. With a touch of his hands to a few controls on the side of the table, the holographic projectors came to life. They displayed the meager information they’d managed to gather from their encounter with the robots. Tony had fed the data from Iron Man’s scanners into SHIELD’s mainframe, and a three-dimensional schematic of the mechanical soldiers they’d faced appeared above the table’s center, rotating slowly. In addition, there were a few maps of Turkey, a small flashing icon marking the location of the factory from where the machines had supposedly originated. “We need to figure out what attacked the city,” Fury announced, gesturing to the data.

All eyes turned to Tony. Of course, the billionaire thought wearily. He leaned backward in his seat, folding his arms across his chest. “Why are you looking at me? This wasn’t my tech.”

“Did you recognize it at all?” Fury asked.

Tony shook his head. He knew Stark Industries’ long history in the weapons business led a lot of people to assume that that was all he knew, this business of efficient killing. His detractors often linked a lot of the world’s problems to his weapons, never mind the assholes that stole them and pulled their triggers. But this time he was truly at a loss. He’d recognize his own work, and this
looked completely foreign to him. “Nope. If we had some samples, I might be able to reverse engineer them.”

“Oh, come on! Really? You want to pretend that this is some insane coincidence?” Tony shook his head dramatically. “They came after Stars N’ Stripes, the only man left alive who fought them back in their heyday, with a weapon designed from the Red Skull’s own blood specifically to take out the world’s only super soldier, and then when he’s down they send in their army of blood-thirsty, violent, indestructible robots to raze one of the most populated cities in the country. I am the only one who thinks the timing of all this is somewhat suspect?”

“Not in its finished form, no,” Romanoff clarified. She looked apologetically toward Rogers. “I did what I could to track potential buyers of the toxin or what’s needed to create it, but the lab was too secure to get inside any of the offices. The workers weren’t permitted on the grounds after dusk, and infiltrating was impossible. This place was heavily guarded.” The fact that they had security thick and powerful enough to thwart Black Widow was saying something. That bad feeling that this was all part of some larger plot, something more dangerous and sinister, festered in Tony’s heart again until it was physically distressing and he winced despite himself. It was pretty goddamn unusual for him to hate being right, but this time he really fucking despised it. Natasha pressed a few keys on the console before her, and a slew of pictures appeared. This lab was nestled in the woods. Much like the other facility in Afghanistan, it was dark and secluded and veritably screamed “go away” from its shadowy, inhospitable appearance. “I did manage to get these.”

The computer scrolled through the dozens of images. Some were of biochemical laboratory stations not unlike those that had burned in Afghanistan. But this place was obviously significantly more elaborate. Tony saw what could only be components of the robots, an entire series of those hideous, jawless skulls laid out on a production line. “It’s like goddamn Skynet,” he muttered disdainfully. Thor’s face fractured in confusion, and he opened his mouth to ask the obvious question, but Tony waved it away before he could. “Forget it. I take it they shipped these parts down to the factory in Turkey?”
“En masse,” Natasha confirmed, “about three days ago. I snuck aboard the transport. I didn’t know what they were building.”

“Hold it,” Bruce said, standing as the computer paused in sequentially displaying the photos. He grabbed the holographic line of pictures and pulled it to the right, going through a few images until he found the one that had caught his attention. He narrowed his eyes as he gazed at the collection of vials, and he looked displeased. “Yeah, that’s it. That’s a precursor of the toxin.”

Clint’s face darkened, and his eyes hardened with a murderous glint. “I guess that answers the question of whether or not this is a problem,” he muttered.

“It’s not,” Tony quickly assured, settling his confident gaze on Steve. After the remarkable change in Steve that day, after the return of their leader, he didn’t want the slightest hint of doubt or dismay to jeopardize his progress. He saw the demons lurking in Steve’s eyes, saw the nightmares and memories that he’d so narrowly escaped. And he knew better than anyone that this wouldn’t be the end of it. This was only a single battle, thankfully and importantly won, but it wasn’t the war. The war would never be won. “We can fix this, Cap.”

Fury narrowed his gaze. “You’re sure you can?” he asked. Nobody had informed the master spy of their progress in permanently protecting Steve from the toxin. Tony still wasn’t sure the SHIELD Director needed or even deserved to know.

“I’m sure,” Tony said forcefully. He turned back to Steve. “You don’t need to worry about it.”

It was hard to tell if Steve was. His expression was damn near unreadable. “I know,” he said. “It’s a moot point. And the toxin’s only a weapon against me. These… robot things could have destroyed the city, and they would have if JARVIS hadn’t stopped them. That’s a much bigger threat.” There was nothing they could do about the toxin at this point. It had been developed, proven viable in battle, and exposed to the world. What had happened was immutable, and either Tony’s machine and Bruce’s serum would work, or they wouldn’t. Steve was dismissing, but not out of avoidance. Out of acceptance. There was nothing about this conversation that warranted a smile, but Tony grinned anyway, even if it was tiny and brief. He couldn’t shake that elated thought from his head. Steve was back. “You said you weren’t sure this was HYDRA,” Rogers said, glancing at Fury intermittently as his keen eyes scanned the images on the holographic display. “But this sure as hell looks like the HYDRA bases we took out during the war.”

“What does that say there?” Barton asked, standing with a barely contained wince. He pulled one of the displays closer to him, trying to get a better look at blurry text on what looked like a black missile casing. “Can we magnify this?”

“It’s AIM,” Romanoff answered even before the computer began to manipulate the image. The angry set of her jaw and the anxious note in her otherwise composed voice indicated she knew exactly who that was.

Tony and Bruce exchanged worried and questioning glances. “Aim? What is this? Some sort of archery group?” Thor asked, growing irritated at his lack of understanding.

Tony highly doubted they had acronyms on Asgard, and he knew that those seemingly simple little letters stood for something bigger before Fury even opened his mouth. “Advanced Idea Mechanics.” Then he recognized the name. A few years ago, well before the birth of Iron Man, he’d had some dealings with an international consortium of brilliant scientists, industrialists, and engineers, seeking (supposedly) the betterment of the world through technology. He’d been invited to contribute to this somewhat secretive group by this loser, Aldrich Killian. Tony’s brains and deep pockets and considerable manufacturing assets would undoubtedly prove a boon to anyone trying to
do what these people envisioned. But he’d turned it down both because he’d gotten a bit of a bad vibe from the unexpected offer and because, at the time, he couldn’t have cared less about “contributing” to a good cause that didn’t have the Stark Industries’ logo splayed all over it. And Killian had frankly weirded him out.

That bad feeling kept getting worse and worse. Tony may have understood (and if Bruce’s grimace was any indication, maybe he did as well – perhaps they’d also approached him?), but Steve and Thor seemed utterly lost. Fury sighed gently. “AIM is a subversive group of scientists that once fooled the world with some high talk of developing technologies that might solve humanity’s biggest problems: clean, renewable energy, cures for diseases, eradicating hunger. As we discovered, however, their true goals were world domination. We exposed them, sent them into hiding. I’d hoped we’d manage to permanently disrupt their funding, but apparently not.” Fury’s expression hardened into one of frustration and a bit of dismay. His gaze drifted over each of the Avengers before settling on Rogers. “We’re starting to believe that HYDRA never disappeared, Cap. They’re just operating under a different name.”

“So you’re saying that HYDRA and AIM are one and the same?” Banner asked incredulously.

Fury nodded. “Recent evidence suggests that, yes.” He looked back to the display. “This is why we need to try to get a handle on what these things were, trace them back to their source. Yes, Stark, I think it can’t be coincidence that the Red Dawn chose to do what they did just in time for AIM to unleash its mechanical monsters on Manhattan. Everything probably is related.”

“But why?” Bruce asked, shaking his head. “You saw that battle. They weren’t after the city necessarily. They were after us, first and foremost.”

The excitement of an idea jolted over Tony, and he leaned forward quickly. “It was a beta-test.”

Thor’s frustration was outright. “This is infuriating,” he muttered disdainfully.

Steve assuredly sympathized, and his own patience was probably wearing thin. “Translation?” he prompted.

“Beta-tests are used primarily in software – computer program – development,” Bruce quickly supplied, looking a little annoyed himself. “It’s like… doing a dry-run in a real environment with real circumstances. Real problems, instead of manufactured ones. It’s usually the last step before you release a final version.”

Steve’s face was fractured in confusion. But it was Clint, who looked equally perturbed, who spoke. “So you’re saying AIM or HYDRA or whoever it was sent these robots out to test them against us?” He squinted a little and shook his head, like grasping that concept was difficult. Or, more likely, disturbing. From the moment those robots had been deployed and Thor had engaged them, it had been painfully obvious that they were targeting the Avengers. They may have used the millions of innocents living in New York City as leverage, but their true purpose had been to destroy – no, not even that – to fight the Avengers. That final move, their ultimate strike, could have been made at any moment. Whatever assault they had almost unleashed from above would have been devastating. They’d waited to do that, waited until the Avengers were assembled and had engaged them completely. The thought was monumentally frightening. Whoever had sent these robots had toyed with them, played with them, used them as guinea pigs to gauge the efficiency of weapons of mass destruction. “That was what this was all about. Testing? To see what? To see how we matched up? To give them a real opponent?”

“To see what we’d do,” Natasha said. “As a team.” Her eyes were clouded with thought, but then she looked up. Her piercing blue gaze settled directly on Steve.
And then it made sense. Why Fury hadn’t told them everything. Why SHIELD had been so subversive, withholding what seemed to be pertinent information. Why Fury had let the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing, televised to the entirety of the United States and its allies, take place only to stop it precisely when he had. The Avengers shared looks that were full of anger, of frustration, of disbelief, repulsed by the same conclusion.

Tony had had it with SHIELD and Fury and his manipulative super spy bullshit. He’d had it long before this moment. He’d had it from the beginning, in fact. But this was the culmination of it all, of one too many half-lies and partial truths, and he was too fucking annoyed to reel in his vitriol. “You’re a goddamn bastard. You knew this could happen. You let it happen. A crisis of epic proportions was just the right answer, wasn’t it? To show everyone how much the world needs the Avengers,” he said, glowering at Fury and remembering the little speech the spy had given him all those days ago when he’d handed him the tablet with the video. *The world needs Captain America.* How much collateral damage had been caused in pursuit of that better future Fury wanted?

For his own part, Fury showed no shame, no surprise that he’d been found out, and no compassion. Tony growled, “You could have told us. We could have gone in, stopped them before they ever launched that plane full of those goddamn things.”

“We didn’t know the specifics,” Fury reminded.

“And the best offense is a good defense, right, Director?” Banner added coldly. “Especially a defense that wins the game right in front of everybody.”

“This was all about proving a fucking point!” Tony shouted. “You risked millions of lives and four people are dead!”

Fury didn’t bat an eyelash. “I’m not the one who needed to prove something,” he said. He wasn’t insulted at Tony’s accusations. He didn’t confirm or deny, but they all knew what he’d done. How they’d been used. And they again looked at their captain, who sat stone-faced and without an apparent opinion, though his eyes were a storm of so many emotions.

When the silence in the room grew too thick and contemptuous, Fury sighed and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on the table and clasping his hands in front of him, like he was going to level with them. Like he had *ever* been entirely straight with them. “Look, I did what I thought was best. We knew something was coming down the line. We’ve known for weeks that AIM was going to make some sort of move. You can’t amass the sort of materials they have, bring together that amount of money, and keep it secret. But I promise you that we didn’t know what. It was never my intent to endanger anyone. But if I’d tipped you off that AIM might be linked to HYDRA… This needed to happen the way it did.”

He didn’t explain that, but he didn’t need to. If they’d known for sure what was about to happen, they might not have acted the way they had. They might not have come together. And Steve might not have pulled himself from his personal hell to fight again. To pick up his shield and get back out there. To *lead* them. For better or worse, this situation had forced Steve from his shell. It had saved Captain America.

“The ends justify the means, Director?” Barton asked. Tony couldn’t tell what Clint thought of his superior’s actions. They were reprehensible and manipulative, but it had all turned out alright. *But would we even be considering calling this okay if the city had been destroyed? Or if one of us had been killed?* Of course not.

“Sometimes they do. Sometimes they have to.”
Steve’s quiet declaration immediately cooled the teeming tension. The soldier sat, his eyes lowered and gazing vacantly at his dirty hands where they rested against the edge of the table. Tony couldn’t believe what he’d heard. Pragmatism from the man with a plan? Realism from the guy who saw everything in black and white? Cynicism from the only person in the world with uncompromising morals?

Rogers looked up then and saddled Fury with an icy glare. “But thinking like that, rationalizing… That shouldn’t be the first choice. It’s the last choice. You want us to save the world? Fight the fights that no one else can?” Steve stood, and suddenly he seemed very tall, much bigger than he normally did, and he normally towered over most people. “Fine. But on our own terms. Not yours and not theirs. So next time, ask, because saving innocent people is the only point I care about making. And I’m not going to be used. Not anymore.”

He jabbed a finger the images floating before them. “If this is HYDRA, you better believe they’ll be back. They won’t give up. But we’ll be ready for whatever they throw at us so long as we can trust you.”

Fury stood. His single eye never broke its gaze with Rogers’, his expression serious but steeled into something indiscernible. It was impossible to say if he felt threatened or ashamed or heartened, even, at Rogers’ show of strength. But he nodded, and Tony wanted to believe he was, at the very least, being truthful. He’d done that in the past, but this time… “You can trust me,” Fury swore. “Good.” Whether or not Steve believed him wasn’t obvious. “Then we’re done here.”

And they should have been. At least, the others were. The debriefing ended, and they all rose from the table. But as Tony stood, fairly shocked and amused and downright proud to have seen Captain America, the world’s most perfect soldier, dressing down what was by all rights a superior in the chain of command, he caught sight of something. More of Romanoff’s pictures were streaming across the display, and one in particular of a pair of men walking down a hallway drew his notice. The man on the right he didn’t recognize, some older guy in a nice suit. But the man on the left…

Shoulder-length brown hair. Brown eyes. The metal arm under a black jacket. A banal face, marked by that scar. That scar.

And everything that was concluded blew wide open again.

It took Tony a few hours to corner Romanoff. He knew he was being a sneaky son of a bitch, but he frankly didn’t want anyone, not Bruce or Thor or Clint and especially not Steve, to know what he wanted to talk to Romanoff about. So as the Avengers finished their business aboard the helicarrier, he hastened away and caught Natasha in her quarters, emerging from the shower. He should have knocked before entering, but he didn’t want to give her the chance to send him away. Thankfully she had wrapped herself in a towel just as he opened the door (after JARVIS unlocked it by hacking the helicarrier’s security system). She already looked like she was about to murder him, slowly and painfully, so he didn’t want to picture what would have happened to him had he walked in on her naked.

“What the hell, Stark!” she snapped, pulling the covering tighter around her glistening body as he stepped further inside the room and closed the door behind him.

Tony was too rattled to manage any sort of lewd comment, instead pulling his phone from his jeans pocket. Her expression immediately softened; she was too perceptive not to notice the distress that had robbed him of his composure and any sort of useful thought process since the debriefing. “I need to ask you something.” He unlocked his phone and offered it to her. It was displaying a
picture he’d had JARVIS send him from the Tower, the still of the man who could be Bucky Barnes. The best, clearest image there was of him. Natasha’s eyes clouded, and her form tensed, as she looked at the picture. “Do you know who this is?”

He was taking a bit of a gamble here. But he trusted his brain more than he trusted anything or anybody, so he knew he was right. If that man in the image from the lab was the same man in this scene from the video of Steve’s torture, then he wasn’t just some actor. Part of Tony’s worst fears about this whole disaster had been confirmed, that whoever had arranged for Steve to be kidnapped and tortured and nearly murdered was still out there. But there was still the more disturbing part that he couldn’t answer, the same goddamn question that he hadn’t been able to answer since that horrible night when he’d first watched the video.

Was it possible that this man truly was Barnes?

Steve had said no. Tony wanted to believe Steve (hell, he had pushed Steve to give him that very answer), but he didn’t even know if Steve believed himself, so he couldn’t put much stock in that. At least, not enough to quiet the voice of dissent in the back of his mind that screamed he shouldn’t settle on a conclusion he couldn’t prove logically. Then he’d realized that there was one more person who could perhaps elucidate the truth. If this man had been the mastermind behind the Red Dawn, then he would have had to have been involved in the faulty intel that had landed the Avengers in the trap in the first place. And that meant Natasha might have met him.

The distress in her eyes immediately told him he was right long before she spoke. “Yes, I know him.” She shifted her concerned eyes from the image to Tony. “Where did you get this?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Tony lied. It did matter. It mattered a whole fucking lot. But he couldn’t say the truth. Not until he knew for sure. And maybe not even then.

She must have realized he wasn’t going to divulge the image’s source to her, and still she went on. She hadn’t expected her to. “I don’t know his real name. They call him the Winter Soldier. He’s an ex-Soviet assassin.”

“So what?” Tony repeated incredulously. The man looked to be in his early thirties, so that meant he would have been only about ten years old when the Soviet Union had fallen in 1991. That was just impossible. Ridiculous. Unless...

“It might be a single alias used by multiple people. He’s been on SHIELD’s radar for years, well before I joined. Most of the intelligence community can’t track him. We’ve only managed to get images of him recently, mostly because of me.”

Tony’s face fractured. “You?”

Natasha’s voice lowered, as though she was about the say something very private. That wasn’t her way, to be open about anything, but here she was, nervously shifting her eyes about the very secluded and very empty room and leaning closer to him to keep their conversation hushed. “He and I worked together on a few jobs in the past. He was the best with a sniper rifle that I have ever seen, maybe even better than Barton. He took me under his wing, taught me...” She looked like she wanted to say more, but she stopped herself with a small, shaky breath and looked away. “We had a system. I’d go in, expose our mark, and he’d terminate them. But even though we worked... closely together, I... I never really learned much about him. He wasn’t Russian, at least. I never heard his name or who’d been before or why he was...” She didn’t finish, her eyes lost in things she wouldn’t say. Tony felt the slightest bit guilty; there weren’t many people in this world who could count themselves as intimate with the Black Widow. Hawkeye was one. Apparently this Winter Soldier was another. And Tony Stark had no business traipsing about in her hidden, painful memories.
“When Clint got me out of there, got me into SHIELD… I ran into him, now and again. He’d pass me information, even though he knew I was with SHIELD. He seemed to have his finger on the pulse of evil in the world. Now I know why. He’s part of HYDRA.” She turned off Tony’s phone and handed it back to him. “Maybe he always was.”

“This Winter Soldier… He gave you the bad tip on the weapons sale?” Tony asked even though he already knew the answer.

She looked confused and surprised. “How did you… I never exposed my sources. Not even to Fury.” The question she’d let go before she asked again, this time more insistently. “Stark, where did you get this?”

Tony’s mind was racing, twisting around the puzzle in every way he could. This wasn’t conclusive evidence. This didn’t mean anything, other than the man who’d tormented and stabbed Steve hadn’t been some random actor or terrorist. Natasha didn’t know much about the Winter Soldier, not his name or his past. So the fundamental question remained unanswered. Nothing had changed. Nothing, really. Nothing.

*That’s a load of shit.*

“Tony, where…”

“I found out he was the one who tortured Rogers,” Tony said shortly. It wasn’t a lie.

Romanoff twitched. Her jaw clenched; he thought he could hear her teeth grinding. The silence that came then was deep and hungry and filled with anger. Whatever relationship Natasha might have had with this man, it had clearly ended long ago. So there was no remorse, no grief, no emotion at all in her voice when she very flatly declared, “All the more reason to hunt him down and kill him.”

Tony wasn’t thinking about vengeance. After the staccato thunder of so many ideas and questions and theories abated, a singular thought possessed his agile mind, which was quite the rare occurrence. No matter how he tried, he couldn’t think of anything else. Maybe he was no more certain now than he’d been before that the man in that video wasn’t Bucky Barnes. There was no further evidence, no grand clues, no verifiable facts to substantiate it. And there couldn’t be, wouldn’t be, not until they did exactly as Natasha said and hunted this man down. There was no way to know. And the mere idea that a soldier thrown from a speeding train in the Alps seventy years ago could have survived without aging and been turned to evil seemed as preposterous now as it always had.

But Tony was sure of one thing: despite what he’d sworn to Steve, there was a chance all of it was real.
This time, when the Avengers returned to New York City, there was fanfare. Fanfare and celebration and reverence and euphoria. It was infectious, blasting away doubt and darkness and fear. The media was triumphantly showing clips from the battle somehow caught on camera over and over again, glimpses of heroes courageously fighting against insurmountable odds. Their supporters were frenzied, overjoyed and relieved. Their detractors were now proudly proclaiming that they had really supported the superhero team all along, even though it might have seemed to the contrary before. The government was applauding their resilience, their quick-thinking and bravery. And the grateful citizens of New York were downright beside themselves, filling the streets and shouting and waving and cheering as the SHIELD quinjet flew overhead with Iron Man alongside it. People were gathered outside Stark Tower in a massive crowd, clapping and chanting in a loud wave of elation that seemed to resonate throughout the city. News choppers hovered nearby, eager to catch a shot, as the quinjet set down and the weary heroes stepped onto the helipad. The other Avengers grumbled and rolled their eyes and jogged (or limped, in Barton’s case) inside the Tower to avoid it all. Tony thudded to the pad, retracted his helmet, and stood outside, drinking it up, smiling, waving, offering his customary peace symbol. Then he decided he’d had enough of his own bullshit and stepped inside and ran into Pepper’s comforting kiss.

They ate quiet a dinner. All of them, gathered around the table. Even Steve, who sat and enjoyed a few slices of pizza and some pasta like he had never been gone at all. There wasn’t much conversation. Not about the battle. Not about the hellfire they’d gone through together. Not about Fury’s actions. Just silent companionship. Silent understanding. Peace. And when they were finished, they all went their separate ways, bone-weary and sore and stiff, but unburdened. For the most part.

Tony collapsed into bed, every inch of him aching. Pepper was already there, and he clumsily clambered over to her, laying his head in her lap with a dramatic show of exhaustion. It wasn’t much of an exaggeration, though. She wove her fingers through his hair gingerly, smiling. A few minutes crawled away, Pepper tenderly stroking his head, Tony drifting on thoughts that were quiet and peaceful. Even the imminent issue of when (and how) he was going to tell Steve what he’d learned seemed distant and assuming. He knew he should have told him already, but there hadn’t been the opportunity. And he was too tired. And he didn’t want to ruin this one nice moment. There were tons of excuses, a glorious litany really, when he put his mind to it. He didn’t need to figure this out not. He had time. Who said he needed to say anything, anyway?

He’d nearly fallen asleep (for the first time in weeks without tossing and turning and battling insomnia), when Pepper’s soft voice filled his head. “You did great,” she murmured.

“‘I know,” he murmured back. “I kicked ass.”

A lyrical chuckle against his ear. “You did,” she confirmed. Her lips sealed over his in a deep, loving kiss, and he was warmer and happier than he’d been in a long time.

The next morning, when the rush of the near-death experience and the high of surviving it began to fade, things that were easy to dismiss the night before weren’t now so simple to ignore. The first thought in his head when he opened his eyes was that he needed to tell truth. He needed to tell the truth to Steve. A whirlwind of memory assaulted him as he laid there. The fight in his lab over their
plans to repeat Project: Rebirth. Steve’s breakdown. Steve convincing himself that the man who’d nearly murdered him hadn’t been his best friend. The robotic army. The battle in Central Park. Steve coming back, as strong and commanding as he’d ever been. And what Tony had learned about the Winter Soldier.

The Winter Soldier.

Tony sighed, wanting nothing more than to gather Pepper’s sweetly slumbering body in his embrace and go back to sleep. The first light of dawn poked through the blinds in the penthouse, slicing through the comforting cover of darkness, and he couldn’t close his eyes again. His mind was already running, and once started, he knew he wouldn’t be able to stop it. Kissing Pepper gently, he slid from the bed and took a shower and dressed in some sweat pants and an old sweat-shirt from MIT. Then he went to go find some much-needed coffee and battled his conscience and indecision the entire way there.

As it turned out, the question of when (or, more fundamentally if) he would confront Steve was answered for him. When he stepped into the spacious kitchen, he found a pot of some gourmet blend that Pepper really liked freshly brewed. Glancing around, he quickly spotted the man responsible, the door to the balcony left ajar so it let the cool October air inside. Steve sat outside one of the lounge chairs, a steaming cup cradled in his hands, watching the sunrise warm a gray and lavender sky. Tony sighed, suddenly feeling like a vicious bastard for everything he’d done yesterday. Maybe Steve had come back to the team, but that didn’t mean – couldn’t mean – everything was resolved. Maybe nothing had been. Maybe he was up this early because he couldn’t sleep, or didn’t want to sleep, after another nightmare, another stretch of darkness spent reliving the horrors. Everything yesterday had just been a show, a show for the team, for Fury, for the whole goddamn world, and he was just as lost in anguish this morning as he had been every morning since he’d been kidnapped. Then Tony was terrified that nothing had changed as he watched Steve sit completely still and gaze blankly at the New York skyline like he was a million miles away. And he was terrified that Steve hated him. They weren’t the best of friends, but Tony had a feeling (and he rarely acknowledged this sort of sentimental crap) that they could be. Would Steve blame him forever for what he’d seen, for what he’d said and done? Tony had thought yesterday that he’d be willing to bear that sort of resentment as long as necessary, but he knew he’d just been deluding himself with a bunch of bullshit. They both deserved better.

He stood at the counter, his cup of coffee idly resting on the sleek surface, for a long time before he mustered the courage to go out there. There was no sense in putting this off. Bruce had been right yesterday morning (had it only been yesterday?) when he’d said it wouldn’t be any easier to wait. So he took a deep breath to center himself and strolled out onto the balcony. “Morning,” he said casually.

Steve turned. He didn’t seem angry at Tony’s intrusion. He didn’t seem upset at all. Tony took that as an encouraging sign. “You’re up early,” Rogers commented before taking a sip of his coffee.

Tony settled into another of the chairs beside the captain, trying to ignore how chilly it was. “Couldn’t sleep.” He didn’t want to dread the answer to his next question, but it was impossible, because as simple as it was, it seemingly carried everything. “You?”

Steve squinted a little, looking out over New York. The corner of his lips drew into a small grin, and Tony couldn’t help his relief. “Had a good dream.”

“Yeah?” Tony’s voice sounded shaky with hesitant hope that he was trying to mask. He lifted his mug to his lips. “Blonde or brunette? Or both?”

“Peggy.” Steve’s tentative little grin grew into a soft smile. He didn’t speak for a long moment,
watching the sun grow brighter and brighter as it cut through the clouds in the east. The noise from
the city below was a distant and quiet hum, the pulse of something sleeping but very much alive.
Alive and exuberant, thanks to the Avengers. “Do you think there’s such a thing as fate?” he finally
asked, looking down at his coffee.

Tony didn’t know how to answer that. Honestly, no, he didn’t. He believed a man made his own
destiny and rose or fell, lived or died, based on his own merits. But he knew Steve believed in God
(or had, for most of his life – these last few months might have challenged his faith just a little). And
he wanted to tell Steve what he wanted to hear, even if he didn’t think it was true. He settled on
something in the middle. “Anything’s possible.”

“I think there is,” Steve said with absolute certainty in his voice. “I think things happen for a reason.
There has to be a reason. Peggy…” His voice grew quieter, laden with soft sadness. “She was so
beautiful. And so smart. She always knew what needed to be done, what needed to be said. She
told me something once. Back after Doctor Erskine was killed, SSR wanted to condemn me to life
as a lab rat so they could try and recreate the serum, so I went to work for Congress. The
government had me touring the country selling war bonds.” Tony knew that. He’d seen the footage,
the old film reels, the posters and newspaper articles. “It was humiliating at first, but at least I was
doing something more productive than just sitting around while scientists ran tests. Got out to
Europe with the USO show, and I ran into Peggy out there. She told me I was meant for more.”
Steve sighed softly. “It was exactly what I needed to hear.”

Finally Steve turned and looked at him. “The government had me up there, this symbol of the war
effort. The Star-Spangled Man with the Plan. This hero to inspire a nation. But that wasn’t who I
was. And that wasn’t what Erskine or Peggy or your father believed I could be. I didn’t have to be
the country’s symbol. She made me realize… I don’t have to be anyone’s symbol.”

Tony couldn’t help but smile at that. “No, you don’t.”

“I’ve been pushed around a lot in my life,” Steve said, his voice tightening with a bit of anger. “First
time I got beat up after school, mom patched me up, held me when I cried. Told me I’d be okay.
The second time they jumped me, I didn’t cry. And after that, I just picked myself back up no matter
how much it hurt, because it was always more important to do the right thing.” He sighed. “Why
should this be any different?”

“Doesn’t have to be,” Tony said. “Fury maybe set the stage, but you’re the one who put the suit
back on.”

“Thor said something to me a few days ago. He told me that you can’t be made to be strong.” Steve
held Tony’s gaze then. “You have to learn to be.” He gave a lopsided smile. “I think he’s right.”

Tony did, too. Shields and armor didn’t matter, when it all came down to it. Shields and armor
could be stripped away, broken, shattered. And once those were gone, there was no power, no
Getting hurt was unavoidable. But getting back up after, with no protection, bare and broken and
bleeding… Getting back up was true strength.

And that sort of power was earned.

Steve’s eyes had a hard glint. “They don’t get to destroy me.”

“They didn’t,” Tony said. “They won’t.”

“Not any of us,” Steve added, turning to his friend.
They were quiet for a moment as dawn broke out over New York. In the silence, what Tony had come here to do resurfaced in his mind. He was torn, truly torn, and beyond thought. Beyond any sort of reasonable choice. Anything he said now about what he had learned, about what could be true... It didn’t seem worth the peace of mind that Steve had found. But he couldn’t just let it go. The Winter Soldier could be out there, lurking in the shadows, waiting until he found the next chance to strike at Captain America. “You know it’s not going to be easy,” he eventually said. “HYDRA will throw everything they have at us. At you. More than ever, they know you’re in their way.”

Steve grunted softly. “Exactly where I’m supposed to be,” he said resolutely.

And then Tony realized. It didn’t matter if it was Bucky or not. It didn’t matter. Steve Rogers was Captain America. That meant he would fight and protect and do everything he could to stop the evil in the world no matter what it cost him. That was the point behind the only symbol Steve had ever embraced. And if the Avengers ever came across the Winter Soldier, whoever he was, they would defeat him. There was no sense in upsetting the precious balance that had returned to Steve’s spirit with unsubstantiated facts and unlikely conjecture. When the time came to face what could be the truth, they would face it together.

“You sure you want to join me?” Steve had no idea how appropriate his question truly was. “If this AIM is anything like the old HYDRA, they play dirty.”

“I do excel at pissing people off,” Tony answered.

“It’s not going to be easy,” the other man repeated, offering Tony a little knowing look of his own.

Tony paused a moment. It was there again, the darkness, the hard things he’d faced and done and everything he’d nearly lost. “Yeah,” he conceded. “But I’m Howard Stark’s son. Standing up against HYDRA sounds like my destiny. My father’s legacy.”

Steve laughed. “He’d be proud, I think,” he said. They were quiet after that, each content with his own thoughts. The city below them was waking, the noise from the streets growing louder and louder as the day descended. Tony sipped his coffee, and it spread heat all down through his throat and chest. It wasn’t so bad, this stuff that Pepper liked. It was comforting. “Peggy told me something else, too.” Steve’s quiet voice cut through his malaise. He focused on the other man again, watching as Steve rubbed his thumbs slowly along the sleek, black porcelain of the rim of his coffee cup. “She told me I should let her go.” Steve closed his eyes for a moment and lifted his face to the new day. “I think I’m ready now. To let them go.”

He turned and looked over with only openness and heartfelt appreciation. “Thanks, Tony,” he said. “You pulled me back.”

Warmth radiated through Tony, and he couldn’t help but grin. “Anytime, Cap.”

The next day, they were ready to try Bruce’s plan. There was no way to know when the next crisis could occur, when the next deadly game would begin and threaten the world. So there was no reason to delay, even if Bruce was newly nervous this procedure of his wouldn’t work. There was also no other way to test it. It had no chance of success on anyone but Steve. In fact, like so much else of late, Steve faced a trial, an obstacle, that would probably kill anyone else. That left a bitter taste of fear and worry and doubt, one that couldn’t be easily washed away. But this had to be done, had to be tried, because without protection from that toxin, Steve couldn’t lead them.

And they, like the rest of the world, needed Captain America.
So they gathered in Tony’s makeshift genetics lab, where the sleek chamber was waiting. The team stood around Rogers as Bruce had him take off his shirt. The diligent scientist checked over the other man’s vitals, but Tony had a feeling he was just trying to delay. He was afraid of making a mistake, and mistakes in this line of work had led to terrible things. But Tony caught Banner’s eyes and offered a small, confident nod. There wouldn’t be any mistakes. Not this time.

Silently they watched as Bruce inserted a needle attached to a small length of tubing in Steve’s forearm and then led Steve over to the chamber. They’d made no effort at idle chit-chat, at distraction from the frightening moments to come. “Why the hell do you all look scared shitless?” Tony demanded as Steve looked hesitantly at the chamber he’d built. “It’s got my name on it, so it’s gonna work. Hell, they did this once seventy years ago not knowing a fraction of the stuff I know and they managed to get it right.”

“Thanks for the pep talk,” Steve murmured.

Thor laid a comforting hand on Steve’s shoulder. “From the fire came a warrior stronger than any before him,” he said with a knowing smile. “This is your fire.”

“You can do it, Cap,” Clint said from behind him. The archer stood with his arms folded over his chest, and in his eyes there wasn’t a shred of doubt. Natasha was beside him, and she gave a small, stern nod.

Steve turned back and looked apprehensively at the chamber. He stood still, his brow furrowed, every line of his body hard and tense. Then he sagged a little in submission. “What the hell,” he said, rolling his eyes a little as he glanced at Tony. “Worked the first time, right?” Then he stepped up inside.

Bruce worked his hands together nervously as Steve settled himself. Then he went to the tray of supplies beside the chamber and pulled a few syringes from them, one filled with a bright, blue liquid. Nobody made a sound as he went about injecting each into Steve’s arm. He hesitated a moment with the blue one before he gathered his composure enough to go through with it. Steve winced a little, but when he saw Bruce’s very obvious trepidation, he offered up a soothing smile. “I’ll be okay, doc,” he promised.

Banner seemed a little surprised by the comment, but then his face softened, and the relief was clear in his eyes. “I know you will,” he said. He attached the IV line, already red with Steve’s blood, to a socket in the interior of the chamber. “Ready?” Steve nodded. Bruce looked back over his shoulder. “Go, Tony.”

Bruce backed away as the chamber door slowly began to close, the hiss of the hydraulics loud in the silence. Steve shifted a bit nervously as the thick portal slid shut, his eyes drifting over the team. Over Bruce’s anxious attempt at comfort with a shaky smile. Over Natasha’s firm stare. Over Clint’s confident nod and Thor’s unwavering gaze. Finally he looked at Tony, who grinned cheekily and jokingly gave him a thumbs-up as he fiddled with the controls. “Firing it up,” Tony announced.

The machine operated silently. Bruce came to stand beside Tony, watching the monitors attached to the console. Some were streaming Steve’s vital signs as well as a graphical analysis in real time of Steve’s DNA as Bruce’s serum flooded his cells. There was light building as the chamber flooded with radiation, shown on the video feed. Inside Steve looked about nervously, but then he seemed to draw a few deep breaths to calm himself. Tony watched in satisfaction as the levels of exposure rose. The others observed as well, silent and unsure and astounded, as the light on the video grew brighter and brighter until it became difficult to see Steve at all. “Levels are rising,” Tony announced. “Vitals are holding. Shall we proceed, Doctor Banner?”
Bruce carefully examined the read-outs. “Looks like a good infusion. Yeah, go ahead. Just be prepared to cut it off.”

Tony pressed his fingers to the touch screen over the sliders for the radiation control and pushed them upward slowly. The levels continued to grow more intense, rapidly reaching amounts that could prove fatal. But they didn’t. Aside from slightly elevated heart and respiration rates, Steve was fine. And the cellular analysis was indicating that the serum was beginning to interact with his DNA. Tony waited because even though nothing was going to go wrong he was still nervous. He waited and hesitated. “Sir,” JARVIS intoned firmly, “Captain Rogers’ vital signs as strong and steady.” Tony could have rolled his eyes at the AI’s attempt at comfort and encouragement. But he pushed the sliders up further and further, and the light quickly became blinding.

“It’s working,” Bruce declared excitedly. “Look!”

They all watched, glancing between the solid door of the sealed chamber and the monitors, as the serum fused with Steve’s DNA. The radiation levels were nearly at their maximum, and Tony pushed the controls up as high as they would go, as high as he had calculated. The reaction continued a little longer, the illumination nearly unbearable to see but Steve’s vitals remaining strong.

And then it was all over, and the machine shut down on its own.

Thor was the first to the chamber, Clint close on his heels. Bruce rounded the edge of the console, rushing to join them. The seal on the door was broken, the locks clicking loose, and the heavy slab slowly slid open. Steve remained inside for a moment, breathing heavily and covered in sweat. The Avengers stood, watching. Waiting. Hoping.

Steve opened his eyes. He blinked a few times, hazy and disoriented. But then he saw Thor and Clint and Bruce. Natasha. Tony. And he staggered down from the chamber. Thor was there to catch him, immediately steadying Steve as he stepped to the floor. Clint grasped his shoulder. “Did it work?” the archer asked worriedly, looking between Steve’s flushed face and Bruce. “Did it?”

“I think so,” Bruce said, shaking his head in amazement. “I think it did.”

“Told you it would,” Tony said with a satisfied smirk and relief pounding in his veins.

Steve gasped for a moment more, dazed, sagging slightly against Thor. He eventually caught his breath and straightened to his full stature, the others slowly backing away to give him space. “Are you alright?” Clint asked. “Steve?”

Thor watched Steve intently. “How do you feel?”

Steve caught Tony’s eyes. A slow smile spread on his face before he answered, “Invincible.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

And that, as they say, is that. I know people are probably wondering if there will be a sequel to this. Originally when I wrote this last year, I had thought about doing one. But with Captain America: the Winter Soldier coming out, I’m going to trust the masterminds at Marvel to handle Steve's confrontation with Bucky. The Winter Soldier
(and what he did) in this story was more a means to an end, a way to break Steve (and Tony and even the other Avengers) down and rebuild them into something stronger.

Special thanks to E, my incredible beta-reader, for making this story a reality. And special thanks to all of the readers and reviewers; you guys are the reason I write! Check out my other works if you're in the mood for more Avengers drama and hurt/comfort!

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