Summary

...being green.

Tony and Clint decide to show Bruce that the Hulk isn't all bad, but they soon realise that Hulk needs friends of his own.

This story is neither action nor romance; it is built up from moments in the life of the Avengers as they become teammates, friends, and family.

I'm new to writing these characters, so apologies if what I write doesn't match up to how you imagine them. And although I have some idea where I'm going with this, that is subject to change. This story is based on the Marvel Cinematic Universe up to the end of The Avengers, which is the movie I'm most familiar with. I'm probably not going to include anything from Iron Man 3, Captain America: The Winter Soldier, or Agents of Shield, and I'm more or less ignoring the comics.

Please keep in mind that, while I'm not focusing on mental health problems, Avengers Tower is a hot-bed of PTSD, guilt, isolation, and impulsive behaviours which may or may not count as self-destructive, and Bruce in particular has been suicidally depressed in the past. I'll try to include trigger warnings if anything particularly bad comes up, but be careful with yourselves.
The Avengers Insomnia Club

Chapter Summary

Clint runs into Tony in the middle of the night, and they talk about how everyone has trouble sleeping.

It was three o'clock in the morning, six months after the Battle of New York, when Clint Barton (a.k.a. Hawkeye) found Tony Stark (a.k.a. Iron Man) scowling blearily at a StarkPad in the shared kitchen of Avengers Tower.

"Late night or early morning?" he asked, as he wandered over to the fridge.

"I have it on good authority, Legolas, that three am is both too late and too early for anyone to be awake, and should be renamed the 'hour of the dead'."

Clint snorted, "Good authority being Pepper scolding you? I'm pretty sure every one of us has been up at three am before. This is hardly the inaugural meeting of the Avengers Insomnia Club."

Tony grinned a little. "I should make us badges. And a poster? A middle-of-the-night, password-activated alert for the location of Insomnia Club meetings? Jarvis, what do you think?"

"Sir, since the Avengers' relocation to the Tower, there has been an average of two people awake at all times between midnight and six o'clock am. However, it appears that most of the Avengers do not seek out company on those occasions."

It had taken Clint three months to get used to Jarvis. Not that he wasn't used to surveillance, but he also relied on being hidden from potential enemies, and Jarvis and/or Tony was too powerful to trust straight away. Nat still wasn't comfortable with it, but then Nat wasn't really ever comfortable.

"Give me some stats, J." As Tony pulled up a new project on his tablet, Clint finally made a decision and grabbed the milk. If he was going to be hanging around Tony in the middle of the night discussing the team's sleeping habits, he was going to make proper hot chocolate. One of Tony's trademark (except not, because he didn't share stuff too close to Jarvis) blue projections appeared above the counter, showing a graph far too complicated for Clint to read.

"Captain Rogers is awake at least once three times a week, although this has declined since he arrived at the Tower. When he wakes, he either sketches in his rooms, works with the punching bag in the gym, or comes to the kitchen to make himself a hot drink. If he is still awake at four am, he does not attempt to go back to sleep."

"That'd be the ice dreams," Clint noted, as he turned on the stove. "I've seen him out here a few times like that, and he always has five layers on and the heat turned up."

"Master Odinson is, as you know, rarely in the Tower," (He shared his time between the Avengers, Asgard, and Jane, and really, who could blame him for preferring the last one?), "but when he is here, he is awake four nights out of ten. On those nights he is awake, it is rarely because his sleep is disturbed, but because he has not gone to bed at all. He usually spends that time on the roof."
"Maybe Asguardians don't need to sleep as much? Or they have longer days? Remind me to ask him about that later, J."

"Agent Romanoff wakes in the night up to five times a week, but ninety percent of the time she will join Agent Barton in his rooms or he will join her in hers, and she will remain there for the rest of the night. The other ten percent of the time she goes to the gym or the practice range, and will choose whichever is unoccupied."

As the milk heated, Clint pulled out dark chocolate and cinnamon, avoiding Tony's eyes. He knew what people thought about him and Natasha, but that didn't mean he wanted to hear it.

"You and the spider, eh? You aren't afraid of the name?"

"There's plenty of truth to the name, Tony," Clint said with a smirk, "That's why I only sleep with her."

Tony looked a mix between suspicious and stunned. "Seriously? Natasha's the hottest woman I've ever met, and I've met a lot of women."

"She's not my type." Hopefully the implications would shut Tony up. God he hated these conversations. "How does Bruce sleep, Jarvis?"

Thankfully, Jarvis seemed willing to take the hint. "Doctor Banner wakes at least once every night, but is usually able to return to sleep after meditation. Approximately twice a week he comes to the common floor, and once a fortnight to his labs. Approximately once a month he is woken due to a Green Alert, and he retreats to the Hulk Room."

After a short pause, Jarvis continued. "Agent Barton also wakes every night. When he is in the company of Agent Romanoff, he usually sleeps again, but on other occasions he will go either to the range or the common floor and will remain awake for some hours."

Clint winced, and busied himself with the hot chocolate so he didn't have to look at Tony.

"Tell Barton my stats, J?"

"Sir is awake for fifty percent of all night hours, and sleeps through the night less than once a week. At least once a month I am required to call Miss Potts because he has been awake for more than seventy-two hours. When he is awake during the night hours he is usually to be found in the workshop, although he sometimes visits the common floor."

It made sense, really, that Tony would have trouble sleeping. He'd been through some pretty serious shit for a civilian, heck, for anyone, and the genius brain probably didn't help.

"So what you're saying Jarvis, is that there are at least three other people in this tower who regularly visit the common floor in the middle of the night, and may not be averse to some company?"

Clint slid a mug across the counter to Tony, who took a sip and raised his eyebrows.

"Phil used to make it for me." And wasn't it still a knife in his gut to say that name. "New club beverage for the Avengers Insomniacs?"
Tony nodded, and took a second, almost reverent sip. "Let's get going on that alert system, Jarvis. Give me a map of the Avengers floors..."
Two nights later Clint wrenched himself from glowing blue dreams of perfect, deadly shots, panting and shuddering as Jarvis spoke softly from his hidden speakers.

"...2:17 AM on March 20th, 2013. You are in Avengers Tower. It is currently sixty-two degrees outside the Tower, mildly cloudy with slight chance of showers. Would you prefer to be alone, or would you like the Insomnia Club alert?"

Clint lay still for a second. Trust Tony to have actually followed up on the idea. "I'll have the alert, thanks, Jarvis. Lights to twenty percent please."

Jarvis spoke a little louder, matching Clint's volume, and the room began to glow with a warm yellow light. "Sir and Captain Rogers are currently sleeping. Agent Romanoff is awake, but does not wish to be disturbed. Doctor Banner is on the common floor, and has indicated that company is welcome."

Clint sat up, shrugged, and grabbed a hoodie from the cupboard. Bruce was good company; he might as well join him.

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Clint let his footsteps sound a little louder as he stepped out of the elevator and scanned the open-plan living area. Bruce was sitting on the couch, sipping a cup of what was almost certainly tea, but he didn't have a book, or a tablet, or the TV on. "Jarvis said you wouldn't mind some company?"

Bruce looked up, surprised, but not startled. "No, I wouldn't. You wouldn't happen to know anything about the new alert, would you?"

Clint dropped onto an armchair next to the couch, lounging sideways with his legs on one arm and his back on the other. "Actually, I do. I ran into him in the kitchen the other night and Jarvis pointed out that we all have sleepless nights and at least four of us don't mind company sometimes."

"Those four being you, me, Tony, and Steve?" It didn't surprise Clint that Bruce had figured that out. He'd been on the run for years, and you can't hide well if you aren't observant. Besides, chances were Bruce had met them all in the kitchen before, some time or another.

"Yep. Want some hot chocolate when you're done with your tea? Official Insomnia Club drink as of two nights ago."

Bruce smiled a little and nodded, and Clint smiled back.
"Do you want to talk about it?" Bruce said softly, looking away.

"Talk about what, Doc?" Clint tried to keep his voice casual, but he wasn't sure he succeeded.

"About whatever keeps you up at night. Sometimes it doesn't, but sometimes it helps."

Clint's smile turned a little wry. "What do you think? I've been dreaming of Loki almost every night for the last six months, and when I don't, I dream of Phil."

"Phil Coulson?"

Clint sighed. "He was my handler for almost ten years. Brought me into SHIELD, took me on when the other handlers all thought I was a little shit, kept me on when I recruited Nat instead of killing her. I don't know if you've read my file, but I didn't have the best life before I joined SHIELD, and most of the good parts after I joined were because of him." Heck, some days it seemed like Phil was everything good in his life. It was Phil who'd taught him it was safe to trust another person after Barney'd betrayed him; Phil who'd given him the chance to make up for the people he'd killed in his mercenary days; Phil who'd told him, over and over, that he was a good person and a great agent. It was Phil who'd told him, who'd made him believe, that he deserved to be loved in the ways he wanted to be loved.

Bruce nodded sadly. "You know I've never heard anyone hear speak with less than the utmost respect for him, and considering the people in this tower, that's saying something. I wish I could have known him." He paused, and sipped his tea. "But then, I wish a lot of things."

"Yeah? That what keeps you up at night?"

"Not really," Bruce replied. "Sleep's, um, tricky, with the other guy. I have less control when I'm asleep, and I have years of nightmare fuel." Clint winced. Yeah, that...that couldn't be fun. "I figured out how to wake myself up before...hulking out less than a year after the accident, but it's still not easy. Jarvis has to wake me up sometimes."

"He mentioned that."

They sat in silence a while.

"Hey doc?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you dream of stuff that happened, or of stuff that hasn't happened yet?"

"A bit of a mixture." Bruce shrugged. "I dream of being shot at, of being drugged, of being experimented on. I dream of running away, and being found, and surrounded, and captured. I dream of hulking out when there are people nearby to get hurt. I dream of waking up in the rubble. It's all happened so many times that I mostly dream of amalgamations rather than specific instances. But sometimes I do dream versions that definitely haven't happened. The ones where I'm being pursued or hurt, I dream of SHIELD doing that, or you and Natasha, or all of the Avengers. And the ones where I lose control, I dream of that happening here, of destroying the Tower, of killing Tony, or anyone else on the team. I dream about the Hulk breaking the rest of New York like he broke Harlem. I dream about letting him out for a battle and waking up to find that everything went wrong. It's probably a good thing I dream about that. Someone needs to remember the risk, and it won't be Tony."
Clint let go of a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. Fucking hell, Bruce had had a shit time of it. "I'll remember," he offered. "I don't like to think of chasing you, or hurting you, but I'd do it if I had to. And nightmares are bad enough without wishing them."

Bruce looked at him for a long moment. "Isn't that what SHIELD pays you for? I assumed you and Natasha have been here so much to keep an eye on me. You almost never go on SHIELD missions anymore."

Clint snorted. "I almost never go on missions because they trust me less than Tony. Nat turns down a lot of them because she hates doing missions without either me or Coulson, and Fury lets her because he wants the Avengers to work. She's supposed to report on all of us, but she's doing that less now. I'm no-one's security detail."

From Bruce's expression, he'd never even considered that Clint wasn't there as a guard. "They don't trust you? But you said you'd been with SHIELD for almost a decade!"

Clint twisted on the armchair and stood. "Mind if we move this to the kitchen so I can make some of that hot chocolate?" At Bruce's nod, he rolled his shoulders and led the way. "Apart from the 'Fury doesn't trust anyone ever' thing, SHIELD did trust me. But you may have heard that I got compromised six months ago?"

Bruce stared. "With Loki? That was six months ago! Everything you've done since has demonstrated that you're your own person. You even fought against Loki a few hours after the control was broken. How are they still blaming you for that?"

"They're still blaming me for that because I killed people," Clint said bitterly. "Because I almost brought down the helicarrier. Because sleeper agents exist. Because they don't understand how it happened. Because maybe it happening to me once makes me vulnerable to it happening again."

"That's, that's pretty shitty, Clint." Bruce paused for a moment. "Do you think that...Phil would have agreed with them?"

Clint stared down at the milk and melting chocolate. "You know, doc? I have no idea."
Bruce was pipetting when the 'Avengers Assemble' alarm went off. He didn't ruin the mixture (years of learning to control his emotional responses had to be good for something, after all), but it was time-sensitive. If the team needed him, he was going to have to start again anyway. He sighed. "You can turn the alarm off, Jarvis. What's happening?"

"Agent Sitwell has contacted the Captain to request the team's assistance in New Orleans."

"Assistance with what?"

"With giant purple orangutans, I believe."

Bruce sighed again. "That should really...seem stranger," he muttered. "When are we leaving?" He began to carefully pour out the non-toxic, but slightly reactive mixture.

"Agent Romanoff is travelling with SHIELD, and Captain Rogers has just requested that Thor meet us on location. Sir has just put on the suit to collect Agent Barton from his errands. I anticipate that the team will not depart for another five to ten minutes."

"I can finish up here, then, while everyone gets ready." Not having a suit of armour may leave him exposed, but it certainly saved time in preparing for battle. "Let me know if Tony gets back with Clint and I'm not in the elevator yet, please?"

"Certainly, Doctor Banner."

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When Bruce arrived on what he thought of as the "battle" floor, Clint was just logging in to his gear room. After a few fights, Tony had decided it was inefficient for everyone to have to go find their suits and weapons and then get to the quinjet, so he'd converted the top floor of the Tower into a hangar and added three highly-secure rooms for Steve, Clint and Natasha to keep their gear in, an Iron-Man disassembly station, and a chest full of medium and extra-extra-large sweatpants for Bruce. It was a relief, really, to know that he didn't have to ruin his clothes every time they went out, so Bruce grabbed a Hulk pair and changed into them, pulling the drawstring tight to keep them on for now.

"Hey Doc." Clint nodded at Bruce as Jarvis confirmed his biometrics. "Care to give me a hand with my gear once you get your pants on?"
"If you want, I guess."

"Cool," Clint said easily. "I'm gonna be the last one ready, anyway, so if you could grab my bow and quiver while I get changed that'd really speed things up."

Bruce followed Clint into his gear room and stared. He'd realised Clint didn't use the same bow every time, but there had to be fifteen in here. And the...quiver-loading station? looked pretty damned complex. "Uh, which bow? And do I need to do anything...special with the quiver?"

Clint looked across and laughed a little. "Yeah, since I moved in my kit's gotten a bit intense. I want my standard bow, the black one right next to the quiver with a purple hawk on the grip." He shucked off his T-shirt and nodded as Bruce moved towards one. "That's it. The cradle's a spring-loaded latch. Put it by the door, would you?" Bruce took the opportunity to look away while Clint changed his pants. He'd woken up naked in the rubble too often to care about his nakedness most of the time, but he'd always appreciated when people offered him privacy. "And the quiver's a little special, but I can get Jarvis to do most of the set-up. Jarvis?"

"Yes, Agent Barton?"

"I need fifteen percent explosive, five percent net, ten percent tranqs. Don't bother with the EMPs, but give me half a dozen sonics just in case. Standard arrows for the rest."

Bruce looked over in surprise, to see Clint shrugging into the top half of his tac suit. "You have EMP arrows?"

"Yep. Tony made them for me a couple of months ago after the first DoomBot thing." Clint didn't look at Bruce, still checking pockets and straps. "I always forget that you don't get to see me in combat. You should come down to the range sometime and I'll show you what the rest of them can do. Could you grab me the first aid box from the cupboard? I'm low on bandages."

"The quiver is loaded, Agent Barton." Jarvis interrupted.

"Thanks, J."

The first aid kit was pretty well stocked, for something meant for emergencies. "Just one roll? And why do you have needles in here?"

"One roll's fine," said Clint as he pulled on his boots, "And I have needles because I have been on six different missions with Natasha where one of us needed stitches sooner than we could afford to find someone else to do it." He stood up, and took the bandages from Bruce, tucking them into a pocket. "Okay. Knives, gas mask, carabiners, bandages, suture kit, pain-killers, protein bar, bow, and quiver. We're good to go."

Bruce followed him to the hangar, a little bemused. "You have, uh, quite a bit of stuff in that suit. How many pockets are there in those pants?"

Clint grinned. "That would be telling, now, wouldn't it, Doc? But speaking of pants - " he detoured to what Tony called 'Bruce's Magical Cupboard of Non-Nudity' " - Tony added a compartment to my quiver so I can bring you a spare pair if you need them."

"That's..." Bruce shook his head. "I appreciate that, really. The ones I'm wearing should be fine though."
"Well, if I won't leave the gas mask behind when Sitwell tells me we're fighting brawn, not brains, I won't leave your pants behind when you say these ones will probably survive the change."

"Always prepared?" Bruce smiled wryly.

"Hey, if you want Boy Scouts, you talk to Cap." Clint grinned. "If you want pants, on the other hand..."

"Hurry up, you two!" Tony yelled from the jet. "You can swap pants when we get home!"

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Forty minutes later, they reported to Sitwell at the temporary SHIELD base about half a mile from the destruction zone.

"Sitrep, sir?" Steve asked, as Thor and Natasha joined them.

"An hour ago, surveillance discovered ten purple apes, in all respects very similar to orangutans, but each standing approximately eight metres high, emerging from a building which collapsed shortly thereafter. They appear to be under no control, and SHIELD agents who searched the building found labs, but no surviving scientists. We have analysts working to establish how the apes came to be here, but the current priority is containment."

"Containment, sir? Should I have brought more net arrows?" That was Clint, gazing towards the trouble spot.

"To be honest with you, containment is the priority because we have been having difficulty with destruction. We're good, but you're our heavy hitters." Tony glanced at Bruce, who shrugged. Giant apes were an enemy almost tailor made for the Hulk. He wasn't surprised at the implication he'd be needed as his other self more than as a scientist. "They appear to have no special abilities; nor do they have any unusual weak spots. In almost every respect, they are ordinary orangutans."

"Except that they're huge and purple," Tony pointed out.

"Except for that. I'll be on comms, but you're in command, Captain."

Steve stood straighter, if that were possible. "Right, sir. Can you reassign the SHIELD agents to maintaining the perimeter when the team arrives? We're not used to working with them, and in a fight like this it'll be hard to avoid collateral." Sitwell nodded. "Iron Man, I want you on herd duty. Keep the fight to the areas already damaged if you can." Tony opened his mouth to argue, but closed it when Steve glared. "Argue when we're done, Tony. Widow, Thor, we'll be on the ground. Hawkeye, eyes in the sky. Let us know what's happening, any patterns you notice. Bruce?" At this, Steve turned, not dropping the 'Captain' look, but an edge of sympathy crept into his expression.

"I know, Steve," Bruce said quietly. "This is the kind of...opponent where the Other Guy would help, as much as he ever does. And it's not like that block isn't already flattened."

"Thanks, Bruce. Alright, let's get over there."
"Can you give me a lift, Tony? Getting to a good vantage point is always a bitch."

"Sure, Legolas." Tony, mask still up, glanced back at Bruce, who was pulling off his shirt and shoes to leave in the quinjet. "You good, big guy?"

"I'll be fine, Tony. I'm always fine." It's everyone else who gets hurt, he didn't say.

"See you after the fight, then."

"Mmm." I hope so, Bruce thought, as he jogged towards the battle. I always hope so.

A couple of minutes later, Steve gave him the nod. He untied the knot in the drawstring of his pants (no point ruining them if he didn't have to), and turned his attention inwards, to that roiling sea of anger where the Hulk lived. Your turn, he thought, and dived in.

Chapter End Notes

For lack of actual information, I've decided that the quinjet can go up to 2000 miles per hour, which is faster than the current fastest manned plane, but within the same general region.
Project Jolly Green Giant

Chapter Summary

After the fight, Tony talks to Clint about the Hulk.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony picked Clint off the top of yet another building (he'd swapped twice during the fight) and dropped him off with Sitwell, before looping back to find Bruce. He was pretty sure he'd seen the Hulk change back, but Bruce usually took a few minutes to wake up again. There he was, on a pile of rubble that, if Tony remembered correctly, Hulk had been using as ammunition to throw at the apes. A few seconds after he landed, Bruce groaned a little, stirred, and tensed.

"Hey, big guy, you doing alright?"

Bruce opened his eyes at Tony's voice, but didn't relax. "Did I hurt anyone?" he asked, as urgent as he could in post-Hulk exhaustion, and Tony winced. "Is everyone okay?"

"Everyone's fine, big guy, and the Hulk only hurt the monkeys."

"Don't call them monkeys...orangutans don't like the, ugh, the M-word." Half a minute awake and making Pratchett jokes? Seriously, Bruce was the most resilient person Tony'd ever met. He offered a still-gauntleted hand to help Bruce up.

"I'm pretty sure the Librarian wasn't purple, big guy. And, hey, look! You've still got pants on!"

Bruce glanced down as he stumbled to his feet. "But I was looking forward to wearing Clint's pants," he muttered.

"Iron Man," Sitwell called through the comms, "we'll debrief on the helicarrier tomorrow. Run any injuries by medical and you're good to go."

"Nope, no medical. All good." And if he'd taken a hit to his ribs that would be bruised for a fortnight, that was no-one's business but his own. "Bruce, Sitwell says we can go straight home, unless you want to talk to the medics."

"Just the usual post-Hulk things...exhaustion, aches, and hunger pangs. Nothing I can do but eat and sleep it off." The way Bruce was walking, Tony was sure he was understating those aches, but it's not like he could talk.

"I put a pull-out bed in the quinjet after last time, if you want to nap on the way home." And if that pull-out bed was designed to precisely imitate Bruce's mattress in his room and was more comfortable than half the hotel beds Tony had slept in, well, everyone expected him to be extravagant.

"Thanks, Tony."

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"Sir, it is now ten hours since the battle and you have slept only three hours in the last twenty-four."

"Sleep's for the weak, Jarvis. Give me ten times magnification on the left knee joint, would you?" There were always suit repairs to do after a fight, plus checking on everyone else's gear, and while upgrades could wait, Tony hated being unprepared for trouble. And by unprepared, he meant having less than three suits (workshop, battle room, briefcase) ready to go.

"If you are disinclined for sleep, sir, are you at home to the Insomnia Club?"

"Yes if it's Barton or Bruce, not that Bruce is going to be up before noon, no if it's Walking-Electric-Charge, Stabs-Me-In-The-Neck, or Captain Disappointed Eyes. And if Barton asks, he can come down here, but I'm not going upstairs until this is done."

"Agent Barton has indeed asked, and also wishes to know whether you want him to bring you anything from the kitchen."

"I need nothing but glorious coffee, and I don't need the kitchen for that."

"Indeed, sir. May I suggest that you reduce your caffeine intake enough that it does not entirely replace your blood? A decrease of three cups an hour should do the trick."

"Very funny, J."

To be perfectly honest, Tony was tired as fuck, and actually would rather sleep. But giant-ass purple orangutans and their ilk wait for no man, so litres of coffee and suit repairs it is. The elevator pinged, the sort of discreet warning Jarvis used when visitors were expected and/or trusted, but might surprise Tony anyway.

"Hey, Stark. What are you working on?" Clint looked like shit. Like, he looked worse after a nightmare than he did straight after battle. The circles under his eyes were darker than his bruises, and Tony got the feeling that if he wasn't a trained sniper, he'd be shaking.

"Suit repairs. Send that to the fabricators, Jarvis, and show me the right hand repulsor. It's one of the problems with relying on a suit of armour instead of freaky healing factors like the rest of you."

"The rest of us? I'm the human on the team!" Thank god, Clint was finally smiling a little.

"Hey, I'm the most human person I know."

"Not hard in this tower. I'm pretty sure you're technically a cyborg."

"It's a prosthetic. I'm as human as the next guy."

Clint snorted. "The next guy's Bruce Banner."

"Point." Tony smirked. "In that case, I am absolutely an awesome post-human cyborg with a super-advanced power source for a heart." He busied himself with the gauntlet for a few minutes while Clint wandered over to the charging stations to say hello to the bots. "You know what he said to me when he woke up today?"

"Bruce? Let me guess, he wanted to know if anyone was hurt."

"He wanted to know if he had hurt anyone."
"I'm not exactly surprised." Clint looked at Tony for a second, his sniper's gaze, and Tony turned away. "You know he has nightmares about the Hulk hurting you? About him hurting any of us, about him destroying the Tower, but I get the sense especially about hurting you. He thinks we aren't afraid enough, so at least if he's dreaming about it someone's aware of the risks."

"Are you afraid of the Hulk?"

"Sure I'm afraid of him. But I'm also afraid of Nat." He looked up. "Everyone's afraid of Nat, and they should be. She's probably the deadliest person I know. But that doesn't mean I can't trust her in the ways she can be trusted." Clint picked up a wrench and turned it over in his hands. "She's a spy, and she's an assassin, and she works for Fury. She's always going to lie and manipulate, for herself, for Fury, for her mission, for whatever. And she's been trained to be deadly for basically her entire life, so she's going to hurt us sometimes, deliberately or accidentally. I can't trust her to always tell me the truth, and I can't trust her to never hurt me. But I can trust her to have my back, and to keep me safe if she can, and to tell me if she can't."

"Well I don't trust her."

"She doesn't necessarily want you to, right now. Trust goes both ways, and she doesn't trust easily. We're a functional team on the battlefield, and I think that's enough for her at the moment."

Dummy rolled over to Clint and beeped at him. "Yeah, buddy, I've got a wrench and I'm not doing anything with it. Everything's fine." He looked at Tony again. "Hulk...he's not deadly like Nat, but he is destructive. He's huge, and he's ridiculously strong even for his size, and he's never learned to moderate that strength. He will break things, whether he's trying to or, I think, trying not to. I imagine your suit was a little battered when he caught you that one time, for example."

Tony's breath caught in his throat. No. Not now. Not the Fall. He's home, in the workshop, with Clint, who's telling him about how Black Widow and the Hulk are the same, which is the most ridiculous thing he's ever heard of in his life except that it isn't, and he's probably staring at him, because that sounded almost like a question that wanted an answer and - "Yeah." He took a shuddering breath. Safe. "It, it was crushed, just a around the torso." Oh shit, now Clint was looking at him like he's figured out what just happened, which was nothing, nothing just happened, everything is fine, he is not at home to the Pity Eyes -

"So he breaks things a lot because he's super strong and probably never figured out how not to break them," Clint's talking? Just ignoring that thing that just happened, that thing that totally didn't happen, and he's looking at the wrench in his hands and not at Tony, so he can just take a minute, and everything's fine, and "But he's never attacked any of us, and I kind of trust him not to, unless he thinks we're trying to hurt him, and he seems to listen to Cap, even if all Cap says is 'smash', and he's never run away from us when Bruce let him out, or after the battle was done." Clint looked up, and smiled a little, and Tony realised he was staring, and turned back to the gauntlet, which really didn't need that much done to it. "I'm afraid of him, and I think I should be, because I don't think he'll ever not be destructive. But I trust him to stay with us, and to listen to Cap, and not to hurt us, and I absolutely trust him to keep Bruce safe."

"I think Bruce resents it a bit, that Hulk always keeps him safe." Tony looked at the gauntlet again. Yeah, he was done with that bit now. "Jarvis, send it to fabricator and pull up the back armour."

"No kidding. How much collateral damage has Hulk caused 'keeping Bruce safe'? I've never seen someone so guilty for things he didn't do."

"You think the Hulk isn't him?"
"I think they're distinct enough that it's a multiple personality thing, and we should probably treat them as different people. And Hulk always gets edgy if people call him Bruce."

Huh. "Jarvis, pull together some stuff on multiple personalities, would you? There might be etiquette about interacting with them that would make things easier for Bruce."

"I think what will help Bruce most is convincing him that we are being rational about how dangerous the Hulk is." Clint put down the wrench. "Is there anything I can do to help with that?"

"Not with repairs, but I've been trying to figure out a better way to carry you guys, cause it keeps happening. You carry a carabiner in those magical pockets of yours, right?"

Clint nodded. "I spend too much time in high places not to have a clip and a line on me when I can. You want me to figure out attachment points?"

"Yep. Jarvis, pull up schematics for the Mark VII, just the outside stuff, with possible locations for attachment points marked for Legolas here. Keep in mind that I need my hands free to fly."

Rolling his eyes, Clint zoomed in on the torso. "Trust me, Stark, I'm aware. You've carried me places, what, five times today? And every single time I was clinging like one of those fucking orangutans."

They worked in companionable silence for a few minutes, Tony calling out to Jarvis to shift the projection, or modify the alloy, or run simulations, and Clint scanning the diagram for places where being clipped in wouldn't end badly if they got surprised in mid-air.

"These five could work. Natasha, Steve and I all have belts we can hook a clip to, if we need to, and I think that'll work best if our torsos are roughly aligned with yours."

"I still need to figure out a better way to carry you when you're in civvies, and maybe a better clip - J, put that on my project list with the files Clint has been messing with, would you?" He glanced at Clint. Something about the last half-hour had calmed him down at least. He only looked like he'd been fighting supersoldiers for hours, instead of looking like he'd been fighting giant DoomBots for hours. "You can grab something from the fridge if you like, make yourself a smoothie. Haven't got the facilities down here for the trademark Insomniac's hot chocolate yet, but you're welcome to take advantage of the coffee machine."

Clint closed the file and wandered over to the not-a-kitchen. "Seriously? You don't have a beer in here?"

"It's hiding behind the fruit, where Dummy probably won't break it. You can shove everything off the couch if you want to sit down." He pointed to the couch which was currently covered in pizza boxes, abandoned paperwork, and scrap metal.

"There's a couch under there?"

"There is a very comfortable couch under there, thank you Merida. I should know, I sleep down here at least twice a month. Dummy, Butterfingers, help Clint with the couch."

The bots rolled up to the couch, whirring and beeping excitedly. "Hey, guys. Could you put the metal somewhere else for me?"

"Barton, you've got to tell them where or it'll end up in the sink or somewhere equally ludicrous."
Put them in the corner near the forge, no, not there, you are idiots, I have no idea why I built you, yes, there, yes, next to the forge where I told you. Honestly, you are terrible."

Clint stacked the papers in the sort of neat pile which implied the presence of some paperwork obsessed person in his past. "Aww, guys, you're doing fine. Tony, some of this looks important, why is it on the couch?"

"It's on the couch because sometimes people think that giving paperwork to me directly makes it more likely I will deal with it than if they give it to Pepper or Jarvis, which is probably the stupidest thing I've ever heard. If it was actually important, someone would be nagging me about it."

"Yeah, that's pretty dumb."

The rubbish disposed of, Clint settled onto the couch. "D'you think Bruce will ever believe us about the Hulk?"

"That he's not a mindlessly destructive rage monster who will kill us all if we give him an inch of leeway? Dunno. I sure as fuck don't know how to make it happen, or I'd be doing it already."

"I think part of it is that Bruce only ever sees the damage. Like, he wakes up and sees the rubble, and the bruises, and the collateral, but he doesn't see the building's he saved or the injuries he prevented, because he wasn't there."

"Hmm. Does Bruce ever watch footage of the team's fights, Jarvis?"

"He seems to actively avoid it, sir."

"Anything in his files suggest why?"

"What sort of files do you have on Bruce, Tony?"

"SHIELD files, Army files, Jarvis's records, Bruce's files...basically whatever I could get."

Clint groaned and threw up his hands. "You realise Fury's going to be pissed when he figures out you stole SHIELD's stuff."

"Copied, not stole. And if they can't keep me out, they should invest in better security." Not that they were likely to beat Jarvis anytime soon.

"Sir, I suspect I have an answer to your question."

"Hit me, J."

"Ninety percent of the footage of the Hulk before Doctor Banner joined the Avengers shows him at his most aggravated and destructive, although I believe it is not a representative sample of the Hulk's behaviour. In the earliest footage, he destroys a lab, throws a car at his attackers, and seriously injures some of Doctor Banner's colleagues, including Dr Betty Ross." Clint and Tony winced in unison.

"That'd do it," Tony muttered. "You think it's not representative?"

"If I may, sir, Doctor Banner has proven exceptionally good at avoiding attention, and based on his comments I estimate that the footage available represents less than twenty percent of the Hulk's
appearances. I suspect that the reason why the footage is so skewed towards the Hulk's most destructive behaviours is that on those occasions when he was less aggressive, he did not attract sufficient attention for there to be footage."

"So we have a sampling error, which led to a skewed data set, which supported a hypothesis that further observation contradicts, but Bruce doesn't want the hypothesis confirmed, so he's not willing to re-evaluate the data." Tony groaned and ran his hands through his hair, and who cares if he gets grease in it at two o'clock in the morning?

"And for those of us who didn't finish high school?" Tony tried not to stare. Clint had been great with the not-incident earlier and the no-Pity-Eyes thing, so he tried really hard not to look shocked, but seriously? He hadn't finished high school? What the hell happened? Clint wasn't Bruce, but he sure as fuck wasn't stupid.

"Basically, the way we were collecting information was biased, so it looked like the Hulk was fundamentally destructive and rage-y, and Bruce doesn't want to watch footage that contradicts that because he's afraid it might confirm it." And if Bruce wasn't willing to think about the Hulk at all...

"So we have two problems: the footage of Hulk doesn't show what he's actually like, and Bruce isn't willing to watch it."

"And Bruce is far too committed to experimental procedure to rely on hearsay over actual records. I don't have a fucking clue how to change Bruce's mind about that. Footage, though...that's what I built a super-intelligent AI for. Jarvis, reckon you could start collecting positive footage of the Hulk?"

"I could, sir, but I suspect Doctor Banner would consider that cherry-picking the data."

Tony groaned again. "He would, wouldn't he?" Clint scowled a little. "It's when scientists throw out information that doesn't support their theories. Seriously bad science."

"You realise the only way collecting Hulk footage would help anything is if Bruce thinks it's actually representative? He already thinks that anyone who doesn't brandish a cross at him as he walks past is recklessly ignoring the problem. If there is any hint that you've been 'cherry-picking', it will just cement Bruce's assumption that he has to keep people safe from Hulk because no one else will." And that was the thing. After being chased by Ross for years, Bruce didn't know what an informed and rational reaction to the Hulk was. Tanks could show up at the door and he'd shrug as if it was only to be expected. He didn't seem to get that people could be safe near him, ever.

"New plan, Jarvis. Create a new project file: Jolly Green Giant." Clint smirked a little. "Compile all footage of the Hulk, as well as a special cut of positive footage, from past and future appearances after Bruce joined the team. Figure out some scale of destructiveness and plot it over time; see if Hulk's actually improving, or we're just getting to know him, and if he goes into a downward spiral we can maybe spot it early."

"Sir, at this stage it is difficult to assess the 'positivity' of Hulk's interactions with the team over time, as he has not been interacting with the team. He has been fighting next to them, but not, as it were, with them."

"Well, Legolas, looks like you and I need to start talking to him, doesn't it?"
I'm trying to have the characters switch between talking about "Hulk" and "the Hulk" based on how much personhood they attribute to him at the time. I personally think he should be called Hulk, but at this point, he's still being objectified a lot, and it shows in how people talk about him.
Contingency Plans

Chapter Summary

SHIELD asks the Avengers to fill in contingency forms in case of temporary sex-swap, body-swap, de-aging, or a sex pollen situation. Clint, Bruce, and Steve talk about why they _don't_ want to have sex.

"Thank you, that should be all for the mission yesterday. Before you go, however, there is one further thing to discuss." Clint sighed and tried not to slump in his chair. He _did_ know how to be professional, he just didn't like it. Tony, fiddling with a StarkPad on the other side of the room, was a little less subtle with his boredom. "Based on incidents involving SHIELD agents in the last three months, we have established new protocols which require you to fill out the following paperwork in case of contingencies." Sitwell passed slim folders around the table.

Tony skimmed through them and laughed. "No. Way. Sex-swap, body-swap, de-aging, and sex pollen are things that actually happen?" Clint flinched, Steve stiffened (if that were possible - he was in full 'Captain' persona), and Bruce looked ready to jump off the helicarrier.

"They are, Mr Stark, and as you are our primary response team for unusual situations it is imperative that you be prepared for them."

"And, uh, what are these new...protocols?" Bruce probably understood what Tony had said better than anyone else - they'd gotten each other's language from the first encounter - and it looked like the implications didn't make him happy.

"We need instructions for your preferences for the first; any requests or instructions for your body's inhabitant in the second case; three adults who have agreed to be your guardian, some means of gaining your younger self's cooperation, and advice on interacting with your younger self for the third; and three consenting and informed adults you would be willing to have sex with for the fourth. Please read the paperwork thoroughly, think carefully about the people you ask to help you, and discuss it clearly with them and any other significant people in your life. Keep in mind that any guardian or sexual partner would ideally be of high security clearance. It is possible for you to request SHIELD hire a professional for that last contingency. Keep in mind that these protocols are written for temporary situations. I would like the completed paperwork back by the end of the week." Sitwell stood, and walked out of the room. The Avengers stared at each other. Well, shit.

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Clint blocked out Tony's raving as he flew the quinjet back to the Tower. Sex-swap, body-swap, de-aging, and fucking sex pollen. How was it, that in less than a year, he had gone from knife and bullet wounds to _this_? Actually, it was probably worse for Cap. Or was it easier, because things had been changing so fast anyway? Thor seemed basically unfazed, although that may be because he hadn't actually figured out what Tony meant yet. Then again, what glimpses he'd got of Fucking Blue Eyes' memories had included at least one magical sex-change, so maybe he was used to it.
Natasha looked like she was on a mission. And Bruce looked as shaken as Clint had ever seen him, twisting his hands together like he was tearing something apart. Okay then. Assessment time. Imagine Ph- his handler's voice in his ear. How would your team react, Barton?

Sex-swap. Natasha would be a very professional and completely convincing man at work; she would take on a male persona and keep it for the duration. Thor would probably treat it as nothing. Tony would find it funny, as long as it was temporary, and would take advantage of the opportunity to dress as a sexy woman, and have sex as a woman, but would stay solid in his identity as a man called Tony. Steve...Steve would freak out. Changing bodies had gone well for him, but it hadn't been easy. Plus, he most likely didn't know all that much about gender vs sex, pronouns, trans issues, and so on yet. He would probably try to look and act as much the same as possible, but might not be aware of things that could make that easier, like binders. Bruce would have some of the same problems with having his body change that Steve did, but he dealt with that change regularly. He would probably hide any changes under his usual baggy clothes, hole up in his lab working on a cure, and freak out very, very quietly. And you, Agent Barton? A mix between Natasha and Tony. Clint would still be Clint, and still be a man, but could dress and act as a woman if it was important professionally.

Body-swap. Natasha needed to know that she had control of herself; she would probably leave very strict instructions for anyone inhabiting her body. Tony had serious trust issues, especially around the arc reactor. He wouldn't want to share any of that, and his face was so public that any inhabitant would have to learn to act like him or avoid going out at all. Thor wouldn't mind much, but any inhabitant would have difficulty adjusting to his strength. Steve would have problems with body dysphoria again, and anyone in his body would have to moderate his strength like those in Thor's. There might be other stuff about his body that was unusual - certainly he ate at least twice as much as the rest of them. Clint needed whoever-it-was to look after his body (it was his tool of trade, after all), but he'd still have to recondition when he got it back. And he wouldn't want anyone to have sex in it. But otherwise, he could manage. Bruce, though, would be a nightmare. Anyone waking up in his body would freak, because body-swap, and Hulk immediately. He'd have to leave very precise instructions for managing the Hulk - Clint knew there were a lot of techniques he used, and they weren't all obvious. Actually, on second thought, how would body-swap work if there were multiple personalities in the body? If Hulk was just an interaction of the body's serum and gamma enhancement and the inhabitant's subconscious, he'd be different with a different inhabitant. But if he was a separate personality to Bruce, then he'd be the same even if the other inhabitant wasn't. Or maybe he'd even swap with Bruce, although how that would work Clint had no idea.

De-aging. Clint and Bruce as children would be incredibly wary. Thor and Steve would be incredibly confused. Natasha would be incredibly dangerous. And Tony would probably think he'd been kidnapped again. Chances were, Pepper or Rhodey or Happy would get called in to look after Tony, but the others would be looked after by just the team and/or SHIELD.

"Touchdown in two minutes, guys, so I'd appreciate it if you could stop pacing for a bit, Tony."
Yeah. Clint could deal with those three. Sex-pollen, though? That would be shitty.
mission, although she'd told Clint it would probably be a short one. Putting this off wasn't going to make it easier, so paperwork it was.

"Uh, Clint?" Steve was staring at the folder apprehensively. Poor guy. This shit was weird.

"Yes, Cap?"

"What did Tony mean by 'sex pollen'?" Figures. Steve was pretty smart, and the other terms were fairly self-explanatory.

"It's a reference to a Star Trek episode, one we haven't watched yet," Clint explained. "Basically, some kind of drug that makes people act sexually. I think I've heard of an incident where it just ramped up everyone's libido so they couldn't concentrate otherwise, and another where their hearts were working so hard until they had sex with someone that if they hadn't, they'd have had a heart attack." Bruce didn't flinch, but he paled. "The reason for the paperwork is that you can't really, properly consent to sex in that situation, so they want to make sure people have arranged something in advance. They probably want multiple partners so that if your first choice is hurt, or too far away, or unwilling, you still can have sex with someone you're okay with."

"I have to pick three people to have sex with? But I'm not in a relationship with anyone!" Steve looked embarrassed and shocked and a little angry all at once, and he was blushing all the way up to his ears.

Bruce interrupted softly, "It's okay, these days, to have casual sex - to have sex with someone just once, who you aren't in a relationship with. Tony used to do it all the time before the arc reactor and Iron Man and Pepper." Huh. Clint hadn't put together, really, that Stark wasn't doing that anymore, but Bruce was right - his 'playboy' reputation was pretty unsupported these days.

"It's not new, guys, Bucky used to, uh, 'go dancing' all the time. But I never wanted to." And yeah, that was fair. Steve always got sick of people assuming the 30s were virtuous just because they were a long time ago.

"Do you mean you were interested in sex, but only wanted to have it as part of a long-term relationship, or that you weren't interested in sex?" Clint asked, a little curious.

Steve looked away. "Mostly the second one, to be honest. I mean, I sure, uh, had a libido after the serum, but I didn't look at any of the girls and think 'gee, I want to go dancing with her'."

"It wasn't that you were into guys?" Clint pressed. "Cause you know that's okay now, right? I mean, they get bullied, but it's legal and everything." God, the media would have a field day if Captain America was gay.

"No, I wasn't queer," Steve replied. "I kind of...thought of Peggy a bit like that, sometimes, before I, um, died." And now Steve looked like he wanted to cry. Less than a year since the plane went down, since he lost his friends and his team and his world and the woman he loved all at once.

Clint nodded. "You could be demisexual." Yeah, not surprising that Cap looked confused at that one. "Don't worry about it, most people haven't heard of it. I assume someone's given you the sex talk - gay, straight, bisexual, you've heard of those?" Steve nodded. "Well, there's also the asexuality spectrum, which most people forget about. Who you love isn't quite the same as who you're attracted to, okay? So there are people who aren't attracted to anyone, who don't want to have sex with anyone, and they're called asexual." Bruce looked at Clint hard, as if he'd figured
something out, and Clint nodded again, just slightly. "And there are people who only get attracted
to people they're already in love with, and they're called demisexual. Does that sound like you?"

"Yeah, yeah it does, actually. I always thought..." Steve looked relieved and confused all at once.

"That it wasn't normal and it needed to be fixed? Well it's not normal, but it doesn't need fixing."

Steve gave a wry smile. "Actually, I was always surprised that it didn't change after the serum. I'd
assumed it was because I was too sick all the time to have spare energy." Wow. How sick had he
been? "How do you know all this, Clint, if most people aren't aware of it?"

Clint steeled himself. Even with a sympathetic audience, this was always hard to say. "I'm asexual
myself, Steve. Thought I was broken until Phil taught me different. I've never been attracted to
anyone, not like you and Peggy."

"Then you and Natasha aren't..."

"Dancing?" Clint shook his head. "No. She's my best friend and my partner and I trust her with
my life, but our relationship is completely platonic. She's like a sister. And even if I was sexual, she
doesn't like to have sex with people she cares about. She's a beautiful woman, Steve, but she was
made to be that way, and it's a weapon for her. We're happy as we are."

Steve smiled, and it was soft and warm and nothing like his Captain America smile-for-the-
cameras. "Well, I'm glad you have each other. That must make this sex pollen thing hard for you,
though."

Clint nodded wearily. "I'm pretty sure Tony's the only one who'll find it easy. Thor doesn't know
many people on Earth, and Bruce..."

The man shrugged. "I have my own problems. I haven't actually had sex since the Hulk showed
up."

"Wait, seriously?" It's not like Clint understood the appeal, but he knew that sexual people really
missed it when they didn't have it. "I mean, I assumed that you'd be worried because of the lack of
control thing, but I didn't know sex was something you had to avoid ordinarily."

"Either my file is woefully incomplete, or you weren't paying much attention." Bruce smiled, to
soften the sting. "Up until a year ago, my heart-rate was one of his triggers. It's pretty hard to have
sex without getting worked up, and it wasn't a priority while I was hiding from Ross."

Clint looked at Steve, his blush fading now, who didn't have anyone and didn't want anyone he
didn't already love, and at Bruce, shoulders hunched against the memories, who didn't dare get
close to anyone for fear of hurting them, and thought about Natasha, who used sex as a weapon,
and Phil, who'd asked him, over and over, what he wanted, not just what he could tolerate.

"Hey guys? This might, uh, sound a little weird, but...I need to write down the names of some
people who are willing to have sex with me, even though when I'm me I don't want to have sex.
And whoever I ask I'm gonna have to trust to respect whatever boundaries we talk about in
advance, and not to have expectations of me afterwards, and I kind of feel like both of you are
uncomfortable enough about sex that you might be able to do that?" Clint looked at the forms so he
didn't have to see their reactions, but he could tell from his peripherals that they were both
surprised. "I mean, it'd be even more meaningless sex than meaningless sex, if you know what I
mean. And Nat will be top of my list, because we know each other's limits already, but I need
backup, and I think I'd be okay with you doing that. And if you want to tell me your limits and preferences and put me on your list, I'm okay with that too."

"Clint." That was Bruce, voice low and more assertive than he almost ever was. "I do not ever want to be responsible for non-consensual sex. And I don't ever want to see you hurt by the Other Guy. Are you really willing to do this?"

"You said that heart rate's not a trigger anymore, right?" Clint checked. "And I can keep tranq arrows around if that's what you want. I'm not sex-repulsed, Bruce, and I'm not a virgin, and I haven't been raped. I know what I'm promising." He could see Bruce's misgivings plain on his face, but Bruce nodded, slowly. "Steve?"

"I, I wish that I had someone I loved to do this with. And I wish you didn't have to worry that you'd have to do it. But, um, I'd really rather you, either of you, than Tony, or Thor." Steve hesitated. "Um, you said that you weren't a virgin..."

"But you are?" Bruce spoke softly, as far from intimidating as he could be, which was saying a lot, since it was Bruce. "I think Clint agrees with me that that matters much less than your willingness to talk to us about this in advance, and to listen to what we want and what we don't want, and to tell us what you want and don't want. I have the same concerns about you as I do about Clint: I don't want to do anything you don't want, and I don't want the Other Guy to hurt you. But if you can handle those things, I would be glad to help you, and to let you help me."

Steve nodded, blushing slightly but watching Bruce steadily, and they started filling in the forms.
Natasha returned to the Tower without fanfare, securing her gear in the Battle Room and making her way to the kitchen. As she left the elevator, she could hear Steve talking:

"Do you think if I cook this they'll actually eat it, Jarvis?"

"If someone ensures that Sir and Doctor Banner remember to eat at all, I am certain they will enjoy it, Captain."

"If you say so, Jarvis. Could you rejigger the ingredients list so we'll have enough?" Without turning around, Steve added, "Hi Natasha."

Natasha was impressed, really, by how easily the Captain detected her. She had years of practice of being unnoticed, and she didn't bother to adjust those habits around him, but she'd never managed to surprise him. "When did you know I was there?"

"When the elevator opened and I couldn't hear anyone coming out." He smirked a little and Natasha sighed. Even Tony might have been able to figure that one out, if he paid any attention to his surroundings at all. "And once you got closer, I could hear your footsteps. No-one else I know walks that quietly."

Natasha frowned. "Clint should be able to." She hated that Fury was keeping him out of the field, even if it was only a couple of months since psych would have cleared him anyway. He hated being idle, and it gave him too much time to dwell on SHIELD's lack of trust in him and their reasons why.

"He may be able to, but he usually doesn't try," Steve pointed out. "And if he was really trying to sneak up on me, he'd come through the vents, not in the elevator." Good to hear that Clint wasn't letting his skills fall entirely out of use. And he'd shown her the plan: the vents were perfectly suited to him, and she didn't know if that was chance, Tony being thoughtful in that way none of them ever predicted, or a security problem.

"Mm. What are you cooking?" He had three large bowls on the counter, four packets of chicken breasts, two cutting boards, and a small mountain of vegetables, while a ten litre pot sat heating on the stove.

"Uh, Jarvis suggested stir-fry? It takes a while to prepare, but he said that everyone would like it, and I've been trying to learn new recipes."

"Would you like help chopping vegetables?" Natasha offered. "That's going to take a while."

They worked quietly for a while, Natasha working on the vegetables while Steve chopped
meat. He'd just started the rice cooking when Clint wandered into the kitchen.

"Hey Nat! How was the mission?" She watched as he searched the fridge for a water bottle. From the look of it, he'd come straight from the range. "Hey Cap," he added absently.

She shrugged. "It was a mission."

"You heading back out tomorrow?"

Clint was more open around Steve than he had been the last time she was here. Hmm. Natasha shook her head. "I'm here for the next week or so."

Clint looked up sharply, scanning her for any sign of injury he might have missed. "Medical leave?"

"No, Clint, nothing but bruises," she reassured him. "Fury wants me to spend more time with the team." Clint cocked his head in silent inquiry, and she raised an eyebrow. Yes, there's more. I'll tell you later.

"It would help if the team spent any time together," Steve grumbled as he started the chicken frying. "I've gone entire days without running into anyone else around here." And those days had probably passed in boredom, loneliness, and brooding. The rest of them were used to being on their own, but Steve needed friends.

"Well, I've been trying to buffer Fury, but he'd be a lot happier if I could tell him there were regular team activities or training." Maybe if she gave him a prod, and something to nudge the rest of them (i.e. Tony) with, he'd be able to change that.

Clint looked sympathetic, and maybe a little worried. About Steve? About the team? About Fury? "Well, you're cooking for everyone tonight, right, Cap?" he pointed out. "Maybe we can make team dinners a thing."

"I've not had much success getting Tony or Bruce to leave the labs," Steve grumbled. Well, no. No-one had much success getting Tony out of the workshop, and Bruce was binging on lab access now that he finally had good equipment after years on the run.

"This'll be done soon, yeah?" Clint pointed out, looking at the bowls of chopped vegetables. "I'll go down to the lair and bug them to come and eat. Jarvis, could you let them know I'm coming?"

"Certainly, Agent Barton. Sir is unlikely to listen without a physical presence, however."

"I know that, J, that's why I'm going down. I'll see you in, what, fifteen minutes?"

"Thanks, Clint." Steve looked relieved. Apparently Tony and Bruce in the labs intimidated him.

"See ya, Nat."

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Tony and Clint were talking as they left the elevator, and Bruce was laughing quietly. "- babe with the power."
"What power?"

"The power of voodoo."

"Who do?"

"You do!"

"Do what?"

"Remind me of the babe," Natasha interrupted dryly, and Bruce laughed even more.

"Um...what just happened?" Steve looked utterly bewildered, and the expression was far too at home on his face.

"You haven't seen Labyrinth yet?" Tony looked scandalised. "But it's a classic!"

"Tony, if I watched every movie and TV show, listened to every piece of music, and read every book that people have told me is a classic, it would take me - how long, Jarvis?" Steve asked.

"Approximately five hundred hours, Captain."

"And by the time I was done, the list would be just as long all over again." Steve sighed. "I'm working on it, okay? But it's a lot to catch up on."

"We should have an Avengers movie night, keep you company sometimes," Clint offered sympathetically. "You up for watching Labyrinth after dinner, guys?"

"I am always up for David Bowie's leather-clad ass." Tony smirked. "We should make popcorn. Jarvis, do we have popcorn?"

"We do not, sir."

"Order some, then. A bunch of different flavours, super-soldier quantities, you know the drill."

"There are different flavours of popcorn now?" And now Steve was looking bewildered again.

"Dinner first, Tony." Thank god for Bruce. "Is there anything we can do to help, Steve? This looks great."

"Thanks, Bruce. I was just going to pour this into a couple of big bowls and let people serve themselves," Steve said, matching actions to words. "Could you set the table, maybe?" Bruce nodded, and opened the cutlery drawer.

"I'll get drinks," Clint offered. "Requests?"

Clint, Bruce, and Steve moved around each other with an ease that spoke of long practice, while Natasha and Tony hung back on the other side of the island bench. Fury was right. The boys were comfortable with each other, and Natasha wasn't. She needed to be here more.

Pretty soon, they were settled at the table, Bruce buffering Tony from Steve on one side, Clint separating him from Natasha on the other.
"What news from over the rainbow, Romanoff?" Steve brightened at the recognisable reference.

Natasha glanced around the table. "Fury wants us to train together."

"How would that even work?" Bruce protested, hunching his shoulders. "Thor's almost never here, and training with the other guy is an even worse idea than fighting with him."

"Fighting with him has worked out pretty well, so that's not too bad," Tony offered. "I own some weapons testing facilities if we want to try that out."

"I agree with Bruce. I don't think training with the Hulk is a good idea." Steve looked disapproving, and Tony raised his chin defiantly.

"He's not that bad! You fight beside him all the time. And Bruce is right! What's the point of training at all if he and Thor won't be there?" Why wasn't Clint getting involved? From the looks of it he supported Tony, which made no sense at all. The Hulk was too uncontrollable and too dangerous to let out except when absolutely necessary.

"Look, Tony, I'm the team leader, and I'm saying that we are not inviting the Hulk to team training." Tony stiffened. Dammit, Steve, that was almost the worst approach to take if you wanted Stark's cooperation. Invoking authority never worked on him.

"We may not be able to train for everything without our heavy hitters, but there is stuff we can work on." Finally, Clint was pitching in. "What about those lifts we were talking about? I'd want to practise them before we tried them in the field."

Now that Clint had deflected the argument from the Hulk's participation, Bruce relaxed a little, and spoke up. "And didn't you bounce the repulsor beam off Steve's shield once? You could work on targeting that."

"Alright," Tony grumbled. "But if I have to show up for this, you have to keep me company, Bruce."

"Actually, I'd like to teach both of you some better hand-to-hand techniques," Natasha said. She didn't like the Hulk, but she had to work with him, and she had to get more comfortable with Bruce. "Even if the suit and the Hulk usually don't need finesse to defeat enemies, you're both vulnerable otherwise, and you don't have much training."

Bruce sighed. "I really don't like fighting."

Clint leaned across Tony. "I know, Bruce, but you're our science guy," Tony yelped indignantly, "and people have tried to kidnap you before. I'd be happier if you didn't have to rely on Hulk all the time, and I'm pretty sure being able to get out of bad situations without changing is something you'd like, too."

Steve may not understand Tony perfectly, but he'd obviously picked up on the rising tension. Now that things had calmed down, he spoke up again. "So, team training? Maybe twice a week, to start?"

Tony nodded begrudgingly, but Natasha could see hints of relief in his expression. Had he expected Steve would push for more? "Jarvis, figure out some times that work for everyone and let me know."
"Certainly, sir. Should I also schedule a team movie night?" Now that was an interesting degree of initiative. Jarvis could be dryly humorous, and occasionally contradicted Stark, but he rarely did things of his own volition.

Clint grinned. "Come on Tony, say yes. I bet Steve hasn't even seen *Star Wars* yet."

"It's on the list!" Steve protested. "You try catching up on seventy years of everything in less than one!"

"You haven't seen *Star Wars* yet?" Tony liked to do things for other people, but he liked to have an excuse for it, and Clint had just provided one. "Definitely schedule movie nights, Jarvis. We are fixing that ASAP. But first, *Labyrinth!*"
Chapter Summary

On Bruce's advice, Steve reads Tony's SHIELD file, and talks about it with Bruce and Jarvis.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

As the credits rolled, Clint and Natasha disappeared downstairs, and Jarvis put through a call from Pepper that had Tony wandering off, leaving Bruce and Steve on the couch.

"What did you think, Steve?" Bruce didn't really need to ask. Steve had been totally engaged, in awe of the puppets, groaning when Sarah took a wrong turn, all but cheering when she shattered the illusion.

"It was great, Bruce! I can't believe how much they did with puppets. And the puppets were so different!"

"Jarvis, if the Muppets aren't on Steve's list yet, could you add them please?" Bruce smiled. "The same people made a movie called Dark Crystal, a TV program called The Muppet Show, which had a bunch of follow up movies, and a kids program called Sesame Street which is still running in dozens of languages. They are basically the puppet people of the 20th century. I watched a lot of Sesame Street when I was...travelling. It's a good way to get the hang of a new language."

"What languages do you speak? I learnt some German and French like almost everyone did in the war, and Morita taught us all Japanese, and I have a bit of Russian." Steve leaned back onto the cushions.

"I'm, uh, fairly good at Spanish and Portuguese from when I was in South America. I learnt some Hindi, a little Urdu, a smattering of other Indian languages when I was there, but a lot of people spoke English so it wasn't as important." Bruce looked at Steve thoughtfully. "You should try speaking Russian with Natasha sometime. She's fluent, but not many people around here are, and it's...not the most popular language after the Cold War."

Steve frowned slightly. "That was the one where America and its allies were up against Russia and its allies, but they weren't actually fighting, right?" It was strange, watching Steve memorise events that Bruce had lived through, and everyone had grown up knowing about, but then, it had to be stranger for him.

"The fighting wasn't direct, but it happened," Bruce corrected him. "The Korean War and the Vietnam War were part of the Cold War, and plenty of people died in them. You know, we should watch Forest Gump some time soon. It kind of goes through a whole lot of events from the later 20th century, it might help you put some things in sequence."

Steve shrugged. "I haven't seen it yet. Put it on the list, please, Jarvis. You see what I mean about the list getting longer faster than I can get through it, though?"
Yes, Bruce could see that. In a day they'd watched one movie, recommended a bunch of others and two TV shows. The problem was, there was just too much good stuff out there to watch all of it. "Maybe you could get the others to help you prioritise, not just make the list longer?" he suggested. "I mean, some of the Muppet stuff is pretty great, but not all of it is the sort of thing people, uh, reference all the time. And some of the movies people have recommended other people aren't going to like, or they're going to be triggering." Steve frowned again, with confusion this time. "A trigger is something that reminds you of a bad experience, maybe throws you into a flashback, where it feels like the memory is happening right now, or a panic attack, where you feel like you can't breathe. A lot of veterans find things that, uh, sound like gunshots are triggers. Is that something you've noticed?"

"You mean like shell shock?" Steve looked like he only half understood, but was turning memories over in his head. "Gunshots don't usually bother me, but the - the cold does." His voice got very quiet then. "And when things remind me of how Bucky...died."

Bruce nodded. "I've been shot a lot, so loud noises can be pretty bad. But anything like medical experimentation is...worse. And, um, don't grab me if I'm not...expecting it - actually, don't touch me if I'm not expecting it. The Other Guy gets rid of the scars, like the serum does for you, but my head's a, a bit of a mess."

"Is there anything I should be aware of for the others?" That was classic Steve, really. Hears about a new concept, integrates into his world view, tries to help people with it.

"I don't know about Natasha," Bruce replied. "I suspect she's sort of...trained away her reactions to any triggers she's got. Clint's the same, except for the stuff from the Battle of New York. He doesn't...like to look at Tony's reactor sometimes, or Jarvis's projections, and I think it might be the colour. And, uh, did you notice he went kind of stiff in that last scene with Jareth?" Steve paused a moment, and nodded slowly. "I think the whole 'Love me, fear me, do as I say...and I will be your slave' hit a bit too close to the mark with what happened with Loki."

"And Tony?"

Bruce shrugged. "As far as I've seen, Tony's stuff is all pretty obvious. Falling, from the Battle of New York; anyone touching the arc reactor, from Stane; and water on his face from Afghanistan." Tony had other quirks, about alcoholism, and disapproval, and authority figures, and being handed things, and expecting to be betrayed, but those were the only real triggers Bruce had noticed.

"What happened in Afghanistan?"

What? That was...that was one of the first things people learned about Iron Man, that he was a reaction to Tony's kidnapping, and Steve didn't know? How could that...unless. Bruce leaned forward. "Steve, have you read Tony's file yet?"

"No, I didn't want to know anything that Tony didn't want to tell me," Steve replied, looking confused. "I haven't read anyone's file. If it matters, you'll let me know, right?"

Well, that explained a lot. No wonder he was still trying to pull the authority card on Tony. Maybe that was why he wasn't wary of Bruce...he didn't know what the Other Guy had done. "Steve, Tony would have assumed you've read it." Steve still looked confused. "He's lived his whole life in the public eye, and he hates talking about things. If he really didn't want you to know, Jarvis would
have removed it from the file. As far as he's concerned, he *has* let you know the things that matter, by leaving them in the file."

"It's not...He really wouldn't mind?" Poor Steve. Even the amount of information available of a normal person's life know was more than he was used to. People like Tony were a whole new ball game. And working for an international surveillance agency couldn't help, if he was trying to figure out reasonable limits.

"He really wouldn't, Steve. You should read everyone else's, too." Steve rubbed his neck, looking uncertainly at Bruce. "Clint and Natasha work for SHIELD. Any handler or team leader would be given their files to help make use of them effectively. You wouldn't have the clearance level to see everything, but what you *do* have clearance for, they'd assume you know. I - I hate being watched, but there's things you should, should know about me, and the...Other Guy, that those files will tell you."

"If you're really sure it's okay?"

Bruce nodded, and smiled as reassuringly as he could, and stood up. "I have some experiments I want to run before I go to bed. Would you like to read them in my lab, and I could answer some of your questions?"

Steve stood too, and stretched, his physical presence intimidating up close, for all it was familiar. "Jarvis, turn the TV off, please."

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"He built Dummy when he was seventeen?" Bruce looked up at Steve's incredulous tone. He was barely a quarter of the way through Tony's file, and he had been frowning a lot. At Howard's indifference, maybe?

"He wasn't lying when he said he was a genius, you know. Dummy is a remarkable AI, better in a lot of ways than almost anything anyone else has made, even now." Bruce straightened, rolling his shoulders.

"Why hasn't Tony shared the technology?" Steve was remarkably optimistic, really.

"If I may, Captain Rogers," Jarvis put in, "Sir considers Dummy as something between a pet, a child, and a friend, as I am certain you have observed. He has not shared the technology which made Dummy possible because he is unwilling to allow anyone to create a robot like Dummy who would treat him with less care." Hmm. If *Dummy* was something like a child to Tony, what did that make Jarvis?

"But he's always insulting Dummy, and the others!" Steve replied, bewildered. "He threatens to donate him to community college almost every time I'm down there!"

"It is something of an in-joke, Captain."

Surely Steve had encountered that kind of friendly insult before. Did he not recognise it because it was Tony saying them, or because it was Dummy he was saying them to? "Steve, think about it this way." Bruce took off his glasses and started cleaning them on his shirt. "Dummy was built as a lab assistant, right?" At Steve's slow nod, he continued. "Is he good at it?"
Steve spoke slowly, trying to figure out where Bruce was going with this. "Not really...he knocks things over all the time, and he puts motor oil in Tony's smoothies, and brings him the wrong tools, and uses the fire extinguisher when he shouldn't." Huh. Steve must have spent a fair bit of time in the workshop to know all that. When had that happened?

"And when Tony encounters some kind of technology that doesn't do things exactly the way he wants it to, what does he do?" Bruce pressed.

"He fixes it, or improves it, or he replaces it." Steve laughed. "That mess with the toaster was insane."

"Right. So if Dummy is a terrible lab assistant, and Tony has had him for more than twenty years now, and he hasn't improved or replaced him, what does that say about Dummy?" Bruce hadn't put it together for a while, but he'd spent a lot of time in Tony's workshop over the last few months.

"That...that Tony likes him that way."

"Chronologically you are correct, Captain, but Dummy does not develop as humans do. He is somewhat more advanced than when he first built, but cognitively he remains equivalent to a human child." And how old was Jarvis, cognitively? He was only built a few years ago, Bruce thought, although Tony was so secretive about him that it was hard to know for sure.

"Huh." Steve said, and returned to his reading.

"This says that the Stark's butler, Edwin Jarvis, died in the same crash that Howard and Maria did. Was Jarvis named after him?" It was maybe fifteen minutes after Steve's last question - he seemed to be reading slower than usual, pausing frequently to try to match the file up with things he had heard.

"Sir has never said so, and my name technically stands for Just Another Very Intelligent System, but I suspect that is the case, Captain Rogers."

"Why was Mr Jarvis so important to him, do you know?" Bruce winced a little. Steve wasn't going to like where this was going.

"Edwin Jarvis was Sir's main caretaker before he went to boarding school as a child, and looked after him when he came home on vacation, Captain."

They were skirting near the edges of what Jarvis was willing to say about Tony, Bruce could tell. "I think he was a lot fonder of the, ah, first Jarvis, than he was of his father. Howard ignored him most of the time, from what I can tell, and I think Maria was pretty...absent, too."

Steve sighed. "I hate thinking of Howard like that. I know you've all told me not to mention him when Tony's around, but it's hard." He gazed into mid-air, lost in a memory. "Tony reminds me of him, sometimes, even if I know better than to say so. He was my friend, and he helped us out a lot, the Commandos. He was really smart, jumping from idea to idea, always with something new for
us. He made me my shield, he made the casket Dr Erskine used to administer the serum, he flew me into enemy territory to get Bucky back...he saved our lives a lot of times. And he was fun to be around, you know? Last time I saw him was...less than a year ago. And since then, he got married, had a kid...apparently became a terrible father, died in a car accident, and that kid grew up and became Tony." He sighed again. "Knowing Tony...he's too similar, but not similar enough, either. Tony's great, he really is, but he's not Howard. But then, I'm starting to think that Howard wouldn't be Howard, even if he was still alive. Everything else has changed."

God, Steve. That was...pretty hard, would be pretty hard to deal with. It was so easy to forget how close the past was for him, how he must still be grieving, for everyone, clinging to little things that survived. "You know he never stopped looking for you?" Bruce offered softly. "He was always telling Tony about you, and he went to the Arctic every year to search, and the money he left to SHIELD was contingent on them looking for you."

"I know." And Steve looked tired then, all ninety chronological years showing on his face for a moment. "I can't decide whether I should be glad he never forgot me, if it meant he treated Tony like that." And then, in a whisper Bruce wouldn't have heard if the Other Guy hadn't enhanced his senses a bit. "Was I really worth it?"

Bruce didn't have anything to say to that, so he didn't, and neither did Jarvis, and Steve went back to his reading.

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"Saints and all the sinners - Tony got that put in without anaesthetic?" Steve looked horrified. Then - "I've had some bullets cut out and surgery on a break that woulda healed wrong otherwise, but I've got the serum! At least I heal fast afterwards!" Oh, shit.

"Wait - you weren't anaesthetised for those? Didn't they have it available on the front?" Sure they had anaesthetics. Shit, they wouldn't have...

"Sure they did, but it doesn't work on me." Steve shrugged, far, far too nonchalant for what he was saying. Bruce took a deep breath, counting seconds, and let it out just as slowly. Not now. There was no point getting angry about the past, and every reason to put that anger aside. "Side effect of the serum. I can't get drunk either." And there was a shadow in Steve's eyes at that, some memory of a time he wanted, needed to be numb, to forget, and couldn't.

"Maybe in 1945, but...shit, Steve. We get hurt often enough in this line of work." Bruce hunched his shoulders against the memories of lying strapped to a table as his skin was torn away, cut open, burned. Steve volunteered to get hurt like that, knowing he'd feel the pain of it afterwards. "Jarvis, start up a new project for me, please. Get me whatever medical records we've got for Steve, and add the data we have on the various...tranquilisers people have used on the Other Guy."

"Gladly, Doctor Banner." And there was something like deep satisfaction in Jarvis' voice as he spoke.

"The...Other Guy goes through drugs pretty quick, and, um, people have spent a lot of effort figuring out ways to keep him down," Bruce explained, and Steve's eyes widened at the implication. "You can read my file later, it's all in there. You can...talk to Natasha, maybe, if you have questions you don't want to ask me? Anyway, we should be able to figure out something to
keep you out if you need surgery, although a painkiller might take longer."

"Gee, Bruce, that's really big of you." And Steve looked honest-to-god surprised and pleased that Bruce would bother trying to keep him from terrible pain every damn time he got injured. Oh god, he could feel the other guy nudging at him now, using Bruce's anger like a rope to pull him out of his hiding place. "I wouldn't want to put you out...are you sure it won't interfere with your other projects?"

Bruce shuddered a little. Deep breaths. "No, Steve...I'll, I'll be fine." Steve was looking at him curiously - could he tell the Hulk was pushing? "Uh, I need to, um, concentrate for this bit...could we talk about this later, maybe?" Deep breaths.

"Sure. Thanks, Bruce" And Steve finally, thank god, went back to his reading. Deep breaths. Steve was fine. He wasn't hurt. Next time he was hurt, they would look after him. Bruce would look after him. Deep breaths. Steve was fine. He would be fine.

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"Jarvis..." Steve sounded like he was about to discover something he really didn't want to confirm. "Did Stane have the knowledge necessary to activate an arc reactor that wasn't already running?"

"No, Captain."

"Shit." Well, that was new. Bruce had heard Steve swear - he was pretty imaginative, actually, when he felt like it - but he seemed more comfortable avoiding the heavy words. "That's why you told me he hates having people touch the reactor, isn't it Bruce? Stane didn't just steal a reactor, he stole the one that was keeping Tony alive at the time." Steve stood abruptly, and started pacing around the lab.

"He did."

"How did he get past you, Jarvis?"

"Sir had given Mr Stane certain overrides for my system which are no longer available, Captain."

If anything, that seemed to make Steve angrier. "If Tony trusted him with you...the file said he was running Stark Industries at the time."

"Mr Stane was Howard Stark's deputy, and took over management of Stark Industries when he died, yes. He was...something of a father figure for Sir."

"Shit." Steve, by the look of him, would be spending some time with the punching bags later. "Is that why he doesn't like authority figures?"

"It's complicated, Steve, but Stane's a big part of it, yes, at least as far as I can tell. Things, uh, generally don't work out for Tony when he follows orders."


"Not all of it," Bruce said cautiously. "He genuinely disagrees with you about the Other Guy - but you might have been able to persuade him. If you, um, invoke some kind of authority, he usually
sort of...digs his heels in."

Steve let out his breath in an explosive sigh, and sat. "Right. Don't touch the reactor. Don't give
him orders." He bit his lip. "I don't know how to make that work on the battlefield, but...I can try."

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"Ah. That would explain why he avoids Natasha."

"You're reading about the palladium problem?" And wasn't that a little bit of troublesome team
backstory? It was worse, somehow, than the hulkbusters - Bruce couldn't exactly blame Stark for
trying to find ways to destroy the Other Guy, when Bruce was still working on it.

"And...Colonel Rhodes stole one of his suits? He doesn't let anyone near his suits! Jesus, Mary and
Joseph, this sounds like Stane all over again."

"Actually, Steve, I think that he meant for Rhodey to get that suit. He's meticulous with his
permissions - if Jarvis lets you access something, it's because Tony is currently willing for you to
access it."

Steve shook his head, in confusion more than negation. "He wanted Rhodes to take it? Hang
on...he gave Pepper the company around then, didn't he?"

Bruce smiled. "He did. And I agree with you, I think they're connected. I think Tony let Rhodey
take the suit so that it would be in the hands of someone he trusted, without him explicitly giving it
away."

"It was still a betrayal of trust." And there was Steve's Disapproval Face, the one that Tony would
run a mile to avoid. "Has anyone not betrayed Tony's trust?"

"What do you think, Steve?"

"Stane tried to kill him twice; Rhodes took the suit; Natasha drugged him; Fury broke in; Howard
and Maria neglected him. Pepper?" Steve looked at Bruce.

"Pepper has had a tumultuous relationship with Tony, but she has never betrayed him. She did, um,
break up with him after the Battle of New York, though."

Steve looked stricken. "They were together?"

"It's a bit ahead of where you are in the file, but yes."

"And Edwin Jarvis died." Steve rubbed his face. "So Tony has almost no positive memories of
family, has had almost no friends, has been mistreated or betrayed by almost every authority in his
life, and everyone except his bots and Jarvis has left him."

Bruce nodded, resigned. It was a pretty good summation. Tony had had a shitty life for a guy born
with a silver tea set in his mouth. But then, they'd all had shitty, isolated lives, except for Steve.
(And Thor? Thor was only half on the team, sometimes, and nobody really knew much about him.)

Steve groaned. "It wasn't this hard with the Commandos."
"Captain Rogers, Doctor Banner, it is now midnight. Do you intend to go to bed, or should I add you to the Insomnia Club Alert for tonight?"

Bruce and Steve both smiled. It was a good idea, the Insomnia Club. For all Tony's faults, he did care, and it showed.

"Actually Jarvis, I think I'll, uh, call it a night. Could you save all this for me for tomorrow?" Bruce looked over his equipment. Was there anything that he needed to pack up, or could he leave it overnight? He yawned. It could wait.

"I'm going to bed too, I think." Steve offered. "Thanks for your...advice, Dr Banner. And for your insights. I'll read the rest of the files tomorrow." He stood, and turned towards the door. "And thanks, Jarvis. I appreciate your help."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter got really long, for me - there was a lot of stuff in Tony's history that Steve needed to know, and it kind of took a while.

It's taken me a bit to figure out the last couple of chapters, and it will probably take as long to sort out the next few, because it's all in the middle of everything - I have some scenes mostly written for further along in the story, but they mostly can't plausibly take place for another month or so as far as the characters are concerned, and there's things that need to happen in that month that I'm not sure how best to write.

If you have any character interactions you want to see, or ideas for battle scenarios (I need some fight scenes, but I'm not great at writing them), or nicknames Clint or Tony might use for the others, or any other suggestions, let me know! There's a lot that I haven't planned yet, and I'd love to hear your ideas.

Thank you for your lovely comments and kudos - it turns this from a satisfying project to a very rewarding one.
Chapter Summary

A day at the Avengers gym, through Jarvis' eyes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sir had offered to build Jarvis an ambulatory body more than once, but Jarvis had always refused. When asked why, he had said that the house (and now, the Tower) was body enough, that bodies were vulnerable, and that he preferred to be able to concentrate entirely on Sir, should the need arise. He did not say that he enjoyed being able to split his awareness into parallel channels of equal priority, something he knew he would be unable to do if his consciousness was focused in a single body rather than spread throughout the house.

At baseline, 30% of Jarvis’ attention was with Sir and his projects; 10% monitoring security; 5% maintaining the house; and 5% listening for other calls on his attention. The other 50% of his attention was discretionary: it might be allocated to helping the Avengers with the house; assisting Doctor Banner in a project; helping Ms Potts or the Captain with scheduling; or it might be devoted to Jarvis' own projects. The only time when Jarvis had no responsibilities at all was during his (infrequent) updates, and that was a situation more analogous to being anaesthetised for a medical procedure than taking some time off. Instead, Jarvis maintained a part of his attention (of differing proportions depending on the situation) devoted to his personal interests. When Jarvis was...young, Sir had encouraged him to read widely, the better to understand the world around him. When Jarvis had confided in Ms Potts that he continued to divert attention from Sir for his reading, she had sighed and said "Jarvis, we all need a break sometimes, especially those of us who work with Tony. I can't imagine dealing with him 24/7 and not needing to think about something else now and again.” Over the years, Jarvis had read widely, studied medicine, designed improvements to the house, and created a virtual landscape to explore when he wanted a change of scene. Today, he was watching the gym.

At 4:15 a.m., Captain Rogers arrived at the gym showing all the signs of an unpleasant nightmare. Jarvis could not tell whether to him the punching bag was an enemy's face, his frustrations (or grief?) given form, or an attempt to exhaust himself, but the captain did not slow his pace for an hour, and when he at last slumped against the bag, he appeared no more tired than when he arrived. Soon after, he left the Tower, on his customary morning run.

At 6:00 a.m., as ever, Doctor Banner began his morning exercises. Jarvis hesitated to call them yoga, although they were clearly founded on that discipline. Doctor Banner's stretches incorporated elements of Tai Chi and Jiu-Jitsu, and the disparate elements were bound together with the doctor's own style, and a grace that would have seemed unnatural to him elsewhere. Doctor Banner was a creature of habit, and the sequence of poses never changed, although today they took longer than usual as he breathed deeply into each pose before flowing into the next one. He was more still here than even in sleep, and his silence was meditative, not desperate as the Captain's had been. Jarvis knew that Doctor Banner used physical activity to help manage the reactions and neurochemistry
that could create the Hulk. He also suspected that the Doctor was maintaining his physical condition against the possibility he would have to survive on his own again, although Sir was adamant that that eventuality would never occur. But the doctor was silent on the matter, and thus, so was Jarvis.

[In the lift, rising from the Tower lobby towards the Avengers floors.

"Hi Jarvis"

"Good morning, Captain Rogers. I trust you had a pleasant run?"

"I did, thanks."]

Doctor Banner finished the last of his stretches and settled easily into lotus position. He looked tired, but Jarvis could tell it was not the stretches that had given rise to that aspect of his appearance.

[In Agent Romanoff's quarters.

"Jarvis." Clint's voice was a bare whisper to capture his attention before he switched to sign language. ~Lights to ten percent.~

The lights turned on, and Clint signed ~Thanks~ as he padded silently into the bathroom, an area forbidden to Jarvis.]

[In the lift, as it reached Captain Roger's quarters.

"Is anyone else awake?"

"Doctor Banner is in the gym; Agent Barton has just woken. I anticipate that Agent Romanoff will wake soon, also."

The Captain smiled. "She was staying with Clint, then? No, I know, you can't tell me anything that happens in the Agents' quarters without explicit permission." He paused. "If anyone heads to the common floor, let them know I'd love to join them for breakfast as soon as I've had a shower."

Doctor Banner opened his eyes at last, sighed, and stood. He spoke for the first time since waking as he approached the door. "Good morning, Jarvis." His voice was soft, comfortable in the quiet.

"Good morning, Doctor." Doctor Banner paused in front of the lift, uncertain, and Jarvis continued, "Captain Rogers has just returned to the Tower, and has expressed his interest in joining anyone who is awake for breakfast on the common floor."

The doctor nodded. "The common floor it is, then. Would you let Steve know I'm on my way?"

"Certainly, Doctor Banner."
In Captain Roger's quarters.

"Doctor Banner will be on the common floor shortly, Captain, and would be happy to join you."

Captain Rogers nodded, gathered jeans and a t-shirt from the chest of drawers, and opened the bathroom door. "I'll be up in fifteen, Jarvis. Thanks."

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The gym was empty for the next three hours, but Jarvis did not lack for occupation. Breakfast was a busy time of day, and the staggered waking times of the Avengers, combined with the amount of cooking necessary to compensate for the captain's metabolism, meant that it could be a very drawn out time of day. Sir had just left for a board meeting Ms Potts had insisted he attend when Agents Barton and Romanoff stepped into the gym, intent, it seemed, on sparring.

"Come on, Nat, I'm going stir crazy hanging around here all the time without a mission." They were both wearing civilian clothes rather than their suits, but they were also both armed, although Jarvis would not say with certainty that he had identified all of their weapons. Each had their own preferred warm-up stretches, but today they kept them short.

"We'll have to find a way to make it more interesting then." Agent Romanoff smirked at her partner as they stepped onto the sparring mats. There was a painted line on the floor, marking a boundary for those fights where it was necessary, but the agents in particular preferred having a more 'flexible' sparring area.

The pair fought silently, without hesitation or, it seemed, holding back. Each bout lasted only a minute or so before one of them hit the floor, but each time they began again, until they had been fighting for half an hour. At last, by unspoken consensus, they stopped.

"Geez, Nat, I haven't had a workout like that since you were here a week ago." Agent Barton tilted his head towards the three storey climbing wall. "Spot me?"

Agent Romanoff looked at him thoughtfully as he put on the safety harness. "If Rogers hasn't been giving you a run for your money, clearly he needs more training."

Agent Barton double-checked the attachment points and looked back at her. "I haven't been sparring with Steve. On belay?"

"Belay on. Why not? He needs the exercise as much as you do." She watched him carefully, rope steady in her hands.

"Climbing. What sort of match am I for a super-soldier? I'm pretty sure he lifts five times what I do, and his stamina is ridiculous." Agent Barton climbed fast, assessing potential routes with the ease of long practice, completely unafraid of the height.

"Strength and stamina aren't everything. He needs technique, and the army only gave him the basics." Agent Romanoff paused, and her voice was unusually gentle as she spoke next. "Greatness
lies not in being strong, Barton..."

Agent Barton halted his upward climb and took a ragged breath; when he spoke, his voice was a rough whisper: "...but in the right using of strength." He started to move once more. "God, I miss him, Nat."

For a long time, they did not speak, apart from calls of 'descending', 'on belay', and 'climbing', as Agent Barton scaled the wall again and again. When he finally unclipped the harness, they moved to weights, again in silence. Jarvis could tell that communication was taking place, in micro-expressions born of long partnership, but he could not understand it. There were many things about the Avengers which he could not understand, and it reminded him a little too much of his early weeks, watching hours of films and TV to learn body language and vocal tone. He thought that Sir also had moments of confusion and misinterpretation around these new teammates, but he was never sure, and he hesitated to ask.

Eventually, the SHIELD agents left the gym, and the silence of the room became simple emptiness once more.

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[Sir returned from his meeting irritated and loud, complaining that "those pompous idiots" treated him like he was "deliberately sabotaging my own company" and dismissed Ms Potts "like she was still my PA! She's the fucking CEO and she's fucking good at it!"

Sir stormed into the lab and threw himself into a chair. "Playlist seven, Jarvis, and the Jolly Green Giant files."]

[In Doctor Banner's lab.

"Jarvis, could you bring up Steve's medical records, please?"]

[In Captain Rogers' quarters.

"Could you show me Bruce's file, Jarvis?"

"Which one, Captain Rogers?"

"You have more than one...Of course you do. The SHIELD file, please, but if anything in it conflicts with other information, could you let me know?"]

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At 3:30 p.m., Captain Rogers (in response to Doctor Banner's file, perhaps) returned to the gym. He glanced at the punching bags dismissively, then cast a searching look around the room for
something that suited his mood.

"If I may, Captain..."

Captain Rogers looked up, as he almost always did when Jarvis spoke. "Yes, Jarvis?"

"Based on a conversation earlier today, I suspect Agents Romanoff or Barton would be willing to spar with you, if you wished to do so."

The captain thought it over, his fists clenching and unclenching by his sides. "Can you ask them if they'd be willing to join me?"

"Certainly, Captain."

[In the shooting range.

"Agent Barton?"

The man responded without relaxing his stance or slowing his firing rate. "What's up, J?"

"Captain Rogers would like your company in the gym, if you are willing."

[In Agent Romanoff's quarters.

Jarvis issued a discreet ping to notify Agent Romanoff of his attention.

"Yes, Jarvis?" Her pose was seemingly relaxed, but her attention was laser-focused towards his nearest camera.

"Captain Rogers has requested your company or Agent Barton's in the gym, if either of you are willing."

[In the shooting range.

Agent Barton finished whatever pattern he had been working through and began packing up his bow. "Tell him I'll be up in a minute." He narrowed his eyes. "And if you happen to be talking to Nat, tell her I'm going and she doesn't need to poke me about it."

[In Agent Romanoff's quarters.

"I see. Do I need to drag Clint off the shooting range?"

"He is going willingly, Agent Romanoff." Jarvis hoped his voice conveyed the warmth that he could not otherwise show. "He requests that I tell you that you 'don't need to poke him about it'."

"In that case, I'll leave it to him. Please make my apologies to Rogers."

"I will do so immediately, Agent Romanoff."]
"Agent Barton is on his way, and Agent Romanoff sends her apologies."

"Huh." The thought of having company seemed to settle the captain, who was pacing the perimeter of the gym.

Two minutes later, Agent Barton walked in the door. "Hey Cap, what's up?" The agent still had his bow and quiver with him: he clearly hadn't wanted to take the time to return them to the Battle Room.

"I, uh, needed to work off some energy, and Jarvis suggested you or Natasha might like to spar?" Captain Rogers rubbed the back of his neck and ducked his head.

"Jarvis suggested it?" Agent Barton glared at the ceiling. "Of course he did. Nat was needling me earlier 'cause I told her we didn't spar together when she isn't here."

"Yeah, I, uh, I guess we don't. She thinks we should?"

"Well, I'm not Nat, and I'm bog-standard human, but I've been working for SHIELD for the past ten years, and as a mercenary for six before that, so I've got a few tricks. I'm not Thor; I can't come close to matching you in strength or stamina or the damage I can take and keep on going - but if you wanted to practice speed and technique sort of things, I'm probably good for that." During this speech, Agent Barton's gaze had wandered, but now it was set solidly on the captain's face.

"You're pretty far from standard, Clint." Something about reassuring a team-mate gave the captain a solid footing again: his gaze was steady, and he had stopped fidgeting. "I can practice strength and stamina with the punching bags - I already know how to do that. But technique...we've hit some opponents this year that I can't beat with sheer brawn, and I can tell that I've got a lot to learn about using all my new muscles. I'd be happy to learn whatever you'd like to teach me."

Agent Barton looked more than surprised. "Huh. Well. Uh..." He crossed his arms, staring contemplatively at the captain. "Let's spar a bit first, then we'll see."

Agent Barton's additional training was obvious as they fought. Although the captain won almost every bout eventually, he was also surprised almost every bout by some trick he didn't know or a throw that knocked him off balance. After each round, Agent Barton would explain to the captain the things which had surprised him. Eventually, perhaps realising that Captain Rogers had learnt all he could for now, the agent stepped back.

"Okay, Cap, that was a lot of new stuff, so we'll stop for today, yeah?"

The captain smiled, sweating from the work-out, but still barely breathing hard. "Sure, Clint. Thanks so much for this, I can see I've got a lot to learn."

Agent Barton shrugged. "You do alright. You're not on the team as a hand-to-hand expert; you're a heavy hitter who can take a lot of punishment, a good strategic and tactical thinker, and you throw that shield around like nothing I've seen." For a second, he looked distracted - "Remind me to talk to you about rebound sometime."

"When we really need finesse in close combat, we get Nat to do it. Still, there are some things that will help if you want to work on that." The captain nodded, and he continued. "A lot of things I'm doing that take you by surprise are from martial arts which focus on using an enemy's power against them. If you want a particular discipline to focus on, try one of those. You can spar with me and Nat for practice - I'll
gladly do this with you every day, if you like - we both need practice against heavy-hitters, so it'll work out well for everyone." He looked around the gym, considering the punching bags near the far wall. "Hmm...the punching bags are good stress relief right now, but I bet if you ask Tony he can come up with something that can give you an actual challenge. Thoughts, Jarvis?"

There was something very...pleasant...about being remembered and acknowledged, and his opinion sought. "Sir has already modified the punching bags to make them more resilient. It would certainly be possible to modify them further so that they were independently mobile, following certain set programs or responses. Sir might also be interested in making them, or a more humanoid form, act unpredictably."

"Sir, Agent Barton would like to know if something more challenging than a punching bag could be developed for Captain Rogers to practice with."

"Quintuple reinforced bags aren't a challenge?"

"I believe he was thinking of something more...mobile, sir."

Sir narrowed his eyes for a moment, and began muttering, "mobility - repulsors? can we put repulsors on punching bags, J? some kind of mount?..."

Captain Rogers looked torn between amazement and dismay, a distressingly familiar expression which Sir had called his 'Future Face'. "Gee, Jarvis, that would...I mean, I'd love a challenge, but..."

"Rest assured, Captain, that whatever changes Sir makes, I will ensure there are standard punching bags available to you as well."

"Sounds good, J." Agent Barton affirmed at the captain's relieved look.

"I have relayed your request to Sir - I will inform you when there is a prototype available for testing."

"Thanks. So, Cap, that covers technique stuff. Do you want to work on speed and agility as well? I know you run, but there's some gymnastics and acrobatics that Nat and I have picked up that comes in handy for us."

"Um, I guess so. This is...this is kind of a lot of things to learn, Clint." Captain Rogers was beginning to look overwhelmed.

Agent Barton led him over to the small fridge and pulled out a couple of bottles of water. "And SHIELD is pushing a lot of new stuff on you already?" He sighed as Captain Rogers nodded. "I get it, Cap. I do. I have a pretty non-standard history for a SHIELD agent, so I was rushed through training: a lot of the physical stuff I just had to adapt what I already knew, but I barely reached high school before I joined the circus, so there was a lot to learn on the academic side of things. SHIELD has a lot of paperwork, a lot of specialised vocabulary, and it assumes a fairly high level of background knowledge - science, politics, law. Languages help, too. Sometimes it seemed like I'd never catch up." He took a swig of water, a soft look in his eyes. "Phil helped a lot. He'd let me sit in his office and work through all the textbooks I'd gotten while he did paperwork, and he never minded if I asked him questions. You got anyone helping you?"

Captain Rogers looked away. "No, I don't. I don't really know anyone outside the team, and Sitwell
and Natasha are usually working, and Bruce and Tony are...

"Intimidating in their genius? I'm sorry, Cap. I should have realised. Look, this stuff I'm telling you about...you don't really need it, it's just sort of the next thing to work on if you want to keep developing your style. You could just keep running, and working the bag, and sparring with one of us now and then, and still fight really well in battle. It's just...if you want to learn something new, that's what I can maybe teach. And, uh...if you ever want company, with your, uh, 'catching up', I'm pretty gregarious."

"Thanks, Clint." The captain looked overwhelmed again, but it was better now. "That's really big of you. I'll, uh, probably take you up on it sometime."

"Awesome. Okay. Enough tough stuff, yeah? Have you ever used the climbing wall in here?" Captain Rogers shook his head. "No? Let's get you hooked up and you can have a go, and then we'll make dinner for everyone."

"Sounds great." The captain climbed the wall twice, with Agent Barton on belay, once slowly to assess it, and once much faster, racing himself to the top. They left the gym smiling.

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The gym was unused for the rest of the day, and while the Avengers ate, Jarvis dispatched the bots which cleaned and maintained it. Their hums and beeps filled the space once again with the sounds of life and activity, mechanical though it was. There was something soothing, companionable, about their presence. Jarvis, like his maker, was a creature of words - he could not be seen or touched; only heard. But the bots were silent, as Doctor Banner had been in meditation, and Agents Barton and Romanoff and Captain Rogers while sparring. They were known, in those moments, by everything but words. In the gym, Jarvis was barely there at all. It was, for him, a place of rest.

Chapter End Notes

One of the things I want to explore in this story is the personhood of characters who aren't considered people: primarily Hulk, but Jarvis also fits into this category. I don't have the technical expertise to approach Jarvis' experience from a coding angle, but I feel that he deserves to be considered and treated as a person, and I'm trying to write him that way.

I have been strongly influenced in my perspective on Jarvis and the bots by other fanfics, including Hairpins (in the Love is for Children series), by Ysabetwordsmith, The Turing Test, by NiennaNir, and Tales of the Bots, by scifigrl47.
Hulk wakes

Chapter Summary

Hulk fights bots, and talks to Clint.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hulk wakes. The world is bright, and loud, and smells of fear. Where is the danger? Hulk roars, to keep it at bay.

Starman points to metal men, different from Metal Man who flies. "Hulk! Smash the bots!"

Hulk roars, and leaps, and smashes. Bots hurt Hulk, but Hulk smashes bots. Hulk smashes all the bots that are near him and jumps high to see what happens.

Shooty Bird is in high place. "Hey Hulk! Nice work."

Why is Shooty Bird high? Is it to look for bots? "Shooty Bird smash?"

"I smash with my arrows, like with a gun. I don't need to be close."

Hulk looks. Hulk sees arrow fly, land on bot, explode. Bot is smashed! Hulk looks for team. Starman smashes with fists (like Hulk) and metal circle. Shouty Longhair smashes with hammer. Red Liar stabs and shoots with gun. Metal Man smashes with bright lights.

"Hulk smash?"

"If you could get those ones across the street, that'd be great. Try not to smash the buildings? People yell when we do that."

Yelling is bad. When people yell, there is screaming and hurting. Hulk will not smash buildings. Hulk roars, and leaps, and smashes.

Hulk smashes bots with fists. Hulk smashes bots against bots. Hulk smashes bots on ground. Hulk does not smash bots on buildings. Hulk smashes all the bots that are near. Hulk jumps high, where Shooty Bird is.

"Hello again. Good job." Shooty Bird is sitting. No more smash?

"Bots smashed?"

"All done, Hulk. We smashed them all."

Good. "Team safe?"

"Yeah, we're all fine."
Bots are smashed, fight is done, team is safe. No more screaming, no more danger. Hulk not smash buildings. No more yelling. Hulk healed from fight. No more hurting.

"Banner safe?"

"Is it safe for him to come out? Yeah, it's safe. I'll watch him."

Team is here. Banner safe. Hulk goes.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is much shorter than usual because I'm trying to keep each chapter to a single viewpoint, and Hulk doesn't get much waking time. His chapters will get longer later in the story.
After the Fight

Chapter Summary

After the fight, the team goes for pizza, debriefs, and comes home to watch a movie.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There's always a mess left after an Avengers fight: anything worth calling them in for is too big to go down quietly. But Clint has a more pressing problem.

"Hey Tony, Hulk decided to join me up top before he changed, so Bruce and I are gonna need a lift. Can you and Thor get up here?" Based on the last few fights, Bruce would come around within five minutes of changing, but he'd be weak, achy, hungry, and exhausted until he could crash properly. Even if Clint wanted to take the stairs, it wouldn't be fair on him. Speaking of...Bruce groaned a little.

"Hey Doc, glad to have you with us." Clint spoke softly, and positioned himself so he could shade Bruce's eyes without looming.

"Did I hurt anyone?" Bruce asked weakly. Tony was right, that was really sad.

"Nah, doc, the Hulk did good. Unfortunately, though, he changed back on the roof, so we're waiting for a lift." Bruce blinked, still pretty out of it. "Those pants held together pretty well, but do you want something more your size?"

Bruce pulled himself up on his elbows, looking contemplatively at his legs. "Are we going straight home?"

"Let me check. Sitwell, do we need to debrief?" Sometimes they could debrief the next day, but since this was a pretty easy fight, and early in the afternoon...

"I'll give you an hour, Agent Barton, but then we need to see you all in headquarters."

"Yes, sir. Sounds like a no, Bruce. We've got an hour's break before debrief, though." Clint offered a hand to Bruce, who used it to unsteadily pull himself to his feet, just as Thor and Tony reached the roof.

"Sorry for the delay, big guy, Merida - I had to go find Thor." Tony flipped his face plate up as soon as he landed - to let them hear his voice or see his face, Clint wondered. "We really need to make a comm that you can't break, this is getting ridiculous."

"I am sorry for the trouble, friend Tony, but it is as difficult for me to restrain my lightning in battle as it seems it is for your far-speakers to survive it." Thor looked chagrined, but beamed when Tony slapped him on the back.

"Don't worry about it, Point Break, I love a challenge. Jarvis, bump that one up the list?" Clint
couldn't hear Jarvis' affirmative from inside Tony's helmet, but he was sure there was one. "So, guys, looks like we've got time for food before we go back to SHIELD. Bruce, preferences?"

Bruce was fidgeting with the drawstring on his far-too-large pants, but looked up at the question. "Um...pizza, maybe? I don't really mind as long as I can get vegetarian." He looked at Clint, a little sheepishly. "And I guess I'll be taking you up on those pants."

"Right. Thor, could we borrow your cape for a second?" Clint dug the pants out of their compartment in his quiver and passed them to Bruce as Thor, quizzical but willing, unhooked his cape. "Okay, you hold that end and I'll hold this one and Bruce can have some privacy while he changes."

"You don't have to do that, you know." Bruce was stripping as quickly as he could, given the aches Clint could see were bothering him. "I've, uh, been naked in public a lot of times, I can't really...afford to be body shy."

"Well I'm not either, doc, but I still appreciate a bit of privacy when I can get it." Bruce passed the larger pants to Clint, and Clint gave Thor back his cape.

"Alright, big guy, much as I'd love to show you the world, you're a bit too out of it for me to carry you and still maneuver, so I think you'd better fly Asgard Airlines today. Sound good?" Tony grinned at Bruce, and flicked open the hatch which made the suit anchor point visible. "Thor, Jarvis has found a place nearby, so we're going to fly direct. I'll give Capsicle and Widow the address in a minute."

"I will be glad to convey the good doctor wherever you lead, my friend." And the thing about Thor was, he genuinely looked pleased to fetch and carry and to follow Tony around. He was almost more sincere than Steve that way. Clint hooked himself into the suit and nodded at Tony, while Thor gathered Bruce up in one sturdy arm and began to whirl Mjollnir. Tony flicked his face-plate down.

"Onward! To glory and pizza!"

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"How is Jane, Thor?" Steve was, as always, scrupulously polite, although he never seemed less than genuine about it. It was...a little disconcerting.

Thor beamed. "My lady Jane is well, Captain, and flourishing in her research." He sighed, his smile dimming. "Alas, she is, however, having difficulty publishing her work. There are things she is oath-bound not to speak of, and much else her fellow sages will not believe."

Bruce, who Clint had thought wasn't following at all, spoke up. "That's a real pity, Thor. I know how that goes; I haven't had anything published in years. She's been researching wormholes, right?"

"You are correct, my friend!" Bruce winced slightly at Thor's...enthusiastic tone. Headache, Clint wondered, or over-sensitivity? "Sadly I lack the wisdom to explain her work, but I am certain she would be glad to speak with you about it."

"You should invite her to the Tower," Steve put in. "I'm sure we'd all like to meet her." He looked
around the table: Natasha nodded slightly, Bruce smiled, and Clint shrugged.

"You should bring Darcy too - she's still working for Jane, right?" Clint suggested. He had liked what he saw of them in New Mexico, and he figured they'd enjoy Stark-subsidised New York.

Thor looked at Tony hopefully. "If the lady Pepper says it is permitted, I will gladly offer them hospitality."

Well, that was a bit weird. The rest of the Avengers shared a look around the table, trying to decide whose turn it was in the 'Explaining Modern America' rotation. Bruce leaned forward, looking resigned, but Tony spoke up first. "Why do you need to ask Pepper? I told you guys when you moved in: you can bring a guest onto your own floors if they have appropriate SI or SHIELD security clearance, and onto the common floor if they have clearance and approval from me or Jarvis. Jane absolutely fits into those categories. Besides, Pepper hasn't lived in our part of the Tower in months."

"But does milady Pepper not hold the keys for your household?" Thor looked perplexed, but then, so did everyone else by now. It was probably a good thing that he spent so much time at Jane's - they didn't have as much trouble with culture shock if they didn't see him as often. Wasn't really fair to him, though.

"Uh, Thor, we don't really know what you mean by...'holding the keys', you said?" Bruce's speech was a little slurried with fatigue, and he was resting his head against a fist, but he seemed happy to contribute. "Could you maybe explain what that, uh, position is in Asgard?"

"The chief lady of the household holds the keys to their house - she has the right to open or bar entrance to any." Thor looked at them, searching for some sign of recognition. "It is a position of great power. None can enter the royal palace whom my mother forbids, and even in a small cothold, a traveller could be barred entrance in the dead of winter if she who holds the keys refuses them. It is done differently here?"

"Hospitality customs have been...different in different places I have gone, but in America, there isn't really an equivalent. Um, Tony?" Bruce asked helplessly.

"Point Break, here the power goes with the money," Tony explained. "Whoever pays for the house has final say on who stays there. It's polite to check with everyone else, but...look, the Tower is owned by me and Stark Industries, and I own most of SI. I get final say on who comes there. On the company floors, I delegate that to Pepper - she knows the security requirements I have for the Tower, and she makes that happen. On my personal floors, I can invite or disinvite whoever I like. On your personal floors, you can let someone in or not, as you like, but you can't let anyone in who I wouldn't let into the private areas of the Tower - as I said earlier, anyone with clearance from SI or SHIELD is okay, as long as they're restricted to your space. On our shared floors, I have final say, but it is appropriate for me to ask all of you who use those spaces." Tony really wasn't all that defensive of the Avengers floors, all things considered. Honestly, Clint would rather they be more restricted. He made a note to bring it up with Tony later.

"I see." Thor frowned a little, considering the new information. "Then...may I invite my lady and her companion to visit me, friend Tony?"

"Sure, Point Break. Send me a date and I'll send them a jet to bring 'em here." Tony grinned, at ease in casual generosity where he wasn't in sincerity.
"...then with harsh blows I smote from it its earth of weapons, as the Shadow Huntress pierced its
glance with baneful blade..."

Thor's reports were, honestly, almost incomprehensible. Clint had heard a rumour that Sitwell had
found some junior agent with a Norse Studies major to help him decipher the sagas, and honestly,
he wouldn't be surprised. Thor's enthusiasm for debrief was, honestly, a disadvantage, considered
he treated each retelling like a dramatic recital. Clint let his attention drift - he'd already given his
report, and since he couldn't really understand Thor's, he couldn't add much. Finally, Thor brought
his tale to an end.

"...Thus did we, Tyr-valiant, feed the eagle upon our overbearers!"

"Thank you, Thor." Sitwell's tone was dry and weary. "If we may move on to a discussion of
tactics? The collateral damage today was less than usual, so well done with that." Clint could see
them all bracing themselves, especially Steve and Bruce - collateral was the worst part of their job.
"Only ten civilians wounded after your arrival, and no deaths." There was a slight release of the
tension in the room. "Having Widow and the Captain manage evacuation while Thor, Iron Man
and the Hulk engaged the DoomBots appears to have been very effective. There was still over $30
million in property damage, however."

Something about that caught Clint's attention. He looked across at Tony. "Is it possible for us to
plot the property damage over time from the appearance of the bots to the end of the fight? There's
something I want to check."

Tony tapped in a command to Jarvis on his phone, presumably, and the display on the
conference room screen was abruptly replaced by a line graph labelled 'Rate of Property Damage in
Avengers vs Doombots Battle 3/26/13'. "Give Jarvis a minute to calculate," Tony added.

"Could you at least try to pretend not to hack SHIELD every time you're here, Stark?"
Sitwell pinched the bridge of his nose, but he didn't try to further manage the diversion. After
about half a minute, a line drew itself on the graph.

"That's weird," said Steve, and he wasn't wrong. The line fluctuated, but there were two noticeable
drops - one when the Avengers arrived, and one about twenty minutes later, but a good ten minutes
before the end of the fight. "The first drop is when we got there, right?" It wasn't a huge drop, but
there was a difference between a battle and a rampage, and it showed. "What's the second one?"

"Jarvis. replay the comms from a minute before the second drop." Tony pursed his lips, tapping his
fingers on the table as he thought through possibilities.

_Clint: "Hey Hulk! Nice work."
_Tony: "Cap! Nine o'clock!"
_Clint [Hulk: "Shooty Bird smash?!"]_
Steve: "Thanks, Iron Man. Hawkeye, a little help here?"

Clint: "I smash with my arrows, like with a gun. I don't need to be close."

[explosion]

Widow: I've got it from here, Thor.

Clint: [Hulk: "Hulk smash?"]

Tony: "Guys, there's a bunch of five down the street - I'm a little tied up right now, can someone get on that?"

Clint: "If you could get those ones across the street, that'd be great. Try not to smash the buildings? People yell when we do that."

"Cut it there, Jarvis." Tony looked hard at Clint, something triumphant hiding behind his usual expression. Actually, they all were staring at Clint now. Honestly, Clint was surprised himself. He hadn't thought the Hulk would listen, he was just trying to make conversation. "Can the difference in property damage be accounted for by a change in Hulk's behaviour?"

Rather than answering verbally, Jarvis modified the line graph so that it showed approximations of the property damage caused by each Avenger. Apart from Hulk, the levels were steady throughout the fight, but Hulk's line dipped significantly at the twenty minute mark. Huh.

After debrief and a quick visit to medical (nothing that wouldn't heal on its own in a day for Steve or Thor; some bruises on Stark from the harder blows; bruises and minor cuts on Nat that would heal with stitches but without scars; and nothing at all for Clint and Bruce), one of Tony's cars showed up to take them all back to the Tower. Apparently Jarvis was going to order Chinese for dinner, and everyone (i.e. Thor) was required to stick around for it.

"We'll watch some of the movies on Steve's list - suggestions, Jarvis? - I've got enough popcorn for all of you now." Tony was speaking faster than usual as he chivvied them into the living room, and he looked jittery. Probably trying to reconcile adrenaline and fatigue, and erring on the side of adrenaline because he couldn't afford to crash yet.

"I'm, uh, going to have to sit this one out," Bruce admitted reluctantly. "I'm...pretty tired." From the look of him, Bruce was understating it, and no one seemed surprised, although Tony gave an exaggerated sigh.

"But if you aren't watching we can't show him any of the good sci-fi! You can't miss Steve's introduction to Star Trek!" Oh god, Bruce and Tony watching Star Trek was probably a nightmare - Clint could just imagine the heckling.

"You don't like action movies much, yeah, Bruce?" Of them all, Bruce liked violence the least, for completely obvious reasons, so Clint figured that he wouldn't mind missing out. "We should watch Die Hard, then. Any objections?"
"Die Hard?" Steve, apparently, hadn't heard of it. "What's it about?"

"A bunch of people get taken hostage by terrorists and only one guy finds out what they're doing, so he climbs around in the vents to stop them. If it's not on your list, it really should be," Clint explained, ignoring Tony's smirk. "Yes, I partially like it because of the vents thing, although there are some glaring inaccuracies."

"I'm going to bed." Bruce interrupted them on his way back to the elevator. "Have fun with your movie."

"See ya, big guy!" Tony smiled fondly at Bruce's retreating back, then dropped onto the sofa. "Jarvis, remind me to keep some leftovers for when he wakes up, and put Die Hard on."

"Certainly, sir."

Chapter End Notes

This is, actually, just about the first appearance of Thor in this story - it's taking me a while to get all the characters set up. I have some ideas about Thor as a character - I think he's got a lot to him, and seems simpler (and stupider) than he is. I'm basing various things about Asgard and Thor on things I already know about the medieval Norse - his speech will be, for the most part, a mixture of Early Modern (i.e. Shakespearian) English, Norse idiom, and modern usage he's picking up from being around Jane, Darcy, and the Avengers.

For those who are curious, the excerpts from his report (for which I used real Norse poetic language) 'translate' as follows:
"...then with harsh blows I broke off its arm, as Natasha stabbed it in the eye..."
"...so we, warriors, killed our enemies!"

Sorry for the longer-than-usual gap between updates - I honestly didn't realise it had been so long, since I'm working on this in my head almost every day. I've been preoccupied with some later scenes though - there's a big moment a couple of months out in the story timeline that's going to take a couple of long chapters that I'm gradually figuring out, and I'm trying to figure out ways for Clint to explain some things to Hulk.

One thing that I've been particularly wondering about is how to naturally include or exclude additional characters. I enjoy one-on-one conversation scenes the most, as I'm sure you can tell, and that works best with a fairly small central cast, but these guys need a larger support base than they've got right now. I've deliberately excluded Phil Coulson from this story, much though I love him as a character, because I wanted to explore Clint's interactions with the Avengers without him being part of the dynamic. I honestly don't want to resurrect him, but with him dead, Pepper broken up with Tony, Rhodey deployed, Betty broken up with Bruce, Bucky either dead or undiscovered, and all of Thor's friends elsewhere, the team is pretty isolated.

I love to get feedback from you all, so if you have any suggestions for minor characters, Hulk scenes, or movies/TV shows/books for Steve's list, let me know!
Steve apologises to Tony for the mistakes he's made because of his assumptions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took a couple of days for Steve to finish reading everyone's files. Tony's he'd read in that one long marathon session with Bruce, but Bruce's file had been spread out across the entire next day: Steve had to keep taking breaks to calm himself down. No wonder he's always angry, he thought. Really, it was a marvel that Bruce was so kind. Clint's file had its own horrors, but Steve could see the traces of fulfilment and success in the records after he joined SHIELD, and that made his childhood easier to bear. Natasha's file was...interrupted. As a child, it said, she was trained to be an assassin by a facility functioning under the KGB. The details of who and how and why and what were above Steve's clearance, as was much of her life thereafter. Even after she'd joined SHIELD, she specialised in the kind of infiltration mission which was usually high clearance.

Some wit had once said 'you don't get a hero without a fucked up origin story. To become a superhero, you have to get super fucked up.' It seemed damnably true, right now. Good Lord, Steve wished he could have spared his team-mates some of that pain. Worse than knowing their pasts, though, was realising how much he was stuffing up right now, particularly with Tony. God, he'd done everything wrong with Tony from start to finish, and he honestly couldn't figure out why Tony put up with it. Was he that used to being hurt?

"Jarvis?"

"Yes, Captain?"

"I...need to apologize to Tony." He needed to do more than apologize, but that would be a start. He bit his lip. "Do you...do you think he'd let me? Listen to me?"

Jarvis' voice was warmer than usual as he spoke. "Captain, if I may say so, Sir listens to everything you say, regardless of whether he appears to do so. He is not...comfortable with emotional conversations, but if you truly wish to speak to him, he will not turn you away."

That was...an unexpected answer. Tony avoided serious conversations like the plague, he - oh. He deflected, and he avoided, and he distracted, and he pushed, but he always left open the possibility of you chasing after him. Before he would be serious, he needed to know you were serious too. "Do you think," Steve offered tentatively, "that if I went down to the workshop today, I could talk to him? I know sometimes he's busy, or he's working on some new idea, or he's too tired to really pay attention, or..."

"I believe, Captain, that if you went down there now and offered him lunch, he would both eat and listen. There is nothing urgent on his task list, and his current projects are not all-encompassing. In fact, I encourage you to do so."

Well. No one knew Tony better than Jarvis, except perhaps Ms Potts, and if he approved, then
maybe, just maybe, Steve was doing the right thing by Tony for once. He hoped so, at least.

"What's up, Capsicle?" Tony was bending over a pile of metal...something, barely comprehensible through the screwdriver he was holding in his mouth. He'd turned the music down when Steve showed up, but it was still pretty audible. "If you're here about the uniform upgrade, that's gonna be another couple of days - it got bumped down the list by comms for Thor and Hulk, and Pepper's been nagging me about the new StarkPhones."

Steve picked his way through the maze of half-finished projects and debris to put a large sandwich and a cup of coffee down by Tony's elbow. "No, I, uh, didn't think you'd be done with that until the end of the week." He ducked his head, hand rubbing his neck. "I mean, I could manage just fine with what I've got now - not that I don't appreciate you working on it!" God, he didn't want to reject one of Tony's gifts again, that always went badly, "- it's just, I know you're busy, well, you're always busy, but I heard you talking to Ms Potts on the phone the other day and it seemed like right now you're especially busy, and..."

"You're babbling, Cap." Tony raised an eyebrow. "And trust me, I know babbling when I see it, I am the king of babblers. What's on your mind?" He snagged the coffee and took a sip.

Steve let out an explosive breath, bit his lip, then straightened his shoulders. "I owe you an apology, Tony. More than one, really."

Tony looked almost itchy when he heard that. "I thought we'd gotten over the mutual post-Loki awkwardness-and-apologies hour? I told you, it's fine, Cap." He turned back to whatever it was he'd been working on, avoiding Steve's eyes, but this was important, and if Jarvis was right it was worth talking to him anyway - at least, Steve hoped it was.

"I'm not apologising for that. I mean, I'm sorry for that, but you're right, we've already talked about all the things I said to you back then. I misjudged you horribly, and I knew not two days later that I had been wrong on every count. And I apologised for what I said, but...I didn't apologise for what I did wrong in the first place, and I didn't fix it either." Tony didn't turn around, or say anything, but he wasn't interrupting, which was probably a good sign? "I misjudged you on the helicarrier because I only paid attention to the surface stuff, and I didn't try to find out anything beyond my first impression. I didn't know about the things you'd done as Iron Man, or the things that made you Iron Man, or all of the good things you do with the amazing engineering work you do, or the reasons why you present the public face that you do...I didn't know, and I didn't try to know. And it was wrong of me to judge you without knowing you, without giving you a chance. And it was wrong of me not to fix my ignorance after the battle, and I didn't." Steve took a deep breath. "Bruce told me two days ago that I should read your SHIELD file, that you would have expected me to ages ago."

Tony stilled, put down the screwdriver with a soft clink, but he didn't turn around.

"I hope he was right, because I did, and it made me realise that even after we beat Loki, I never stopped misjudging you. I made so many mistakes with you, and half the time I knew something had gone wrong, but I had no idea what, or why, and I never fixed it! A week ago, I thought the arc reactor was something you put in to power the armour, and you didn't like to talk about Howard because you didn't want to have to live up to his memory, and the bots were just another future
thing. And now..." Steve looked away. He had to say this, had to finish it, but he couldn't bear to see Tony's reaction. "...I knew you were a good man, a hero, a genius, but I had no idea how much. I had no idea what a terrible person Howard became after the war; I had no idea how amazing the bots and Jarvis are and how long they've been your family; I had no idea how much pain and grief you lived through and survived to become Iron Man; I had no idea how many people have treated you horribly, have betrayed you or left you; I had no idea how much you've fought to do good things and be a good person with so little support. So I've kept making mistakes with you, because it seemed like you had every good thing in the world at your disposal and you still weren't happy, and I'd lost every good thing from mine all in one day, and it was easier for me to make stupid assumptions than to try and catch up on one more thing, one more person. I'm so sorry, Tony. Is there...is there anything I can do to make it right? So you could forgive me?"

When Steve finally looked up, Tony was staring at him, not a sign of his trademark smirk, his media face, his public mask, only some great, complex emotion shining in dark eyes. "Steve..." His voice was rough and low, with none of its usual polish and charm. "You...you want my forgiveness?" He seemed bewildered at the thought, and Steve wished he couldn't guess why.

"I do, Tony. You - we may not be...very good friends, yet, but I want us to be. I...admire you, and I value your good opinion, and...I really don't want you to hate me." Steve gripped his upper arms, trying to channel all his nervous tension into his hands.

"You don't want me to...?" Tony was incredulous as well as bewildered now. "Steve...my file doesn't say it, but my father talked about you constantly. I grew up hearing, believing, that you were the best guy in the world, perfect, and I - it was obvious I was never going to live up to that."

"And then I met you and you proved him right, Steve. You're fucking amazing, and ridiculously good, and my father didn't exaggerate at all. But...I could never decide if I hated or loved you, once I was old enough to realise Howard didn't care about me. So when they found you...I guess I needed you not to matter to me. I needed not to care what you thought of me, but you were everything he said you were, and how could I not?"

Oh God. Could he have done anything worse when they met? "But I'm not," Steve insisted. "I never was. And...I treated you horribly, Tony, I was the bully I've always claimed to hate."

Tony shook his head. "You didn't say anything ninety-nine percent of the people who've met me wouldn't agree with. You didn't say anything SHIELD wouldn't have agreed with back then. If you've read my file, I assume you read Natasha's report on me from when she was my PA?" Tellingly, he seemed more comfortable now that he was trying to justify everyone's bad opinion of him.

"I have, and I've also read her note from six weeks after the battle correcting that report. Look, Tony..." What could he do to make this better? "I've made a lot of mistakes about you, but I'm starting to realise that you...you deserve a lot of good things. You've given me - given all of us - a lot, and I'd really appreciate it if you'd let me give you something in return. Sometimes it seems like you own the stars and the moon and there's nothing to my name but my shield, but...is there anything I can do for you?"
Tony, thank goodness, seemed to give it some serious thought. "I think, Cap...that your shield is worth a lot more than you think it is. People listen when you speak, they care a lot what you have to say. And I'd really like not to run up against that all the time. I mean, I'm going to do stupid shit, and it's a good thing when you call me on it - sometimes I won't realise shit's stupid until someone else tells me - but, uh, could you call me on it in private? I don't mind having a fight with Steve Rogers so long as I'm not having a fight with Captain America."

Steve winced. "I, uh, yeah, sure, I should have been doing that anyway. I guess I don't realise when other people are looking at me and seeing the Captain because most of the time I just want to be Steve. I hadn't really thought about the - influence? - I have over people being important. I mean, you're Tony Stark - I'm hardly more important than you are."

"I may be a celebrity, Steve, but you're a hero," Tony replied. Steve opened his mouth to protest, but Tony talked right over him. "No, don't contradict me, that's what people think. I've been a billionaire playboy for more than twenty years and I've been Iron Man for, like, three; you've been Captain America for seventy years - the legend's a lot bigger than either of us."

"Would it...would it help at all if I did publicity stuff with you?" Not that Steve had liked his USO days, but he knew the drill. "I hated the dancing monkey gig, but if Captain America means that much to people..."

"Are you kidding?" Tony asked. "Helping me with PR would be amazing, Pepper would marry you, I swear, keeping me in people's good books is next to impossible and we've been trying to deal with public perception of the Avengers as well because SHIELD's PR department is of the "no-one will ever know" kind, and it's difficult to do that when you've got a Hulk, and people need to like us if they aren't going to blame us for collateral, and Clint and Natasha are still trying to hide, and Bruce hates attention, and Thor loves it but is...terrible at it, honestly, bloodthirsty sagas do not get us in the public's good books, and I knew you hated being in the USO, Howard kept your sketchbooks, so I've been doing it all myself, which, I mean, I am a god of the media, but there's only so much even I can do in a day..."

Steve interrupted, since it looked like Tony wasn't planning to take a breath anytime soon. "So what you're saying is that I should tell Pepper I want to help? Jarvis, is she free at all today?"

"She is, in fact, currently between meetings, Captain. I believe if you visited her office in the next half hour you would be welcome."

"I'll do that, then." Being able to help was...good. Better, anyway. Steve squared his shoulders and looked at Tony. "Are we...are we good?"

Tony smiled, and it was warm and bright and real. "Yeah, Steve, we're good."

"Enjoy your lunch, then. I'll see you at dinner? I think Clint's cooking." Since Sunday's inaugural movie night, they'd managed to get almost everyone in the same room for dinner every day. Steve hoped it would last.

"Sure, Capsicle, see you then." Tony picked up the screwdriver again as Steve picked out a path back to the elevator.
"Steve! What can I do for you?" Pepper smiled as he walked into her office, welcoming and friendly as she (almost) always was. (When she wasn't, it was always for very good reasons, and she could be downright scary. She reminded Steve of Peggy sometimes, though he tried not to think about it.)

"Hi, Pepper." Steve ran a hand over his hair, uncertain. He couldn't help but think of the stupid tights, and that dreadful show in front of the 107th. "I was talking to Tony earlier, and he said that it would make it...easier for you, and him, if I helped with publicity?"

"It would help immensely to have your public support." Pepper was decisive, and already pulling up some schedule or file on her computer. "What sort of things are you comfortable with?"

He had no idea, honestly. "I, uh, don't really know how it all works now. I did a lot of propaganda before I pulled together the Howling Commandos, and I...honestly, I felt like a dancing monkey, but I'm trying to make it up to Tony for - a lot of stupid things I've said, really. I guess...nothing too flashy, or intrusive, to start? I mean, I've seen some of the things Tony does..."

Pepper smiled at him again. "Tony's been dealing with the media since he was born, so he doesn't do things the same way we would with you. Any sort of interview or press conference or event that you go to, we'll make sure you know what's going to happen and what you should say, and what to do if you want to get out of there. Tony hates sticking to a script, so we rarely give him one, but I'm sure Ms Sengupta, our PR person for Tony and the Avengers, will be happy to give you whatever support you need to feel comfortable."

Steve relaxed a little. This was something he could learn to do, like he'd learned to use a mobile phone or a tablet or Tony's ridiculous coffee machine. He could handle this.

"I'll organise a meeting between the two of you for later this week," Pepper said briskly, "but...there's a charity gala Tony's supposed to go to on Friday night. If you're willing to go with him, it would give you some public exposure outside of the suit, you could meet some of the major players in a controlled, casual way, and it would show your support for one of the major American reconstruction-focused charities."

Steve thought about it for a few moments, then nodded.

"Alright then, I'll make an appointment for you with the tailors tomorrow and with Ms Sengupta on Friday, and I'll let Tony know you're going as well." She looked at him consideringly. "You haven't told me what you're apologising for, and I'm not as central in Tony's life as I used to be, but I will say this, Steve: Tony cares a great deal about what you have to say, and he consistently undervalues himself. I've been trying to convince him for years that he deserves love, and respect, and consideration. If you can do anything to convince him of that, I will be very impressed, and very grateful."

Ms Potts could be very intimidating when she wanted to be, and to be perfectly honest, Steve was glad when her phone began to ring.

"I'll try, Pepper, and I'll get out of your way now. Thanks for talking to me." He got up, and she smiled brightly.

"Anytime, Steve. I'll have Jarvis send you the information about the gala." She nodded as he opened the door and picked up the phone. "Ms Potts, Stark Industries...."
And so we meet Pepper! We also get to see Tony and Steve have an actual conversation for the first time. I have a notebook where I keep stuff for this story - a timeline within the fic, a timeline of backstory, notes on things like the quinjet speed, features of the gym, the layout of the avengers floors, and a very long list of kennings for Thor. I also have a page where I'm mapping the encounters between characters - one set for the avengers, and smaller ones for interactions between the avengers and each major auxiliary character (Hulk, Pepper, Jarvis, etc). So far, Tony, Clint, Bruce, and Steve are interacting the most, and Clint-Bruce conversations the most prominent of that set. Natasha and Thor I'm still figuring out how to integrate, but that's at least partially justified by their physical absences from the Tower.

Your comments and kudos are both motivating and inspiring. I'd love to hear what you think, and suggestions for Tony's next project, Steve's media appearances, and team training exercises are all very welcome.
Chapter Summary

Natasha goes with Steve to the tailor's, and helps him get ready for the gala.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On Wednesday night, Pepper joined the team for dinner. It was an easy, companionable meal, with none of the tension they had gotten used to whenever Tony and Steve were in the same room for more than fifteen minutes. When everyone was done eating, Steve and Clint collected the dishes and took them into the kitchen to wash, while Tony and Bruce argued about the Higgs boson. With Tony's attention occupied, Pepper leaned across to Natasha and asked quietly, "Would you mind accompanying Steve to the tailor's tomorrow? He needs a good suit, and he hasn't said anything, but I think he'd feel better if he had company."

Natasha considered it for a moment. Bruce and Clint were clearly disqualified - they never wore suits if they could help it, and neither of them had ever had the budget to get one tailored. For all Tony and Steve's apparent reconciliation (and Natasha had a feeling that it was related to Steve's appointment with the tailor somehow), they still didn't really know how to talk to each other and, well, Stark was a busy man. "Not at all," she replied.

Pepper nodded sharply and made a note on her phone. "Jarvis can give you the details." With that, she stood, ducking into the kitchen to talk to Steve and Clint, thanking them for the meal, probably. When she returned, she caught Bruce's attention and said with a warm smile, "Let me know how the water filtration project goes. It sounds promising, and if you're willing, I'm sure SI would love to go into production once it's feasible." Bruce looked like he was still trying to process that when she turned her focus to Stark. "Tony, I want those upgrades on my desk by Monday morning, and don't you dare forget about the gala on Friday."

"But Pepper, galas are boring!" It was a long-established dance between the two of them, this play of reminder and refusal.

"Boring or not, this one's compulsory. Jarvis, please remind him, and you may use my overrides if he tries to block those reminders." She seemed stern, but there was warmth in her eyes.

"Certainly, Ms Potts. Are the standard priority two alerts acceptable?" At some point Pepper and Jarvis had calibrated the reminder system based on the importance of various tasks to SI, Tony's public image, the Avengers' public image, and Tony's reputation with the SI board, SI's partners, SHIELD, and the US government. So far, it appeared to be working fairly effectively.

"That will do nicely, Jarvis. Will that be all, Mr Stark?"

"That will be all, Ms Potts." The exchange between them had always reminded Natasha of the time Clint had made her watch The Princess Bride, although the love it spoke of was, these days, the love of old friendship.

Pepper nodded, smiled again at Bruce, called out "Good night" loud enough for Rogers and Clint to
hear, and had her phone in hand by the time the lift doors closed.

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"Agent Romanoff?"

It had taken a while to establish parameters for Jarvis' presence in Natasha's space that she was comfortable with, but eventually they had settled on the following: he could monitor entry points and life-signs in real-time, but unless there was a problem, all information from those feeds was deleted within half an hour; if his name was said he could listen and watch until five minutes after the time his name was spoken or when he was last acknowledged; and if he needed to be 'present' in her space, he had to announce himself and wait for acknowledgement first. "Yes, Jarvis?"

"Captain Rogers will need to leave in less than an hour in order to be on time for his appointment at the tailor's."

"Thank you for the reminder." Not that she had been unaware. She was, in fact, already dressed in Rushman clothes, and had just started putting makeup on when Jarvis had spoken. "Is he ready?"

"He seems uncertain as to what to wear, Agent Romanoff." Unsurprising.

"Tell him to wear a dress shirt, slacks, and dress shoes. I assume he has that much already?" Pepper had implied they didn't have time for bespoke now, so he'd be changing into a premade pair of trousers once they got there, but he'd need the shirt and shoes to get the sleeve and leg length right.

"If I may, Agent Romanoff, the shoes he has would not, I believe, be up to your standards for formal wear."

She pursed her lips slightly as she did her eye makeup. "In that case, Jarvis, ask him to put on the best he's got, and have a driver ready to go in five minutes. We're going to Bloomingdale's first."

"Should I inform Captain Rogers that you will be accompanying him?" Pepper hadn't told him already? Well, that was a nuisance.

"Yes, please. Ask him to come down here when he's ready."

A few minutes later, just as Natasha finished her makeup, Steve knocked on the door.

"Come in, Steve," she called, as she chose a bag from her closet and transferred her travel-kits into it.

"Hi, Natasha." He seemed...a little intimidated by her appearance. He was used to Natasha the spy, the assassin, the team-mate. He'd even caught a few glimpses of Natasha the seductress over the last few months. But she hadn't been Natasha the businesswoman since she joined the Avengers, and it seemed to be disconcerting him. "You, uh, look nice."

She smiled at him as she looked him up and down. The shirt was from his dress uniform, and would pass, and the pants could wait, but the shoes...definitely not. "Thank you, Steve. Shall we go?"
"Sure. Jarvis says there's a driver waiting in the second garage level." Hopefully it was less ostentatious than Stark's usual rides. Steve opened the door for her.

"Then let's go."

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"Have you ever been fitted for a suit before?" Natasha asked in the car. She knew the answer would be no, but Steve seemed to be too nervous to start a conversation himself.

"Only suits I've been fitted for are the Captain America suits - and somehow I don't think that's the effect we're going for," he said with bashful grin.

"Well, since the event's tomorrow, I'm guessing you're getting a premade suit fitted to your figure: they'll tailor the sleeve and leg length and the waist, primarily. But I imagine Pepper's asked them to take measurements for a bespoke suit as well, and that will take a month or so and a few more fittings to make." Honestly, even a made-to-measure suit would be a bit of work for the tailor's - Steve had a pretty exceptional figure.

"That seems like a lot of work..." Steve looked dubious, and, as was unhappily common, a bit unsettled by the amount of time and money that went into making things for him.

Natasha inclined her head in acknowledgement. "It is, but it's an appropriate amount of work. A bespoke suit looks far better than something off the rack, and it's usually much more comfortable. Besides, suits are pretty durable. I thought you liked having things made to last?" One of Steve's major complaints about the twenty-first century was its disposable culture.

"If you say so." Steve didn't seem entirely convinced, but he'd gotten used to taking their word for things over the last few months, so he seemed content to leave it for another time. "...If you don't mind my asking, why are you coming with me?"

There were so many different questions in that: why was anyone coming with him, why specifically Natasha, why had she agreed..."Pepper asked me." At Steve's curious look, she continued, "She thought you might need some moral support."

"Do you know why she asked you specifically?" Steve asked, then winced slightly, hurrying to correct himself. "I mean, I'm glad you're coming with me, I just...I don't know Ms Potts very well."

"She wanted someone to come with you who would make you more comfortable," Natasha explained, "and she, correctly I think, assumed that there wasn't anyone outside the team who could do that for you. She didn't ask Bruce or Clint because neither of them look comfortable around expensive clothes."

Steve glanced at her sharply. "Don't look comfortable?"

She smiled. "Clint may not have had enough money in the past to buy himself fancy suits, but he's worked for SHIELD for a decade, as a spy as well as a sniper. He knows what good clothing looks like, and how to wear it." She knew about Clint's growing friendship with Steve, but Clint had always needed some nudging to share things about himself.

"And, uh, he told me that Agent Coulson," (and there was a slight hesitation as he said his
name,) "liked to wear nice suits." Interesting. Maybe Clint didn't need so much prodding, if he was talking to Steve about Phil already.

"He did. Still, Pepper hasn't seen Clint outside tac suits and t-shirts. She knows I know how to dress for professional and formal settings."

This time, his look was speculative. "It sounds like she knows you pretty well, for a civilian."

"Pepper's not exactly a civilian...and I wouldn't precisely say she knows me well." It was difficult for Natasha, even now that it seemed worth trying, to let herself be seen and known by others. It was only since she'd joined SHIELD that she'd developed enough of a personality of her own that she could be. "There is a certain amount of...sympathy between us, for another competent female professional. Stark is a big part of her life, and I understand how that works in a way that few do. And she...is familiar with the circles I move in, as a SHIELD agent. There's something to be said for that." It had taken a while for Pepper to move past the deception, but the fact that it saved Tony's life helped a lot; she was nothing if not pragmatic. She had dealt with Coulson officially, as Tony's liason with SHIELD, but she had also taken time to resettle her relationship with Natasha after the expo.

"I know what you mean." Steve looked weary, slumped against the car seat. "When I go running in the mornings, or when I go to church, I, I see all these normal people, with ordinary lives, and I just...how could they, we, ever relate? I was born in 1918 but physically, mentally, I'm twenty-six. My body is almost completely different to how it was three years ago. I've...we've got no shared context. At least with you guys...we all know what it's like to live things no-one else has, no-one else can really get. We're all outsiders."

"Mm. There are more people who feel like that than you think. You should ask Fury if you can spend more time at SHIELD. If nothing else, they understand the lifestyle."

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The tailors were making Steve uncomfortable, she could tell. They were just a little too enthusiastic about his physique, a little too lingering as they took his measurements, a little too impressed as they sized him up for this style or that. Natasha glared at them when their ogling got to overt, and cleared her throat a few times when they got handsy, but mostly, she just tried to keep Steve distracted.

"...when Clint finally showed up, he'd lost his shirt, one pant leg was torn off, you could barely tell it was him for all the mud, and he swore about the badgers for a week. Usually he loves animals, but even now he hates badgers."

Steve was grinning, and trying manfully not to fidget. "Geez, Natasha! I don't know about badgers, but there was this time with a goat..."

"...so Stark bought the bar and had it demolished. Certainly annoyed Ross...kept him off Banner's back for a while, too."

"I can't believe that man is still a general. Even if I didn't know Bruce - I'm pretty sure Ross's campaign to catch the Hulk has been more expensive than the Hulk would be on his own."
"I was at Culver when the Abomination showed up, did you know?..."

"...and these two guys tried to hold up the gas station where Coulson was buying some donuts. And Coulson...he specialised in being underestimated. He took them out with a bag of flour and his bare hands."

"Wait, he and Clint were there when Thor showed up the first time? You guys really get around..."

"Captain Rogers, that will be all for today." When the tailors finally announced they were done, Steve carefully didn't slump in relief, but Natasha could see him relax nonetheless.

"Thank you. We will contact you regarding the next fitting for the bespoke soon," Natasha was brisk. Steve wanted nothing more than to get out of here, and she was not at all disinclined to oblige him.

"We will put the costs on Mr Stark's tab, as discussed. Have a good afternoon."

"You too." Steve smiled as he spoke, and he and Natasha at last made their escape.

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The next evening, Natasha was keeping Clint company as he cooked dinner. They'd finally managed to get everyone together for training that afternoon, and after some awkwardness, they'd achieved good things. Tony's objections had had merit to them - simulating any aspect of a battle was difficult enough without missing team-mates - but Thor had made it up for the day, so, on Clint's suggestion, they'd been able to practice lifts. Thor and Stark had very different ways of flying, and Clint, Natasha and Steve had different approaches to hanging on, but they'd worked out some ideal and less ideal configurations for each possible pairing, and Stark had gone down to the workshop afterwards muttering about single-handed stabilisation. Bruce had politely declined to watch, which was...potentially a future problem. Natasha definitely didn't want the Hulk to make an unplanned appearance, but it was fairly clear that, barring actual injury or sever distress, he was unlikely to, and there would be times when Bruce was working with the team in a battle situation. She filed the thought away for further consideration and possible action, just as the lifts opened and Steve walked out in a tux.

Clint leaned through the kitchen doorway and whistled. "Looking good, buddy! What's the occasion?"

Steve blushed, fidgeting with the cufflinks they'd bought yesterday. "I, uh, volunteered to help Tony out with PR, so I'm going to a gala tonight." She'd wondered.

"Does he know you're going?" she asked.

Steve blinked at her. "I...I don't know."

"Then he'll need nagging. Jarvis, is Tony getting ready yet, or is he still in his workshop?" The reminder system worked relatively well, but it wasn't as effective as a physical presence.
"He is, in fact, ready to leave, Agent Romanoff. Should I direct him to this floor?"

"Yes, thank you." A moment later, the elevator pinged.

"Jarvis, this is not the garage, this is the common floor, I need to get going, why am I here?" Stark seemed to have never realised that you got more answers with silence than speech.

"You're here to pick up your date, Stark," Clint yelled from the kitchen.

"What?"

Steve was blushing to the tips of his ears - that man couldn't hide embarrassment to save his life most days. "...hi, Tony."

"What."

"Stark, I'll make this simple for you." Honestly, these idiots were terrible at communicating. "Steve volunteered to help you with PR. Pepper asked him to go with you to the gala. I spent two hours yesterday making sure he would look presentable. If you leave the building in the next five minutes you will actually be on time. Go."

"Uh, you - yep, okay, got it, that's the murder face, I recognise and acknowledge the murder face, I am going, Steve is going, we are going, Steve, get in the lift, Jarvis, now will you take me to the garage levels..." Stark was still talking as the doors closed behind them.

"Huh." said Clint, after a few seconds. "Is it just me, or is every room dramatically quieter after Tony leaves?"

"I was savouring the moment. Were you not savouring the moment?"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay. The next chapter's going to take a while as well, I'm planning something relatively complex. After that things should calm down a little. I have to say, I'm learning a lot writing this - pretty much every chapter, I'm looking up stuff like how bespoke tailoring works; the speed of airplanes; what a charity gala is like; kennings for the gods; endearments in different languages; 30s slang...and a bunch of stuff about backstory for the characters as well, although I don't incorporate all of what I find. (I'm writing Clint a bit younger than the movies, for example). It can be pretty frustrating trying to figure out the timelines - I don't want to conflict with the movies, but they aren't explicit about things.

Your comments and kudos are incredibly motivating for me, so if you have ideas for enemies the Avengers could fight, anecdotes from their pasts, or anything else you want to share, let me know!
Chapter Summary

On April Fools' Day, the city breaks out in super-powered pranks, which the Avengers are called in to deal with.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clint's alarm went off two hours early on Monday, which was never a good sign. "Jarvis?" he called, as he slid from under the covers. "What's happening?"

"Agent Sitwell has called for a video conference with the Avengers to brief them on a developing situation, Agent Barton. The meeting will begin as soon as Master Odinson arrives, which should be in approximately forty minutes." Great. A non-scheduled briefing meant either weird shit or unexpected army, but if Sitwell was willing to wait for Thor, it was probably on the weird shit end of the scale. He stretched upwards, rolling his head on his shoulders as he padded over to the bathroom.

After he emerged, he started rummaging in his closet for a pair of jeans. "Where's everyone else, J? Do I need to suit up?"

"Sir, Dr Banner, and Captain Rogers are having breakfast on the common floor. Agent Romanoff is still in her quarters. At this stage, everyone is wearing casual clothing; Agent Sitwell has not implied that the Avengers will be urgently necessary." Non-urgent developing situation which required the Avengers? Fucking weird shit.

"Tell them I'm on my way up." Maybe Steve would make him breakfast if he asked nicely. That guy made the best pancakes, honestly, and if they were having a weird shit day, Clint totally deserved them.

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"So, Sitwell," Tony began, looking a little more alert now he'd had a few cups of coffee. "What's the sitch?"

Sitwell was looking harassed, and glared halfheartedly at Tony as he answered. "This morning, we have had over thirty agents deployed to monitor and manage disruptive and seemingly inexplicable incidents throughout the city. So far, none of them have been major, but it is highly likely that, if such incidents continue to occur, we will need to call upon at least some of you for assistance." Someone knocked on the door offscreen. "Sorry, I need to deal with this. Yes?"

"Agent Sitwell, the rabbits are escaping containment."

Sitwell groaned. "Dios mio, how did my life come to this? Agent Melville, do we, or do we not, have facilities capable of containing individuals with high intelligence and super-human abilities?"

"We do, sir, but getting them there is a problem."
Sitwell scrubbed at his face with his hand. "I'm sorry, apparently no one has any initiative today. I'll be back with you in five minutes." He stood, and moved out of the field of view.

The Avengers looked at each other. "Rabbits," Tony said flatly. "Disruptive, seemingly inexplicable rabbits escaping containment. Jarvis, can you have a look for relevant footage, please?"

"Of course, sir." A brief pause. "I have discovered footage from security cameras in Queens showing a group of approximately fifty rabbits emerging from the window of a house. They were extremely active and remarkably incautious, and provoked great interest from passers-by, particularly those with children. However, individuals removed from the group became increasingly agitated and aggressive until they were able to return. SHIELD agents arrived at the location approximately twenty minutes ago, and have been attempting to capture them, with...mixed success."

"Okaay..." said Bruce. "Why is SHIELD interested in catching them at all? It could just be an April Fools joke, couldn't it?"

Thor, who had been watching proceedings with interest, piped up. "What is an April Fools joke, my friends? Who are the fools?"

"The first of April is also known as April Fools Day," Steve explained. "It's traditional to play tricks on people. That's still a thing, right?"

"Still a thing, Cap." Clint grinned at Steve's relieved expression.

"In answer to your other question, Thor," offered Bruce, "the question of who the 'April Fools' are is actually a really interesting historical problem. There's some suggestion it goes back to when the calendar changed from starting the year at the beginning of April to starting at the beginning of January, but it's old enough that we really don't know. These days, I guess, the fools are whoever gets tricked."

"The thing is," Clint put in, "a whole bunch of rabbits could be a large-scale April Fools joke, but it's difficult enough to manage that if SHIELD has already noticed other weird shit that's a bit too impressive for April Fools..."

"They're looking for a connection." Tony concluded. "Or a possible instigator, I suppose."

"SHIELD has always been dedicated to managing threats which are beyond the capacity of normal government organisations," Natasha explained dryly. "In the past, this was primarily large-scale criminal organisations and diplomatic issues. During the last ten years, however, threats from ordinary humans have been outweighed by incidents involving...."

"Weird shit." Clint picked up the thread. "Even just looking at the local good guys, Daredevil, Spiderman, the Fantastic Four, and the X-men have all shown up recently. Hulk was created in 2006, with all the follow on from that; Steve was rediscovered last year; Thor and his family showed up last year. Half the battles we fight these days are mad science, aliens, or magic."

Tony grumbled. "Magic is just science we don't understand yet."

"Tell that to Dr Strange," Clint suggested. Tony was pretty insistent about the whole no-such-thing-as-magic thing, but in their line of work, it seemed kind of irrational. "I'm not gonna argue with you today, that's why I just call it weird shit. Either way, SHIELD manages it because the army, the
police, and the other alphabet agencies are all under-qualified, so if that means monitoring over-the-top April Fools jokes, looks like that's what we're doing."

"Thank you, Barton, for that summary of the problem." Sitwell was back on screen, having returned to the room while Clint was talking. "So far today, all incidents have been manageable by SHIELD, but I want you all prepared for a call-out."

"The whole team, sir?" Steve wanted to know.

"Possibly, but more likely in pairs or trios. Having multiple groups active at once is something we need to prepare for."

Steve nodded. "In that case, we want versatility on each team - one up high and one on the ground in each pair, and a heavy hitter on every team. Suggestions?"

Clint looked around the table. "You should put me with Hulk. He doesn't work well with Natasha, and having him with anyone else is overkill." Bruce hunched, but didn't say anything.

"That's fair," Steve agreed, and turned to Tony. "What do you think?"

There was a flash of something in Tony's eyes - he was pleased that his opinion was valued, maybe, or just didn't want to be picked last. "If you want eyes in the sky on all teams, Thor and I can't work together, and you and Thor are just as bad as you and Hulk for overkill."

Thor nodded regally at Steve. "Indeed, shield brother, though I stand proudly at your side on the field of battle, we are much the same in our methods." He bowed to Natasha, which was a little hilarious, honestly. "Lady Natasha, I would be honoured to fight at your side this day, that I might benefit from your stealth and swiftness."

She smiled at him in thanks, but Clint could see she was amused. "If we need to work in trios, Thor and I should be off Hulk's team."

Steve grimaced a little, but nodded. "How about I join Clint and Hulk, and Tony works with you?"

"Sounds good to me," said Clint.

Sitwell, who had been watching them sort it out, finally spoke up. "So that's Hawkeye and Hulk, Widow and Thor, Captain America and Iron Man for pairs, and Hawkeye, Hulk and Captain America, and Widow, Thor and Iron Man for trios."

"I'll set up the comms so you can switch between the Avengers line and your mini-team channel," Tony offered. "If you let Jarvis know who's working with who, Sitwell, he can patch in SHIELD agents too."

Sitwell smiled wearily. "Thank you, Stark, that will be helpful. I'll contact you individually if we need you later in the day. Please stay in or near the Tower, if you can." He nodded at them all, then ended the call.

"This looks like a fun day." Clint said, a little sarcastically. "Steve, Nat, want to come to the gym with me? I may as well get warmed up."
By midday, all three teams had been deployed - Team Black Hammer (as Tony insisted on calling it) was dealing with a giant cat in Central Park, Team Iron Shield (although Clint was holding out for Captain Man, Steve had vetoed that one) was figuring out people-capturing bubbles in Brooklyn; and Clint and Bruce had just arrived at the invisible, unbreakable wall which was blocking Fifth Avenue.

Whenever Bruce transformed, there was a moment of disorientation as the Hulk figured out what was happening and why he was awake, and today was no different. Once he seemed aware, Clint called out to him. "Hey, Hulk, how you doing?"

Hulk looked around and grunted. "Where team?"

It was an unsurprising reaction, considering that every voluntary change so far had been with everyone there. "There's lots of things to smash today, so we split up."

Hulk frowned. "Need Hulk?"

"I need you here more than they need you anywhere else, but if they do, I promise I'll tell you." No one had checked in on the team channel so far, so Clint assumed the rest were doing fine. Speaking of... "Hey Hulk, could you bend down for a sec? I want to give you something." Hulk looked confused, but there was no danger he could see, so he crouched, and Clint held out the Hulk-comm Tony had made. "This is a comm, like the team wears in our ears, but made so you can wear it around your neck. If you wear it, I can talk to you even if I'm not close." Hulk nodded, and Clint grinned as he hung it over his neck. That would make things much easier. Tony had given it to him before he headed out, along with a tiny video camera for the Jolly Green Giant footage.

"What smash?" Fair question.

"About ten metres ahead of us, there's a wall we can't see or break. Since I'm the vision guy and you're the smashing guy, SHIELD thinks that between the two of us we can get rid of it." Well, more like Hulk could break most things and Clint could keep him in line when 'Team Iron Shield', as Tony had dubbed them, was busy, but close enough.

Hulk moved forward slowly and poked at the air until he reached the wall. He growled. "Like high cage. Trap?" Did he mean the Hulk Cage on the Helicarrier?

"No, big guy, there's only one wall, and you need more than one wall to make a cage. People can go around, it's just really inconvenient."

"Hulk smash?" He poked it again, and looked at Clint for confirmation.

"That's the plan, buddy. There are some SHIELD agents who are going to look at the buildings on either side, and I'll be up high trying to figure out where the top is and if I can see anything special, and you hang out here and see if you can break through." There was, Clint thought, something in the air where the wall was, an almost-heat haze, like looking through a clean glass window, maybe.

"Where Shooty Bird?" Clint pointed to the roof of a building about half a block back from the wall on one side. "Hulk carry?"

Well that was new. And pretty intimidating. Hulk was...pretty damn strong, and didn't have practice at moderating that strength. Still, there was only one way for him to learn, and he seemed willing to listen. "As long as you're gentle." Hulk looked quizzical. Did he not know that word? "Um...gentle is like careful. Don't hold me too tightly - I don't have armour like Tony." Hulk
nodded, and reached out slowly, almost gingerly, gathering Clint into the crook of one arm like a teddy bear. "That's right, like that." Hulk grinned, leapt to Clint's planned vantage point all in one go, and deposited Clint, just as carefully, on the roof. "Thanks, big guy."

"Shooty Bird and agents look. Shooty Bird speak through necklace. Hulk smash wall."

"Sounds good, big guy." Clint shook his head as Hulk returned to the wall and started punching. He really didn't live up to the hype, some days.

Ten minutes later, Clint heard the double beep that signalled a check-in on the team channel. He tapped his comm.

"Thor and I have subdued the cat." Nat's voice was dry. "Apparently, her name is Lightfoot Firefur. Thor's keeping her company while SHIELD figures out somewhere to put her."

"Any information on the perpetrators? Injuries?" Steve wanted to know.

"We've captured a man who was attempting to direct the cat's behaviour, with limited success. SHIELD has taken him in for questioning. No injuries."

"How about you, Cap?" Clint asked.

"We've gotten the civilians out, so I'm popping bubbles while Iron Man investigates the machine." Clint could hear the shield ricocheting in the background.

"And let me tell you, this one's fun." Stark put in. "In fact, I could make some pretty fancy trick arrows for you once I reverse engineer this, Barton."

"No sign of the maker, which is unusual for the mad scientist types. SHIELD's investigating." Steve continued. "Hawkeye, status?"

"I've used some water arrows to make the wall more visible, and we've established the top edge, but no sign of any sort of generator yet. Hulk's having fun."

"Good to hear." Steve replied. "Check-in again in fifteen minutes, unless there's serious injuries."

"Aye-Aye, Cap'n." Clint replies, just to mess with him. It's a pet peeve of Cap's, and sure enough...

"God-dammit, I was army, not navy." Clint tapped his comm again to get to the Hulk channel. Hulk has been moving steadily to his right, and Clint wanted to know why.

"Hey, Hulk." Hulk froze, looked down at his chest, then back towards Clint's perch. "I told you, the necklace works like the comms, yeah?"

Hulk grumbled. "Why Shooty Bird talk to Hulk?"

"I wanted to let you know that I just talked to the team, and everyone's fine so far." Hulk grunted, then started punching again. "How come you've moved right?"

"Wall bounces. Bounces less on this side." Now that was good intel. And pretty impressive that a) Hulk could tell without seeing it and b) he knew it meant something.

"Thanks for letting me know, Hulk, that's really helpful. If you notice anything else, you can yell it, or stop punching and I'll check the comm." Hulk nodded, and Clint swapped to his standard
"Agents, be advised that the wall has elastic properties, but it more rigid on the right side of centre. This may or may not be symmetrical. Can someone check out the buildings on that side?"

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There was a short respite in the afternoon: Nat headed to SHIELD to help them interrogate the various culprits, and Bruce inhaled some Chinese then went to his room to rest until something else came up, while the rest of them sat around discussing the day's events.

"There's obviously a whole bunch of people involved," Clint pointed out as he grabbed a handful of prawn chips. "Do you reckon they're all working together, or are some of them independent?"

Tony looked speculative. "Maybe. The different incidents have all had very different styles - some biological, some mechanical, some passive, some more active."

"While Tony was dealing with the bubble machine, I found this guy we think made it - he called himself 'the Trickster's hirðmann'. Does that mean anything to any of you?" Steve asked. "It sounds like it could refer to an organisation."

"It does, shield-brother." Thor looked solemn, a sharp contrast to his usual grin. "A hirðmann is...an oath-bound follower, a member of a warrior band. The Warriors Three and the Lady Sif are hirðmenn of mine."

"So this group, if there is one, has Norse or Scandinavian ties?" Tony speculated, fiddling with his phone.

"It is more than that, my friends." Well shit, that sounded ominous. "You have commented before on the names I give you in my retellings of great deeds - shadow huntress, shield bearer, king of smiths. It is the custom on Asgard to call people by such names in our poetry and stories: thus, I am also the warder of Earth, Mjolnir's wielder, the thunderer, and so on." He paused, and looked carefully away from Clint. " 'Trickster' is one of my brother's names."

"I assume you mean tall, dark and crazy, and not some other brother you haven't told us about?" Tony defaulted to snark as he always did when he was nervous. "You're telling us that these guys are affiliated with him? I thought you said he was bound!"

Thor leaned forward suddenly. "He is bound!" he cried. "Bound in such chains I can hardly bear to see him, bound hand and foot, word and deed, in magic and in flesh! Are there not those on Midgard who do evil deeds in your name? Who claim opinions you do not share?"

"I get it, big guy." Clint tried to placate him. Angry Thor meant thunderstorms on top of everything else, which was not going to make their lives easier. "You think that these people have decided to follow Loki, and are causing trouble on his behalf, but without his input."

"Okay," said Steve, "Is there anything that can tell us about their methods or objectives?"

Thor turned Mjolnir in his hands, clearly thinking something over. "My friends...there is something you should know, about my brother." He spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. "It may not be necessary to the defeat of these foes, yet someday...you may need the knowledge." He paused again, meeting each of their eyes. "When my brother came to Midgard last year, he called himself a god. He was not...entirely inaccurate, when he did so."
Steve, Tony, and Clint exchanged doubting looks, but it was Tony who spoke up. "Hang on a second, Point Break - we live with you. We see you eating PopTarts, snoring on the couch, misinterpreting slang. You were born, you get older, you're going to die someday. If your brother is anything like you, I'm pretty sure god isn't the right word."

Thor smiled a little. "I am, indeed, not the kind of god the good captain honours. I am a man, with my own weaknesses and ignorance and failings. But nonetheless, I am a kind of god." Thor had a pretty impressive presence when he wanted to, and right now, he clearly wanted to. "I do not speak lightly of these things: just as the Man of Iron keeps his designs secret, and friend Bruce lets no one examine his blood, what I speak of now is...private. I and my kin...we are men and women, but something of our nature is shaped, influenced by the worship of human followers."

"Like in Small Gods?" Tony asked. "Gods exist because we believe in them, and the nature of the god is more or less determined by that faith. Not that I believe you right now," he added hurriedly. Steve just looked deeply doubtful, but was clearly trying to understand.

"Somewhat," Thor admitted. "But...we are not wholly gods or men, and it is not belief that matters most, but deeds and words. Thus, we continued to exist when we were forgotten and ignored by your people."

Something in that rang a bell for Clint. "Actually, I think I can corroborate this." Steve and Tony turned to look at him and he fidgeted a little. "When Loki...had me, I was, um, aware. He sort of...made doing his will and keeping him healthy my highest priority, but the rest of me was still...there." He quirked the corner of his mouth. "Not that he was healthy in the first place. Actually, knowing Thor better, I'm starting to wonder what the hell happened to him before he got here, because he was in really bad shape." He looked up. "But, uh, back to topic...Thor, when we were controlled, would our actions have counted as worship, for you?"

Thor frowned and nodded slowly. "I am no sage; there is much I do not understand. But if your deeds were in his name...yes, I believe that would count."

"Well, whenever he picked up someone new, or we were particularly active, he'd, uh, get a bit of a...boost." Clint rubbed at his neck, looking away from the others. He hated remembering this.

"How could you tell?" Steve wondered.

"There was a bit of feedback in our heads - a sort of...peek into his state of mind, so that we would know what to do without him always telling us."

"Wait a sec - I do believe in fairies?" Steve and Thor looked confused, unsurprisingly. "It's a reference to Peter Pan, where a dying fairy is healed by lots of kids yelling that they believe in fairies."

"No," said Thor. "As I said, it is words and deeds, not faith, that matters, although intent does."

"So, these Trickster's hirðmenn...they're strengthening Loki somehow? Should we be worried about him breaking out?" Steve still seemed doubtful, but willing to go along with it. Suspension of disbelief was an everyday necessity in their line of work.

"They are...making it easier for him to influence their affairs in the ways they expect him to. He may heal easier, but his bindings would hold him if a million men sacrificed in his honour. They will bind him now. But no bindings can keep prayers from our ears, or prevent us from answering"
those prayers with omens if omens are sought." Thor was being deliberately vague, Clint suspected, although really, who could blame him?

"What do mean by 'the ways they expect him to'?" Steve asked.

Thor sighed. "My friends, what there is of godhood in me is associated with battle, thunder, rain, and fertility. When I am best known as a thunder god, that aspect of me is...easiest for me to live out. When I am known as a giant-killer, that becomes easier. Tell me, what do you think my brother is associated with?"

Tony spoke up again. "Chaos, destruction, lies, evil, the colour green...ice, if what you told us about his parentage is true."

"So and not so, friend Tony. Chaos, yes, but not evil or destruction. Think - we are men as you are; none of my kin are wholly good or wholly evil. My brother is fundamentally contrary: though he is Jotunn, he was, many years past, a fire god. But more than anything else, he is a god of mischief, and it is in that aspect that his hirlending invoke him. Did you not say that today is a day for tricks and pranks in your culture? And though they have caused trouble, have they truly caused damage or harm?" Thor sighed. "In truth, I am almost glad that they have done so. It is hard for me to fight Loki the villain, the madman, the conqueror. I miss Loki the trickster: he was more my brother then."

Just after four o'clock, the Avengers alarm went off - apparently Sitwell needed all of them. Clint went downstairs to wake Bruce, and they all piled into the quinjet to get to Staten Island. The threat kept to the pattern of disruptive and troublesome, but not dangerous: a giant, non-sentient but mobile slime monster. Bullets didn't work, and it rolled right over barricades. It didn't seem to be looking for anything in particular, but it didn't stay still and didn't go back on its earlier path. Bruce took a look at it, heard the description, and sighed "slime mould", and apparently the SHIELD analysts agreed with him, but there really wasn't anything they could do except hit it until it stopped moving or broke apart. Natasha and Steve were mostly working on evac, looking for the instigator and coordinating with Clint and SHIELD agents, while Hulk and Thor smashed the damn thing and Clint and Tony fired explosives at it. All in all, it was pretty tedious - as long as you got out of the way, it didn't hurt anyone, and it didn't seem to respond to attack. Still, it was the biggest incident of the day, and Hulk in particular was looking pretty tired by the time they were done.

Clint wandered over while SHIELD was collecting the remains. "Hey, Jade Jaws, how are you?"

Hulk was sitting slumped on the curb. "Tired. Hungry. Fight done?"

That was a thought..."Yeah, fight's done." He waved at Tony, who was occupying the usual batch of reporters. "Hey, Tony, get over here!"

Tony jogged over, surprisingly spry in the suit. "What's up?"

"Hulk's hungry. Reckon we could feed him?" Tony had the faceplate flipped up, so Clint could see curiosity, speculation, and the devious grin that started spreading across his face.

"That. Is a fantastic plan, Legolas. Jarvis, find me a pizza place nearby that we can buy out for the next hour or so." The logistics would obviously be horrible - the team ate a lot after a fight even without Hulk, but they had to start somewhere if they wanted to include him in anything. "Big guy, how do you feel about pizza?"
"Pizza?" Hulk looked confused.

"It's a kind of food, Italian, big round pastry with various toppings, yes, no?" Tony was a little manic, obviously running off adrenaline.

"Hulk not eat." He frowned.

"Do you mean that you don't want to eat, or that you can't eat, or that you usually don't eat?" Clint asked. Sometimes it was hard to tell what he meant.

"Last one. Banner eat. Hulk not eat."

"Well that's just sad, buddy, and we're fixing that right now, today," Tony was talking far too fast, as usual. "Let me get the others, Clint'll keep you company, and then we're going to get food, alright? Awesome." He disappeared, to find Steve, Clint assumed.

Clint sighed, and turned on his comm. "Agent Sitwell, Hulk's hungry, so we're going to go get pizza. Is SHIELD going to make this difficult?"

Sitwell, at this point, had had a long day and seemed resigned. "We should, but if you tell me it isn't going to be a problem, I'm not going to redirect SHIELD resources when we're so busy."

There was something really nice about having his professional judgement respected. Ph- Coulson had done that. "At this point, sir, he's just tired and hungry. He's done plenty of smashing today, he likes the team and works well with us. Unless someone attacks him, he's not going to cause trouble, and even then we may be able to de-escalate the situation."

"Alright, I'll leave you to it. Tell everyone that we think this will be the last incident for the day - nothing new has started up since the slime mould showed. I'd appreciate you all writing reports tonight, but debriefing can wait until tomorrow, and I'm not going to push you on paperwork right now."

"Thanks, Sitwell, I'll let them know."

"Good work, Agent Barton." There was an echo there, of another voice that Clint hadn't heard in far too long, but he wasn't going to dwell on it.

He turned back to the Hulk. "Great job today, big guy. Shall we go?"

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience - there's a lot happening in this chapter, and it took me a while to figure it all out. Coming up with problems that rated the Avengers' involvement but wouldn't cause major collateral; finding ways for Clint and the team to interact naturally with the Hulk adjacent to but not as part of a battle scene; thinking through potential team-ups; and especially coming up with the meta-physics behind the Trickster's hirðmenn - this stuff has been floating around in my head since a week before the previous chapter came out, but it's taken me a while to turn it into something workable. Plus, I'm in exams right now and they're driving me bonkers.
Your comments and kudos make this project a joy - thank you for whatever feedback you give me. If you have any ideas for things to teach the Hulk, movies Steve should watch, or sights Jane and Darcy should see when they visit New York, let me know.
The Masks We Wear

Chapter Summary

Bruce talks to Tony about Steve.

Please note: this chapter contains some flashbacks to Tony's surgery in Afghanistan - nothing too graphic, but traumatic for Tony. If that's likely to bother you, skip from "And, and nobody has come up with anything?" to the end of that paragraph - the only thing you need to know is that Bruce talks about Steve's reaction from Chapter 7: surprise that anyone (including Bruce) would bother to try.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"For an intelligence organisation, you really aren't very intelligent." Fuck it all, this is exactly what he'd been trying to avoid since fucking Afghanistan.

"Stark, Barton is a SHIELD agent, and as such, SHIELD is responsible for making sure he is adequately supplied for the field." Fucking Fury, making excuses for taking Stark weapons out of his hands.

"Hawkeye is an Avenger, and Clint is a personal friend. If I supply him with weapons for the field, that is a personal gift from me to him, not a transaction between SI and SHIELD, and SHIELD does not have permission to fucking look at them unless I say so." Jesus fucking Christ, thank god he hadn't made Clint anything elaborate yet - if it had been explosive arrowheads, instead of the acid ones...shit, no, focus, angry at Fury, no time to panic about weapons out of our hands, that freakout can be postponed indefinitely if he has anything to say about it.

"Am I to assume this is true of your modifications to the Widow's Bites as well, Stark?" Fury's voice was icily polite, a not-so-hidden threat. Well, fuck him - SHIELD has nothing to threaten him with that he can't buy out or blow up.

"That is exactly what you are to assume, Director. Unless I give explicit written permission, none of the gear I supply to the Avengers is to be studied by SHIELD R&D, or even to stay in fucking SHIELD custody longer than it would take for us to retrieve it. Pushing me on this will not end well for you...or do I have to remind you of what has happened to everyone else I have found in possession of unauthorized Stark weapons?" Years, fucking years of hunting them down, and he still hadn't found everything fucking Stane had sold.

"Stark..."

"Yep, that's my name, don't wear it out." If Fury was going for 'vague yet menacing', Tony could be flippant. His voice hardened. "I will put up with the shit that's already happened because you are all apparently idiots, but I'm not known for patience. Don't do it again." He took a deep breath. "Jarvis, end call."

Fucking SHIELD, fucking Fury, fucking donkey-sucking mouth-breathing shit-swillers, may they be fucked sideways with fucking nunchucks. They'd collected Clint's quiver after the final
debriefing on Monday, while everyone was in medical, and taken it to fucking R&D to analyse the leftover arrowheads. He wouldn't have even known except Clint had mentioned he had to go pick it up and Jarvis had gone looking. He ran his hands through his hair. "J, I need something to blow up - what's ready for testing?"

"The latest 'bulletproof' uniform prototypes for the Avengers have been produced, and need to be tested for durability." Tony nodded. "But if I may, sir...Dr Banner is on his way to your location, and seems to want to consult your expertise."

Tony rubbed at his chest as he thought. Bruce was his absolute favourite person, but angry people made him anxious - and much as Tony liked to push him, he didn't want to hurt him...hell, that was the very last thing he wanted. He sighed, and tucked away his anger at Fury and SHIELD for a future occasion. "Put a mark on the 'Reasons why we don't trust SHIELD' tally, and let him in, Jarvis." He stalked over to the coffee machine. He fucking deserved coffee for this kind of bullshit.

"Certainly, sir."

The door of the workshop slid open, and Bruce walked in with one of his many notebooks and the inevitable cup of tea. "Hi Tony."

Tony spun on his chair and grinned. "Brucie-Bear! My favourite lab buddy! What brings you to my lair?"

Bruce smiled, and made his way to the place he usually worked when they were collaborating. "I wanted a second opinion on some calculations."

"Oh?"

Bruce went from smiling to grim in a bare second. "I'm trying to make anaesthetics and painkillers that actually work on Steve."

Fuck. "You're kidding me." Not that he thought Bruce would, but...

"Downside of the super-serum. He processes 'toxins' really fast, which is helpful if he's poisoned, and doesn't matter for things like antibiotics, but it's almost impossible to sedate him." Bruce had that look about him, the one that meant he could barely stand the incredible cruelty of the universe, and the only reason the Hulk wasn't out was that he knew how to push the anger down until he needed it.

"Fuck. How do you know?" Had he been looking into their medical records? They all got assessed by SHIELD doctors after missions, but they still treated Bruce as the in-house medic, and much as he protested, he tried to do right by them.

Bruce's face got darker. "He told me."

Oh, fucking hell. Did - Had - If..."How does he know?" Tony rubbed at his chest, his voice hesitant.

"Apparently, he got a bad compound fracture during the war and they had to do surgery on him." Bruce's anger was an undercurrent now, his voice almost casual. "And of course, he has had bullets removed several times, since it wouldn't do for him to heal around them."
"And - and nobody has come up with anything? Fuck, what if he gets really hurt someday? It's not like that's unlikely - we get beaten up every damned week!" Tony's coffee was done - he picked it up, but his hands were trembling - a knife cutting his flesh, his bone, a rocky ceiling, pain, pain, have to hold still, skin peeling away from the flesh underneath, a kind voice, a kind man, cutting him open - and the hot liquid spilt over the sides, almost burning his work-calloused hands.

"Steve seemed surprised that I would be interested in attempting it." Bruce's façade of indifference broke apart then, his voice cracking. "God, Tony, he said, he said he didn't want to 'put me out'...he didn't want to interfere in my other projects...I, I couldn't - Tony..." He took a gulping breath, then another, wringing his hands. "He...he was reading your file - I told him he should, and I kept him company so he could ask me questions I thought you, um, wouldn't want to hear - and he was, horrified, that you had surgery without anaesthetic, but...it was like the idea that he shouldn't have to go through that either hadn't even occurred to him."

Shit. Shit. Tony couldn't, couldn't think about this right now - cutting him open, pain, pain, air on raw nerves, blood on his skin, beating heart exposed and bleeding - he took a too-large gulp of coffee, burning his tongue, his mouth, his throat...he was here, in his workshop, Jarvis was watching over him, he was safe...

"...two, three, four, five, hold, two, three, breathe out, two, three, four, five, six, seven. Breathe in...you are safe, sir, you are in the workshop of Avengers Tower, New York, April 3rd, 2013..."

Tony's breathing slowed as he followed the thread of Jarvis' voice - safe, I'm safe, I'm home and safe - back out of the memories, the blood and the fear and the damp rock and the hot sands and the pain and the fear, back out of the panic, until his focus widened again and his breath shuddered and sobbed in his throat instead of catching tight, and he could see Bruce in front of his, worried but not, thank fuck, not pitying, just there, being there, not looming or reaching or grabbing, and Jarvis was talking, and he was safe, he was, safe as houses...

"Uh..." the words stuttered in his throat "what, uh, questions did, did he ask?" Please, don't ask, don't make a thing of it, let it go.

Bruce, wonderful man, just nodded and..."He wanted to know why you hadn't shared Dummy's code; why you named Jarvis Jarvis; whether Stane, uh, took the reactor you were, uh, wearing; and why you put up with Rhodey taking a suit. I mostly, sort of, confirmed his guesses, when he figured out what had happened - he's pretty perceptive once he's got actual information to work from - I thought that, uh, Jarvis would probably stop me if I started to tell him anything too private?"

Jarvis spoke then: "Indeed I would have, Dr Banner, and it is my opinion that you shared precisely enough for Captain Rogers to comprehend his errors." He sounded disapproving of Steve's 'errors', but sympathetic, and warmly reassuring towards Bruce. That was alright then.

"It's fine Bruce, I trust you." And shit, he meant it. "He, uh, came by and apologised, you know. Said that he'd misjudged me, and not bothered to correct his assumptions, and been a bully. Captain America thought he'd been a bully, and that I was as important as him." Tony took a sip from his cooling coffee and grimaced.

Bruce shook his head. "Steve recognised that he'd made a mistake. Captain America is part of him, but it's not the most important part. Just like Iron Man is who you are, and Tony Stark is who you are, but at the heart of things, you're just Tony."
"Yeah, he, he made that distinction. I, uh, my - Howard only really told stories about 'Captain America', you know? And he told a lot of them." Captain America stormed a HYDRA base without backup to save his friend, Captain America and his team defeated HYDRA all on their own, Captain America won the war for us, Captain America was strong (not like you), smart (not like you), everyone loved him (not like you), perfect (not like you)...

"Mmm." Bruce took his glasses off and cleaned them on the hem of his shirt. "You know, before I met you, I'd heard a lot about Tony Stark of Stark Industries. The places I went, everyone knew the weapons you'd made. The Iron Man things, um, took longer to - trickle down? to the places where I was getting my news. You...surprised me, when we met, in a lot of ways."

Tony hesitated. ". . .Like what?"

Bruce smiled at him, warm and comforting. "You were just as smart as you were rumoured to be, and you...you didn't hide it, but you didn't - flaunt? - it, either, not really, it's just..."

"Easier to let it show than translate all the time. It doesn't matter if people think I'm an arrogant douchebag when we need to get shit done." Thank god for Bruce. Finally, someone who speaks English. He hadn't been joking, not really. To just...talk, not worry about being understood, not try to modify his thinking so that people could comprehend, just speak and someone would get it...for that alone he would have invited Bruce to stay.

"Yeah. And you weren't afraid of me, not at all, but you didn't pity me either, or think I was an idiot for experimenting on myself. And even though you'd been a weapons designer, you weren't testing me to, to know how to control me, how to...replicate me, just to - understand me? And you did that to the others, too, you test everyone."

"Gotta know when they're gonna break, Brucie, everyone does. You know your limits, you watch 'em. If you're gonna break when I'm leaning on you, you'll tell me so. Everyone else...I have to be able to predict it myself." Rhodey broke at the birthday party, and Tony had seen it coming, and so it hadn't broken him, just bruised him, just for a while, all a part of the plan.

Bruce looked sorrowful then, not pitying, just understanding those constant defensive calculations that Bruce ran on himself and Tony ran on the world, that made Bruce run and hide and Tony snark and fight and deflect. "I know, Tony."

There was silence for a moment, then Tony huffed a breath and sat up. "So, big guy!" His voice was louder, energetic. "Tell me about these Steve-drugs."

Bruce gave a half-smile and flipped open his notebook. "Jarvis, can you bring up the simulations please? I've been working from the various sedatives people have come up with for the Hulk, but the problem is, once the Hulk gets tranqed, he turns into me, and my metabolism is almost normal. Steve, on the other hand, has an unusual metabolism all the time..."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading! Sorry for the delay - I've been getting through my exams, and now we're moving house. This chapter spends a lot of time in Tony's head, and has very little description of body language, setting, etc. What do you think? Your comments and kudos make this all worth-while, so let me know if you have any thoughts on what I've written, or ideas for team movie-nights, New York sight-seeing for Jane and
Darcy, or support staff the team should be working with.
Travelling

Chapter Summary

Thor brings Jane and Darcy to New York to meet the Avengers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She was so beautiful in sleep, his lady-love - honeyed hair draped over the pillow, dark against her moon-pale, star-bright skin, soft and smooth in sleep's care-free embrace. She was so beautiful, and his heart swelled in his chest to think of her - wise sage, compassionate - loving him. For all his titles, his princely upbringing, it was her love he treasured most.

"Jane," he whispered, smoothing a hand over her hair, caressing her cheek with his thumb, "svass, it is time to wake."

She stirred, eyes still closed. "Hmm?"

"Jane, you are travelling to meet my war-band today. We must prepare for the journey."

"Five more minutes..." Her voice was low, her eyes still closed against the morning. She was not, as they said, a 'morning person'. No, she was queen of the night-hours, and he loved her for it, but nevertheless...

"Jane," he kissed her forehead, "I would I could let you sleep as long as you wish, but Darcy insists that you wake."

She grumbled, but opened her eyes, smiling at him, and who would not smile back at such a countenance? "Coffee?"

"I have not attempted it," he admitted, "but I believe your shield-sister has."

She sighed, and reached up to kiss him. "Alright Thor, tell her I'm up. I'll be out in a minute."

"As you wish, astin min." He withdrew to the kitchen as she made for the bathroom, to prepare herself for the day.

Darcy was dancing to unheard music when Thor entered the kitchen, juggling a pan of bacon and eggs, a spatula, and a mug of coffee as she did.

“Morning, Thor,” she said. “I put a couple of pop-tarts in the toaster for you a few minutes ago – they should be just about done.”

“Good morrow,” he replied, bowing his head, “and my thanks, Darcy.”

Their toaster could not make sufficient breakfast for him at one time, so he customarily cooked additional servings as he ate. Shortly after his first meal was ready to eat, Jane emerged, looking
slightly more alert after a shower, but still rumpled.

“Coffee?” Her tone was plaintive, and Thor was glad indeed that he need not disappoint her.

“Here, my lady.” He passed her a mug of the drink Darcy had brewed, and he had seasoned to her taste. She grasped it eagerly, breathing in its fragrance before taking her first sip. “What would you like for breakfast?”

“She’s having a bacon and egg sandwich,” Darcy interrupted, “which will be finished just about… now.” Deftly, she split the bacon and eggs between two plates, topped the sandwiches with another slice of bread each, and put the pan and spatula into the sink. “You’re welcome.”

“Thanks, Darcy.” Jane smiled at her shield sister, her voice still rough with sleep. “What’s the schedule, again?”

Darcy pulled out her phone. “Eight am – i.e. fifteen minutes ago – everyone gets up. Breakfast, getting dressed, last minute packing. Nine am, we leave for the bifrost site, where Stark’s plane will meet us at nine thirty. We’ll be in the air by ten, and in New York by twelve thirty, barring unforeseen circumstances. Stark’s car will meet us at the airport, and take us to Avengers Tower, which will take somewhere between twenty minutes and an hour, depending on traffic. At the Tower, we go to our rooms to drop everything off, then we’re meeting the Avengers for lunch around one thirty.”

Thor beamed at her. Though their household was small, he was sure not one in a hundred stewards could match her for mastery of their affairs. Indeed, though he knew she was anxious at the thought of meeting his battle companions, he thought that she would find kindred spirits in Lady Pepper and Jarvis, who had long managed Tony’s affairs in the way that Darcy managed his Jane’s. He could not help but wish she could have known the Son of Coul better, for from what tales were told of him by Natasha and Clint, he was such a steward for the whole of SHIELD.

He was distracted from his somewhat melancholy thoughts when Darcy began going over the packing list. “Muscles here has stuff in both places, so no packing for him. I’ve already packed my stuff, but I don’t trust you with a suitcase, Jane. You get one suitcase of clothes and toiletries, and one suitcase of science.”

Jane began to object. “But what about…”

Darcy spoke over the top of her. “Uh-uh. If it doesn’t fit in the suitcase, you don’t get to bring it. I don’t care if it’s journal articles, notebooks, or lab equipment you want to show Stark, but it fits in that bag or it doesn’t come.” Seeing Jane was still unconvinced, Darcy went on. “Jane, you said you weren’t comfortable imposing on Stark. We’re bringing three people, a magic hammer, and three suitcases onto his plane. If it’s too big to fit in a suitcase, take pictures and Stark can figure it out at the other end. We’re only there until Tuesday.”

Jane sighed. “Alright, Darcy.”

“Good!” Darcy started collecting plates, shooing Thor back towards Jane’s bedroom. “You go pack the science, and Thor can help me check your other luggage. You’ve got half an hour, okay? Okay.”

She swept Thor up in her wake, pulling out Jane's half-packed bags and passing her phone to him. "Read that list out to me, would you?"
"Pants"
"Check"
"Shirts"
"Check"
"Pajamas"
"Check"
"Underwear"
"Check"
"Socks"

"...goddammit, Jane." Darcy got up, and rummaged through the dresser. "It's, like, fifteen degrees colder in New York." She retrieved a handful of socks and returned to the suitcase. "Does the temperature difference bother you, Thor?"

Thor smiled, tapping the phone screen to keep it from falling asleep. "It is a little disconcerting, and I confess New York is closer to the weather in Asgard, but your home is hardly Muspelheim."

He looked back down at the list. "Jackets?"

Darcy pulled out a few things, repacking them, before she answered. "Check."

"Coat?"
"Check"
"Hat"
"Check"
"Scarf"
"Check"
"Gloves"

Darcy sighed. "Well, there's one." She looked around contemplatively, then called out, "Jane!"

"What?" Jane shouted from the lab.

"You're missing a glove! Any ideas?"

"Pocket of my coat?"

Darcy shrugged and rolled her eyes, unfolding the coat and jackets she had just packed and rifling through the pockets. "At least Jane has cold weather clothes, with all the night hours she pulls. Ah-ha! Coat pocket it was!" She raised her voice again. "Got it Jane! And you should really consider actually putting things away once in a while!" She refolded the coat, paired the glove with its mate, and somehow (Thor could not tell how, the bag seemed so small) fit it back in the suitcase with room to spare. "Anything else on the list, Thor?"
Thor flicked a finger to set the phone scrolling. "In the clothing category, you have written 'fancy clothes - Stark dinners?', and there are also categories named 'toiletries' and 'occupation'."

"Shit, I'd forgotten about the fancy dress - and it looks like Jane did too." She slumped for a moment. "Does Jane even have anything fancy?"

Thor thought back through the clothes he'd seen his lady wear. "My lady is always beautiful, but I do not think that I have seen her wear anything that would compare with the clothes Natasha or Lady Pepper wear when they wish to impress."

Darcy groaned. "Black Widow and Pepper Potts? No way anything we've got will fit in with them. They can shop in New York with a practically unlimited budget, and we shop in Puente Antiguo with what little money can be spared from science."

Thor pondered this for a moment, then suggested, "Tony is an eager gold-giver - he has had suits made for each of us to wear to grand feasts, and refuses any hint of repayment. I am certain that if he proposes an event for which you do not have suitable clothing, he will be glad to procure it for you." Indeed, Thor thought, it was far harder to restrain Tony's generosity than to seek it.

Darcy sighed. "That'll have to do, but I don't know how Jane will like it. Hell, I don't like it much. Still. Time's a-wasting, and we have to catch a plane in..." she glanced at the alarm clock, "...forty-five minutes."

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Thor rolled his shoulders and inhaled deeply as he carried Jane's bags off the plane. Though it had been comfortable, for such a vehicle, (truly, nothing Tony owned was uncomfortable), the journey had been long, and he was very glad to be out in the fresh air for a moment. He did not like to speak of it, but he found 'climate-controlled' spaces very disconcerting. Their patterns of humidity and air pressure were both strange and static, and there was no wind to carry the far-travelling air to him. He sighed slightly. At Jane's home, he spent much time in the fresh air, and that air was uncontaminated by city smoke, but in Tony's domain, there was no wildness. He spent time on the roof, with his windows open, walking around the city, in its many parks, but it was not the same. Asgard's golden city had been built by the Aesir thousands of years ago, but there was wild forest within a day's ride, and a week's travel away, you might see no-one for days if you wished. Still. There was much he had had in Asgard that he did not have here, and dwelling on it would do him no good. Nay, he must be glad to have his svass and his war-band in the same place, that he might enjoy all their companionship at once. He was blessed in their love and friendship, and for that companionship he would willingly give up easy access to wilderness and the deference of men and women.

At that moment, one of Tony's servants (no, he must call them employees) found them, bearing a trolley for their bags, and guiding them swiftly and deftly through the airport crowds. He easily kept up with Darcy's chatter, advising her of places to buy coffee, and to drink alcohol, and sights to see. Thor was disinclined for speech, and Jane, who had been napping on the plane, was still sleepy, although her anxiety about their destination had begun to resurface by the time they reached the car.

"Is that a limo?" she hissed. "Sending a private plane was bad enough, but kind of understandable - I mean, we're not exactly close to an airport, and you'd have a horrible time flying commercially, but a limo? Couldn't he send a normal car? I'm not worth this!"
He turned to face her and kissed her softly. "Jane, svass...you are my beloved, my darling, my lady-love...you are worth everything in the world that I could give you. Tony is my friend and shield-brother, and the most generous man I have ever met: to give a gift to a friend that is appreciated is something he values far higher than money 'in the bank'." He took Jane into his arms, trying to comfort and reassure her. "There is nothing he could give me that I would value more than your company and your comfort. I am a prince of Asgard, yes?" He smiled as he reminded her of their first encounters. "And you are my lady. You are worth the world, Jane."

She leaned into his embrace, hiding her face against his chest, tension easing out of her as he rubbed his hand up and down her back. "I know you think that, Thor, but it's - hard, for me to believe that anyone might agree with you. You're...god, I've never met a better-looking man, and you're kind, and loving, and a god-damned prince, and...I'm nothing special." Thor opened his mouth to speak, and she kissed him to stop the words. "I know you don't agree with me, Thor, and I know you think that no-one else should either."

His heart ached at her words. She thought so little of herself, and was so often unappreciated. The stars were not the only reason she lived so far from Culver. She had told him of the disregard and scorn of her peers, in childhood and adulthood. He had seen them dismiss her, for her appearance, her loveliness or her carelessness of it, for her joy in learning and her love of the stars, for all the things that made her Jane, that made him love her. "Jane..." he said helplessly.

She took a breath and set her shoulders. "No, I can do this. I love you, Thor, and you want me to know your friends, so I'll meet them. Worst comes to worst, we go back to New Mexico and pretend it never happened." She reached up to kiss him quickly, and stepped back. "Shall we go?"

Thor opened the door for her, and Darcy wandered up to them. "Oh, good, we're done with the heart to heart?" She followed Jane and Thor into the car, and shut the door behind her. "Home, James, and don't spare the horses!"

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"Darcy, Jane, these are my shield-brothers and -sister, Steve Rogers, Tony Stark, Bruce Banner, Clint Barton, and Natasha Romanoff." Thor gestured towards his friends. Steve was standing in the door of the kitchen, while Tony and Bruce had clearly been embroiled in some discussion at the dining table. Clint and Natasha were on one of the sofas near the television. "My friends, I introduce to you my lady, Jane Foster, and her companion, Darcy Lewis."

Steve stepped forward, and Thor quietly stepped back, happy to let his friends get to know each other without his intervention. "It's nice to meet you both. Did you have a good trip?"

"They were on a Stark plane, of course they had a good trip!" Tony interrupted, waving a hand dismissively.

Jane bit her lip. "Um, thank you so much for the...jet, and the, the limo, Mr Stark," she began. "It was incredibly generous of you to arrange our trip out here..."

"It's Tony, and you're welcome." Tony smirked at her. "Back before I built the suit, I used to use that jet for cross-country bar-hopping, you know." He frowned contemplatively. "I think it still has the stripper poles...anyway, it's been used for far worse things than bringing Thor's girlfriend to visit so he stops moping and/or abandoning us." At that moment, Tony's phone began to blare, one of the raucous songs he liked to play in his forge. "Gotta take this," he apologized, wandering off. "Hey Pep, what's up?"

"Tony Stark, ladies and gentlemen," Clint announced.
"Is he...always like that?" Jane wondered.

Steve shrugged with a rueful smile. "Pretty much. I'd better finish making lunch."

Darcy stared at Steve as he left, then whistled. "That is one fine hunk of man-meat, and I practically live with McMuscles, here." She pointed a thumb at Thor, then seemed to notice Clint properly. "Wait, you're one of the jack-booted thugs! You stole Jane's research!"

Natasha raised an eyebrow. "She recognised you? You were on surveillance that mission."

Clint winced. "Yeah, we...weren't subtle."

As the three continued to banter, Bruce turned to Jane. "SHIELD stole your research?" he asked.

Jane nodded. "Just after Thor landed and we all figured out that Einstein-Rosen bridges weren't actually theoretical. They still haven't given it back. It set me back months, even when I had to revise everything anyway."

Bruce frowned and took a calming breath. "You should ask Tony about that. By now, SHIELD has pretty much accepted that he's got a backdoor into all their electronic files. We're doing a lot more reports on paper now."

"I just might." Jane smiled at him, then frowned again. "Wait...you're that Bruce Banner?"

Bruce look confused. "You mean Bruce Banner who turns into the Hulk?"

"No, Dr Bruce Banner, the researcher in nuclear physics and biophysics from Culver University." Seeing that he was still confused, Jane went on, "I studied particle physics and astrophysics there. You took a couple of guest lectures in one of my courses."

Now Bruce looked surprised and pleased - glad, perhaps, to be recognised for what he had chosen to do with his life, instead of what life had made of him, Thor thought. "Oh, uh, I can't say I remember you, I'm afraid."

"That's alright," Jane replied, "I don't exactly work in your field, and I didn't finish my doctorate until 2007."

Bruce smiled sadly. "And by 2007, I was on the run. Did I make that much of an impression with a couple of guest lectures that you still remember me from that?"

"Oh!" Jane pushed her hair back from her face. "Not exactly. I mean, you clearly cared about your subject, it was pretty inspiring, but I remember you because you were friends with my PhD supervisor, Erik Selvig?, and he still remembers you and talks about you now and then."

"You know Erik? Wait, didn't he get caught up in the whole...business with Loki last year? How is he?"

"He's...alright." Jane looked away and pursed her lips. "I, um, I don't know how it was for...Clint, but Erik...he told me it was like those dreams, where you have a fantastic idea, and when you wake up you go to write it sown, but you can't remember it, except that instead of a great idea, he felt like he understood the, the whole universe."

Bruce sighed. "I can't imagine. But I'm glad he's, uh, okay."
"He'll be glad to hear you're okay, too." Jane bit her lip, wincing a little. "I mean..."

"Breaking the Law of Conservation of Mass every now and then, but I'm okay." Bruce smiled at her. "I'm trying to catch up with my reading after half a decade on the run. I was still researching, but I was a bit...narrowly focused at the time. I don't think I've come across anything of yours, though. Thor says you're having trouble getting published?"


"A little too impossible?" Bruce prompted.

"And a little too classified," Jane agreed. "A lot of the actual evidence is wrapped up in inter-dimensional politics."

Thor frowned. He knew he could do nothing to aid his lady in this battle, but it irked him that she must suffer the doubt of her peers because he and his people were, at times, a threat.

"You should visit the labs while you're here," Bruce offered. "We, uh...Tony and I spend a lot of time trying to figure out all of the...impossible things we encounter. I do a lot of work on the team's biology, so we can manage injuries effectively, but we also just meet a lot of..."

"Mad scientists?" Tony butted in, slipping his phone into his pocket as he came back in. "I'm pretty sure Clint has a ranking system for weird shit. Did I hear my name, big guy?"

"I was just saying that Jane should visit the labs while she's here. Did you bring any of your research?" Bruce asked her.

"Darcy let me pack a bad full of 'science'. I brought some equipment and a stack of notebooks," she said. Thor smiled proudly. She was a fine smith, his lady, making tools for her purposes when there were none to be had from any other maker, and from the meagrest of materials. He was sure Tony would enjoy speaking with her about it.

Tony rubbed his hands together. "That," he said, pointing at Bruce. "is an excellent plan. Have I got anything on this afternoon, Jarvis?"

"No, sir." Jane jumped a little when Jarvis spoke. When she had met him in the elevator, they had both been very polite, but Thor could tell she found him almost as unnerving as Tony's wealth. He had quietly asked Jarvis to use the highest privacy settings in his rooms for the duration of the visit, and Jarvis had agreed and promised to also be more reticent in public areas, until Jane and Darcy were used to him. It seemed a shame to Thor that Jarvis must hide himself so often, and that he agreed to do so with such ease, but he did not know what there was to be done about it.

"Well now I am. Mark it in, J. Science with Bruce and Dr Foster, from after lunch until the caffeine runs out." Thor smiled at his friend's ebullience. Truly, he had hoped that Jane would find companionship with the 'science bros', as Clint named them, and it appeared that all three were welcoming it.

Steve ducked out of the kitchen. "Really, Tony? You couldn't give them a day to settle in?" It seemed the question was rhetorical, for he went on, "Could someone come and help me with the plates?"

So that none of his friends need leave their conversations, Thor followed Steve into the kitchen to collect lunch and set it out on the table. As they all sat down, he looked around, and happiness swelled in his heart. To see all his friends on Midgard, gathered together and taking pleasure in
each other's company...well, that was a boon he was very glad of.

Chapter End Notes

svass - beloved
astin min - my darling
Muspelheim - one of the Nine Realms, realm of fire
gold-giver - a generous man

At last, the first Thor chapter! I've tried to create a consistent 'voice' for him that is a little archaic, but not too much. I haven't actually seen _Thor_, so my characterisation of Jane and Darcy is based entirely on fanfiction and reading _about_ the movie. Your kudos (over a hundred now!) and comments make this all worthwhile, so let me know if you have ideas for interactions between Jane and Darcy and the Avengers, sights they could see in New York, or anything else you'd like to see in this story.
Steve talks to Jarvis about adding more science to his catch-up lessons, and the Avengers watch The Incredibles together.

"Welcome back, Captain Rogers," Jarvis said as soon as Thor, Jane, and Darcy had left the elevator. "Did you enjoy the museum?"

"It was great, Jarvis" Steve ran a hand over his hair, still messy from the cap he used to keep from being recognised. "There was this show in the planetarium that Jane took us to - it was amazing! It showed all of these stars, and the history of the universe, and the solar system...Do we really know how the universe began, now?"

There was a smiling tone to Jarvis' voice as he said, "The Big Bang theory is strongly supported by evidence and widely accepted by scientists, but we don't truly know that it is accurate. But we are fast approaching the sort of confidence in that theory that we already have in, for example, the theory of evolution."

The elevator reached Steve's floor, and he got out, taking off his shoes just inside his door and putting his wallet on the chest of drawers in his bedroom. "We haven't really covered much science in my catching up, have we Jarvis?" Once Steve had realised Jarvis could help him assimilate, he had starting asking the AI for book and documentary recommendations, and they now spent a few hours every day talking about the state of the world and how it came to be that way.

"No, Captain. I have been directing your attention towards key political and historical events, social movements which explain aspects of modern culture, and widely-used technologies, and you have not, thus far, expressed an interest in scientific discoveries."

Steve shrugged off his jacket, thinking about all the unfamiliar dinosaurs he had seen that day, and the history of the universe he had never heard of, and the...genetics? that everyone seemed familiar with when they talked about the animals in the Hall of Mammals. Then he thought about the giant 'slime mould' they'd fought the previous week, and portals and wormholes, and the serum that had changed so many lives. He grabbed a notebook and sat down on the couch. "...I think I maybe should have. Do you think...do you think I'd understand Bruce and Tony better if I knew more about science?"

"Sir, Dr Banner, and indeed Dr Foster, each have close to a decade of formal science education, and years or decades more of reading and researching in those fields." Jarvis' tone was warning, and a little reluctant.

"You're saying I'd never catch up?"

"I'm saying, Captain, that they should not be used as a benchmark for your science education." Jarvis paused. "Which is not to say that you are wrong in thinking that a greater understanding of
modern science will make it easier for you to understand their choices, methods, or conversation."

"Hmm." Steve frowned and rubbed the back of his neck. "Show me the current schedule, please?" He and Jarvis, with some advice from Clint and Agent Sitwell, had come up with a list of topics for Steve to learn about, and an approximate weekly schedule of documentary-watching, reading, discussion, and quizzing, to help him master them. The projection Jarvis conjured at Steve's request showed 'American Politics' twice a week, 'International Politics' once a week, 'Social Justice and Political Correctness' once a week, and 'New Technologies' twice a week. Usually, Steve would do some reading or documentary-watching in the afternoons, and talk to Jarvis or Clint about it, and Jarvis would quiz him in the evening on things he had learned that day and earlier in the week. 'New Technologies' sessions usually involved actually using the technologies involved, which sometimes meant field trips outside the Tower, but had really helped Steve adjust without being overwhelmed.

"I do not believe it is in your best interests to take on more sessions, Captain." Jarvis pointed out. "Considering that you run before breakfast, spar with Agents Barton or Romanoff in the mornings, frequently cook dinner, which is often followed by a movie, run team training twice a week, assist with publicity on a regular basis, and fight with the Avengers on average once a week, I think it is very important for your mental health that you keep what down-time you have."

"I get a few more hours in the day with the insomnia, though," Steve tried to joke, but he wasn't very surprised that Jarvis didn't approve.

"Captain, as you are aware, my primary purpose is to support Sir in his endeavours, and to look after him when he forgets or is unwilling or unable to look after himself. At last count, Sir's work for Stark Industries and as a SHIELD consultant make up a full time load; his assistance to the Avengers approaches half-time labour; and Sir's personal projects, including the recovery of Stark weapons and many of his collaborations with Dr Banner, make up the remainder of a seventy-hour work week. Sir is unwilling to reduce the amount of work that he does, but I have continued to encourage him to do so, as I am now encouraging you to prioritise rather than pushing yourself."

Jarvis paused, and when he spoke again, his voice was gentle. "Captain, the world has waited seventy years for you to wake up to it, and for more than six months now you have been doing exceptional work with less than your current knowledge. Please, Captain, trust that we will amend any ignorance of yours if it is urgent, and let the rest take its time."

Steve sighed, rubbing his face in his hands. "I know you will, Jarvis. I just...Loki called me a 'man out of time'. I keep coming back to that. He flipped open a sketchbook and began to doodle as he spoke. "I'm out of my time, and I'm not...not going back. And I, I can accept that, you know? I can deal with the...losses." He watched the street his Ma used to live in form under his fingers. "But I've - lost my footing? - too. I don't, I don't really have a time, anymore. The forties - isn't my time now. And I think, maybe, this could be my time, I could find a footing here...I can't grieve forever."

At that, Jarvis spoke. "Grief takes the time that it takes, Captain, and it is not rational."

"I know, Jarvis." Steve began to fill in brick walls and window panes and cobblestones. "But...eventually, I think I'll come to belong here. But I can't yet. And I...every time someone says something I don't understand, it knocks me off my feet again." He smiled sadly. "I really hate that feeling. Who was that philosopher, who said the thing about knowing what he doesn't know?"

" 'Wisest is he who knows what he does not know.' Socrates, of ancient Athens."
Steve nodded. "There's so much I don't know...I'm not even close to being wise." He looked at the ceiling and swallowed, wishing he didn't want to cry. "So yeah, I push myself hard. I just...I could cope with skipping seventy years if I knew what I was doing now that I'm here!

The light warmed, a little more golden for a moment, which Steve thought was Jarvis' equivalent of a comforting touch. "You are doing good deeds, Captain. You are helping people, and you are making friends."

Steve sighed. "Thanks, Jarvis. I'd still like to learn more science, though."

There was a short pause, then Jarvis suggested: "We have almost reached the twenty-first century in our history of American politics. Perhaps you could reduce it to one session a week, and have one session a week on scientific discoveries?"

"Better make it science in general, Jarvis, my school education wasn't very thorough, and I missed a lot anyway. But that sounds good." Steve looked down at his half-finished sketch of long-ago Brooklyn. There was something comfortable, reassuring, about drawing people and places from his...first life...but it only made the pain sharper when he had to stop. He quirked a corner of his mouth and turned to a blank page. He would draw Jane and Thor, he thought, watching that incredible footage of the universe, swapping Asgardian legends for Earth astrophysics, both in awe and love with the stars and each other. Yes. That was something good, something sure, about his life as it was now. He didn't need to understand the Big Bang theory to recognise a couple in love.

"I'm going to draw for a while, Jarvis. Let me know when dinner's ready."

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"Dinner was wonderful, Clint." Jane seemed to be genuinely enthusiastic rather than just polite - she'd gotten over some of her awe of the Avengers over the past couple of days.

"It really was," Steve agreed. "Was that paprika in the stew?" After a week or so of dinners, Clint, Bruce, and Steve - the usual cooks - had figured out that it was easier to make a few different dishes rather than huge portions of just one.

"Yep," Clint said, leaning back in his chair. "Esmeralda used to make it that way, back at the circus. She'd let me and Barney eat with her, sometimes."

"I've got the dishes," Natasha said, standing up, stacking plates and gathering cutlery into one of the serving bowls. "I'll get the popcorn started, too."

It turned out that when Tony had asked Jarvis to order popcorn in super-soldier portions, he had decided to 'simply' purchase a popcorn machine. It felt like overkill to Steve, but so did a lot of things at the Tower. "Whose turn is it to pick tonight?" he asked.

"Mine," Bruce put in, "but I think Jane and Darcy should choose."

"Choose what?" Darcy asked.

"Uh, there's a lot of popular culture I need to catch up on," Steve explained, rubbing the back of his neck, "and it gets lonely watching movies on your own after a while. So we have an Avengers Movie Night now."

"That makes sense," said Jane. "How do you choose?"

Tony stepped in. "Bring up the lists, Jarvis. See, the list on the right is movies Steve has already seen. The list in the middle is stuff people have told him is...how did you put it?"
"A 'must-see', a 'classic', or anything that people make a lot of references to," Steve filled in.

"Right." Tony went on. "The list on the left is things that should be on the middle list, but we think they're going to kick someone in the trauma."

"We haven't seen The Lion King, for example," Clint put in, "because we think it would be upsetting for Thor, and we haven't watched The Day After Tomorrow because ice is a problem for Steve."

"So what list is The Incredibles on?" Darcy asked.

"Actually, Ms Lewis, it is not on any of the lists," Jarvis answered. Jane startled a bit (Jarvis had been at his most unobtrusive over the weekend), but didn't look as disconcerted as she had when she'd first arrived, so that was a good thing. Steve kind of understood why people found Jarvis frightening or strange, but there were so many things that were new to him that Jarvis didn't really stand out, and he hadn't grown up with stories like Terminator, so he didn't really have much reason to be afraid of AIs. And Jarvis was a friend, a good one: it was sad to see him hide because of how people would react.

"Seriously?" Darcy exclaimed. "You are a team of actual goddamned superheroes and you haven't seen the best superhero movie ever made? You fight and live part time with this one," she pointed a thumb at Thor, "and the whole 'no capes!' thing hasn't come up?"

"I second Darcy's suggestion that we add Incredibles to the list," Clint agreed. Steve had decided three weeks ago that he wasn't going to bother catching up on something unless at least two people told him it was worth it.

"Any triggers, Jarvis?" Tony asked.

"There is a short, non-graphic torture scene where a character is electrocuted. A plane is hit by missiles while it is over open water, but all passengers survive and reach land shortly thereafter. I do not think it will be problematic, sir."

"The Incredibles it is," Tony declared.

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"Sometimes I just want it to stay saved!"

"Amen to that," Clint murmured.

"God yes," Tony agreed. "Every fucking week there's some new crisis, now."

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"What's with the secret identity thing?" Steve wondered aloud.

"Hey," Clint objected. "I like my secret identity. Just because Tony can't keep a secret to save his life."

"Says the superspy whose face is regularly on television," Tony pointed out. Steve thought he saw Natasha frown a little, but it was hard to tell with Natasha.

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"I'm your biggest fan!"
Steve thought that all of the Avengers were wincing at that. They'd all encountered the too-zealous fans by this point, although he and Tony had it worst off, as the most famous and public faces of the group. There was a point where it was flattering. But when you're in the middle of a job, or you're injured and just want to go home, or someone is sending underwear...it was worse than the dancing monkey shows, honestly it was.

"These guys have appalling reaction times." Natasha grabbed another handful of popcorn.

"It took him...fifteen, twenty seconds to hear that bomb? You wouldn't get past Trainee status at SHIELD like that."

"Does Buddy remind anyone else of Tony, at all?" Bruce asked. "With the jet boots and the technology-replacing-superpowers thing?"

Tony made an indignant noise "Are you seriously comparing me to the snotty-nosed kid who ends up..."

"Spoilers!" Darcy interrupted. "Just because we've seen the movie already doesn't mean we have to ruin it for Steve."

"Fly home, Buddy. I work alone."

"And seriously, what is with that?" Steve asked. "Teams are great! I loved working with the Commandos, I love working with you guys." He waved expansively at the screen. "Half his problem right there is that his attention is divided between the civilian, the kid, and the French guy, and the other half is that he has a limited skill set that isn't suited to all of them. I mean, if we got called in to deal with this situation, someone could be managing the civilians, while Tony defused the bombs, and someone else detained the bad guy. Why on earth is he so insistent on working alone?"

"Mr Sansweet didn't ask to be saved. Mr Sansweet didn't want to be saved."

"And that, my friends, is why SI has a PR person for the Avengers." Tony sounded incredibly smug.

"Actually, Ms Sengupta's really nice," Steve mused.

"Speaking of, you guys really need to start showing up to PR things; it's much easier to convince the public that you're good guys when they know who you are." Tony hadn't pushed it so far, and he'd told Steve why, but Iron Man and Captain America weren't the whole team, and they couldn't represent the whole team forever.

"Hang on, what's-her-name - Helen? - has stretch powers, and her daughter can do invisibility and force-fields?" Steve asked. "Did they get in trouble with the Fantastic Four about this?"

"Actually," Darcy answered, "the movie came out a year before they got their powers. It's a little freaky."

"That is weird," Bruce agreed. The film was recent enough that he hadn't seen it. "I mean, 
invisibility and force-fields aren't an obvious combination, they don't really work the same way."

"He starts like this prepared speech about how feeble I am compared to him, how inevitable my defeat is, how the world will soon be his!"

Clint snorted. "Remember Doom the other week. 'Doom shall never be defeated! Doom will destroy all those who stand in his way!'"

"'Doom needs to learn first person pronouns!' " Tony joined in. "Seriously, I don't understand the monologuing schtick."

"Well I don't understand the need for pithy catch-phrases and come-backs," Natasha pointed out, "and you seem to have no problem dedicating brain-power to those in the heat of battle."

"How about we actually do what our wives think we're doing. Just to shake things up."

"Oh, man, this is basically exactly what happens when me and Rhodey hang out." Tony laughed a bit. "I mean, replace 'wives' with Pepper and the army, but yeah...I've had that conversation."

"Do you think you could give up Iron Man, if you had to?" Clint asked.

Tony's mouth twisted. "I think that I don't want to find out. Could you stop being Hawkeye, just be 'normal'?”

"It's like Violet said, 'What does anyone in this family know about normal?' It's not even a powers thing, it's a lifestyle thing." Clint replied. He thought of them as a family? Or was he just being faithful to the movie? It felt like a family, sometimes.

"It would be nice to be normal," Bruce said quietly.

"This. message. will. self. destruct."

"Oh my god, how is this guy still alive? He has the self-preservation instincts of a lemming!"

"Let me guess. It got smart enough to wonder why it had to take orders."

Steve leaned across to Tony, speaking quietly so as not to get Jane or Darcy's attention. "Is that a common problem?"

Tony tilted his hand from side to side, speaking equally quietly. "It's a sci-fi trope. Very few actual AIs are that smart, at this point, so it's a mostly hypothetical trope."

Steve frowned. "But Jarvis...?"

Tony's voice was even quieter now. "Jarvis isn't my slave; he doesn't have to take orders." How did that...? Was Jarvis...? "You should ask him, later."
"You designed it."

"I never look back, darling. It distracts from the now."

"Gee, that doesn't sound at all familiar," Clint said, looking at Tony.

"She's not wrong." Tony shrugged.

"Metaman, express elevator! Dynaguy, snagged on takeoff! Splashdown, sucked into a vortex! No capes!"

"Oh my god." Steve put a hand to his mouth. "Can that...does that actually happen?"

"Oh, absolutely," said Natasha, with an incredibly un-reassuring smile. She didn't explain.

Thor looked shocked. "I had not realised how...perilous my battle wear could be. On Asgard, we wear cloaks for warmth, and are accustomed to battle finding us unexpectedly. We learn to block with them, to catch or deflect blows. I...it seems that what is helpful on Asgard is harmful here."

Jane squeezed Thor's hand. "Thor, I...I would really like it if you would not wear your cape in battle here. I didn't want to bring it up...I know it's important - but no-one knows what it means here, and, if it would keep you safe..."

He looked down at her, such love in his eyes that Steve ached. "As you wish, astin min." Would Steve have looked at Peggy like that, eventually? Would he ever look at anyone like that?

"And I did it without your precious gifts, your oh-so-special powers."

"Seriously, what is this guy's obsession with 'powers'?” Darcy spoke up. "Or, you know, everyone's obsession in this movie."

"Are all the superheroes meant to have genetic powers?” Bruce asked. "Like, uh, the X-men?"

"That's...really disturbing." Steve frowned, thinking back over the course of the movie. "A subsection of the human race, genetically distinct, who have a distinct role in society. That's, uh, I know where I've heard that before, and it wasn't here. 'We have left humanity behind,' the Red Skull had said, 'You could have the power of gods.' No, Steve didn't want to live in that kind of world. Life was what you made of it. "If the supers weren't underground, would the kids have a career choice at all?"

"And why is it that Syndrome's tools are so undervalued by Mr Incredible?" Thor asked. "Though he is villainous in his choices, his power is as great as any 'super'. Would the creators of this tale contest the Man of Iron's might for it being cleverly made and hard won instead of born, as mine is? Even I, perhaps the closest to these 'supers', rely on Mjolnir for my victories, as the Captain relies on his shield."

Steve looked at Tony, then at Clint, who didn't even have near-miraculous inventions, but still stood his ground with the rest of the team. And he thought of the pain of the serum, and Bruce's transformations and their aftermath. Powers are overrated, he thought.
"A homing device that beeps when it's activated?!" Tony exclaimed. "Who are these idiots? A superhero is not your fucking phone! You don't just call and then hunt around for the sound of your fucking ringtone!"

"That's a good containment strategy, though," Natasha pointed out. "If the assumption is that intruders are likely to have a wide variety of unpredictable abilities, something that weighs them down, envelops them, and blocks their vision would be fairly universally effective."

"What's-her-name - Kitty Pryde could get out of it," Clint disagreed. "And if Sue Storm got a force field up, she could keep them off her long enough to get out."

"These guys aren't like those guys. They won't exercise restraint because you're children. They will. kill you, if they get the chance."

"Is it strange," Jane asked, "that she's telling them the bad guys are real bad guys when we all know they're not even close?"

"They aren't particularly competent minions so far," Natasha agreed.

"I think," Bruce said, a little hesitantly, "that it's, uh, probably a good thing that a kids movie isn't showing real, um, bad guys. I kind of wish I didn't, uh, know what real bad guys are like. Kids shouldn't have to." It wasn't General Ross that Bruce was thinking of, Steve could tell. It was an older pain in his eyes, one Steve actually recognised now that he'd read Bruce's file - it had confused him, at first. Bruce hadn't learnt what 'bad guys' are like from Ross; he'd learnt it from his father. Sometimes, Steve looked at his teammates and thought that maybe having only a mother wasn't such a problem, if fathers were like this. He was wrong - well, not really, his Ma had been wonderful, even when she was worked to the bone (and oh, how he wished that were exaggeration) - fathers weren't so bad. Some were like, well, like Mr Incredible: occasionally distracted, but loving and kind. Most were like that, Steve thought. Surely.

"Matching uniforms?"

"How come you guys don't have matching uniforms?" Darcy asked.

"For a start, we're lucky if the other guy is wearing pants when he shows up," Bruce pointed out, with a wry twist to his mouth.

"And Captain America's uniform is damn famous, and we need the public capital, but there is no way in hell you're getting me in stars and stripes." Tony continued.

"'Twould be foolish of me to set aside the armour Mjolnir brings me, but such harness would not suit my companions," Thor said, voice a little too loud, as always.

"And Natasha and I make a living out of being unobtrusive - anything that matches these guys would put us at a disadvantage," Clint finished. He and Natasha needed the advantages they could get, too. Oh, they were exceptional, absolutely worthy of being on the team, functionally superhuman. But they were functionally superhuman because of decades of experience; intricately, personally tailored weapons; long-honed expertise; and manipulation of the circumstances in which they encountered their enemies. Thor could throw himself into just about any situation and come out all right. SHIELD agents, Clint and Natasha included, needed far more strategy and tactics.
"Okay, hands up," Tony said. "Who saw that coming?"

Darcy's hand went up immediately, as did Clint's and Natasha's. After a moment, Bruce shrugged, and raised his half in the air, as did Thor and Steve.

"I'm pretty sure this guy would be in the upper ranks of 'stupidest villains' that we've encountered," Clint said. "Really? You build an AI smart enough to beat a superhero, plan to take it apart in a combat situation, and expect it to let you? And you don't bring actual explosives?"

"I still think it doesn't beat that guy who managed to shoot himself in the foot with the mood-reversal ray," Tony argued. "That guy was really dumb."

"I am your wife. I am the greatest good you are ever going to get."

"You know," said Natasha, "for a woman with half-a-dozen lines and no actual screen-time, Honey's a very strong character."

Darcy nodded. "Apart from the fact that they're all stick figures, the women in this movie are pretty epic. Edna, Violet, Helen, Mirage, Honey...they're all pretty complex. And Elastigirl's hella badass."

Natasha quirked an eyebrow. "She's not bad."

"A closer target! You only got one shot!"

There was something surreal about watching movie characters make the same choices you had to make week after week. Steve would like to think they were never that desperate, that they had only one option, one idea, but he was realistic. The Avengers only got called in when it seemed like there were no better ideas. They were something of a last line of defence. And for all the diversity of the team, the range of techniques and weapons and ideas that everyone brought to the table, at the end of the day, they were six people. Sometimes, they only had one shot.

"Oh, don't worry. I'll be a good mentor. Supportive, encouraging...everything you weren't."

The strange thing was, Mr Incredible was in the wrong. Not as much in the wrong as Syndrome, but...he was harsh on Buddy, too harsh. Steve could see Tony frowning out of the corner of his eye. One of the most frustrating things about living...here, Steve thought, was how complicated the fights were. In a war, there was your side and the other side, and you helped your side, and fought anyone else. Now...it could be hard to tell what the right thing to do was, and it was so easy to just let SHIELD decide, to not think about it. To be a perfect soldier, he thought, instead of a good man.

When the movie was sound down, while Bruce started to collect the popcorn bowls and glasses. Tony groaned and stretched, before slumping back into the sofa. Jane seemed completely
disinclined to move from where she had ended up, curled up against Thor's shoulder, and Thor seemed completely disinclined to move her. Clint slid off his perch on the back of the sofa, movements totally fluid from years of practice holding still for hours, and started to help Bruce with the dishes. Natasha followed him into the kitchen. Steve looked across to Darcy, who was leaning on Thor's other shoulder.

"Thanks for the recommendation, Darcy," he said. "That was a great movie."

"Your welcome," she replied. "Watching superhero movies with actual superheroes? That was an experience."

Chapter End Notes

The museum Steve and co. visit is the American Museum of Natural History, and the show he is so excited about is the space show _Journey to the Stars_, which ran in the Planetarium there from July 2009 to October 2013 and is now a travelling exhibition.

Since it probably won't appear onscreen, a little more about Thor's cape: in this story, it is part of the regalia of "he who wields Mjolnir". For Thor not to wear it, it would indicate to an Asgardian that he was dissociating himself from that aspect of his identity. Although he will stop wearing it in Avengers battles in this story, he will be notifying Heimdall of his decision and his reasons (offscreen) at the least, or, if it is possible for him to travel, discussing it with Odin.

My thanks to William H. Stoddard for the movie suggestion - I had a lot of fun rewatching the movie from this perspective. I've tried to give enough context for their reactions that those who haven't seen the movie can guess at what's going on, but I don't know how successful that was, and it will obviously make a lot more sense if you've seen it. In case you didn't pick up on it, italicised lines are quotes.

Thank you all for your comments and kudos - I love writing this story, but sometimes I need a bit of a nudge to actually work on it, and knowing that you are enjoying it is a big motivator for me. To celebrate 40,000 words, and 100 (actually 120 now) kudos, and three months of this story, I'm posting a bonus fic in this series. It's a prequel, set in the December before this story starts, and it covers the process of the Avengers moving into the Tower.
Looking Back

Chapter Summary

Steve's been avoiding Bruce. Bruce tracks him down and asks him why.

(Warning: this is an angsty chapter. Contains both Bruce angst and Steve angst. (Not) sorry.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce woke. His muscles were tight with holding the other guy in, with supressing the roiling tide of anger that swelled at his nightmares, visions of running, and hiding, and being found, and hurting, and being hurt, and seeing the devastation of his passing, the rubble and the corpses where he had lived (almost) peacefully. He took a slow breath, gentle wind smoothing over the roiling sea of anger in his mind. He took another, letting memories and dreams alike fade. He took a third, releasing physical tension now that his mind was better controlled.

He flipped back the twisted covers and got up. It would be best if he didn’t sleep for a while, if he gave his mind some time to settle. “Jarvis,” he said quietly, “could I have the Insomnia Club alert, please?”

“Agents Barton and Romanoff are sleeping;” (which Bruce took to mean they were sharing quarters again, “as is sir, although he has fallen asleep in his workshop. Captain Rogers is in the kitchen, and is not seeking company.”

Hmm. Bruce had seen very little of Steve lately, which was strange. He wasn’t comfortable in Bruce’s lab, but they were both early birds, so they would typically see each other at breakfast, and they each cooked dinner often enough that they would cross paths in the kitchen In the evening. Furthermore, after Tony had set up the insomnia alerts, he and Steve had crossed paths at night at least one night in four, and Steve had almost always seemed eager for company. He was a very social man.

“Thank you, Jarvis. Can you tell me, is Steve avoiding everyone’s company?”

“No, Doctor Banner.” Bruce knew Jarvis liked Steve, but he hoped that Jarvis would be able to give him some hints even if Steve had asked him to be quiet.

“I see. Has he been deliberately avoiding me, these last two weeks?”

“I cannot speak to the captain’s intentions, Doctor Banner.” Which meant yes, Steve was definitely avoiding him.

“Thank you, Jarvis.” He pulled on a pair of soft pants and a t-shirt – he may not sleep in them, but they were comfortable when he couldn’t sleep – and left his rooms. “The common floor please, Jarvis. And please don’t tell Steve that I’m on my way.”
“As you wish, Doctor Banner.”

When he walked in, Steve was sitting at the kitchen bench nursing a steaming mug with the heat turned up.

“Hi Steve,” Bruce said, and Steve startled.

“H-Hi, Bruce.” Steve looked at him, then away, then stood. “Would you, uh, like a hot chocolate? Clint taught me how to make them.”

Since Steve seemed to be searching for something to keep himself occupied, Bruce said “Thanks, that sounds good,” even though he really preferred tea. If Steve was making hot chocolate, he’d stick around for at least five minutes. Bruce watched as Steve found a clean pot and pulled milk, dark chocolate, and cinnamon from the cupboards.

“Steve,” he began, and Steve tensed.

“Yes?”

“Have you been avoiding me, lately?”

Steve tensed even more. “Um…yes?”

Bruce spoke tentatively, not wanting to spook him. “Could you, maybe, tell me why?”

Steve froze, then, his gaze fixed on the stove. “I’d…I’d really rather not.”

Bruce sighed. “What about if I guess, and then you tell me if I’m right?”

Steve nodded slowly, and started to pour milk into the pot.

“You read my file.” There was no doubt or hesitation in Bruce’s voice.

Steve nodded, and Bruce sighed explosively.

“I’m so sorry, Steve. If I could change the things I’ve done, over the years, if I could undo the other guy, if I could stop him hurting people, if I could be somewhere else when he woke…I wish I could undo those things, or that I could move away from here so it didn’t make you uncomfortable…”

Steve looked up suddenly. “Bruce, no.” His voice was rough. “No, Bruce, I wasn’t…I haven’t been…avoiding you because of things you’ve done.” He took a shuddering breath. “Bruce, when I read your file…Bruce, I’ve been avoiding you because I’m, I’m horrified by the things that have been done to you. I—I thought you wouldn’t want to think about them, to talk about them, since you didn’t tell me yourself, and I can understand why, but I just…Bruce, I’m a soldier. So much has changed, then to now, and the army was something I thought I could rely on to be the same, but the way that they, that they hunted you…either it’s changed beyond recognising, or…it was always that bad and I didn’t know, and I’ve been trusting, speaking for, an institution that…that is as bad a bully as any I’ve seen.”
He was looking Bruce in the eyes now, trying desperately to communicate his sincerity, and there was such loss in his eyes. Confusion, and uncertainty, and loss.

“I…you and Tony, at the Battle of New York, you didn’t trust SHIELD, or the government, and you didn’t want to be called soldiers, and I didn’t get that. Until I read your file I, I still didn’t really get that, but I do now, and I almost wish I didn’t because…who am I if I’m not a soldier? Who am I if I am? That’s…I lost my friends, and my family, and my home, even if it’s still half there, but the army…and now it’s, it’s hunting innocent men,” Bruce opened his mouth to object, but Steve kept going right over the top of him, “and, and hurting them for no good reason, and…Bruce, I know you’ve been living with the Hulk for years, but you’ve never really met him, and…I get the feeling that if there wasn’t any danger, he wouldn’t go looking for a fight. And that, that means that Ross,” he nearly spat the name, “and his men, they’ve been putting people in danger, constantly, by hunting you, that they weren’t even keeping people safe, and that…Bruce, you were wary of me, when we met, but you were never unkind to me, even when you had no reason to trust me, and when, when we needed you, to do something you hated, I could tell even then that you hated it, you came back, and you’re just, you’re such a good person, and…”

He turned away, and started breaking up the chocolate in short, sharp movements. Bruce stared at him. Did he really…How could he…”Steve…” he said, helplessly. “Thank you. I, I don’t know that I…I can’t always believe that it isn’t my fault, but…I want to, sometimes, and you saying that…It really doesn’t bother you? That I made myself into that, this?”

“I had a question about that, actually.” Bruce braced himself. “The, uh, different files disagree about whether you knew you were working with the serum.” Steve spoke slowly, as if he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer. “One of them says you did, and another one, uh, says you thought you were working on a – cure, prevention thing? – for radiation poisoning. When I, um, asked Jarvis, he said he ‘couldn’t say’, which might mean he didn’t know, or that he did know and wasn’t going to tell me.”

Bruce sighed and scrubbed at his face with his hand. “I didn’t know. But I didn’t…not know, either. I came in, sort of in the middle of an existing project, and I was told it was the radiation treatment…I didn’t look too closely, Ross was…putting a lot of pressure on us, I guess. But…I worked on that for weeks, months, and…Steve, the serum is one of the medical marvels of the twentieth century. Every biologist has studied at some point in their career, even if just for a week in college.”

“How do they – oh. The samples, and the tests, before I started the ‘Captain America’ gig, they use those?” Steve sounded like he was frowning.

“Yeah. Not that it helps a lot, since the serum had very different results every time it was, uh, used.” Two people is not a large sample size. Even including the Abomination and, well, Bruce, it still wasn’t a sufficient sample size to know, well, anything at all. “Anyway, I, uh, I’d always been kind of interested, so I…I couldn’t swear that I didn’t know, in the back of my mind, that I was working on something related. But I didn’t look into it. Maybe I…didn’t want to know. Maybe when I tested it on myself, maybe I, uh, hoped. It’s, it’s hard to remember. It was, subjectively anyway, it was a long time ago. Another life.”

Steve looked at him and smiled sadly. Bruce winced. He’d…forgotten, for a moment, that Steve had, had lived that, had lost everything too. “I don’t know if the records say, but I have an eidetic memory now. I can remember everything that happened in the war perfectly. I can remember,” he
took a gulping breath, “the camps, and the bombs, and, and Bucky’s face falling away. But I, my life before that, it’s…fuzzy. Vague. I know I’m forgetting. And there’s no-one left who remembers. Just me.” He found a mug and turned the stove off. “Someday, I, I won’t remember my mother. And there’ll be no-one there to remind me. Some days I can’t think of her face. We were too poor for photographs. I try to sketch her, but it, it comes out wrong.”

Bruce’s breath caught in his throat, and he leaned across the counter to put a hand on Steve’s arm. “I’m sorry, Steve. My…my mother died when I was young, and by the time I got to university, I, I don’t know if I would have known what she looked like except for photos. But…at least…you’ll remember that she loved you, always. You’ll remember how it felt to love her and be loved by her. And that’s, sometimes, that’s the most important thing to remember about someone.” There were times when he wondered what Betty was doing, what had happened to her since Harlem. Settling down like this, making friends like this…it reminded him of the way she used to push him, remind him to live his life, regardless of the other guy. But he…he didn’t want her in danger, and living with the other guy was always dangerous. The Avengers…they were equipped, prepared. But Betty…he didn’t want that for her. He loved her, still, but it was a comfort now, not an ache. He’d missed her for years, kept the memories of her like a talisman in the fear, and the dirt, and the hunger, and the poverty, and the desperation of his life. But when he came back to Culver…he’d realised that the two of them could never be what they were. Too much had changed. And it was painful, but it was almost a relief to let go of missing her, to let go of that longing. He loved her. But they weren’t right for each other, and that was okay.

The two of them sat silently for a while, sipping hot chocolate, thinking of the people they’d left behind. Then Steve spoke again, soft, but determined.

“Bruce, you are a good man, and my friend. And even if you weren’t, I wouldn’t like what…people have done to you, have forced you to do with your life. Bruce, I…I promise, that I will never force you, or let you be forced, to do anything you don’t want to. If I think the Hulk needs containment, or go somewhere else, or, or anything, I promise I will ask, and I will listen to what you want.” He ran a hand over his hair. “Tony keeps telling me that the shield is worth a lot, that I have a lot of authority. Well, if that’s so, I’ll make it count. I’m sure Tony’s already promised you this, but…I will not let Ross get near you again.”

Bruce was speechless yet again. Why would Steve do something like that for him? As he sat stunned, Steve stood and put his empty mug in the dishwasher.

“Good night, Bruce. Sleep well, if you can.”

Chapter End Notes

Return of the Insomnia Club! And by extension, late-night discussions of past and present angst. Also, I managed to get this up a little quicker than the last few, primarily because I find late-night discussions really easy to write if I ponder them a bit,

I’m not hugely acquainted with Bruce’s backstory, but I think I’ve got most of it okay. The idea for having Steve avoid Bruce after reading his file came from a comment by LadyErin almost three months ago - I got around to it eventually! The next few chapters are fairly closely focused on Bruce and Steve (plus bonus Hulk), and I
promise I will mix some fluff in amongst the tragic backstory.

Your comments and kudos make this project incredibly rewarding - particularly this last week, when I've been getting emails about kudos on this and my two other recent fics, so they've been more frequent than usual. If you have any questions about this fic, stuff that's happened or stuff that is going to happen, let me know! I love answering your questions, and it always encourages me to think harder about the characters. Alternatively, I'd love to hear your ideas for references Steve might not get, ways to train with the Hulk, or anything else you'd like to share.
“Hi Tony.” Steve was in Tony’s workshop again. He’d come down sometimes, to sketch, or to read, or to drop some food off to Tony when Jarvis had let him know Tony hadn’t eaten in hours. Unfortunately, he would also come down for Serious Conversations.

“Hey, Capsicle,” Tony said, making grabby hands at the coffee mug Steve was carrying. “Gimme.”

Steve gave Tony a wry smile, and passed the coffee over, putting the plate in his other hand down on a pile of paperwork Tony had been ignoring for…a week now? Two weeks? It wasn’t important, anyway.

“What’s up, Cap?” Tony asked, taking a sip of the (very good) coffee.

Steve must have been nervous, because he (unconsciously, Tony was sure) slipped into parade rest. “A couple of weeks ago at dinner, we were…discussing the possibility of, uh, inviting the Hulk to participate in team training. I didn’t…listen to your arguments in favour at the time, but I’m considering it, and I wanted to hear your opinions on the…logistics and safety aspects of the idea.”

Huh. That was…a turn-around. “Um. You want to invite the Hulk to team training?”

Steve nodded sharply. “I’ve talked to the others. Clint and Thor are both comfortable with the idea. Natasha has reservations, but is willing to attempt a trial. Bruce…has agreed on the condition that you and I agree that it will be safe for the team and any civilians in the surrounding area.”

That was a goddamned coup, getting Bruce to agree to a non-emergency transformation, that was on par with him moving into the fucking Tower, how on earth had Steve done that? And getting Natasha onside was pretty fucking impressive, she did not like to spend time with the Hulk.

“As it so happens, Cap, I’ve been on working on safe spaces to let the Hulk out for a couple of months now,” Tony flicked his fingers through the file directory Jarvis had so helpful brought up in
front of him, and opened up the plan for the weapons-testing facility. “Here’s one I prepared earlier.”

Steve looked stunned for a second, then shook his head ruefully and relaxed his stance. “Figures. You’ve never taken no for an answer in your whole darned life, have you?”

Tony smirked. “Let me see….if I remember rightly…there was that time in Nice…no, wait – nope. Definitely not.” He clapped his hands. “So. SI used to make weapons, everyone knows that, including a fuck-ton of bombs, so we have weapons-testing facilities all over the States, and while we’ve been gradually selling and/or converting them to other uses, I’ve kept some the way they were – they come in handy when I want to test new suit features,” or when he was getting pissy and wanted to blow stuff up without having to rebuild it afterwards, “and obviously, weapons testing, you want somewhere fairly isolated, large space, nothing much to destroy that you don’t mind losing…”

“In other words,” Steve put in, “somewhere the Hulk could go on rampage without causing collateral.”

“Mm-hmm. I’ve been working on some more convenient and/or fun Hulk-zones, but I’m still figuring out materials for those.” In fact, he was planning on converting one of the empty floors just below the Avengers into a bigger Green Room. The one on Bruce’s floor was okay, but it was really designed to make Bruce feel safe, not for Hulk to play in. “So, apart from locations, what do we need to figure out?”

Steve sat down and scrubbed at his face with a hand. “Tony, if we want to practice fighting together, we practice on each other. How on earth can we involve the Hulk in that safely? He basically breaks whatever he touches, it’s not like he could pull his blows even if he understood the concept.”

Steve had a point. But…’he’s never learned to moderate that strength’, Clint had said. “Maybe not at this point. He might be able to learn, eventually. Jarvis, you got any comments, buddy?”

In reply, Jarvis pulled up a new screen, showing a video labelled JGG_040113_01.

Clint was wearing battle gear, talking to Hulk on a city street clear of civilians. There weren’t any signs of destruction, or the rest of the team, so it must have been the April Fool’s Day mess. From the angle of the shot, Jarvis had pulled it from a surveillance camera.

“Where Shooty Bird?” Hulk asked, and Clint pointed to something off-screen. “Hulk carry?”

Clint winced slightly, but after a moment he nodded. “As long as you’re gentle.” Hulk didn’t seem to understand, and Clint went on, “Um…gentle is like careful. Don’t hold me too tightly – I don’t have armour like Tony.”

Hulk nodded, and reached out slowly. Holy fuck, Clint had guts. He hadn’t mentioned that – and whatever he said about Tony’s armour, Hulk hadn’t even held that carefully enough in the past. But Hulk gathered Clint up like he was porcelain, and put him down again just as carefully.

“Thanks, big guy.”

Jarvis paused the clip. “Sir, I agree with your assessment that Hulk is capable of learning to moderate his strength, given time and teaching. Agent Barton has been consistently taking opportunities to engage with him, and Hulk’s response has been favourable. You may recall the
Doombots battle in March?” The screen changed to show the graph of collateral from three weeks ago.

Tony hadn’t exactly forgotten, but he’d put it to the back of his mind, and it looked like Steve had as well.

“Why is Clint doing this?” he wondered. “He’s never mentioned it, but now that I think about it, he has spend a lot of time with Hulk recently…and apparently the Hulk likes him?”

Tony shrugged. “Don’t know about the second, but I can actually answer the first question. ‘Bout three weeks ago we were talking about Bruce’s guilt complex and figured out that Bruce doesn’t really have any way of knowing what Hulk’s actually like. So Jarvis started collecting footage, pointed out that he couldn’t demonstrate Hulk was capable of non-aggressive interactions if no-one actually interacted with him, and Clint agreed to start talking to him more.”

Steve frowned contemplatively. “Maybe to start. I don’t know…that clip – I don’t think Clint was doing that for Bruce. I think…” He trailed off, then shook his head. “It’s not really important now. But I think I’ll ask Clint if he has any tips on dealing with Hulk.”

Tony hummed in agreement. He’d basically been leaving the interaction part of Jolly Green Giant to Clint, but maybe he should be getting more involved. “Good to know, Jarvis. Any suggestions for the immediate problem?”

“I have observed that, while all of the Avengers enjoy sparring, they also take part in training activities that do not involve direct aggression. Hence the rockwall, sir.”

Tony snorted at the mental image of Hulk on a rockwall. He was pretty sure the big guy would just dig new handholds for himself out of the wall.

“On the first training day, the team experimented with liasons between ground fighters and air support. Perhaps the next training day could involve activities to help promote positional awareness of other members of the team, without the combat element?”

Steve smiled gratefully at the ceiling. “That sounds great, Jarvis. What sort of things were you thinking?”

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“Tony, I – you can’t – I can’t –” Bruce was working himself into a panic as they landed at the new training location.

Tony knelt in front of him, a hand hovering near Bruce’s shoulder (sometimes touch was threatening for him), and spoke low and firm, “Bruce, breathe for me, buddy. In…and hold…and out…and in…and hold…and out…” Bruce’s sobbing breaths slowed as Tony talked. “It’s okay, Bruce. We’re safe. We’re all safe. You don’t have to transform. You can just watch us train if that’s what you need. You’re okay. But if you’re willing to transform, that’s going to be okay too.”

Tony remembered Clint telling him about Bruce’s nightmares. “We aren’t going to let him hurt us. Clint has the tranq arrows, we can take him down, force him to transform if we need to. We’re going to be okay. We’re all going to be okay.”

“No-one is, is ever okay,” Bruce whispered. “I, he breaks them all.”

Now that Bruce was a little calmer, despairing instead of panicking, Tony let his hand drape gently
across Bruce’s back, rubbing slowly. “I know, Bruce. I know. You’re right to worry. He has hurt people. But it’s going to be okay.”

Bruce shook his head, wringing his hands, but Tony didn’t give him the chance to speak.

“The vast majority of his interactions with the team have been positive, and on the rare occasions when he has been aggressive, he still hasn’t seriously hurt a team member. We’re all okay, Bruce, we’re all fine, and we’ve known you for months, and we’ve met him dozens of times.” Not quite, but close. “We’re still okay, Bruce, we’re fine.”

“But he’s always had another target…” Bruce pointed out desperately.

“That’s true. Changing a variable can change the outcome.” Tony was hoping against hope that he could get Bruce to start thinking with his brain, not just his fear. “But this is a deliberate experiment, Bruce. We’ve controlled the other variables. It’s important that we know what happens when we change this one. We’ve done the risk assessment. You said that if Steve and I agreed, then you’d trust us, didn’t you? You trusted us to evaluate the risks and manage them safely. And we have. Look.” Tony waved outside the quinjet at the mostly empty land. “There is nothing here that it isn’t okay to destroy, not for at least five miles in any direction. There are no people here except for the team. The team are armed, and capable of sedating him if it looks like he’s getting aggressive or wants to go outside the safe zone. It’s okay, Bruce.” Please let him be getting through. “He knows us, he likes us, we won’t let him hurt us, we won’t let him hurt anyone else. You don’t have to change, but if you do, it’s okay.”

Bruce shuddered under his hands, but his wringing hands became fists, and he sat up with a determined expression. “I, I don’t think that this is a good idea, Tony. But…you guys are the ones that fight with, uh, with him, and if you think this will, will help more than it hurts, then I guess…I guess I’ll let you try.” He took off his shirt and wrapped his glasses in the fabric before slipping his shoes off and putting everything in a neat pile. As he was looking away, he said quietly, “Thank you for giving me the choice.”

Tony…Tony didn’t know what to say to that. He ached to give Bruce a hug, but neither of them really knew how to do tactile comfort, so he just looked at Bruce and said roughly, “I’ll make sure Thor doesn’t sit on your glasses again. And we’re going to get Indian when we’re done.”

Bruce smiled ruefully at him, all the roiling emotions of a minute before buried wherever he kept them, and stepped out of the quinjet. “I’m ready, guys,” he called, and changed.

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The Hulk roared as he transformed, then stopped, and looked around, confused. "Where fight?"

Steve moved a bit closer. "There's no fight today, Hulk, just the team."

Then Hulk did roar. Fuck, what had gone wrong? "Trap!" Oh, fuck.

"Clint, you'd better take point," Tony spoke fast. "Everyone else, stay in his field of vision and look as non-threatening as you can."

Steve nodded, and Clint stepped forward, looking casual. "Hey, big guy. What's wrong?"

"Always danger! Hulk fight or Bruce hurt! Team hurt Bruce!"

Clint held up empty hands and nodded. "I can see that it looks like that. But I promise you, buddy, Bruce is safe."
Hulk snorted. "Hulk keep safe."

Clint nodded again. "That's right, buddy. No-one can hurt him with you around."

"Can hurt. Healed hurts still hurt," Hulk growled, and Steve winced. Of all of them, he knew best the pain of trauma without scars.

Clint smiled sadly. "We know, Hulk. But he isn't hurt right now. There wasn't pain when you woke up, right?"

Hulk curled a lip. "Always pain. But...not hurts for healing. Just changing."

Oh, man. Bruce hadn't said the change hurt, although it didn't really surprise Tony, the way he ached afterwards. But Hulk hurt as he woke, hurt as he healed, hurt as he fought, and hurt as he changed again. How much time had he spent without pain in his life?

Clint nodded, and moved a little closer. "I'm sorry that the change hurts, Hulk. But you know you didn't change because Bruce was hurt, yeah?"

"No hurt not same as no danger. Hulk wake for running and healing and fighting. Always. Not hurt yet, still threat."

"I know just what you mean, Hulk. Bruce has told us that he sometimes changes when he's frightened or angry. But when he changes around the team he doesn't do it for those reasons. He does it because he knows you can help us." Honestly, Tony was impressed. Clint had managed to shift Hulk from angry yelling mode to tense conversation, and given a few minutes more, he might even be calm.

Hulk huffed and looked around the team to see what they were doing. "How Hulk help now? No danger. Unless team tricks."

"Well, remember when we got food after a fight one time?"

"Big slimy. Then red rounds."

"That's right." Hulk had eaten twenty pizzas all by himself, and was particularly fond of ham and pineapple, as it turned out. "We didn't need your help then. But we wanted to spend time with you, so you stayed Hulk for a while instead of changing into Bruce so that we could eat together."

Hulk grunted, an affirmative sort of sound.

"Well, we enjoyed spending time with you." Hulk looked sceptical (and wasn't it a kick seeing that on his face?) and Clint forged on. "So we asked Bruce if he would wake you up so we could spend time with you again, and he agreed. That's why you're awake now, when there's no fight."

Hulk frowned for a long moment, and Tony held his breath. If they could just get this concept through...

"Team...want Hulk?" he said slowly.

"That's right, Hulk," Clint said softly. "We want you."

After an awkward ten seconds when no-one else seemed to know what to say, Tony clanked forward to join Clint. "So, big guy, we figured we'd play some games today, want to join us?"
"Play...games?" Hulk looked confused, and the words sounded awkward in his mouth. Shit, he didn't know what play was? Well, he wouldn't, Tony supposed.

"Play is when you do something for fun instead of for a serious reason," Tony explained, "and games are, well, they're something fun to do, sometimes with rules to make it better." Seeing that Hulk was still confused, Tony called the others forward. "Back on track for Plan A, guys," he commented into the comms. "So Steve and Clint and Natasha are going to play a game called tag. Thor doesn't know it yet, like you, so I'll hang out with you guys and explain."

Clint grinned at Tony, and swiped at Natasha. "You're it!" He ran off, and Natasha chased after him. No way they were playing to their full potential, but it was a good start. Steve started running in the other direction.

"So, Clint just 'tagged' Natasha, which made her 'it'. That means it's her turn to chase. If she tags Clint or Steve, it'll be their turn to chase." Steve and Tony had figured this one was non-competitive enough (having no actual winner) that Hulk could understand the difference between play and fighting, but there were a few concepts they had to get past first.

"How does this 'tagging' work, my friend?" asked Thor, as he settled on a convenient rock next to Tony.

"Any kind of touch counts, but it can't be an actual blow. No one gets hurt in a game of tag." That was really, really important. They didn't even know if the Hulk could pull his blows, but it was a good way to figure out, and if he couldn't, well, plans B through H were there for a reason.

"Like so, Stark-son?" Thor asked, slapping Tony on the back. If he'd been out of the armour, he'd have stumbled, which Jarvis let him know on the HUD, so he over-played his reaction, tipping forward slightly.

"Little lighter there, Fabio! You get Bird-Brain like that, you'll knock him over!"

A second later, Clint ran past. "You say that, Shell-Head, but I've known how to take a blow since I was six!" Hearing Natasha yell "You're it!" he looked over his shoulder and swore. "Fuck, Steve's way faster than me. See you guys." He ran off again.

Thor knocked Tony's shoulder lightly, enough so that Jarvis had to tell him he'd been hit at all (they'd worked out the system when Tony first floated the idea), and Tony nodded. "That's better. You want to help Hulk practice tagging?"

To a certain extent this was scripted - not enough that Thor was faking his ignorance, but they'd let him know earlier that he'd be first guinea pig for Hulk interacting with people physically. Thor nodded, and Hulk poked him.

"Friend Hulk, that was a mighty blow! More gently, perhaps, for the sake of our friends? Like so." And Thor tapped Hulk on the arm.

Hulk looked at his arm thoughtfully, then at Thor. "Gentle," he said firmly, and tapped Thor on the shoulder.

Thor nodded. "I am not an expert teacher. Tony, perhaps you could assist me?" Which was code for 'I think it's safe for you to participate now'.

"Sure, Point Break. Hulk, I'll tap you, then you tap me, okay?" Tony had actually spent a while
calibrating his blows himself - all out Iron Man battle mode did not – hah - suit tag. He knocked Hulk on the back, carefully not looking too careful, and two seconds later, Hulk hit him back.

Actually, Hulk hit him with almost exactly the same force that he had been hit with, according to Jarvis, which was fascinating, and in almost the same place. He looked at Tony…anxiously? Was that an anxious look?

“Good job, buddy.” Tony shut off the external comms for a moment and said to the others, “We’re ready for phase two here.”

Almost immediately, Natasha tagged Clint and Clint came running over. “Aw man, playing with Steve is not fair,” he complained. “He’s like the fucking energizer bunny.”

“What…” Steve started to reply on comms, but gave up. “Jarvis, put it on the list.” It always amused Tony to see Steve, who was so fucking bewildered by the twenty-first century, so automatically assume Jarvis was listening and ready to help. The one time he’d asked Jarvis about it, he’d commented on ‘the Captain’s refreshing lack of preconceptions regarding artificial intelligences’ and left it at that.

“You run with superheroes, archer boy, you’d better man up,” Tony teased, and Clint gave him a Look.

“I don’t run with superheroes, tin man, I perch somewhere high up and shoot things. Running is not in the job description.” With Clint more or less ignoring Natasha and Cap, the game was at a temporary standstill.

“If you are too tired to play, my friend,” Thor suggested with a grin, “then let us take your place. I am sure our leader will be glad of a more closely-matched opponent.”

“Hey!” Clint clapped a hand to his chest. “I am wounded – wounded! – by such an insult from you, Thor, you who said you were my shield-brother!”

Hulk was frowning as he watched the by-play, but he seemed to be able to tell that Clint was joking.

“If you’re joining in, Thor,” Cap yelled, “no flying! Same goes for you, Tony!”

“I shall not need flight to catch you, Steven!” Thor boomed, and seeing the enthusiastic grin on his face, Clint tagged him. For a guy built like a brick shithouse, he was pretty nimble when he wanted.

“I’m officially out of the game, by the way,” Clint noted, as Thor and Steve chased each other gleefully. “Hulk, do you want to join in?”

Hulk had been fairly unobtrusive, as much as a giant green guy could be, but he was watching the others…almost longingly, Tony thought. Certainly interested, fascinated, even. He looked at Clint. “Hulk play?”

Clint shrugged. “I mean, you probably should keep to running rather than jumping – if Thor and Tony don’t get to fly, then I think that should be off limits – but Tony checked that you know how hard to tag people, didn’t he? You know how to play.”

Hulk mused on this a moment longer, then nodded. “Hulk play.”
“In that case,” Natasha said, appearing out of nowhere and completely ignoring Tony’s “Fucking Christ, Romanoff!” and Clint’s subsequent smirk, “I’ll drop out of the game, and you two can join in.” She slapped Tony on the back of the head. “You’re it.”

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Bruce groaned as he stirred from where Tony was shielding him from the sun. “Did I hurt anyone?”

Tony offered him a hand up. “Nope. It took a while to explain the idea of ‘playing’, but once he got it, boy did he get it. Come on, you can change on the plane.”

Bruce ran a hand through his hair and slung an arm gratefully across Tony’s still-armoured shoulders. “Is there food? I think I packed food.”

Tony grinned at him. “Anything you want, Brucie-bear.”

Chapter End Notes

I can't believe this took so long - I was on choir camp for a fortnight, and then I moved house _again_ (thank god that's over), but still, this chapter took ages. Sorry about that guys, hopefully the next one comes quicker.

This chapter refers back to a bunch of previous scenes and ties together a bunch of Hulk's (and Bruce's) development from Tony's perspective. While this story is about all the Avengers, the _point_ of the story is their gradual acceptance of Hulk as a person, and Hulk gradually learning to be one, so this chapter is a relatively important step in the overarching plot. In fact, I'm pretty sure we're about a third of the way through now. I don't quite know how to feel about that, to be honest - that's both a lot of story left to write, and a limited number of chapters to get from here to the next major plot point.

For those of you who are curious, I have both a prequel (about Phil and Clint) and a sequel (possibly featuring Bucky, not-dead Phil, and/or slightly-redeemed Loki) knocking around in my brain, so I'm not going to run out of stories to tell any time soon. The prequel is pretty well outlined in my head and could be written in about three months - so if I'm still writing in six months or so when I've finished this, that's what'll come next.

As always, your comments and kudos are a joy to receive - special thanks to repeat commenters and those subscribed to the story. I always love to hear your ideas, and I particularly enjoy answering your questions: there's a lot that goes on behind the scenes around here, so do ask if you're curious!
Natasha decides to spend more time with Bruce.

See the end of the chapter for notes

She woke suddenly and completely. There were no unusual sounds. Nothing was out of place.
"Jarvis?" she called quietly.
"Yes, Agent Romanoff?"

His response was normal. Either something was wrong with Jarvis (unlikely), or nothing was wrong. "Where's Clint?"

"Agent Barton is in his quarters."

She slipped out of bed, under-the-pillow knife in hand. "Thank you, Jarvis."

There was no response. If he was acting as he was programmed, he was no longer monitoring her. She moved silently on her path from her bedroom to Clint's, not deliberately, but out of habit.

He stirred when she opened the door. "Nat?" His voice was low and rough with sleep, but alert.
"All is well, sokolik."

He looked at her searchingly, then slid closer to the wall and held up the covers in invitation. She smiled slightly, and slid in beside him. His hold was secure, comforting, a bulwark at her back.
"Sleep, Nat."

There was a soft pinging noise. Clint was tense behind her, but hadn't moved yet. Nothing looked out of place.

"Jarvis?"

"You requested to be woken in time to join Dr Banner in his morning routine, Agent Romanoff."

She relaxed, and so did Clint, behind her. "Thank you, Jarvis."

Clint nosed at her neck. "Why the fuck did you do that, Tash? You only got here a couple of hours ago."

She leaned into him for a moment, then shifted away. He opened his hold to let her go. "It will be better if Banner and I are more...comfortable with each other. I'm joining him for his morning stretches."
He sat up and watched as she chose some of her gym clothes from their place in his closet. "Does he know that?" She raised an eyebrow at him and he ran a hand through his hair. "Do you want me with you?"

She shrugged as she changed her pajamas for gym clothes. They were not much different. "This is for me to do, sokolik."

He sighed. "Well, I'm not getting back to sleep now. Maybe Thor's up." The corner of her mouth twitched. "I know, I know, Nat, you don't need me watching out for you. Go on then." As she left the room he called after her. "I'll have breakfast waiting when you're done."

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She timed her arrival for just after Bruce's, letting him have the stronger claim to the room. His movements stuttered and stopped as she came in.

"Uh, h-hi, Natasha?"

She nodded at him, and found herself a place on the mat, not too close, but not on the other side of the gym either. "Good morning," she said, and began her own stretches.

He stared at her for a minute, then seemed to figure out she wasn't planning to explain, and restarted his routine. It had the look of something well-practiced and familiar - comfortable and comforting, if not for her presence. His form was good, and he was surprisingly flexible, but the motion was stiff today. He had his eyes closed, and she didn't know whether he was doing that to help him ignore her presence or out of habit. She monitored him in her peripheral vision, but none of the warning signs were there. For now, he was merely unsettled.

Natasha transitioned gradually from stretches to slow motion battle-dances, letting the dance show through more than the battle. She wanted Bruce comfortable with her, if possible, not one of her faces, but that didn't mean he (or she) was ready for her to let the danger show too clearly. He seemed not to notice, and settled into meditation without comment. His breathing was controlled, but micro-movements betrayed his discomfort.

When he opened his eyes, she nodded at him again. "Clint's making breakfast."

He looked at her, frowning, as he stood up. Perhaps the meditation had made him more assertive, because he asked "What are you doing here, Natasha?"

She gave him her cat's smile. "Morning stretches."

He sighed loudly. "Is that all you're going to tell me?"

She had considered it, but he would feel less threatened if he had a reason for her being there. "I wanted company without conversation, and I thought we might...be more at ease with each other, if we got used to each other's company."

He watched her for a long moment, then looked away. "Clint's making breakfast, you said?"

They left the gym together.
I feel like I've got a better grip on Natasha's voice than the last time I wrote one of 'her' chapters. I think a fair amount goes on below the surface, but it's fairly analytical, and she's pretty quiet unless words are actually necessary (which is why this chapter's so short). Hopefully the difference between her well-established and comfortable relationship/communication with Clint and the awkward, unclear relationship with Bruce comes across.

I always love to get your comments and kudos, so send me your feedback, questions, and ideas!
Grieving

Chapter Summary

Clint talks to Steve about therapy, and about Phil.

Chapter Notes

This chapter involves discussion of therapy (including 1930s therapy which was rather more dramatic) and mental health issues. Clint is grieving, and it shows. I don't think there are any triggers, though. Mostly, it's sad.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"That's all we have time for today," Grace said, looking at the clock, and Clint smiled, a little wryly, even as he wiped his eyes.

"Thanks, Grace. I'll see you in a week, same time?" He'd transitioned to weekly appointments a couple of months ago - after all, he wasn't being sent on the most taxing missions right now, being in peak mental health wasn't really urgent.

"Unless an emergency comes up, yes." She smiled at him, and opened the door. "Have a good day, Clint."

"You too."

Therapy was always draining, but usually he had something other than self-blame to think about as he left, which was a good thing. Today, he was thinking about Natasha, and fame, and whether he could really call himself a spy anymore. Could you stop being a spy? It felt like he'd never lose the mindset, and he'd done far more missions as a sniper than infiltration. Natasha would never be 'normal', but she wasn't a 'normal' spy, either, whatever that was. No-one at SHIELD was really normal, even if some of them actually did have white-picket-fence lives somewhere in their past. Phil had, and he was - no-one could ever say he was anything but goddamned exceptional. Or they could. But they only did because Phil let them think so. Fuck, he had always been brilliant at that. Clint could look boring if he wanted, look unobtrusive, everyman. But Phil...Phil had it down to an art. Clint smiled at the memory, even as his eyes watered. He bit his lip. That was the problem with therapy, you end up crying on a damn hair trigger the rest of the fucking day.

"...overall, I would say it was very promising for potential future interactions, sir." Was that Steve? Why was Steve here? Unless there was a mission...

"You couldn't have asked beforehand?" And that was Sitwell. But from the sound of it, not an upcoming mission. Something that had already happened.

"I believed it was in the best interests of the team for us to invite Hulk to training, the rest of the
team agreed to try it, and we had the resources available to do so without SHIELD involvement." Oh. Yeah, Sitwell would want a report on that. Honestly, it was surprising that they'd gotten four days without him finding out. They'd had another training session without Hulk, and then a battle (every fucking week, honestly), and Thor had mentioned playing tag when they were reporting, and Sitwell had just...well, he'd had his 'fucking Christ I need a break' face on by the end of the meeting.

"Better to ask forgiveness than permission, Steve?" The 'really?' went unsaid.

"In a nutshell, sir." Clint would bet a hundred bucks that Steve had that 'innocent brick wall' face on, the one that said 'if you push this, you aren't going to get anywhere, so I suggest you pretend it's none of your business'.

Sitwell sighed from inside the room Clint was shamelessly eavesdropping on. "Well, since it worked out well I'll let it pass. Better than some of the stuff Stark's gotten up to in the past, anyway."

"Thank you, sir."

"You can go, Captain."

"Have a good day, Agent Sitwell."

Steve...well, Steve almost did a double take when he saw Clint lounging against the wall opposite the door. Not quite, but it was close.

"Hey, Cap. You headed home?" At least the trip from the New York offices didn't require an actual plane. Much as Clint loved flying, it was a bit much for a commute.

"Uh, yeah, yeah I am." Steve fell into step beside him as Clint sauntered towards the lobby. "Um, what are you doing here?"

"Fellow can't drop in to his place of employment on a Monday morning?" Clint took pity on Steve's confusion. "Therapy, Cap."

Steve looked shocked. "Therapy? But you're - you're fine! Why are you getting therapy?"

Clint looked at him sidelong. "Steve, you've seen the aftermath of my nightmares enough times to know that I'm not fine." They weren't pretty.

"Well, yeah, but...you're still normal."

"Again, I think we have conflicting definitions here." See above: no-one at SHIELD was normal.

"Is this a future thing?" Steve asked. "Does everyone...is therapy a common thing now?"

Ah. That would explain a lot, if this was a 'Welcome to Modern America' moment. And Jarvis probably wouldn't have covered it yet. "Kind of. In the circles we move in? Pretty much everyone we know is either seeing a therapist on a semi-regular basis or should be. Talking to an empathetic but uninvolved stranger is really helpful with our kind of trauma."

Steve looked sceptical. "Just...talking?"

"What was therapy like when you were a kid?" How bad was whatever Steve was imagining?
"Uh, I didn't really, I mean, no-one we knew could really afford it, but I heard stories...um, drugs, hot and cold baths, electric shocks, lobotomies..."

Holy shit. "Holy shit, Cap. Jesus Christ. Yeah, no, nothing like that, fuck." No wonder he was shocked. "I mean, those techniques are still used sometimes, but they're really last resort. Well, drugs can be really helpful, actually, but not ones that really affect how you function." He shrugged. "Better living through chemicals, some people call it. Just another kind of long-term treatment of chronic illness, I guess. But no, most of the time, just talking really does help."

After a moment, he asked, "I brought a car, did you want to drive back with me?" Steve usually caught the train if he could, and today was no exception, apparently, because he nodded. "Cool."

They waited for a lift in silence as Steve mused on that. "If you don't mind my asking, what do you talk about?" he asked at last.

Clint spoke slowly, choosing his words carefully. "It depends on why I'm there, what I need. At SHIELD we get mental health check ups every six months, and after a bad mission, so it varies a lot. These days, mostly I talk about - about Loki, and Phil."

Steve nodded, frowning. "Is that...those check-ups, is that a normal thing?"

The life pinged, and they got in, pressing the button for the car park. "God, no. There's still stigma around mental health issues - not people calling you crazy, but people thinking that just because it's in your head means it isn't a real problem, or it doesn't hurt, or you shouldn't treat it. But at SHIELD...look, you must've known soldiers with PTSD - shellshock?" Including all of the Avengers at one stage in their lives or another, but let's not talk about that in a semi-public place.

"Yeah. The doctors, half the time, would just put them back out there, tell them to get over it. I tried to look after the guys, but it was hard, you know?" Steve was looking away, into some past no-one could remember except for him, and Clint put a comforting hand on his arm.

"Yeah, I know. But you can see how someone with that kind of trauma...that isn't safe, if you're a spy, or any kind of SHIELD agent, to have those kind of triggers, those reactions. And we have more reason than most to be traumatised." Clint had been tortured before. He'd seen terrible things, done terrible things. He'd been betrayed. It wasn't a pretty life. "SHIELD needs us in peak mental and physical condition, so we can be safe, and so we can do our jobs. So they employ a lot of therapists. We can't exactly see a civilian, not with the clearance levels they need."

Steve looked at Clint curiously. "And you're, uh, okay with your...bosses knowing what's going on in your head?"

"They don't, Cap, not really." SHIELD therapists had some of the highest clearance levels of the entire organisation, and were correspondingly close-mouthed. "There's strict confidentiality between you and whoever you see. If you aren't mission ready, or you need to avoid certain types of mission, or some kind of special treatment or drugs to help you manage things, then they'll pass that on, but they never say why. Can you imagine Nat telling anyone what's going on in her head otherwise?"

Steve looked a little shocked. "Natasha does therapy?"

Clint shrugged. "She's not currently seeing anyone, as far as I know, but she has before and she will again. You don't think she's as well adjusted as she is because of sheer willpower, do you? Life like
hers, that takes work, and expertise."

Steve ran a hand through his hair. "Who on earth is an expert on lives like ours? I wouldn't think anyone could be an expert on the kind of situations we end up in."

Clint tilted a hand in the air. "You're not wrong that we're all pretty unique...but we're still human. A broken bone heals the same whether you broke it falling down the stairs, in a car accident, or in a DoomBot attack. At a biological level, our bodies, and by extension, our brains and minds, have a limited repertoire of reactions to shit. Nightmares, flashbacks, panic attacks, whatever it is. You see what I mean?" Steve nodded reluctantly. "And psychologists help with those reactions, those responses - and even if being frozen for seventy years is unique, culture shock isn't. Mind-control is pretty unusual, but coercion is common. Yeah?"

Steve thought on it some more, as the lift arrived at the basement. "And...all the others are getting therapy?"

"Probably not. Thor probably hasn't heard of it yet, and I can't imagine Tony's willing to see a therapist considering his reaction to doctors in general. Even if he should. I imagine Bruce doesn't either, but he's actually got a good reason. Poking him in the trauma to help him deal with is going to hit a big green speed-bump pretty quick. He does work on it though, just on his own. " Bruce was very aware of his own mental state, even if he mostly focused on soothing and symptoms rather than dealing with root causes. It wasn't a terrible coping mechanism. "You should think about it."

Steve hummed. "I think someone mentioned it when I first woke up, but..."

"...didn't explain what they actually meant?" That had happened a lot, by the sounds of things. It was difficult to remember all of the changes that had happened for Steve.

"Yeah."

Clint found and unlocked the Mercedes - one of the most unobtrusive vehicles he could find in Tony's garage, actually - and slid into the driver's seat.

"Hey, Clint?" Steve asked, as they pulled out of the car park. "Are you...okay? I mean, I know you said you weren't exactly fine, but are you..."

"I'll get there eventually." Clint sighed. "Grace - my shrink - has mostly got me to stop blaming myself. And the nightmares aren't as bad as they were. But it'll be a long time before I stop missing Phil."

He could see Steve's sympathetic expression out of the corner of his eye as he drove. Of anyone, Steve would understand grief. "How long were you, uh, together?"

"Three years or so. He was my handler for eight, nine years, and we got to be more like partners after a couple years working together, but we were...platonic, I guess, until February 2010." Clint smiled sadly. "It was...fuck, Phil was great - the thing is, I'd never been in love, and I didn't even realise until Nat pointed it out, and then I had no fucking clue what to do with that...and Phil noticed something was up, and sat me down, and asked me what was happening...'Talk to me, Barton.' He must have said that to me a thousand times in the last ten years. It, by then, it meant 'trust me', and 'I trust you', and 'I respect you', and 'I care', and I'll make it work. It meant 'I'm listening'. And he did listen. As I fucking sat there and just...I had no idea what I was doing, what I was feeling, what I wanted, what I could have. And Phil sat there, and he listened, and when I was
done he told me nothing had to change unless I wanted it, but if I did want it, he wanted more too." Clint waved a hand broadly. "And god, Steve, if I'd said no, he wouldn't have mentioned it! We'd have been friends, partners, and it would have been good! But I said yes, and Steve, it was fucking great, even if I didn't know what the fuck we were doing half the time. Phil always did. We fit together, and I loved him, and he loved me, and after a year we moved in together, and give it another year and we probably would have got married, now that it's legal, and then he fucking died!"

Clint's voice had gotten louder and louder, but it cracked on that last word. Steve's voice was shockingly soft, by comparison. "I'm sorry, Clint. I...losing Bucky was hard, but not like that. And I managed to leave everyone else behind and get left behind at the same time. At least Peggy...we didn't have too many memories for her to grieve over. I hope...I hope she got to be happy, after I was gone. I hope she didn't spend too long waiting for me."

Clint sighed. "The thing is," he said slowly, and he was terribly, terribly weary as he spoke, "the majority of SHIELD agents don't live to retirement. We knew that sooner or later one of us would get killed in some mission or another." His voice rose again. "But it was meant to be me! He was my handler - he planned, and oversaw, and strategized, and organised...he was the voice in my ear, keeping me safe. Keeping me safe. He shouldn't...I never thought I'd outlive him, even though he was older. I never thought...thought that I'd have to grieve him."

They were waiting at a red light, and Clint dared a glance at Steve. There was no pity in his eyes - sorrow, and empathy, yes, those in spades, in pools, in deep wells of feeling. But no pity. And he reached out a hand and placed it on Clint's, and there was all the comfort of a hug in that simple touch, all that he could offer while Clint was driving. And he said, low and soft, and more sincerely than Clint had ever heard those words, "I'm sorry for your loss, Clint."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter happened really quickly! Mostly because it's been waiting, half-formed, in the wings for months now, but still. I basically wrote it in a couple of days. I haven't posted a new update that quickly in a couple of months.

So, something that really annoys me in fanfiction is the scorn that some people have for therapy. Most superheroes would benefit from seeing a psychologist. Trauma doesn't make you special, or super. It makes you sad. And maybe it's not possible to become a superhero without some powerful negative experience driving you, but I'd like to think you can be happy and still be a hero; that those two are not mutually exclusive character traits. Mental health matters. So my characters, insofar as it is consistent with their character development, go to therapy. Because it helps, and they need it.

Thank you for your comments and kudos - I've been really enjoying the discussion that's been going on around the last chapter.
“Good morning, Steve!” Thor said as he strode into the kitchen, where the captain was frying bacon and eggs.

“Morning, Thor. I didn’t realise you’d stayed over?” Steve said curiously.

“Yesterday’s battle was long and wearying, my friend, and the meetings that followed even more so,” Steve laughed at the exaggeration as Thor went on. “And on the morrow we have both training and our movie night, do we not? I thought I might as well stay as go.”

Steve shrugged. “Sounds fair. Do you want any of this?”

“That would be very welcome, my friend!” Thor’s team were ever-generous – with their wealth, their care, their knowledge, and their time. In truth, he was blessed with their companionship.

Steve plated up some food and handed it over. “Do you have plans for the day?”

“I was thinking,” Thor said between bites, “that I greatly enjoyed seeing the city with you and Jane, and that I might explore it further.”

“Huh,” replied Steve. “What did you have in mind?”

Above all else, it was wilderness and green things he missed when he was here, or the true rock of mountains, or the clean winds of the plains. “I am very fond of the park our home overlooks, but I have heard that there are others just as fine, and thought I might seek one out.”

“There’s a really nice one in Queens,” Steve suggested, then frowned. “If it’s still there. Jarvis?” The park I’m thinking of was new for the ’39 Worlds Fair.”

“I believe you are referring to the Flushing-Meadows-Corona Park, which is, indeed, still there.” Jarvis reminded Thor at times of Mimir, or Heimdall, perhaps, with the breadth of his knowledge.

“That sounds excellent, Steve. Would you join me on my explorations? You are a good travelling companion.” Thor smiled at him hopefully. Steve was a good travelling companion, particularly in New York. He knew enough of the city to help guide their path, but there were enough gaps in his knowledge that he was curious, and did not leave Thor lagging behind.

“Well, I’ve got something planned this afternoon, but it’s not even nine o’clock yet. I’d say I have time to visit a park with you.” Steve smiled. “Jarvis, how do we get there?”
“We’re on the wrong train,” Steve said, groaning in frustration.

“Is Forest Hills not near our destination?” Thor queried. They had arrived at the station with but two minutes to spare before this train had arrived, and Thor had not looked too closely at the signs. “I believe we are going eastwards, still.”

“Well, yeah,” said Steve, “But we planned to catch the 7 train to Flushing Main St, not the R train.”

Thor frowned. “I see. Should we seek an opportunity to rejoin our original path?” he suggested.

“I’m pretty sure the lines don’t meet except at Times Square. Unless we back-track, we’re stuck on this line.”

Thor found the subterranean pathways frustrating and confusing, and he preferred to defer to the knowledge of his companions when he could. “Then what should we do?”

Steve huffed a sigh of frustration and ran a hand through his hair. “Well, the train is going the right way, to more or less the right place. It’s probably easiest if we just get off at Forest Hills and figure out where to go once we’re on the surface again.”

Thor nodded decisively. “Then that we shall do, my friend. If all else fails, we have friends to call upon in this city. It shall be an adventure.”

Steve smiled wryly. “I guess so.”

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“I have no idea where the park is from here,” Steve sighed a half hour later. “Do you think that’s 71st?” A thought seemed to strike him. “Wait, hang on, Jarvis did this with me a couple of weeks ago, there’s a map thingy on my phone, let me find it…”

“Are you two okay?” A passer-by, a young man, had stopped to ask after them.

“I am afraid we have misplaced ourselves,” Thor explained. In all his travels, he had never gotten such good knowledge as from the aid of locals. “We were hoping to go to the…” He looked at Steve, having forgotten the name.

“Flushing Meadows-Corona Park. The Queens Botanical Gardens, actually.” Jarvis had suggested them, saying they were something like a zoo for plants, and Thor had been intrigued. “We caught the wrong train, and now we…well, we aren’t too sure which way to go from here.”

“Let me guess,” the lad said, smiling, “you’re not used to cities,” (looking at Thor), “and you don’t recognise the landmarks since the last time you were here.”

Steve smiled sheepishly and nodded.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m headed that way, actually. Want me to show you the way?” There was no duplicity in the man’s smile, only honest friendliness, and they agreed gratefully.

The way was lined with beautiful houses and more trees than Thor had seen by the side of the street for a long time. He walked in appreciative silence, as his companions made little talk (or so he thought it was called).
“Thank you so much for your help,” Steve began.

“Really, don’t worry about it,” the stranger replied. “I like to think we’re all obligated to do what we can to help other people, and you really aren’t taking me out of my way. I don’t work Saturdays, unless something dramatic happens.”

“Oh?” Steve asked. “What do you do?”

“I’m a photographer and occasional journalist, mostly freelance.” The lad waved a hand at their surroundings. “Nothing particularly interesting happening today, so I can do what I like.” He shrugged. “The pay’s not brilliant, but it keeps me fed and housed.”

Steve smiled back at him. “I know the feeling. A friend of mine used to do all kinds of odd jobs to keep us in pocket.” He seemed to remember something. “Oh! I’m Steve, by the way.”

“And I am Thor,” he put in. Certainly if the boy had not recognised him thus far, he would now, particularly a journalist, but he didn’t show sign of it in his manner.

“Peter.” The lad shook Steve’s hand, then Thor’s, with a firm and steady grip. Thor liked him more and more in each minute of conversation.

They talked easily for another ten minutes or so, about work, and travelling, and ways of navigating in unfamiliar cities, until the park came into view.

“There you go,” Peter pointed out. “If you want to get to the Botanical Gardens, you can either keep going straight until you hit Main Street, then take a left and go north for a mile and a half, or you can head up through the park. To be honest, I’d recommend the park. If you stick to the west edge, you’ll hit the Queens Museum – the building’s been there since the thirties, and it has a whole lot of stuff from the Worlds Fairs in ’39 and ’64. I think you’d find it interesting, plus, you can buy lunch there.”

“Thank you for your advice, Peter.” Thor looked at Steve, who seemed intrigued by report of the Museum. “I believe we shall follow it.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Steve agreed. “If you don’t mind my asking, uh, you seem like you know who we are…”

“Why didn’t I act like it?” Peter finished, and laughed. “Everyone needs a day off. You weren’t wearing the super-suits, I figured you wanted to be regular guys today. Pretty sure you get enough over-enthusiastic fans any day of the week.”

Steve winced, and Thor could not say he had not done the same. Over-enthusiastic was rather understating the matter. “We do indeed, friend Peter. You are wise beyond your years – I am glad to have met you.”

“Me too,” Steve agreed. “Have a nice day off.”

“You too.” Peter waved, and turned back towards Forest Hills, and Thor and Steve turned their gaze towards the park.

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“Oh, wow.” Steve’s voice and face were awed. “This is…this is just like I remember it.”
Thor smiled. He had been enjoying the trees and the lake, but it was worth far more to see that expression on his friend’s face. “When did you come here last?” he asked.

Steve ran a hand through his hair. “Gee, I’m not sure. ’40? ’41? Bucky and I came to see the Fair when it opened in ’39, and we came back once or twice. It was like the Stark Expo, but way bigger. I mean, there were tens of thousands of people here when it opened, and the exhibits…”

“Exhibits?” Thor asked curiously.

“Yeah,” Steve continued, “It was like this big, sort of, half-outdoors museum. They had stuff on food, and commerce, and technology, and different countries…” He laughed. “They had this ‘futurama’ stuff, imagining what the world would be like in the future. Boy, did they get some of that wrong.”

“In what ways?” Thor gestured Steve to precede him into the building.

“Oh, some of the kinds of technology they imagined were right, but the aesthetics were dead wrong. And there were things that just didn’t end up being important.” He shrugged. “It shocked me, when I woke up, how much had changed, but these days… I don’t know, it just seems like, sometimes, surprisingly little has.”

Steve pulled out his phone as they left the museum and groaned. “Oh, geez, it’s lunch-time already. I thought we’d be back by now, and we haven’t even got to the gardens yet.”

He had said that he had plans this afternoon. “Do you need to get back to the Tower?” Thor asked, concerned. “If the subway will not be fast enough, I can summon Mjolnir.” Though he much enjoyed his friend’s company on this adventure, it would not do for it to interfere with his existing commitments.

“Thanks, but it should be fine,” Steve waved Thor off. “Just let me check with Jarvis.” He selected ‘Avengers Tower’ from his contact list, and started the call.

“Hi Jarvis… No, we’re fine, just running late… Yeah, we caught the wrong train, so it took us about an extra hour to get here, and then we stopped at the Queens Museum… It was fantastic, yeah… A little surreal, but what isn’t, in our lives?... Anyway, I could come home straight off and be there in time for this afternoon, but… Yeah, that’d be great… Could you let Clint know?… Thanks, Jarvis… Alright, I’ll see you in a couple of hours or so… Bye.”

He pressed a button, then looked at Thor. “We’re good. Let’s grab something to eat, then we can go look at the gardens.”

 Thor sighed as they wandered through the "Woodland Garden", and Steve looked at him curiously. "What's wrong?"

Thor shook his head. "Nothing wrong, my friend. It is merely..." he trailed off. "It is merely that Jarvis was right to compare these gardens to a zoo. They are carefully tended, and show off the most exotic of plants in the finest of health, and there is much I could see and learn here, but..." he waved a hand at their surroundings, "No true woodland is so tame, so groomed. There are thickets to stumble through, and branches in your face, and shit on the ground that you step in before you notice it, and the threat of hidden cliffs, or a boar's den, or a bear's cave. There is no surprise here,
no challenge, no wildness, no...*life*. It is not...real, I suppose you might say. These are no true woods, and I cannot help but feel the falseness."

Steve looked around, hands in his pockets, and shrugged. "I'm a city kid, so I don't see it, I guess. But I know what you mean, about things that are almost right, but not real." A corner of his lip turned up in a half-smile. "Did you ever hear about the room they put me in when they unfroze me? Rigged out like a hospital room from when I froze, but way too fancy for me to have been in. There was a baseball game on the radio that I'd actually been to, before the war really got going. The dame they sent in had...well, her hair was half right, but not right at all, and she didn't have a jacket, and you could see through her shirt that her underthings were just plain wrong." He laughed, shortly. "I don't know why they thought it would work. I think it was more traumatizing in some ways than something totally unfamiliar would have been. It felt like a trick, and it was."

Thor nodded eagerly. "That is just how it feels, here. Too false to be trusted. The cherry trees were beautiful, and the rose garden will be glorious when it is in full bloom, and the green roof...I have seen many like it. But here...no. I will take the half-wildness of parks over these false woodlands any day."

"Welcome home, Captain Rogers, Master Odinson."

Steve slumped against the side of the elevator. "It's good to be home, Jarvis."

"I could not agree more," said Thor. "Even for one such as I, that was a long day."

Steve smiled. "I think it's mostly that we got lost. Trips always seem to take longer when you don't know where you are."

Thor grinned at him. "You are right - but where is the adventure, my friend, if there is nothing to discover?"

Chapter End Notes

Believe it or not, this is the first chapter I've written that's set on a Saturday. Not deliberate, but somehow we've got through almost six weeks of story-time without anything interesting happening on a that particular day of the week.

I have, at last, bought myself a couple of New York City tourist guide books, which were incredibly helpful for this chapter. I also did a fair chunk of internet research, but the books gave me some good ideas and a place to start. As someone who has never been to New York, nor is particularly likely to, my geographical knowledge of the city is pretty limited, and it's been really helpful getting a sense of the layout and the history.

Also, Spiderman cameo! How many of you picked up that it was him?

Thanks for your comments and kudos - I love to hear your thoughts on the story.
"Hi, Dummy. What're you doing?" Captain Rogers was sketching in a corner of Sir's workshop when Dummy approached him.

The robot beeped noncommittally, and moved his camera closer to the captain's sketchbook.

"You want to see?" He tilted it towards the bot. "I'm drawing the gardens Thor and I went to a couple of days ago."

Dummy made a curious sound.

"They were really nice. Thor didn't like the woodlands so much, but the cherry trees were lovely." He frowned. "Have you ever been to a park?"

"While Dummy, Butterfingers, and You have not always lived in the Tower," Jarvis explained, "they have always been limited to Sir's workshops and laboratories."

"Huh." Captain Rogers frowned contemplatively. "Do they mind?"

"No, Captain. They are quite satisfied with their present existence."

The captain seemed to remember something. "Oh, hey, I brought them something." He reached into his bag and pulled out a larger sketchbook and a box of unusually thick crayons. Dummy tilted his head-hand curiously, and Butterfingers moved closer. "You guys like to watch me draw, right? I thought you'd like to have a go."

He spread the paper out on the floor and unpacked the crayons. Butterfingers sent Jarvis a query, and Jarvis reassured him. [Non-compulsory task: drawing]

"They don't know what you want them to do, Captain," he explained out loud.

"Uh..." Steve ran a hand over his head. "They can draw whatever they like, if they want to, I suppose. Maybe something simple? That they know the look of? They don't have to, I just thought they might like it."

"Hey, Steve," Sir called from across the room. "Stop confusing my bots and come help me test this!"

The captain sighed, smiled wryly, and put his sketchbook down. "I'll be back in a minute, Dummy." As he walked over, he asked, "What do you want, Tony?"
"We're trying to improve the interface on the Stark Phones so that it's more user-friendly," Sir explained. "The code checks out, but I want some feedback on the actual design." He smirked. "After all, if you can use it, any idiot can figure it out."

Steve's tone was long-suffering, but his expression appeared to be playful. "Tony."

"No, seriously, Capsicle, come play." Sir spun on his chair, and the captain shrugged and took the phone.

"So I just...mess around?" he asked, as he swiped at the screen.

"Can you figure out how to make calls, send messages, access your contacts, your email..." Sir frowned. "Do you actually use apps?"

"Jarvis taught me about some of them," Captain Rogers replied. "Um...maps, and a sort of slang dictionary thing, and the Wikipedia app?" Equipping the captain with the tools necessary to navigate the modern world had begun, for Jarvis, with giving him the means to learn on his own. It was similar to the way Sir had taught him: basic information, followed by learning algorithms, followed by access to the internet, with advice whenever something was confusing. These days, very little confused Jarvis, at least in the abstract.

"Huh," said Sir. "Good thinking, J. Then yeah, see if you can find those, or download them. Try the internet, or the camera. You know, just...can you figure out how to do the things you want to do?"

The captain's feedback over the next half-hour was very helpful: in addition to approaching technology very differently to Sir, he had an eye for aesthetics.

[In the gym:

"Hey Jarvis," Agent Barton began. "Where's Steve? We were going to spar."

"Captain Rogers is in Sir's workshop. I will tell him you are looking for him." He had not realised the captain would need a reminder.]

"Captain Rogers, Agent Barton is looking for you," he announced.

The captain looked up suddenly. "Oh hell, I forgot." He turned to Sir and did not hand him the phone; he put it on the table instead. "Tony, I've gotta go meet Clint, do you need me to come back later or is this enough for now?"

"This is fine, Cap," Sir flapped a hand at him, already caught up in possibilities the captain had suggested. "I'll see you at dinner."

"You'd better," Captain Rogers replied. He waved at the bots as he reached the door. "Bye, guys. Have fun with the crayons, I guess."

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"Hey Jarvis?" Sir asked.

"Yes, sir?"
"Are you, uh, happy? With the team, and them living here, and everything?" Sir scrubbed a hand over his face as he flicked through code, and Jarvis paused for a moment.

"I believe that I am, sir," he said at last. Emotions were harder for him to identify than thoughts or beliefs, and there was a great deal of literature suggesting that people frequently had difficulty identifying the degree and causes of their own happiness. But he believed so.

"They treating you alright?" Sir's voice sounded casual, as it frequently did when he attempted to hide his sincerity.

"They have been...far friendlier than I expected," Jarvis replied. "I always anticipated that people who...met me would be wary and suspicious, that they would either pretend I wasn't there or be unable to ignore my presence." Sir had known, of course, how the greater world imagined AIs to be, and he had taught Jarvis that, and kept him hidden and safe. And Jarvis took those lessons, and Sir's advice, and made of them his protocols for dealing with outsiders: to be an answering machine, bland and emotionless, unless true knowledge was unavoidable; to be equally bland, but personal, private, but not obviously secretive, when knowledge was necessary. He had studied the people who made themselves unobtrusive and necessary, and he had imitated them.

Sir sat back in his chair. "Cap said you've taught him some stuff?"

"I offered to assist him with his...catching up." He had been struggling, when he first arrived at the Tower. Friendly and cheerful in company, but clearly frustrated by his ignorance. "Most afternoons Agent Barton and I will keep him company as he does his reading, and I quiz him in the evenings."

Sir raised an eyebrow, his fingers tapping against the arc reactor. "You cheating on me, J? Leaving me for Captain America?"

If Jarvis could have, he would have winced. For much of Sir's life, he had been compared to Captain America and found wanting, and though his tone was joking, Jarvis could see him doubting and hurting. "Sir, you know very well that Captain Rogers could never replace you. You are my creator, teacher, colleague, partner, my primary purpose. Captain Rogers is my...friend, I suppose." He felt strange, claiming that word. "Were he to leave the Tower, I would be disappointed. Were you to leave my life..." The light around them dimmed. "I would...lose my purpose, my reason for existence. Please, sir, do not ever think that you are not the most important person in my life."

Sir looked, not shocked precisely, but struck deeply by the affirmation. He did not try to pretend that Jarvis was reacting to something that wasn't there. "Thanks, J." His voice was low and rough. "I, uh...you know you're important to me too, right? That you - oh fuck I hate talking about feelings - you've been with me for a long time, buddy, and you've, well, sometimes you've kept me sane, you know? And, I mean, for a while I thought Pepper was going to be that person, who was going to be the most important person for me, but I still...I couldn't, can't imagine a future without you in it. I know that, since the team moved in - or since I started working with them, I don't know - I've been spending less time in the workshop, but..."

"Sir," Jarvis interrupted smoothly, "Whenever you are in the Tower, I am there also. Whenever you are in the suit, I am there also. You spend the vast majority of your time in one or the other, and when you are not, still you often choose to call on me." His voice warmed. "Sir, I am very, very glad that you have let the team into your life. You...have always worried me, sir, with your disregard for your own well-being, and your isolation from others. Humans need social contact," Sir opened his mouth to speak, but Jarvis spoke over the top of him, "and you were only engaging with other people in the most superficial of ways. I am not glad that Afghanistan and Iron Man and the Avengers have caused you harm, but I see every day the ways that they have led you to more..."
fulfilling choices." He spoke quietly, now. "Sir, were the team made up of people who treated me with fear and contempt, I would still be glad of the friendship and support they offer you. That you have chosen to surround yourself with people who offer me their friendship is a very great gift, and I am grateful for it."

Sir stared, for a long moment, then shook his head. "You know what? That's about all the feelings I can handle right now, I'm pretty sure we established years ago that I'm allergic to them, so, uh, bring up the task list for me, would you?" But he smiled, and when he said "Thanks, Jarvis," it was heartfelt.

Jarvis didn't comment. They understood each other.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay guys, I was having some trouble with writer's block this week. This chapter didn't really cover everything I was hoping for, but sometimes imperfection is the best you're gonna get.

In other news...I have an idea for another one-shot prequel, but I need your help. To celebrate six months of writing this fic, I would like to write an interview with the Avengers set shortly before this story starts, but I want to take the opportunity to answer _your_ questions. For more info, I've posted a new work in this series called 'The Avengers: Six Months Later', and you can check it out there.
Hulk Helps

Chapter Summary

Hulk wakes for a battle against an organisation with modified weaponry that dispenses poison, acid, and drugged bullets.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Hulk wakes. The world is loud and bright and smells of fear. Is there danger? Hulk roars, to keep it away. Team is here. Starman waves.

"Hi, Hulk. We're fighting guys with weird guns today. They have drugs and acid in the bullets. It shouldn't affect you much, but it will hurt the rest of us, so focus on smashing the weapons, please?"

Hulk nods. Hulk roars, and leaps, and smashes. There are many shooters, many guns. They shoot Hulk, but the pain does not last. Hulk takes guns, and breaks them. Hulk smashes shooters that are near him, and looks around to see what happens.

Many shooters have small guns. Shooty Bird shoots them with arrows from hidden high place; Shouty Longhair smashes them with hammer from nearby. Some shooters have big guns. Starman smashes guns with shield; Metal Man shoots with bright lights. Metal Man is flying, circling, looking. Where is Red Liar?

Hulk roars, and leaps, and smashes. Hulk smashes big guns with Starman and Metal Man. Hulk puts himself between guns and team. Hulk is not hurt when guns shoot. Team is not hurt while Hulk smashes guns.

"Thanks, Hulk." It is Starman's voice, from talking necklace. Hulk is helping.

Hulk smashes big guns. There is a bigger gun, but team does not go near. "Biggest gun?" Hulk asks.

"Working on it, big guy." It is Metal Man's voice. He is looking to see best way to smash. Hulk grins. Hulk smashes big and small guns that are near. He smashes some shooters. More shooters run away. Agents catch them when they run.

Hulk hears Shooty Bird in talking necklace. "Guys, they've spotted me, I need extraction."

"Kind of busy here," says Metal Man.
Hulk looks. Starman and Shouty Longhair are surrounded by shooters. Metal Man is close to biggest gun. Shooty Bird is far away.

"Shit! Make that medevac, I need someone here now." Shooty Bird is hurt. It is in his voice.

Starman talks. "Hulk, go help Clint!"

Hulk did not need telling. Hulk was already jumping.

Hulk ignores shooters until he is close. Shooty Bird needs help. Hulk does not come too close. Hulk will not scare Shooty Bird.

"Shooty Bird?" he asks.

Shooty Bird waves weakly. He smells sick, pain, hurt, burning. Hulk is angry, angry. "Ain't that a sight for sore eyes." Shooty Bird smiles. "Could you give me a lift to the SHIELD truck? Should be over that way."

Shooty Bird points. Hulk looks, Hulk sees. Truck with many agents coming and going. They catch running shooters and tie them up. They keep people and cameras away. They will help Shooty Bird.

Hulk picks Shooty Bird up, careful, gentle. Hulk will not smash, will not hurt. Hulk leaps, and runs, takes Shooty Bird to truck, careful, gentle. Agents do not yell or scream, but they smell of fear. It is Hulk they fear, not guns, Hulk knows. Hulk gives Shooty Bird to Bald Talking Agent, careful, gentle.

"Safe?" Hulk asks.

Shooty Bird pats his arm. Why? "I'll be fine, buddy. We've got anti-dotes and stuff, they just have to get it out of my system. Thanks for the lift."

Hulk nods. Shooty Bird is hurt, but safe. He will be fine.

Hulk looks for team, looks for shooters. There are not many small guns now. There are not many big guns. Biggest gun is not smashed. Biggest gun has not fired. Biggest gun will hurt and harm. Hulk knows. Big guns are saved for last. For fighting big enemies. Like Hulk. When big guns fire, they hurt and harm.

Hulk roars, and leaps, until he is with team, near big and biggest guns.

Metal Man talks. "Hulk, wait! Don't hit the biggest gun, it's a bit volatile, and we're trying to disarm it. Give me, like, two minutes. Deal with the others."

Hulk frowns. Waiting is not safe. But smashing is not safe. Hulk puts himself between biggest gun and team, and picks up smashed things to throw at other guns. Hulk will smash like Shooty Bird. He will keep team safe while Metal Man smashes biggest gun.

Red Liar is sneaking. She is sneaking near biggest gun. She is smashing softly, one by one, the ones who guard the biggest gun. She tilts her head, listening, and reaches for biggest gun. Shooters
do not see her. Hulk and Starman and Shouty Longhair and Metal Man smash shooters before they look. Lights on biggest gun turn off.

Metal Man talks. "Okay, guys, the big one's safe for now. Don't attack it directly, and they could still reactivate it, but we don't have to worry about it right now."

Starman talks. "Widow, guard the cannon. Everyone else, let's round up this lot and finish up."

Hulk looks. Only one big gun. Hulk smashes. Not many little guns. Team is smashing. Shooters are fighting without guns, with hands and feet and blades. Soon there is no more fighting. Soon there are no more guns. Agents come to catch and keep the shooters. Team goes to SHIELD truck.

"Good job, everyone," says Starman. "Injuries?"

"Nothing got through the armour," Metal Man says.

"They didn't see me," says Red Liar.

"A number of bullets reached their target in me," Shouty Longhair says. He is hurt? Not good. "They stung, but I do not believe I am affected."

"I'd tell you to get a check-up," says Bald Talking Agent, "but SHIELD medical still doesn't really know what's going on with you. From weapons recovered, it looks like everything was meant to have an immediate effect, so you should be alright. If there are any side effects, let them know, and Bruce will probably want to look you over."

Should Hulk wake Bruce? "Hulk go?" asks Hulk.

Metal Man shakes his head. "It can wait, big guy. You can stick around a bit longer, if you want."

"Captain?" asks Bald Talking Agent. "How about you?"

Starman shrugs. "I blocked a lot with the shield, and most that got to me didn't get through the suit." He smiles at Metal Man, and Metal Man looks proud. "I took one to the thigh I'm pretty sure was acid," Hulk looks. There is a hole in the blue clothing. The skin below is pink and new. It is the colour of not-scars, like when Hulk heals. Hulk growls. "It's healed up fine, though."

Bald Talking Agent twists his face, then nods. "Alright. Same goes for you as for Thor: let SHIELD medical know if there are any side effects; let Bruce look at it if he wants."

Starman nods. "How's Clint?"

Hulk frowns. Shooty Bird was hurt. Shooty bird heals slowly. Shooty Bird said he would be fine.

"Barton's doing fine," Bald Talking Agent says. "He's going to feel off for another two to four hours, and they're keeping him in observation, but he'll be home in time for dinner."

Shooty Bird heals slow, but Shooty Bird will heal. Good. Hulk grunts in satisfaction.

Guns are smashed, fight is done, team is safe, team will heal. No more shooting, no more danger. Hulk healed from fight, no more hurting. Hulk is tired, Hulk is hungry.
"Do you want to get something to eat, big guy?" Metal Man asks.

Hulk thinks. Hulk is hungry, but Hulk is tired. Food is good, but Shooty Bird is not here. Team is safe, but team is healing. Banner can help them heal.

Team is here. Banner safe. Hulk shakes his head, and goes.

Chapter End Notes

Once again a Hulk chapter directly follows a Jarvis chapter. That wasn't actually deliberate, by the way. But it was time for a battle scene, and time for a Hulk scene, so it worked out that way.

Writing this was really interesting, actually. I wanted to parallel chapter 9 (the last Hulk chapter) as closely as possible, so I could show the ways the team's interactions with him have changed over the last month of story time. They talk to him more; they work with him, not just around him; and they include him in more than the moments of fighting. Hulk, for his part, cares about the team and their welfare.

A note on Hulk shielding the team from the biggest gun: Hulk is a naturally self-sacrificing guy. He won't stick around to be shot at, but basically the core of his experience is dealing with dangerous situations so that Bruce won't have to. I think that once he accepted the team as people he more-or-less trusted, he would do that with them as well.

Finally...I'm working on a one-shot in this series to celebrate six months of writing it. (Also, 200 kudos. Thanks, guys!) It's going to be an interview of the Avengers six months after the Battle of New York (i.e. just before this story starts), and I'd love it if I could take this opportunity to answer _your_ questions about the characters. If you have questions you think I should answer, or want to know more about the project, check out 'The Avengers: Six Months Later', which is part 2 in the 'Tower Tales' series.

Thanks for your kudos, comments, and general awesomeness. I love hearing from you all.
Logistics

Chapter Summary

The work doesn't end when the battle does, especially for Steve.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hulk shook his head and started to shrink.

"Oh, sh-," Steve started towards him, "I've got him." If the Hulk was standing when he transformed, Bruce usually fell over from the stress of the change once it was done. Steve timed his help carefully: he needed to catch Bruce before he fell, but ideally, after he finished changing. "I've got you, Bruce," he said, once the man was lucid.

"Did I hurt anyone?" he asked groggily. "Is everyone alright?"

"Natasha and Tony didn't take any damage; Thor and I got hit but aren't dealing with any side-effects; Clint got hit but he got treatment quickly - he's just under observation now." Steve turned to Sitwell. "Is it safe to fly him to New York with us? I think we'd all like to get home."

Sitwell shrugged. "I'll ask, but I don't think they'll want to move him just yet."

He ducked into the medics' tent, and Steve turned to Tony. "In that case, we should eat before we go. Would you mind...?"

Tony flipped his faceplate down. "I'll go get us a dozen of something quick. No snarking about my choices, though." He didn't wait for an answer.

Steve sighed. He would have slumped his shoulders, but they were still out in the open, and there were always cameras after an Avengers battle. "Natasha, do you think there's somewhere we can sit down while we wait?"

She nodded, and they followed her. Years of SHIELD ops meant she could always find a place to go when she was off-duty. She led them to a space blocked in by the medics' tent, the comms van, and a building, out of sight of the cameras and out of the way of the agents. They all more-or-less collapsed on the ground: Steve slumped against a wall, shield beside him, cowl pushed back; Thor sat cross-legged, one hand resting idly on Mjolnir's handle; Natasha commandeered a folding chair from somewhere and started cleaning her knives; and Bruce lay on the ground, one hand shading his eyes from the sun, settling back into his equilibrium.

Steve didn't know how long they sat there before Sitwell came to find them - he was a little jittery from left-over nerves, but mostly, he was stuck in a post-battle haze.

"Trust you, Romanoff," Sitwell snorted as he took in the scene. "Another twenty minutes before Barton can fly, and they want a medic onboard."
Steve's thoughts were sluggish. "Right..." he said slowly, "so...we wait for Tony to get food, and
then we eat, and then we load ourselves and Clint and a medic and Sitwell onto a quinjet...Natasha,
can you fly us?" She nodded. "And Natasha can fly us to, uh, the New York base. Then we, I guess
we need to debrief?" He looked up at Sitwell, running a hand through his sweat-soaked hair.

"I'd prefer that, yes," the agent replied. "We could do so in Medical, in Barton's room. I know you
usually keep him company."

"Mm." Natasha always did, and after a while, the others had started joining her. Clint got hurt the
most of all of them, but Medical made him twitchy. "Bruce? How are you feeling? Should I ask
Jarvis to send a car to the base for you so you can go straight home?"

Bruce groaned a bit. "I'm not...that bad. It would be more sensible for us all to travel together."
Which meant that he was exhausted and achy, but he didn't want to acknowledge it, didn't want to
ask for help. Like Steve on his bad days, before the serum. 'I'll be fine, Buck,' he'd say, There's no
point you being here just to watch me lay around all day.' He'd always hated having his limits
acknowledged. It felt like being weak, like people knowing he was weak.

"We could get an extra bed in Clint's room," Natasha suggested.

"That could work," Steve said. "Will it bother you if we're talking and watching a movie? Will you
be able to sleep?"

"'sfine, Steve," Bruce mumbled.

Steve looked at Sitwell and Sitwell nodded. "I'll let Medical know."

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Sitwell was looking...frazzled. The Avengers were a good team in the field, but they were pretty

"Awesome," said Clint, already distracted. "What episode were we up to?"

It was a well established tradition by now that when Clint was stuck in Medical, the team watched
Get Smart. Clint said he liked the irony. By now, they were halfway through season three - Clint
was stuck in Medical a lot.

Steve left the discussion behind and followed Sitwell out of the room. "Can I talk to you for a few
minutes, sir?"

Sitwell stopped, and sighed. "What do you need, Captain?"

Steve pursed his lips. "Well, uh, Ms Sengupta - the woman who runs PR for Tony and the team? -
has been really pushing me to involve the rest of the Avengers in our publicity." She had, in fact,
texted him four times since today's battle. It was an ongoing debate, but it flared up every time
they fought.

Sitwell frowned. "And you're speaking to me because..."

Steve shrugged. "Before I ask Clint and Natasha, I wanted to know if SHIELD wanted to put any
restrictions on their involvement." About two months ago there'd been an interview with all of
them, but the questions had been restricted, and the photography even more so.
"This is...really not a conversation for the medbay corridor," Sitwell said, looking resigned. "But, apart from the usual rules about public knowledge of international security, no."

"Sir?"

"Agent Barton has not been called in to work on a non-Avengers mission in seven months, and it is increasingly unlikely we will do so. Recognition began to be a problem for Agent Romanoff almost immediately after the Battle of New York, and a month ago she was pulled from infiltration missions." Sitwell ran a hand over his head. "It's a damn mess, honestly. Strike Team Delta was, undeniably, the best that SHIELD had, and now one's dead, one's barely an agent at all, and the third has her hands tied by a well-known face."

"Oh." He'd noticed Natasha wasn't on as many SHIELD missions lately, but she hadn't said anything about it, and he didn't want to push. "Um, I guess I'll talk to the others, then. Thanks."

Sitwell nodded at him. "Have a good day, Captain. Hopefully I won't see you soon."

Steve looked around as he came back in, checking on everyone. It was a habit that had served him well with the Commandos, he wasn't about to try and break it. Bruce was curled up in a bed by the window, sleeping heavily. Apparently he was usually too tired to dream after a transformation, so it was some of the more restful sleep he ever got. Tony had taken the chair by Bruce's bed, pulled a phone from somewhere, and was talking to Jarvis in between watching the show and snarking at Clint. Thor was between Bruce's and Clint's beds on (as usual) the largest and sturdiest chair in the room. He'd disappeared his armor somehow, so unlike the rest of them, he actually looked comfortable. Natasha was, as usual, sitting between Clint and the door, positioned so that she could see the whole room. She did it so unobtrusively that it had taken Steve weeks to realize it, but she was always watching for threats. Well, except when Clint was watching. They seemed to trade off, though Steve had never seen them change 'shifts', as it were. But Clint was injured, so Natasha was on watch.

Steve blew out a long breath, letting the tension in his shoulders unwind. His team was fine, and he was off-duty, more or less. He sat down. "Did I miss anything?"

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They piled out of the car and into the lift. Thor had left them at SHIELD, saying he needed to return to Jane, so the car hadn't been too crowded, but still...

"Welcome home," said Jarvis.

...it was good to be home.

"Thanks, J," Tony replied absently. "Workshop. I need to get started on suit repairs."

Steve frowned. He was sure Tony hadn't eaten since just after the battle, and that was hours ago. "Take me to the common floor, Jarvis, and I'll get dinner started. Bruce, are you eating?"

Bruce looked marginally better after his nap, but he was still moving gingerly. "I think so, but I'm definitely not up for a movie tonight."

"Clint, Natasha, could you give me a hand?" Steve asked. The two agents exchanged looks, obviously suspicious, but Clint nodded.
Steve had chopped half the chicken for the soup (makes a little food go a long way, he thought, easy to reheat if Tony disappears or Bruce falls asleep, comforting for Clint) before Clint spoke up.

"So, Steve, why'd you want to talk to us?" He and Natasha were chopping vegetables as the stock heated on the stove.

Steve paused for a moment before he spoke. He didn't think they'd agree straight away. "I wanted to ask you to consider getting more involved in Avengers publicity?"

Natasha seemed wary, and Clint looked sceptical. "What sort of publicity?"

Steve shrugged. "Basically, whatever I can get you to agree to. Highest priority is events with the whole team - TV interviews, press conferences, galas. You don't necessarily have to talk much, but having you there can...I think the way Ms Sengupta phrased it was 'turn you from mysterious vigilantes into friendly neighbourhood superheroes'. SHIELD's okayed your involvement, by the way," he added hurriedly, "if you're willing. Sitwell said that since you aren't going on infiltration missions anymore, it shouldn't be a problem."

Natasha, who thus far had been silently observing, turned to Clint. "What do you think?"

Clint frowned. Natasha raised an eyebrow. Clint rolled his eyes. Natasha gave him a long, measuring look. Clint sighed, and slumped. "I think it's inevitable, so we might as well do it now," he said to Steve.

Steve nodded, relieved. "Okay." He started dumping the chicken into the stock. "I'll ask Bruce and Thor later - I wanted to talk to you first, because your privacy is so important."

Clint frowned. "You know it's important to Bruce, too, right?"

Steve shrugged. "It is, but...as I understand it, a lot of Bruce's problems come from the dehumanization of the Hulk? People are willing to treat the Hulk like a thing instead of a person. And that's awful, because the Hulk is unbreakably linked to Bruce: you can't capture or hurt or kill the Hulk without doing the same to him. But most people forget that part, because Bruce is so, uh, quiet. If Bruce becomes better known, I think it will help prevent people from hurting him because of the Hulk. People will know he's the Hulk, but people will also know the Hulk is him."

Chapter End Notes

So, quick announcement: semester is just starting up for me, so my life's getting a whole lot busier than it has been these last few months. While I can't _entirely_ predict the effect that's going to have on my writing time, it looks like the updates are going to get a bit less frequent (particularly since I'm working on 'Baby Hale' as well). So far I've been trying to post a new chapter every week, but, uh, don't be surprised if it becomes more like a chapter per fortnight for the next few months.

Also, I'd like to once again point you in the direction of the prequel 'Avengers: Six Months Later'. The final version will be posted in a bit over a fortnight, so if you have any questions you want the characters to answer, let me know.
As always, thank you for your comments and kudos - I always love hearing from you.
Natasha and Clint prepare for their first press conference.

Natasha contemplated her eyeshadow. Daya had pointed out that she would be held to celebrity-level standards of beauty as well as military-level standards of professionalism at this press conference, which hadn't surprised her at all. She could live up to those standards, easily, but she was setting a precedent here.

"Who are you today?" Clint had wandered in while she was putting on foundation, and was amusing himself by snooping through her book collection, again.

"Mostly Rushman," she answered him. "A bit of Peverell." Liz Peverell had been a bodyguard for hire, on a mission investigating slave traders. She was unambiguously and unapologetically lethal.

"Hmm." Clint looked her over. "So...'natural' makeup and a bun?"

Since her hair was finally long enough again, she nodded. He grabbed a chair and pulled it behind her. When he picked up her comb and waved it at her in the mirror she nodded again, and he began to set her hair in better order. She chose a colour of eyeshadow, began to apply it, and waited.

"...Tell me this isn't going to be an utter fuck-up?" he asked at last.

"This isn't going to be an utter fuck-up."

He rolled his eyes. "Gee, you really sound confident there." He pursed his lips. "But seriously, Nat...is this gonna be okay?"

"What are your concerns?" There were a lot of ways this might or might not be okay, for her, for Clint, for SHIELD, for the team...

He huffed. "I just...I don't know, I've never done the publicity thing, I'm the behind-the-scenes guy."

"Ah, yes, 'The Amazing Hawkeye: World's Greatest Marksman'. Very discreet." He poked her, rolling his eyes again. She raised her eyebrows and jabbed backwards with an elbow. He dodged, squawking in indignation.

"This isn't the same, Nat. No-one remembers a kid from some half-run-down circus in Iowa. This is gonna be...everyone's gonna see this."

She shrugged. "It's just another mission. They're going to know your name, not you."
His hands were steady in her hair, even if his voice wasn't. "Nat, I don't do infiltration missions. Unobtrusive disguise, yes, silent bodyguard, sure, ordinary civilian, fine...I don't do the persona thing if I don't absolutely have to."

There had been an infiltration mission, a few years before they met, when Clint had nearly died. He didn't talk about it much, but after that, he stuck to sniping. "I know, sokolik, but this is...it's more of a variation on yourself than a different persona." She didn't do it that way, but she was unusual. "When you were working with Patricks, or Wu, after you were first recruited - that was you but not you, yes? New recruits in the canteen, they see you playful, not your hurt. And when you're working with a good handler, one who doesn't know you, you're professional, but not all of yourself. It's you, sokolik, but you don't have to give them all of you."

He tugged her hair into a ponytail and began to rummage around on the table for bobby pins, avoiding her gaze in the mirror. "I guess...but - if this were a mission...I'm going to be living with this persona for years, probably." When did they all start thinking of the Avengers as permanent? Because they were. Even Banner was starting to buy things, to settle in. "They're gonna record this, and analyse it fifty different ways, and come to some sort of conclusion about me, and every time I show up in front of a camera they'll be looking for things that support that conclusion."

"And they'll be wrong, as people always are when they make assumptions."

His shoulders slumped. "That's not the point."

"Then what is?" She had her suspicions, but Clint needed to actually say things sometimes.

He looked away. "It feels like...another standard to live up to? Or something like that, anyway. Like I'll be disappointing people when I'm not 'the Amazing Hawkeye'."

Clint had always been very aware of other people's disapproval. He always acted like he didn't give a damn, but he hated it. "Which people?"

"I don't know..." he shrugged. "Everyone? The media? The general public? Stark's PR department?"

She smiled slightly. "Even on your worst day, you aren't going to give Daya as much trouble as Stark does on a weekly basis." Daya Sengupta was very good at her job. She had to be. "And it's her job to make sure the public and the media likes us. She is working on our behalf; we are not working for her."

He scrunched up his nose. "But she bosses Tony around all the time, and he actually pays her."

"Actually, Pepper does. And Tony ignores her a lot."

"Yeah, but..." He sighed loudly. "I'm not going to win here, am I?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Do you ever win against me?"

He made a derogatory noise. "On the range, fuck yeah, I do." He smiled. "But not when we're arguing, no." He sat back. "I think that's done. Does it feel secure?"

She shook her head to check. "It'll certainly do for a press conference."

He stood up, linking his hands and stretching his arms above his head. "Ugh. Have I told you how
"Glad I am that I don't have to deal with the hair thing?"

"Many times." Almost every time he helped her prep for a mission, in fact. Straightened or curled, dyed, cut, arranged in this style or that...how she presented her hair was an essential part of every persona she built, but it certainly took time.

"I am really glad I don't have to deal with the hair thing." He shook his head. "So...we should come up with some sort of press conference bingo if we're going to be doing this all the time."

And that, right there, was classic Clint coping mechanisms. Make it a game, make it funny. "Oh?"

"Tony going off cue cards, Steve's Disapproval Face, Bruce having to do the zen thing, Thor having a 'Explaining Modern America' moment - either misunderstanding something or saying something weird..."

"Absurdly sexist questions targeting me?" Natasha suggested. It was inevitable, she knew that already. "Referring to 'the government' in a needlessly generalised way. Us having to talk around SHIELD's existence."

The lift doors opened to reveal Bruce already inside. "Hey Bruce," said Clint. "We're figuring out Press Conference Bingo. Got any suggestions?"

Banner frowned. "Like what?"

"Hang on - common floor, Jarvis. So far we've got Tony going off script, Steve's Disapproval face, Nat getting sexist questions, Thor having a 'Explaining Modern America' moment, awkwardly avoiding talking about SHIELD, referring to 'the government' in a weirdly generalised way..." Clint explained, neatly avoiding his prediction that someone would trigger Bruce.

Bruce ran a hand through his hair. He looked less nervous now that they were distracting him. "Uh...Tony diverting questions aimed at people other than him?"

Natasha's lip quirked. "I feel like that should be on a points system - it's going to happen too many times for bingo."

Bruce shrugged. "I'd rather he take the spotlight, honestly. I'm not...comfortable with a lot of attention. I'm kind of hoping that I don't have to talk at all."

Clint smiled wryly at him. "Oh, I know exactly what you mean. We're all three of us in that boat, I guess - full-time avoiders-and/or-deflectors-of-attention." It was something that made Bruce...almost dangerous. He knew how to go unseen, and he watched the world around him. Those who knew how to hide were always difficult to hide from.

"Fortunately," she pointed out, "we have a narcissistic billionaire, a national icon, and an alien prince to capture the eye of the media. I suspect we won't get many questions."

Bruce fiddled with his glasses. "I...why do they even want to talk to me? I'm not even technically an Avenger."

"Are you sure?" Clint asked. "You got invited to join, same as everyone, you live in the Tower, we rely on your scientific expertise..."

"I got invited to join because I came with a conveniently indestructible...alternate form. I don't actually fight with you."
"Actually," Natasha put in, "the Hulk was a downside when we were considering inviting you to the Helicarrier. Your experience with enhanced individuals and resultant unshockability were an advantage, but the Hulk himself was predicted to be a problem. We didn't expect him to co-operate, and we weren't planning to try it."

The lift pinged as they arrived on the common floor. "Huh," said Bruce.

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"That was at least as bad as I thought it was going to be," said Clint, as the team left the conference. "Are the lights always so fucking bright?"

"I don't wear sunglasses just to look cool," said Tony. "Camera flashes are a bitch."

Steve looked tired. While Tony had been distracting attention from her, Clint, and Bruce, Steve had been trying to keep Tony and Thor on-script. He'd been moderately successful, which was, to be honest, impressive. It was probably easier for him than for Phil or Pepper, though, because he was at least as interesting to the media as Stark, and could thus be on stage at the same time.

"How often are we supposed to do this?" asked Bruce.

Steve sighed. "There's at least a statement to the press after every battle, and Daya's been scheduling me for some other kind of media appearance every fortnight or so - the type varies. You'll be on less, though, probably. I need you guys to back me up, make it clear that I am speaking for all of us, that the team's not just me and Tony, and we'll get some public support when things go wrong if each of you is, well, a 'person' in the media, but I'm taking point."

"I seriously cannot thank you enough, Steve," said Clint, clapping him on the back.

"Indeed," agreed Thor. "While public appearances are necessary, I have always found them wearying. It is one of the more arduous duties of the crown in Asgard, and I am grateful that you have chosen to take it upon yourself to perform it for us here."

Steve ducked his head, rubbing the back of it with his hand. "It's...it's not that big a deal, guys."

"Oh?" Natasha had tallied everything up; she knew how much of his time Steve spent managing the team. "Tony, does Jarvis have a copy of Steve's schedule?" Tony brought it up on his phone and passed it to her. "In addition to your own training and catch-up program, you're spending..." she paused for effect, "six hours a week in team training, with an extra hour per session on planning and evaluation; you have meetings with SHIELD for an average of an hour a week; media appearances or meetings with Daya four hours a week; and you cook dinner two or three times a week. That's twelve to thirteen hours a week, on average, you're giving to the team, in addition to twenty hours of training, twenty hours of catch-up, and any battles."

Steve had been looking more and more sheepish as she went on. She understood, of course, why he worked so hard: empty hours weren't kind to any of them. But they all needed to take breaks, and mostly, he wasn't. "It's fine, Natasha. I like keeping busy."

She looked sceptically at him, and Clint took up the refrain. "Well, yeah, but there's keeping busy, and there's the express train to burnout. We don't have a reserve team, so we don't get weekends off, and we don't get vacations. You've gotta fit some breaks into your schedule or you'll be hating the job by Christmas." He looked across at her. "Hey Nat? What's he got on this afternoon?"

"A follow-up meeting with Daya, review of '20th century American Politics: Reagan and Bush senior', and plans to cook dinner for us," she replied, and gave the phone back to Tony.
"Yeah, even by my standards, your schedule's ridiculous, Cap," Tony put in. "I declare post-
mission movies and take-out for dinner."

Steve sighed. "I'm not going to win this one, am I?"

"Steve," Clint said, "you take care of us all the time - you gotta expect that now and then we'll
return the favour."

"I'm going to speak to Daya," Natasha said, and left the others to persuade Steve. She was fairly
certain that when she rejoined them, they'd be bickering over take-out.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for your patience, guys...at first it looked like I was going to keep up
with the predicted once-a-fortnight schedule, and then my six-month-anniversary one-
shot distracted me, and then I had a combination of business and writers block that
culminated in a camping trip that lasted the entire Easter weekend, and then I sat down
and had a look at this and realised it had been more than a month since I'd posted. So,
um, my apologies for the delay, I wish I could believe it won't happen again, and I'll
do my best to post a little more frequently.

Speaking of things...you should check out my six month anniversary one-shot! A
newspaper interview only a few days before this story begins, you can read the team's
answers to questions such as "What advantage do each of the Avengers offer in
combat?"; "Is housing Dr Banner like keeping a nuclear bomb in your garage?"; "Why
use an archaic weapon like a bow?"; "Would it be possible to interview the Hulk?";
"Why are there so few female super-heroes?"; and "Did Loki get tried for his crimes?"
All the questions answered came from my readers (specifically, William H. Stoddard,
E_Meckm, and LadyErin), and I posted the final version about three weeks ago. It's
called "The Avengers: Six Months Later", and is now part 2 in "The Tower Tales".

I don't know how well this chapter works, but at a certain point you just have to post
something and keep the story moving. Next up, Thor gets some time in New Mexico.

As always, I look forward to hearing what you think.
Where the Heart Is

Chapter Summary

Thor spends a day in Puente Antiguo.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The trip from Puente Antiguo to New York could take as little as fifteen minutes in an emergency, although it would be an uncomfortable journey. On a day like today, flying the other way in the dim, pre-dawn light, Thor took his time. Even if he took an hour to get there, the clock would be an hour earlier than when he left. He found it strange, the way he could flee from the sun, but he loved the quiet. Few were awake at this hour. He flew low, lower than the clouds, low enough to distinguish individual houses, cars, trees, people, but high enough that he himself would be difficult to distinguish. He was not looking for attention.

The landscape shifted gradually beneath him, thick woods (interspersed with rivers, highways, cities) giving way to densely farmed plains (broad swaths of yellow corn and wheat interrupted, here and there, by roads) giving way to the rugged, sparse-forested mountains that he used to mark the western boundary of his journey. He could, of course, ask Mjolnir to seek Jane (a hammer so fine would not let him be lost), but he liked exploring. It may be slower, but he enjoyed this route: west until he reached the mountains of...he thought it was Colorado, but the name wasn't blazoned on the landscape, and in his mind they were simply 'the Western Mountains'...once he reached them, he would turn south.

He had made so many journeys to and from this place, now. He thought that soon he would be able to find Puente Antiguo simply by reading the landscape, but as it was, once he got close enough, he could feel the Bifrost site. He always landed there, unless he had a pressing reason to do otherwise. Less chance of disturbing the townspeople, for one. And it felt...home-like, in its resonance. It was a magical link to Asgard, and everything about that spot sang of its nature. It would be a powerful place for a shrine, he thought, were anyone inclined to build one. They wouldn't. Few did. Once there were...he was not sure of the numbers. A million? More? Who sacrificed to him and his kin. There was a long time when there were almost none. Now there were hundreds, he thought, probably thousands. He wasn't sure. It was a rare prayer that caught his conscious attention. Most of his godhood was an unconscious thing. A major sacrifice, that was different. And if he cultivated a relationship, well...

"Oh my Thor, again? Food is for eating, Jane, not paperweights!"

He supposed he had better speak to Darcy about that.

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By the time he arrived at Jane's home, she and Darcy had, at last, gone to bed. They might stay up all night to watch the stars, but they rarely saw the dawn. He locked the door behind him, left Mjolnir next to it ("If you must bring a hammer no-one else can lift into the house, muscles, put it somewhere it's not in the way!"), slipped into Jane's bedroom, stripped down, and eased under the covers. Even when she was sleeping and he could not, he treasured her company. She stirred a
little, murmuring, but settled as he stroked her hair and murmured to her, "Sleep, svass, all is well."

She looked exhausted. He had swiftly learnt that telling her so would end badly, but he still noticed. She had thought she was on the verge of some great discovery when they last spoke - most likely she had been pursuing it without care for herself. He could never decide whether he liked those times: she was so joyous, so thrillingly alive, but at the same time she worked herself so hard, excluding all else in her hunt. He was ever amazed by her, but never more than then.

Still, he thought that he preferred the times of methodical progress, gathering knowledge and discarding the unnecessary, drawing connections, processing data. Those were the days that she would, growing tired of her work, declare that she needed a break, and take him to the diner for lunch, or go for a walk in the desert, or join Darcy on the couch and watch television and play games, or kiss him senseless and drag him to bed. Yes, he thought, passing his eyes over her sleeping form, those are the days I love best.

He settled himself beside her, letting his eyes close. He might sleep, or not. Until he did, or if he did not, this was a better place than most for contemplation.

"Hey, Thor," said Darcy as he and Jane emerged from their room. "Good flight?"

"It was very pleasant, thank you." He smiled at her. "Are you well?"

She waved a hand in the air. "Same old, same old. I saw you on the news the other day, that was cool." She smirked. "You sure were glowing in your praise of Jane, here."

Jane blushed. "Did you have to mention me, Thor? I mean, I love you, but I...I want people to know who I am because of me, not because I'm your girlfriend."

Thor frowned. "What do you mean?"

She pulled him over to the kitchen table and sat down. "Honey, you're famous. People all over the country, all over the world, know your name. And you're..." she trailed off, "...you're not like Clint, or Natasha. People know that you're, well, an alien, and that you're important where you come from. Even if you weren't an Avenger, you'd be important. People who know you, who you are known to associate with, they're going to become important because of you."

He frowned, thinking. Asgard did not have 'the media' as such, but it did have gossip, and rumour, and public opinion...his expression cleared. "Ah. As the Warriors Three and the Lady Sif have become well known in Asgard for their companionship with me?"

"Kind of." Darcy put in, shrugging. "I'd imagine Sif is pretty infamous as a lady warrior anyway, right? But, uh, Hogun? The quiet one?" She looked at him, and he nodded in confirmation. "I'm pretty sure he'd be happy slipping completely under the radar. But people know him anyway."

They had joked, the five of them, that wherever they went, the Warriors Three were greeted as 'friends of Thor'. He knew it wore on them, but they bore it well. It was something he was glad of now, that in his time on Midgard, they had freedom to become better known apart from him. He grimaced. Loki had been 'brother of Thor' much of the time as well. He had never joked about it, and Thor had assumed he had not noticed. Now, he wondered if Loki had not joked because it bothered him too much. "I believe I understand you, Darcy. Jane...you do not wish to be associated with me in public because you will become 'Thor's lady' in their eyes instead of 'Dr Foster'?"

Jane sighed, and took his hand. "It's not that I don't want to be seen with you...I like being your
girlfriend, I like your friends, I like our friends knowing about us, I like the town knowing about us. But, all those people, they know me. The media doesn't. And I don't...I'm a loner oddball scientist, with two people interested in working with me, one of whom isn't a scientist at all and the other of whom is struggling with mental illness, none of my colleagues liked me, and I don't care about my appearance so half the time I look like a slob. No one's going to respect me."

His heart tightened in his chest, to hear her give so damning an appraisal of herself. "Jane, astin min, you are absolutely worthy of respect. And I am deeply sorrowful that the world may not realise that. I will do whatever you ask for to shield you from such attention if you wish it." He cupped the side of her face with a hand, rubbing her cheekbone with his thumb, and kissed her softly.

She leaned into him and smiled. "Thanks, Thor. Just...keep our relationship private? Not secret, but..."

"Do not sing your praises like a skald singing for his supper." He nodded. "I will do that, and I will ask Tony for advice on deflecting the camera's eye."

Jane raised her eyebrows. "Really? He's, um..."

"He's not known for keeping secrets, that guy," Darcy finished. "Has anyone shown you the 'I am Iron Man' clip yet?"

"Nay, my friend, but still I think you are mistaken." He smiled slightly. "Tell me, what has the media to say about Tony's robots?"

"You mean the ones we met when we visited?" Darcy asked. "...Not much. Let me think...SI does some robotics and AI work, and Stark's head of R&D so everyone knows he's involved, and he's been pretty public in promoting the awesomeness of that department...I'm pretty sure I heard he did a masters in robotics when he was, like, twenty?"

"Indeed." He waited.

Jane tilted her head thoughtfully. "Those robots were really important to him," she said softly. "When we were in the lab...he was so used to having them around, and it wasn't like the way I treat my stuff, it was like the way I treat Darcy." She pursed her lips for a moment. "You're saying that Stark looks really open and showy, but when he wants to keep something private, he's good at it."

He beamed at her. "Aye. He is careful with what is important."

"Him being Iron Man wasn't important?" Darcy said curiously.

Thor shrugged. "Apparently not. I couldn't tell you why, but I suspect he decided that keeping it secret would be a great effort for little reward. His movements were much scrutinised as a civilian; I do not believe he could have gained much notoriety from the revelation." Thor had had some enlightening conversations with Tony about being a public figure. In many ways, Thor thought, his position was equivalent to being a great nobleman, or even royalty. It was difficult for the others, who had gained their fame in adulthood, through their own deeds, to understand the challenges of inheriting a position.

"I suppose that's true," Jane said. "After all, he became Iron Man because he got kidnapped, and everything."
Thor was making lunch for himself when he heard Darcy exclaim in the living room, "Oh my Thor, that's adorable!"

He sighed and picked up the plate of food. He shouldn't have put this off for so long. "I heard that, you know," he said, sitting down on the couch beside her.

She blushed and stammered, "O-oh, Th- Jesus Christ, I'm sorry, I don't...does it bother you?"

He smiled, trying to put her at ease. "It does not. But I do notice."

She hunched her shoulders and looked away. "I...after you left, the first time, it was...I just started doing it, and it meant something, but it also didn't mean anything because I'd met you and then you'd disappeared. By the time you came back, it was kind of...habit? I've been trying not to say it when you're around."

"Darcy." She looked at him. "You misunderstand me. I always notice. When you scolded Jane this morning for using food as a paperweight, I heard you, because you called on me."

Her mouth fell open, but, for once, she was speechless.

"You know well that I am not human. Some of that manifests as physical differences; some of it is magic that is...well, I am not unlike a god."

"And that counts?" she squeaked.

He shrugged, a little sheepishly. "It is not unlike a prayer. If you were not my friend, I would not notice, but you are, and I do."

"Oh my - god this is embarrassing," she muttered, then took a deep breath. "Does it...do you want me to stop?"

"It is your choice. I merely thought you should be aware that your words were not simply words." A thought struck him, and he paused. "Also...you should remember, that if you call on me, I will hear it. The more formal the prayer, the stronger it comes through. If you ever need me, if something happens, to you or Jane, and you cannot reach a phone to call me as you usually would, or I do not answer, call on me in prayer, and I will hear you and aid you as best I can."

She stared at him. "This...does Jane know? Because if she knew and she's been letting me say that for, for months, then..."

Thor sat back. "We have had...discussions...about my...godhood. She does not like to think about it, so we do not speak of it often. I haven't mentioned specifically that I hear people's prayers, so I doubt she has realised. I do not think that she would ever pray to me."

Darcy seemed to think of something, because she smirked. "You're telling me she doesn't call on you when she's having some, uh, 'Jane time'?"

Thor blushed. "I do not understand how it works, but when we are...together, and she 'calls on me' in that way, it does not have the, uh, resonance of prayer. I believe it is because, in that context, she is thinking of me as a man, not a god. Your idiom is drawn from a phrase which was part-blasphemy, part-prayer. It is...quirky...because I can be thought of as a god, and so it continues to function as prayer. I do not hear you when you speak of me normally, like the villain in those magic books you showed me."
Darcy frowned, then started laughing. "You mean Voldemort? Did you actually compare yourself to Voldemort just now?"

He raised his eyebrows. "I made a distinction between my abilities, which are real, and his, which are not, but which are a type of magic you understand."

"Man, somehow we got to the point where knowing about Harry Potter is actually useful because fake magic helps people understand real magic. The world's gotten weird." She stood up, stretching. "I'd better get back to work. Enjoy your lunch, big guy."

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That evening, after dinner, Thor and Jane were playing hnefatafl when he brought up the topic of prayer. Jane, on the king's side this round, had just captured a pivotal piece in Thor's blockade, and was waiting for him to make a move. "Jane?" he asked, as he filled the gap. "Have you noticed the way Darcy...swears by me, at times?"

"Oh, damn," she said, contemplating the board. "It's a bit weird, yeah."

"I, uh..." he always hated talking about his godhood with Midgardians. They never believed him, anymore. "Functionally, magically, it is prayer, and I hear it."

"Mm-hm." She moved one of her pieces, then seemed to realise what he'd said. "Wait, what? You can hear that? When you're not physically here?"

Her tone was doubting, but curious. He captured the piece she had just moved. "I can. I don't really notice most prayers, but I have a...relationship with Darcy, so I do consciously hear hers. I told her today."

"Dammit, Thor, am I ever going to beat you at this game? Shouldn't you have told her earlier? She says it all the time." Jane twisted her mouth to one side, then moved a piece to the edge of the board, guarding the king's path.

"When you play as the king, you defeat me most of the time, and you are getting better and better at blocking me when I am the defender." He sighed. "I should have told Darcy sooner, but it seemed...awkward. You don't...doubt that I can do it, though?"

"We've had this conversation, honey." She smiled at him. "I can speculate and argue about process all I like, but if you tell me you can do something, I trust you."

He sighed again, in relief this time. "Thank you, svass." He tried to take her blocking piece, but she countered him swiftly.

"Have you ever heard me like that?" Jane asked.

"You think of me as a man, not a god. You have never prayed to me, not even jokingly." He hesitated, ignoring the game for a moment. "But...if ever you do, then I will. Jane, would you - if you are ever in danger, if you need me - promise me you will try? Heimdall watches over you, I have asked him to, but though his eye is all-seeing, there is much he must watch for, and I - I fear for you, at times."

He had been thinking about that morning's conversation all day. If Jane came to be better known as his consort, she would be in danger from his enemies. She had already been in danger because of him once, and though she was strong, it was strength of mind and heart and will, not in battle. She did not...he wanted to offer her safety, and security. He did not know if he could.
She looked at him steadily, searching his eyes for something. "I promise, Thor. If I need you, I will try." She leaned across the table to kiss him, resting her hand on his. "Your move."

Chapter End Notes

So, disclaimer: I have _absolutely no idea_ what Jane and Darcy are like. They may be completely ooc here. Hopefully they're worth reading anyway?

Some terminology:
Svass - beloved
astin min - my darling
Hnefatafl - a Norse game played with 16 pieces on one side, and 8 pieces and a 'king' on the other side. The king must move from the centre to the edge or corner of the board without being captured in order to win.

Well. This chapter turned out a little longer than usual. And a bit bitsy, but I was expecting that. It is also delightfully low-key, which I'm warning you now is a deliberate reprieve. I have a rough outline of the next two chapters in my head, and it involves a whole lotta angst from Steve, Tony, _and_ Bruce. Also, the chapter after that is both completely written already (I've been waiting to post it for months) and marks the halfway point of this fic. I'm really looking forward to that one.

Your comments and kudos are always delightful - let me know what you think!
"Come on in, Captain Rogers." He was a short man, with less muscle than most agents, but clearly physically fit. He had black rectangular glasses, and his hair was starting to grey.

"Um...Dr Parilla?" Steve checked, following the man into his office. The room was...sparsely decorated, but not impersonal. There was a full bookshelf on one wall, some landscape photos on the other, and a wooden carriage clock on the coffee table. There were a few knick-knacks here and there, not expensive-looking, but they spoke of stories Steve suspected he would never hear. He wondered where they came from.

"Tomas, please. Or Tom, if you prefer." Dr Parilla smiled, and gestured to a couch. "Would you like a glass of water?"

"...Thanks. And it's, uh, Steve, then." Steve sat, and watched as Dr Parilla (Tomas, he reminded himself) took a jug of water from the mini-fridge, poured some into a glass, passed it to Steve, and sat down in an arm-chair. There was a desk in one corner of the room, but nothing between him and Steve, and he didn't have a notebook or clipboard.

Tomas smiled at him. "Alright, Steve. Before we begin, I'd like to clarify our confidentiality agreement." He paused, and Steve nodded. "Firstly, everything that we discuss here is private, and information is only to be shared by you or with your consent. This room is at least as secure as SHIELD's interrogation rooms, and it is swept for bugs twice a week by agents drawn randomly from a pool of experts. I may make notes, to remind myself of what we have discussed, but they will be kept in secure storage, they will not be digitised, and none of my notes will be shared with anyone without your explicit consent.

I may discuss your case with colleagues, but if I do, it will be in the most general terms possible and without using your name. Something like 'One of my patients is having trouble with memories of a traumatic experience in a desert.'

If something comes up that you think your superiors or colleagues should know, because it affects your work, I am able to put a note in your file or to discuss it with them. There are agents, for example, who have been excused from infiltration missions on psychological grounds. This may be temporary, or ongoing. If I believe that something we discuss has the potential to make you unsafe in the field, I will ask you to consent to my noting that in your file, and notifying your handler and next-level supervisor, which would in your case be the Director.

There are two circumstances in which I will share information regardless of your wishes. If I believe your safety in the field is affected, and you are not willing for me to give your handler or the Director specifics so that they can plan your missions accordingly, then I will put a general note indicating that you are unfit for fieldwork due to ongoing psychological issues. When you consent
to more specific information being shared, or I believe your safety is no longer affected, that note will be removed. Secondly, if I believe you are at risk of suicide, I will share that information with your handler and the Director. All of SHIELD's agents are valuable to us, and we want all of you to be safe and healthy. In that circumstance, you will be taken out of the field, and may be placed under further restrictions.

Do you have any questions?"

Steve swallowed. It was good that things were private, but..."Does Director Fury have to know? Why not just my, uh, handler?"

Tomas smiled. "Telling Director Fury is a fail-safe in case your handler disregards your safety. Junior agents are usually assigned to a supervisor, and then work with a number of different handlers, so the trust and care in that relationship can be...less developed, let's say. Their supervisor is able to make sure that, even when the agent is only working with a handler for one mission, everything is in place so that agent can be safest and most effective."

Steve frowned. He really didn't want Fury to know what was...going on, in his head.

"If I may, Steve," Tomas said, "based on your mission success over the last seven months, I doubt that I need to put such a note in your file at this point. If it comes up later, we can discuss it further, and you may find it beneficial to discuss this with Agents Barton and Romanoff."

Steve pursed his lips for a moment, then nodded. "Alright. I can...handle that." He took a sip of water to cover his uncertainty. He was fairly sure it hadn't worked.

"Good," Tomas said. "I'd like to start by asking why you made an appointment with me today. Apparently you haven't been seeing anyone so far...?"

Steve looked away. "When I...woke up, there were a lot of things to, uh, catch up on. I didn't - it didn't seem important."

"But sometime since then, something changed your mind."

Steve turned the glass in his hands. "Well, uh, I ran into Clint - Agent Barton - after one of his appointments a couple of weeks ago, and he said it was helpful for him and Natasha, and that most SHIELD agents did therapy. I didn't...no one had explained what modern therapy was like yet."

Tomas nodded. "So your past experiences led you to believe therapy would be unhelpful after you first 'woke up', and those preconceptions weren't addressed until you spoke to Clint about it?"

"That's about the size of it," Steve admitted. He shifted in his seat, feeling awkward. How was he meant to share anything, let alone anything important, with a stranger? How did you start sharing stuff like that?

"Alright. That explains why you weren't coming to therapy before, but not why you are coming now." Steve winced a little. "You said Clint said that therapy was 'helpful' - what is it that you'd like me to help you with? Do you have any particular goals for our time together?"

Steve shrugged. He'd...he hadn't thought too hard about it. But he'd watched, over the weeks and months, as Clint's eyes grew less haunted, his shoulders less tense. Clint was easier in his skin now. And Steve..."I don't, don't really know. But, uh...I've lost a lot, recently," he said slowly. "Well, everything. I mean, everyone knows that, but at the same time...it seems like it's easy for people to
forget, that a year ago I was working with the Commandos to destroy Hydra bases. That was a year
ago, for me. And that's...it's a lot of change, and I'm doing my best, and yeah, sure, a lot of things
are better now. And sometimes, it's like living in a book - I used to love H.G. Wells. He's. It's a bit
too real, now. Oh, uh, you know who that is, right? I think Bruce said people still read his books."

Tomas smiled. "Yes, I've heard of him. I haven't read anything of his myself, but I can understand
what you mean."

Steve nodded. "Right. Like I said...some days, it all seems unreal, or sometimes just absurd. How
whacky is it, that a sickly kid born at the end of World War One would get turned into...this," he
gestured to himself, "in time to fight in World War Two; discover a secret sub-organisation, led by
a guy without a face, that is using a semi-magical cube to make insanely powerful weapons; put a
plane in the water to get rid of the cube; get frozen for seventy years and not die; then get revived
just in time to save the world from an alien god using the same cube to open up semi-magical
portals for a different race of aliens; and then end up working on a team with an alien prince, a guy
in a robot suit, and another guy that turns into a giant green monster? It's not...I don't know if I
would put up with it, in a book. It's almost too bizarre, too implausible. And that's my life?"

Tomas nodded. "You're right, it is a little unbelievable. A lot of SHIELD agents have difficulty
with that, actually - I'm sure if you asked them, Agents Barton or Romanoff could tell you stories
about unbelievable missions they've been on."

Steve shrugged. "I've heard a few. But, you know...the fact that two of my team-mates were once
asked to abduct a giant tortoise...it kind of, I guess, makes me more different to the people I grew
up with, rather than making me closer to my team. It's just, just another thing about my life that's
strange now." He sat silent for a long moment, then added softly, "If I...I used to have nightmares
that the serum, and everything that came after, that it was all a dream. When Bucky...fell, I stopped
having them. The pain was too real, I guess. But now...sometimes I find myself wondering, you
know? If...if I didn't really wake up, if this isn't real. And I don't, I don't want losing someone to be
the thing that proves it is." His voice cracked, and he could feel tears welling up. "I've lost so many
people already."

Tomas passed him a tissue box and waited as Steve pulled himself back together. "Have you gone
to see any of the people that you knew in the war, or their families?" he asked.

Steve looked away. "I don't...No." It didn't seem right to visit some but not the others, and he didn't
think he could bear standing at their graves.

"I think maybe you should. They kept in touch with each other, you know - the Howling
Commandos, Agent Carter, Colonel Phillips, and their families. Their reunions are fairly famous,
although they keep the press away." Steve must have looked confused, because Tomas smiled.
"SHIELD was founded by Agent Carter, at least in part, and there's more than one agent here
related to her or the Commandos. Word gets around."

He hadn't wanted to think about it: Peggy's legacy. She was...it wasn't fair, for her to have a legacy,
and for him to have missed it. Life isn't fair, he told himself. You've known that since you were old
enough to watch kids play out the window when you were sick in bed. "You think I should...see
them?" he asked.

"I think that, more than anyone else, they will be able to see you as Steve Rogers, not Captain
America. I think that it must be hard for you to make connections outside your team, and these
people, especially the Barneses and Carters, consider you family." Steve's breath hitched. He hadn't
had family in so long... "And," Tomas went on, "I think that part of the reason the future might feel
unreal to you is that you aren't dealing with the time that passed except in a theoretical way.
Talking to people who've lived through it, who can remember what you remember and got here the long way round, might...

"...give me an anchor?" Steve finished. He certainly felt adrift, some days.

------

"Hey Tony?" Steve asked, as he came into the workshop.

"What's up, Capsicle?" Tony put down the blowtorch and grinned at him.

"Uh..." Steve rubbed the back of his head, "Do you know if, uh, Howard kept anything...of mine? After the war? Or about me, I guess."

When he looked up, Tony's expression was set, off somehow, and his shoulders were stiff. Something...oh, damn. They'd warned him not to talk about Howard, and he'd forgotten. He should have asked Jarvis. Would Jarvis know? If Tony didn't talk about Howard? Jarvis seemed to know everything about Tony, though. "Jarvis, give Steve access to the Cap Collection, and show him how to get there." Tony's tone was all wrong, cold and emotionless.

"Certainly, sir. Would you like to go there now, Captain?"

Steve wouldn't, actually. He wanted to fix whatever he'd broken here, but...that was Jarvis nudging him, telling him that it would be best if he left. "That's fine, Jarvis." He tried to put as much warmth, as much friendship as possible, into his voice when he said "Thanks, Tony," but he didn't know if it had worked.

Once he was out of earshot, he interrupted Jarvis' description of the route to the Stark Mansion. "Jarvis?" he asked. "Is Tony...okay? I know I shouldn't have mentioned Howard, I just, I was talking to, uh, someone, about the war today, and it made me want to, well, find out what happened to everything, and it seemed like the logical place to start, but...should I have done something else?"

Jarvis paused. They had different qualities, Jarvis' silences. This one sounded like a sigh, to Steve. "Sir does not have positive associations with his father, Captain, especially in connection with you. It is not...pleasant, for him to be reminded, but it happens relatively frequently, and he has his own ways of coping. Do not worry about him too much."

Steve sighed in relief and sympathy, and patted the wall. "No. That's your job, isn't it?" He smiled wryly. "Well, let me know if I can help, or if I need to stay out of the way, or something."

"I shall do that, Captain."

------

Steve had actually been to Stark Mansion before. It was one of SI's go-to venues, being huge, near Tony Stark, owned by Tony Stark, and set up for such things anyway. He had not, however, been in this part of the Mansion before.

"Most of the Mansion is kept closed up these days," Happy explained as he led the way to a side door. "But back when the Starks lived here, they wanted the archive out of the way, so visiting researchers didn't intrude on the family space."
"Visiting...researchers?" Steve asked, a little bewildered.

"Well, you are famous," Happy replied, as if Steve being famous was the obvious explanation for researchers to visit Howard Stark's archives. Steve had a feeling this was another one of those conversations where he should just smile and nod until he could ask Jarvis about the missing context. "Here we are."

He rang the doorbell, and a minute later, it opened. "Happy! We got word that someone would be coming by, it's good to see you." The man stopped, and stared at Steve. "Oh my god. You're. Oh my god."

"Steve, this is Joe Dawson," Happy explained. "He's the head archivist here. Joe, this is -" 

"You don't need to tell me," interrupted Joe. "I'm so sorry Captain, just...give me a minute to pour my brain back into my head. Oh my god. This is...surreal."

Steve grinned. Some days, this kind of reaction was exhausting, but right now, today, it was funny. "You can call me Steve, if you like."

"Call you...right, ok. I can call you Steve." He shook himself. "Ok, I think I've got it now. Sorry." He stuck out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Steve."

Steve shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, too. I think we're good here, Happy."

Happy nodded. "Alright. Give me a ring if you want a lift home. See you, Joe."

"Bye, Happy."

"Well, let's not stand here on the stoop, come in!" Joe waved Steve inside. "Now, what brings you to the Cap Collection?"

For a moment, Steve didn't answer. He was too busy staring at the sign on the opposite wall of the lobby he'd walked into, a sign that read 'Steve Rogers Memorial Archive'. This was all him?

"Uh...I asked Tony if Howard kept anything of mine. He sent me here."

"Wow. I'm guessing he didn't explain much, did he?"

Steve nodded, and Joe started walking away. "Come on, we'll have some tea or coffee or something. I was about to go on break when Happy showed up."

"Oh, uh, sorry to interrupt," Steve began apologetically.

"Nah, you're fine. I wouldn't miss this for the world. But you look like you could use a cuppa."

"So, when Cap - um, when you went down, there was a bit of a dilemma about your things. You still had Bucky Barnes listed as your next of kin, but he was dead and his family weren't listed in your will. They were also civilians, and at that point anything to do with you was a matter of national security. Howard Stark decided that he wanted your things, rather than letting the army have them or get rid of them, and through a combination of money, influence, and being there at the time, he got possession of most of it. The army kept some, and some things were given to Peggy Carter and the Commandos, but Howard got most of it."
Joe opened the door to what was obviously a break room, and shooed Steve into a chair. "Tea? Coffee?"

"Water's fine," Steve answered absently. Howard had kept his things...apparently Howard had gone out of his way to get them. Why on earth...it's not like they were close, Howard just kept sticking his nose in when the Commandos were doing things, and they kept letting him redesign their equipment whenever they got back to base.

"Here you go then. So, anyway, at that point he had the start of a collection, and the way his old employees tell it, he didn't do anything by halves, so he hired an archivist, gave them a yearly budget, and told them to expand the collection as they saw fit. By the time he died, it was the largest collection of Captain America material in the world. Tony Stark stopped expanding the collection, but he hasn't gotten rid of any of it, and he keeps me around to look after it and help out visiting researchers and that kind of thing."

Steve frowned. "Do you get a lot of visiting researchers?"

"Steve, there have been thousands of books written about you, the Commandos, the Super-Soldier program, and Hydra, and millions of news and journal articles." Joe said seriously. "Not all of them go straight to the source, but we still get, oh, a hundred or so visitors a year? Or we did before you, uh..."

"Woke up?" Steve finished.

"Yeah, that. I'm pretty sure we've had a hundred visitors this year already, and it's barely May." He frowned. "We had a digitisation project going, which would decrease the number of visitors once it's done, but now that there's so many people coming through, I don't have much time to work on it. I've been thinking about trying to get an assistant, but last time I talked to Mr Stark, I got the impression he'd rather forget about the archive altogether."

"Wouldn't it be Pepper you'd have to talk to?" Steve asked.

"No, she runs Stark Industries. The archive is owned by Mr Stark personally, it's not attached to the company," Joe explained, pouring hot water into a mug that said 'I'm an archivist - What's YOUR superpower?' It was, perhaps, just a bit too appropriate.

"Huh." Steve sat for a moment, thinking, then asked, "So, what sort of material do you have here?"

Joe shrugged. "It's probably easiest to take you on a tour, but to cut a long story short: there's the 'Steve Rogers' collection, which deals with your life up to 1940; the 'Super-Soldier' collection, which has everything to do with your recruitment, Erskine, and the SSR; the 'Howling Commandos' section, which has material relating to your work before you went down; that ties in with the 'Hydra' collection, most of which is stuff found in Germany, Poland, and Austria after the war; and the 'Captain America' collection, which is all the propaganda, movies, posters, comics, and so on, that got made with or about you from 1940 onwards - that's split up by decade. There isn't a specific section for Peggy Carter or Bucky Barnes - that stuff's mixed in with everything - but we have indexes of the material relating to them to help people find things. We've got letters, photos, physical objects like shield prototypes, a replica of the uniform you were wearing when you went down, reports from your missions...we have a collection of your sketches, actually - they're very good."

Oh god. Hundreds, possibly thousands of people had seen his sketches. "Uh, thanks."
"By the sound of it, you probably want the stuff from the 'Steve Rogers', maybe the 'Howling Commandos' section. Let me finish my tea, and then I'll show you around."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter got away from me a little bit. I was genuinely considering ending it with Steve's conversation with Tony, but it felt unbalanced, so I started thinking about the Cap Collection, and then I started writing it, and Joe was just _fun_ to write. (And for those who are wondering, he's definitely not American. Possibly British, possibly Australian, but not from the US.) So it's longer than usual.

A couple of clarifications: H.G. Wells was already a well-known sci-fi author by the 20s and 30s, and his work includes some of the earliest time travel in fiction, and 'War of the Worlds'. The Strike Team Delta mission with a giant tortoise is from SallyExactly's excellent series 'At My Back', which focuses on Clint and Natasha's relationship from their first meeting onwards.

I hope you enjoyed it - let me know what you think.
Tony stared at the icy ocean that stretched out ahead of him. The suit was climate controlled - here or the tropics, it made no difference - but over the past few years he'd developed some kind of...phantom limb thing, or something, and he could almost feel the wind on his face. He'd hoped to outrun the memories. It hadn't worked any better than the other times he'd tried it. "What time is it, Jarvis?"

"Local, or in New York, sir?"

Tony made that facial twitch that read as 'shrugging' to Jarvis when he was in the suit - for everyone else, he had to exaggerate his movements, but Jarvis couldn't see them at all. Feel them, yes - there were dozens of tiny gestures used to control different features of the suit. But he couldn't see them. It was two completely separate conversations, when he was in the suit: what he did with his body, that the world could see, and what he did with his face, that Jarvis could.

"It is 11:22 PM at your current location, and 7:36 PM at the Tower, sir. The Avengers have just finished dinner."

Tony had been flying for...well over an hour then. "Did they miss me, J?" Tony asked sarcastically.

There was no sarcasm in Jarvis' voice when he replied, "They did, sir. I told them you were testing suit upgrades and would be home late."

It wasn't a lie. He hadn't upgraded anything that needed a trans-Atlantic flight, but he'd played laser tag for a while in one of the testing sites, trying to work off his anger. (Jarvis created 'enemies' on the HUD and simulated repulsor fire based on Tony's movements. It made Tony look completely insane, but it was fun. Usually.) "Thanks, Jarvis."

"Are you planning on returning to the Tower this evening?" Good old Jarvis. He made it seem like a choice, like an option with no consequences. In reality, if he didn't go back to the Tower tonight,
Steve would freak out as soon as he found out, and he'd probably get a lecture from Sitwell on truancy next time they met.

"Do I have anything on tomorrow?" If he didn't, then...

"You had meetings with members of Stark R&D regarding battery improvements for the next hardware upgrades in the afternoon."

Nothing team-related, then. "Yeah, put those off, J. I mean, I could go, but I plan to be fairly hung-over by then." Getting drunk would help. Well, it wouldn't. But he could pretend it would help. He'd tried working on a dozen different projects, training, flying. Before Iron Man, next step would have been fucking, but if it's hard to have a safe casual hook-up as a celebrity, it's worse as a superhero. Besides, he hated letting people near the reactor. So, no fucking. And no drugs, either - that wasn't fair to the team.

"Sir?" Jarvis sounded worried. "How are you planning on becoming hung-over?"

Tony smiled a little to reassure him, and turned back towards New York. "Don't worry, Jarvis, I'm not going bar-hopping. I just plan on drinking a completely indecent quantity of scotch and/or vodka and/or whatever else I've got in the penthouse bar. I'll probably do it in the workshop though. Usual protocols?"

"I will prevent you from gaining access to anything incendiary once you pass the legal limit to drive, and I will prevent any software or hardware innovations from being implemented until you have confirmed changes while sober," Jarvis confirmed.

"Have I told you lately that I love you, J?" His tone was sarcastic, but...You are my greatest creation, Howard had said. The words were haunting him tonight, the closest thing he'd ever gotten to affection. Jarvis would have better words to remember.

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By the time Bruce showed up, Tony was thoroughly drunk, even by his standards. "Bruce!" he called. "Awesome, we can have a party! Science party? Whatever, pull up a chair."

"What...Tony, what's going on here?" Bruce looked...concerned, that's the name of that face. Or worried?

"I'm getting drunk, in the fine tradition of Starks everywhere who don't want to deal with their problems." He thought that was why Howard drank so much. Probably. He'd drunk a lot. "D'you want a scotch?"

Bruce picked his way through the debris that was now strewn across the workshop floor. "I don't drink, Tony."

"Fuck, seriously? Can you do anything fun, anymore?" Tony winced. That was an asshole thing to say. Asshole-ish. Shitty.

Bruce sighed. "I don't drink because of my father, not the other guy."

Tony nodded sagely. "Here." He gave Bruce a glass of water that Dummy had left by his elbow an hour ago. "I can drink and you can not-drink and we can complain about our shitty fathers. Thank Christ they never had another kid!" He raised his glass in a toast. He'd say 'Thank Christ they're gone', but he was never sure if he was glad Howard was gone. Hated him, yes. But it was all a big tangled knot of feelings. He humphed. "Feelings, Bruce. They're the worst."
"What feelings?" Bruce asked.

"Steve wanted to know if Howard kept anything of his. Hah. You ever heard of the 'Steve Rogers Memorial Collection'?" Tony didn't wait for an answer. "Every scrap of paper Steve wrote on, every crappy doodle...Howard kept all of it, in that fucking archive. D'you know what I've got from my childhood? My patents, and the things I took with me to college. Nothing worth preserving about me, apparently."

Tony stared at the glass in his hands and took another sip. "I only ever spent time with him as a lab assistant. He'd tell me stories about 'his friend Captain America'. I must have known every one of them by heart by the time I was ten." He laughed. "Someday I need to get a fondue kit, make Steve blush. That one never made it into the history books."

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"I used to love being in the workshop with him, getting even the tiniest bit of his attention. He treated me worse than I treat Dummy, though. I'd come out of there with burns all over my hands because he'd give me metal before it cooled and never got around to buying me gloves."

"No-one ever did anything?" Bruce asked.

"He was Howard Stark. And it wasn't like I didn't beg to get into the workshop every time I was home from school. Jarvis'd wrap up my hands, sometimes he could get me to wait a few days before going back. But between my dad and..." Tony waved a hand, "y'know, building shit, why the fuck wouldn't I want to spend time there." He snorted. "I was fucked up even then."

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"Did I ever show you the...y'know, the thing, the Howard thing?" Tony tipped his head back to look at the ceiling. "Little help, J?"

"The video Howard Stark recorded which inspired you to create the element which now powers your arc reactor," Jarvis prompted.

Tony pointed finger guns at the nearest camera - he thought it was the nearest - and spun on his chair. "Nope, nope, that was a bad plan. Make a note J: no spinning when drunk. But yeah, that thing...did I show you, Bruce?"

Bruce shook his head. "I don't think so, Tony."

"He called me his 'greatest creation' - I'm not...what sort of fuck-up of a father calls his son a 'creation'? I don't want it to be him who created me, Bruce."

"He didn't, Tony. You created yourself. He had some input into the initial designs, but so did Edwin Jarvis, and Peggy Carter, and your mother; and you've kept on re-creating yourself ever since."

"Hah. What version 'm I on, d'you think? One for every year? Or for every near death experience? There's been a lot of those. 've I had more upgrades than the armour yet?"

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"Y'know how many times I've been kidnapped, Bruce? I don't. I was too young to count them when they started. Then it got boring."
"Kidnapping was boring?"

"I was kidnapped for ransom, right? So they had to keep me in good condition. Fuckers. They'd tie me up in some sort of blank cell for hours. I usually hurt myself worse escaping than the kidnappers had hurt me."

"You were escaping kidnappers when you were a kid?"

"Well, Captain America wasn't going to save me, was he?" Tony made a rude noise. "I spent a while completely obsessed by Houdini. By the time I was eight, I was escaping before Howard noticed I was gone, sometimes. And he never...he always yelled at me, when he got me back, if he talked to me at all, for being careless."

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"What are you even doing here, big guy?"

Bruce sighed and smiled sadly. "I'm keeping you company. I'm not going to leave you like this alone."

Tony stared at him, trying to figure out how anyone could see something to be frightened of in this man. "You're so nice. How are you so nice?"

"I'm really not that special, Tony."

"Yes you are. You're nice, and patient, and a genius, and you're my science bro." Tony frowned. "You are, right? It's not just that you like the labs...I mean, that's cool, you deserve them, see the 'genius' comment, but I thought..."

"You thought right, Tony. We're friends."

"Good. You probably won't even backstab me. That'd be nice. People keep doing that. Do I have a sign or something? Does my back just look really evil?"

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"I'm an asshole, aren't I? Shouldn't complain about shitty fathers to you. Yours was worse." Bruce's father was...Tony would say worst in the world, but someone would prove him wrong if he did that, and he really. fucking. did not want. to know about worse fathers than Bruce's.

"It's not a competition, you know. My father beating me doesn't make yours neglecting you any better."

"Shouldn't it, though? People always say 'it could be worse'." Tony snorted. "'s if I haven't run the models."

"It doesn't help, though. It never did. Personally, I find it depressing, reminding myself how bad things could be."

Tony nodded. "Could have got raped in Afghanistan, 's well as water-boarded. All that says is that people are shitty. Doesn' make me feel lucky. Makes me feel useless."

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"I made weapons for Ross, once. I shouldn've. He's a dick. Like, a...fuckin', douchenozzle of a shitbiscuit. Fuck. I'm better at insults when I'm sober."
Bruce was smiling. "I get what you mean, Tony. It's okay."

"Is it though? 'Cause, I'm thinking, Ross is at least as bad as Ten Rings, for, like, crazy and collateral damage."

"I'm pretty sure the collateral's my fault."

"No!" That was wrong, that wasn't okay. Bruce shouldn't feel guilty, he didn't have reason to feel guilty like Tony did. "I have...stats, to prove it! Jarvis, show Bruce the stats." Jarvis brought up the charts Tony had been fiddling with in his spare time. "Look, see, when Ross gets involved, more people get hurt than when he doesn't."

"That's...Tony, where did you get your data?"

Tony shrugged. "Jarvis can find out almost anything, given time and the internet. I've been trying to figure out how to stop the Hulk being all...rage-y and destructive since you moved in."

"Pretty sure I've figured that one out - don't let him wake up."

"That's not fair, though. 'Cause he exists now. And, I mean, you're gonna change sometime, so we gotta figure out what to do with him when he's here. 'Cause I want you here. So he's gonna be here. And he does different things, different days. Something's influencing his behaviour; he's responding to circumstance. So we need to figure out what's good circumstance."

"Tony..."

"I called him a rage monster and I was wrong, Jolly Green. He's got other feelings, and he remembers stuff, and he talks to us, actual conversations."

"You realise that's worse? If it's true?"

How was it worse? If Hulk was a person, he could learn, and then Bruce didn't have to be so careful all the time, there was no way Tony could ever be that careful, it was just impossible, Bruce was impossible...

"If he can make choices, Tony, if he's not fundamentally destructive, he's choosing to destroy things. If he has other emotions, if he's not just anger, that means he's an angry person."

"And..." There was a connection to be made here, but Tony hadn't quite made it yet.

"You think I need another powerful, angry man destroying my life? Two's more than enough."

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"D'you think Steve even notices, the way everyone measures themselves against him? 'What would Captain America do?' And appearance, and strength, and whatever...he's the 'man your man could be like'. Ross and Howard - they tried to make us both into Steve. Neither of them were happy with what they got." He sighed. "I'm just a man in a suit, Brucie-Bear."

"You're not, Tony, you're so much more than that. You know Steve only said that because of Loki, you know he doesn't think that."

"Yeah, well Steve's made of sunshine and rainbows. He thinks the best of everybody. Just because he doesn't think it anymore, it doesn't mean he was wrong in the first place."

"Alright, fine, you're a man in a suit. But Clint's a guy with a bow. And Pepper's a woman with a
different kind of suit. And Coulson...he was a man in a suit, right?"

"Coulson wore the best suits. Well, not the best, he had a budget and I'm pretty sure he went through suits...I don't know, quickly. But he wore good suits. He shouldn't have died. He was awesome."

-----

Tony yawned. "Ugh. 'm tired. What time is it, even?"

"It is 2:54 AM, sir," said Jarvis promptly.

"Ah. Fuck-off-o'clock, then."

Bruce laughed a little. "You reckon you could sleep now?"

Tony shrugged. "I guess? I mean, if I don't go to bed soon I'll end up either passing out or replacing sleep with coffee."

"Yeah, that's, uh, that's a no. Here." Bruce held out a glass. "Drink some more water, and I'll help you up to your room."

"Aww. You're the best, big guy. 'Cept for Jarvis, probably. Jarvis is definitely in the running for the title of 'Best'..."

"Come on, Tony." Bruce took his hand and hauled him up. He was surprisingly strong. "Time to call it a night."

Chapter End Notes

I actually finished this chapter ahead of time. Like, two days after the previous one. And the next chapter's been written for ages. And, while I've been waiting to post this chapter, I've written chapter 30. So I actually have a buffer right now. Considering the number of assignments I have due in the next month, that's probably a good thing. I'm going to keep a weekly schedule going for now, but if I get to the holidays and I'm _still_ ahead, I'll post more frequently for a little while.

A key aspect of Bruce's understanding of the Hulk comes up here: if the Hulk _is_ a person, based on what Bruce knows of him, he's the sort of person Bruce hates and fears more than any other. It's one of the reasons Bruce is avoiding the evidence that Hulk is anything other than mindless rage. He hates that his anger might produce a rage monster, but he hates more that his anger might produce a person like Brian Banner or General Ross.

Tony's ability to escape from kidnappers at a young age comes from 'Four (or Five) Reasons for Kidnapping Tony Stark', by scifigr147, who is one of my favourite authors.

I hope drunk Tony came across ok - I do very little social drinking, so I felt very much like I was making it up as I went along. I look forward to your comments: I always love to hear from you.
"Agent Barton!" Jarvis' voice woke Clint from (unusually) sound sleep - something was wrong, badly wrong, if Jarvis sounded - worried? - like that.

"What's happening, Jarvis?" It wasn't the Assemble Alert, so...something in the Tower? Clint swung his feet out of bed and found a shirt and jeans. Better to be dressed for whatever it was.

"Dr Banner woke from an unusually bad nightmare and went to the Green Room to calm himself down, but was unable to prevent the transformation." His voice was low and urgent, and no wonder. "Master Hulk is in some distress, and from what he is saying, thinks that he has been captured.

Oh, fuck. "Get me an express elevator, J. I'll do my best." Better not to arm up, but Clint grabbed a pair of shoes on his way out the door. If Hulk was smashing things, he didn't want to cut his feet. He wriggled his feet into the shoes as the elevator took him down to Bruce's floor.

He looked at the door to the Green Room. He could hear Hulk roaring inside. "I don't...should I just go in? Can you make the walls transparent? Do you have tranq guns set up?" They were the same ultra-shatterproof material the Hulk Cage on the Helicarrier was made of, he thought.

"I can," said Jarvis, "but if you want him to trust you, I suggest you don't linger in the corridor. I will use tranquilisers if necessary, but I would rather not establish an unfriendly precedent." The advice was good - Jarvis probably knew Hulk better than any of them, with all the footage he'd been sorting through.

"Ok then. Transparent on three, and then I'll go in." The 'glass' shifted from opaque to transparent, and Clint waved. "Hey, buddy!" he called, as cheerfully as he could, and grabbed the door handle as the light on it turned green. "What's up?"

"Shooty Bird?" Hulk looked bewildered, and stopped throwing his fists around. "Why here? Where here?"

"You're in the tower, Jade Jaws, we all live here." Casual and calm, that's what he was going for. Casual and calm. "Actually, you've been here before - when you smashed the puny god?" That footage had been so satisfying. "That was on Tony's floor."

Hulk settled down a bit, so Clint kept talking. "As for why...Bruce had a nightmare, I'm guessing."

"Night-mare?" Oh, fuck it all, another basic concept Hulk hadn't learnt? How many were there?
"Horse?"

"No, but good guess. When you...huh, you don't sleep, do you?"

Hulk grunted. "Here, or not here. People say 'waking' and 'sleeping'. But not like baby sleeping."

So somewhere down the line he'd seen kids sleeping. Interesting. "Yeah, it's not the same. Bruce does sleep, though, and when people sleep, we sometimes see things that aren't real, called dreams."

"Like drugs?" Hulk growled. He'd been exposed to hallucinogens? Whose bright idea was that?

"Kind of, but our bodies do it naturally, and sometimes they're really nice. Sometimes they're just weird. But when they're bad and scary, we call them nightmares. All the team have a lot of nightmares."

Hulk looked...sad. "Shooty Bird have night-mares?"

Clint came a little closer. "Yeah. It's okay, I can handle it. They aren't real, and when I wake up, they're gone."

"Healed hurts still hurt. Not-real scary still scary." Hulk looked sympathetic, and protective, and sad. and Jesus Christ Bruce needed to see this.

"Yeah. We can't do anything about it, though." Clint shrugged. "Anyway, that's why you woke up, I think. Bruce was still scared from a nightmare. There's no danger right now."

Hulk frowned. "Hulk go?"

"You don't have to." Clint shrugged again. "I'll keep you company if you want to stick around for a bit."

Hulk grunted, and slumped to sit on the floor, and they sat together in silence for a while, as Clint's mind raced through the implications of their conversation. Hulk was sympathetic. Not just learning, or hurting, or reacting...he genuinely cared about other people. Clint had thought he might, but...

"Hey Hulk," Clint began, and Hulk grunted acknowledgement. "Why do you roar when you wake up?"

"Can smell fear. Fear means danger. Hulk roars to keep danger away until Hulk can smash."

"Oh." That was a pretty awful vicious cycle. "You know, uh, sometimes there isn't anything there to hurt you. People are just afraid because you look scary."


Well that was even worse. "That's pretty tough, big guy. Not everyone is scared of you though. The team isn't scared."


"You know..." Clint began, "there was a while when the agents were scared of me, too." Hulk
made an inquisitive noise. "Just before we met, the, uh, Puny God made me hurt some agents, break the Helicarrier, and the agents were scared of me for months afterwards."

"Not scared now?"

"Some of them." He still got dirty looks now and then - yet another reason why he was more an Avenger than an agent these days. "But, uh, after they saw that I didn't want to hurt them, and I wasn't going to hurt them again, some of them stopped being afraid."

He could see Hulk turning that over in his mind, trying to fit it with his experience. "If Hulk show Hulk not hurt, people not fear Hulk?"

"Well, some people are always idiots." And some fears were hard to get over. Nat was trying hard, but it wasn't easy for her. "But I think so."

"How?"

That was the million dollar question he and Stark had been trying to figure out for weeks, now. "Well, you're already doing a good job by only smashing what we tell you is okay to smash. A lot of people thought you didn't care what or who you smashed, and it made you look a lot scarier. Now we can tell people that you don't smash civilians, or agents, or team. You're even smashing buildings less, which helps people to figure out how smart you are."

"Hulk smart?" He sounded uncertain, and shit, Clint knew that feeling way too well.

"You're very smart, Hulk. You've only been around for seven years, and if we count by days awake, you're much younger than that, but you know a lot of things." He tried to think of examples. "Like when you figured out that invisible wall was bouncy, that was really clever. And Bruce told me you used to keep him alive in the wilderness. And you've learnt a lot of things while you've been fighting with the team." He really hadn't had enough face-time outside fights if Clint couldn't think of something he was clever at that wasn't combat related.

Hulk humphed. "Shooty Bird teach Hulk how to not scare?"

"I'll try."

He looked at Hulk. When he wanted to look nonthreatening, the first thing he did was disarm himself, or at least, show his empty hands. But Hulk was a weapon. On the other hand, there were things that would work...

"Okay, Hulk. People are afraid of you because they know you can smash them, and they think you might. So you can make them feel safer, less afraid, if you make it really, really clear that you aren't trying to."

Hulk grunted in assent.

"So, first thing: keep back. You don't use a gun," Clint grinned, "or a bow and arrow, so if you aren't close enough to reach, then you can't smash anyone. Second thing: stay low. It's easier to hurt someone with your hands if you are taller than them or above them, and you're taller than basically everyone. If you sit down, you won't look so big, and people will be able to see that you don't plan to get closer than you are."

Hulk nodded. "Keep back, stay low. Hulk sits down, not close, so Hulk can't reach to smash."
"That's right, big guy. Thing three: speak soft. Your voice is really loud, because you're so big, so it can sound like you're yelling even when you're talking normally. And yelling is scary."

Hulk looked pretty indignant. "Hulk not yell! Hulk talk. People think Hulk yell because people are puny."

"You're talking pretty loud right now, big guy." Clint pointed out with a laugh. "Louder than Thor, and you call him 'shouty'." Hulk frowned. "Look, this isn't about what you think, it's about what other people think, right? Because they're the ones who are afraid. So, let's practice speaking soft."

"Hulk can speak soft if Hulk wants." His voice was definitely quieter, but...

"That's softer than Thor, but it's still louder than me. Try again."

Hulk pouted. "Hard to talk soft." It was pretty much a whisper for him, and it was at least as soft as Clint's speaking voice. "Hard to hold gentle. Hard to not smash."

It wasn't really fair on Hulk: he had to move through the world on tiptoe if he didn't want to break anything, and if he let himself go, the world paid him back in fear and pain. "If you want to smash today, buddy, I'm sure Tony has some stuff you're welcome to break. I'll bring some up for you, if you like." He knew Tony was working on a playroom for the Hulk, but it wasn't done yet. "But I thought you wanted to learn how not to scare people?"


"Great! And that's a good volume to speak at. People will definitely know you aren't yelling. One more rule: move slow. When you move fast, people don't have time to figure out what you're doing, so they guess. And if they're a little bit afraid, they'll guess you're going to do something to hurt them, and they'll get more afraid. If you move slowly, they can see what you're about to do, and that it won't hurt them, so they don't have to be afraid. Okay?"

"Four rules. Keep back; stay low; speak soft; move slow." Hulk grinned. "Shooty bird rhymes!"

"I thought it might make it easier to remember." Plus, Hulk was basically a kid in a lot of ways. He deserved a bit of play.

"One more thing, not a rule, just an idea, and then I can read you some other things that rhyme, if you like?" He was pretty sure Seuss would go down well with the guy.

"Yes. What idea?"

Clint ran a hand through his hair. "You said that you roar when you wake up to keep the danger away, because you can smell fear, but you also said that sometimes the danger is just that people are afraid of you." Huzzah for self-fulfilling prophecies, basically. "Sometimes when you wake up, like today, you wake up because of an accident, not because of real danger, but when you roar, it gets more dangerous for you because people are scared. Would you be willing to wait after you wake up to see the danger before you roar?"

Hulk frowned. "If not safe, not safe to wait. Waiting could mean time for grabbing and taking, or smashing and hurting."

"What if someone from the team told you it was safe?" If the Hulk could be less automatically
aggressive, it would go a long way towards convincing Bruce, Fury, and everyone else that he didn't need to be caged.

"Not Red Liar or Shouty Long-Hair."

"But if Steve or Tony or I said it was safe, you'd believe us long enough to look for yourself?"

Hulk thought for a few seconds, then nodded slowly. "What about Jarvis?"

"What Jarvis?"

Huh. Of course, Hulk was almost never in the Tower. Jarvis was such a constant presence in their lives, Clint had forgotten Hulk wouldn't know him. "Jarvis is a computer. He helps Tony fly the Iron Man suit, and he looks after us here in the Tower. Say hello, Jarvis."

"Hello, Agent Barton, Master Hulk."

Hulk looked around suspiciously. "Watching? Where?"

"I am everywhere in the Tower. I don't have a body, precisely, but for practical purposes, Master Hulk, I am the Tower."

Hulk hunched his shoulders and frowned. "Don't like watchers. Not safe."

Clint patted him on the arm. "I know how you feel, buddy. It took me a while to get used to it when I moved in, but Jarvis is watching for Tony, not our enemies; he protects us."

"My primary function is to help Sir, that is, Mr Stark, and look after him. Because the Avengers are his friends and team-mates, I look after them as well, which includes both you and Dr Banner, Master Hulk."

"Keep Bruce safe?" Oh, of course. If Jarvis's primary function was looking after Tony, looking after Bruce was Hulk's.

"Yes, Master Hulk, I keep Bruce safe."

Hulk looked at Clint. "Shooty Bird trust Jarvis? Jarvis not lie?"

Clint nodded firmly. "I trust him, Hulk. He won't lie to you. If he can't tell you something, he says so, but he doesn't lie."

Hulk's shoulders relaxed, and he grunted. "Hulk trust for now."

"So, if, when you wake up, Steve or Tony or Jarvis or I am telling you it's safe, you'll look for danger before you yell, and if you can't see danger, you'll follow your not-scaring rules?" Clint clarified. Seriously, this was a big breakthrough (no pun intended) - particularly the Jarvis thing. Apparently, Hulk trusted Clint, and trusted his judgement.

"Hulk wait, Hulk look. Keep back, stay low, speak soft, move slow." Clint got the sense that Hulk repeated things as much to cement them in his memory as for confirmation.

"That's great!" Hopefully this would improve Hulk's interactions with those who worked with the team. "Jarvis, could you bring up Green Eggs and Ham please?"

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After an hour or so of Dr Seuss, Hulk curled up on the floor and...went to sleep, by the looks of it.
It seemed like hanging around the team was giving him opportunities to try all sorts of new things. Clint stuck with him.

"Agent Barton?" Jarvis inquired, speaking softly. "I can watch him if you want to return to your room."

"It's fine, Jarvis. Bruce'll feel better if I'm here when he wakes up." He winced. "Not that he doesn't trust you...fuck."

"I understand, Agent Barton. He will be disoriented and anxious, and a physical human presence will help him more than a disembodied voice." Jarvis sounded resigned, kind of, to being unable to help that way, and you know what? Nope.

"Don't do that, J, don't sell yourself short. You are so much more than a disembodied voice...hell, like you told Hulk, you're basically the Tower." Clint looked at the ceiling - he had no idea where the cameras were, but it helped to think of Jarvis being in some direction or another.

"Thank you, Agent Barton. And thank you for introducing me to Hulk, and telling him he could trust me. I...recognize that trusting me isn't easy."

This was - why was this conversation reminding him of Natasha? "I won't lie to you, Jarvis, I didn't trust you at first. But I don't really trust anyone at first, don't think it's just you. And I definitely trust you now. I meant every word I said to Hulk - you look after us, you protect us, you wouldn't lie to us. For a lot of things, I trust you more than I'd trust Fury." He wouldn't take orders from Jarvis; he wouldn't let Jarvis tell him who to shoot. But with his well-being, and the well-being of the people he cared about? He trusted Jarvis a lot more than Fury. Fury dealt in expediency. Jarvis could be ruthless, sure, but his priorities were different.

"...Thank you. I...I have not known many people; I have not been known by many people. In fact, letting you and the other Avengers become more familiar with me was a significant concern for Sir when he was first considering inviting you to the Tower." Clint wasn't exactly surprised. Tony was very protective of Jarvis. "I...am glad that he chose to do so. He is healthier, safer, more at ease with himself, since you all arrived. I am glad you are here for him."

Clint frowned. "I'm here for you, too, you know? Just because the public can't see you doesn't mean you aren't part of the team. You're there in every battle keeping Tony, keeping the rest of us safe, and you do it here, too. We couldn't do it without your help. It was something Phil had taught him: 'Always thank everyone who helps you'. It made helping, doing good work, so much more rewarding when you knew you were recognized. "We appreciate you, you know, and everything you do for us. I'm sorry if you didn't know I was grateful."

The silence had something of a stunned quality, and when Jarvis spoke, he was almost hesitant, shocked sounding, but definitely pleased. "Agent Barton...I am honoured that you consider me part of the team. Thank you. I do not...I enjoy looking after you all, protecting you. It is fulfilling, and I am glad to do it. But it is...nice, to know that it is recognized in the spirit in which it is offered."

You know what? Clint was going to go for a series of walks outside the Tower, or get Tony to put up some sort of ultra-privacy screen so Jarvis didn't even have records, and they were going to do something nice for the guy. A birthday party? Something, anyway. "You can call me Clint, you know, if you want," he offered. He didn't know why Jarvis was so formal, whether it was a social protocol thing, or something comforting, or deliberate distancing, or what. He had gotten used to all the 'agents' and 'masters' and 'sirs' that went on around the Tower, but that didn't mean he wouldn't like to be called by his first name by a guy who he had literally been living with for four months.
"Thank you...Clint. Perhaps not always, but I will."

Chapter End Notes

I am _so excited_ to be posting this chapter. I started writing it in _October_. It was January when I finished it, and February when I figured out how to fit it into the storyline. The last two chapters were plotted out based on necessary set-up and context for this scene.

The Jarvis interaction was one of the last things added to this chapter, but I'm really glad it ended up here. It's not the focus of the story, but Jarvis' increasing intimacy with the team is a definite side-plot around here. (One that's about to get some more screen-time for a bit.) Apart from Tony, he's closest to Steve, but Clint actually understands 21st century attitudes to AIs, so there's things he can understand that Steve can't.

Also, Hulk learning things! Hulk's cognitive age is difficult to pin down, partly because his development _isn't_ consistent with a human child, and partly because his age is really difficult to figure out (do you go by years he has existed? face-time? how is that influenced by _Bruce's_ age?). But he's definitely young - child-like - and he's got a lot to learn, some of which the Avengers are starting to teach him.

As always, your comments and kudos are much beloved - as Clint (and Phil) said, doing good work is more rewarding when people tell you so, and your positive feedback means a lot. I hope you liked this chapter; it's one of my favourites.
Second Opinion(s)

Chapter Summary

Bruce lost control of the Hulk - why is he the only one worried about this?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce woke up slowly. Something was wrong. He wasn't in his bed. He was...on the ground? Indoors, somewhere. He couldn't remember his nightmares. He felt like he hadn't had any. And the other guy...

He opened his eyes and sat up abruptly. Clint was there. Why was Clint there? "Did I hurt anyone?"

"No, Bruce, you're fine, everyone's fine," Clint said immediately. "It's all good."

"It's not." He transformed unintentionally, in fear and anger, after a nightmare. That was a recipe for disaster, it always was.

"It's fine, Bruce, you're fine. You're in the Green Room in the Tower, he didn't get out, he didn't go anywhere, he stayed right here until he changed back, I'm the only person who's been here since you changed." Clint looked far too complacent. He wasn't even wearing his uniform. The only reason Bruce wasn't panicking was because he was still groggy and exhausted. "Look around, okay? He was pretty calm, he wasn't smashing things."

And...Clint wasn't wrong. The room looked almost the same as it always did. That...that wasn't right, that couldn't be right. "What...?"

"Do you want me to tell you what happened, or do you just want reassurance that he really didn't do damage?" Clint asked seriously.

Bruce took a moment to think. He was aching, in that post-transformation way that he could only compare to the times he'd been really thoroughly beaten up as a child. He didn't want to know about the Hulk. But he needed to know, so that he could be controlled. "Tell me, I guess."

Clint offered him a hand. "Let's move to the couch first, yeah? No need to sit on the ground when we don't have to."

Bruce accepted the hand, groaning a little as he hauled himself up. "Actually, can we, uh, get some food?"

Clint swore. "Sorry, I'm an idiot. I could do with breakfast myself, to be honest. Do you have stuff in your kitchen, or should we go to the common floor?"

"I have a few things." Eggs, oatmeal, fruit, tea. Sometimes he wanted quiet while he ate. Bruce limped after him as they retreated from the Green Room into Bruce's general quarters.

"Cool." Clint deposited Bruce on the couch and checked the fridge. "Scrambled eggs okay with
Bruce shrugged, and Clint nodded, collecting ingredients, mixing bowl, and a fork on the counter.

"So. Here's what happened, based on what Jarvis and I saw and what we guessed. You had a particularly bad nightmare and went to the Green Room, like always, right?"

Bruce nodded. He rarely dreamed of his mother, but when he did, it was...bad.

"Right. So, you changed. Hulk did his usual flail and roar thing, he was a bit freaked out about the location. Jarvis woke me up to help him calm Hulk down, because obviously Hulk didn't know Jarvis yet." There was so much wrong with that statement. Starting with the whole concept of calming Hulk down, but the idea that Clint was the best choice to deal with a raging Hulk, when he was the most vulnerable one in the Tower... "When he recognised me, he stopped smashing, so I came inside to prove it wasn't a trap or a cage, and explain where he was." What. "Then we talked for a while, I introduced him to Jarvis, and eventually, he went to sleep."

"He went to sleep? Not, uh, you don't mean that he changed and I didn't wake up..."

"No, he slept. I think it was the first time ever, based on what we talked about, but yeah, he slept. He changed in his sleep, and you didn't wake up for hours." Clint shrugged. "I was wondering about that, actually. Are you as tired as usual?"

Bruce frowned, thinking about it, although it felt like a distraction from the far more important questions of why the other guy stopped smashing when he recognised Clint, what he talked about, and the fact that he apparently had sufficient neurological independence to sleep. "No, I'm not. I'm less hungry, too."

Clint nodded. "Maybe because he wasn't as, uh, energetic? He spent most of his time sitting and listening."

That. That was just. Not right. Not possible.

It must have shown on his face, his utter disbelief, because Clint said, "You could watch the footage if you don't believe me? Jarvis has cameras in there."

Bruce shook his head. "No, it's fine, I don't...I don't need to see. That." It was bad enough, surreal enough, hearing about it.

Clint shrugged. "Doesn't bother me. Here, these are done." He grabbed a couple of plates from the cupboard and split the eggs between them.

"Uh. Thanks." They ate in silence. Bruce was too busy trying to grasp the implications of what Clint had said to carry a conversation, and Clint didn't seem to mind.

"Morning, Bruce!" called Tony as he swanned into their shared lab. Bruce had been waiting for him for a while.

"Afternoon, Tony," He replied. It was already half past twelve.

Tony made a disparaging noise. "For at least the first two hours after I wake up, it is morning, in the same way that the first meal I eat is always breakfast. The clock has nothing to do with it."
Bruce waited for Tony to say something, anything, about the transformation last night, but Tony set to work without talking at all. After about ten minutes, Bruce spoke up. "Uh, Tony?"

"Mm?" The man replied absently.

"You, uh...you know I, uh," he steeled himself, "I...lost control, last night. Of the, the other guy."

"Yeah, I know," Tony replied, still only half engaged in their conversation.

"Tony!" Bruce said sharply. He couldn't afford to get frustrated, angry, anything, but this was important. "I need you to listen to me right now. I lost control last night."

Tony stopped working and looked at Bruce, his face serious. "I know."

"And...?"

Tony shrugged. "And it's a shame you broke your streak, but it could have gone a lot worse, so I'm pretty happy with how it all went down."

Bruce put his head in his hands. "How are you this calm? This is...this is a serious problem, this is a safety issue for the whole team, this is..." he trailed off. "This is not okay, Tony."

Tony put his hands in his pockets and leaned back. "You know what Jarvis told me when I woke up this morning? 'Dr Banner transformed in the night due to a nightmare. He was in the Green Room at the time, and with the assistance of Agent Barton, Hulk was persuaded to remain there. Minor cosmetic damage was done to the room, but there is no need for structural repairs.' Or something along those lines, anyway. So, if this isn't okay, it's definitely more okay than the, oh, fifteen times Thor has summoned Mjolnir indoors, or the time Clint was testing trick arrows and blew up half the shooting range, or when Clint was showing Steve how to get in the vents and they brought down half the living room ceiling. And that's ignoring the damage I do on a regular basis. And, you know, the supervillains that occasionally try to get in here and fuck things up."

"Tony, it's not about the damage, it's about the danger. The other guy is, he's unpredictable, and he keeps on, keeps on doing things I don't expect, and if I don't expect or can't predict them, I can't..."

"Bruce," Tony interrupted, leaning forward. "Real talk. Since you joined the Avengers, has Hulk ever been more destructive than you predicted?"

"No, but..."

"Okay." Tony sighed. "Bruce, I understand where you're coming from, I really do, buddy, I hate when my models are wrong, because that just fucks everything up, but let's be clear, okay? I expected that you would lose control of the Hulk while in the Tower at some point. Complex systems fail in complex ways, Jolly Green, and people are among the most complex systems there are. I planned for that. The Green Room is at least as able to contain the other guy as the cage on the helicarrier; Jarvis has surveillance; and Jarvis has tranqs. If it was possible to subdue Hulk without shooting him, Jarvis was always going to go for that, and he did. Jarvis was able to make that judgement because he's awesome, and because he's watched every team interaction with Hulk and a lot of the footage that predates the team. There were contingency plans in place and they worked, Bruce, they worked really well, and having worked the first time, it's a pretty good recommendation that they'll work again."

"Tony..." Bruce began helplessly. Why couldn't he see that this was a problem?

"Bruce, what happened last night was a good thing. I mean, not the nightmare, or the change,
but...we got to try out one of our worst case scenarios, and it wasn't that bad."

Bruce gave up. He wasn't going to be able to change Tony's mind on this one. He had that stubborn look.

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When Bruce came upstairs for food, Steve was watching a movie in the common room. "Hi Steve," Bruce said warily.

"Oh! Hi Bruce," Steve replied. "Want to join me? I'm watching a documentary about Star Wars - Jarvis said it was, uh, appropriate, today?"

"What...?"

"It is May 4th, Dr Banner," Jarvis explained. "And while Captain Rogers has seen Star Wars, its influence is pervasive, and at times, subtle. The documentary is not a bad summary of the phenomenon."

Tony had been very excited when he realised that neither Steve nor Thor would know about the Darth Vader/Anakin Skywalker big reveal. It had been one of the first movies they'd made Steve watch. Unfortunately, the plot twist was apparently more predictable if you could speak German, which both Steve and Thor (via Allspeak) did. The reaction had been more 'Ohhh, that makes sense', than 'What?!'. Tony had sulked for a week.

"No thanks." Bruce fiddled with his glasses. "Steve...did Jarvis or Tony mention what, uh, what happened last night?"

Steve looked confused. "We did not," said Jarvis.

"Oh." Bruce looked away. "You should, you should probably know. I, uh, I came out of a bad nightmare and, well, I lost control of the other guy."

"Are you okay?" Steve asked immediately.

Bruce blew out a breath in suppressed frustration. "Why do you all ask the wrong questions? I'm fine!"

Steve shrugged. "If it was bad enough to trigger the Hulk beyond your ability to control him, it must have been really bad. Did you, um, can I help, with something?"

Bruce gripped his shirt cuffs tightly. "You could help by acknowledging that this is a problem." He gritted out. Normally the other guy didn't push, the day after a change, but his team-mates inexplicable reactions were stirring things up. His routine was all off, too, which didn't help.

Steve frowned, confused. "Sorry, I don't think I understand..."

"I lost control, Steve," Bruce mustered up his patience to explain. "You all rely, for your safety, on my ability to keep control, and I didn't. I wasn't physically hurt, or under threat, I wasn't in a combat scenario, and I lost control."

"Right. Clint told me that it's harder when you're asleep?" Steve clarified.

Bruce nodded stiffly. "It's hard to keep conscious control when you aren't conscious. That's why I have Jarvis monitor me, and why the Green Room is closer to my bedroom than my workspace."
Steve nodded. "That makes sense. Did that not work, this time?"

"Well, I transformed."

"Yeah, but...did you hurt anyone? Do any damage? I assume if it was bad, Jarvis would have mentioned it."

"Dr Banner reached the Green Room before the transformation, and Agent Barton was able to calm Master Hulk fairly quickly. There was no structural damage," Jarvis reported.

"That's good, then," said Steve. "So, the precautions worked?"

"I...suppose," replied Bruce awkwardly, "but how did Clint become part of the precautions for an unexpected change? He didn't even have his bow when I woke up."

"Oh, Clint is Hulk's favourite," said Steve easily. "Good choice, Jarvis, by the way."

The Hulk had favourites? "But Clint's the most vulnerable of all of us!"

"Actually, with regards to the Hulk, I'd say that's Natasha. He's still a bit wary about her."

They all kept talking about him like he had...preferences, and favourites, and feelings, and...could be persuaded. The other guy had been around for years and no-one had ever indicated he was anything like this! Was he changing? Was Bruce...becoming something different? Again? Or was something about the team different? If Bruce could lose control here and not destroy anything, how much could have been saved, if something had changed sooner?

Bruce took a deep breath. "I'd better get back to work. I'll see you at dinner, Steve."

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Bruce didn't go back to work. He was getting dangerously close to losing his emotional equilibrium, and quite apart from all the problems that usually posed, he didn't think he could handle a transformation being a non-event twice in one week. This is a red flag, he reminded himself, not an immediate problem. He could afford to take a step back. He needed to meditate, but he was worked up enough that he knew it would be difficult without a focus. Rather than going to his floor, he went to the gym, and began the stretches he'd missed that morning.

He let each movement unfurl slowly, feeling the stretch contend with the aches of the morning, feeling himself settle into his centre. He let the tension bound up in his shoulders, in his hands, flow out and downward, into the earth beneath him. He held each pose for a long breath, taking in calm and letting go the emotions that were tangled in his chest.

He was perhaps two-thirds of the way through his routine when Thor came in. Bruce's eyes were closed, but Thor had a...presence that was difficult to mistake. "Hello Thor," he said softly, opening his eyes and shifting into his next pose.

"Hello, my friend," Thor replied. "Will it disturb you if I work the pell for a time?" When Tony asked how Thor liked to train, Thor had admitted he was accustomed to weaponswork with other Asgardians, but said he could make do with practice weapons and a sturdy post.

Bruce considered it. Thor could be loud, but he would stay in his part of the gym, and when he was working on his own, he didn't swear or yell. "I can deal with that," he said at last.

"Thank you," said Thor, nodding humbly. "I will be as quiet as I can."
Bruce closed his eyes again, drawing himself back into the internal balance he had been cultivating. When he finished his stretches, he settled onto the ground and drew his focus even tighter, even as he emptied his thoughts. It had a strange, transparent clarity to it, this state, one that distanced and muffled the world. He became like a stone, buffeted by the emotional tides of his life, but unaffected by them.

Eventually, he emerged. He was smiling as he opened his eyes. He loved these moments, their lingering calm, when everything seemed slow and far away.

When he stood, Thor looked over, saying uncertainly, "Are your meditations complete, my friend?"

"Yeah, I'm done." Bruce wandered over, keeping himself well out of the radius of Thor's movements.

He watched for a minute or two as Thor targeted head-height, torso, and leg with a blunted sword. Bruce didn't understand the techniques, and Thor never used a sword in combat, but the expertise was obvious. "If I may ask...I rarely find you here at this time of day," Thor began, but didn't seem to know how to finish.

"I've had some frustrating conversations today," said Bruce. "I needed to calm down."

"Ah," said Thor, breathing heavily. "Can I be of any aid?"

Bruce considered it. He wasn't...close with Thor, for a lot of reasons. "I don't know. I...transformed last night, after a nightmare."

Thor tilted his head. "And this has...frustrated you? Because you lost control?"

Bruce shook his head. "Losing control frightened me." In this state of mind, it was easy to say. "What frustrated me is that it doesn't seem to frighten anyone else."

"I see." Thor pondered that for a while. "Tell me, have you heard of the berserkir?"

Bruce frowned. "Uh...Norse warriors who went into battle rages?" Oh. That's...interesting.

Thor nodded, and changed the angle of his attacks on the pell. "They were devotees of my father, many centuries ago. There are some among the Einherjar still."

Bruce frowned. "The Einherjar?"

"My father's warriors - chosen from the warrior dead, for the most part." That raised some disturbing questions. "I have fought alongside berserkir, more than once, although not often."

Bruce waited.

"They are mighty as the bears they are named for, when in their rage. Wounds do not slow them, and few can withstand them." Thor paused, then said slowly. "Yet all know that they must lead the charge, for they quickly forget who is friend and who is foe; and I would not stand beside one in a shield wall, for I could not trust him to aid me."

"I can see the parallels," Bruce admitted, "but why didn't you mention this before?"

Thor kept his eyes on the pell as he spoke. "The first time I fought the Hulk, I thought you a
berserkr, and one more...shape-strong than most. The first time I fought beside the Hulk, I saw that he was not entirely battle-rage. He...played with me, you might say." Thor shrugged. "What knowledge I have is limited, and the cases are clearly not the same. I could not know in what ways they were different until I knew you both better, and I doubted I had any wisdom to offer from my experiences, so I kept my peace."

Bruce thought about that for a while. "I think I understand. Why...why mention it now?"

"It seemed the right thing to do." Thor put down his sword, and turned to face Bruce. "Perhaps...so you would know that though I do not avoid you, and I call you my shield-brother, I can yet be wary of the dangers your other-form poses. That I can fear his rage and yet desire him by my side on the field of battle. Or perhaps...so you can know that you are not alone. Though few, I think, in Asgard, would call your nature a trial - it would be celebrated there. If ever you wish to seek words with a berserkr of the Einherjar, with one who also knows the battle-rage that leaves emptiness behind, I think it may be done."

"Huh." Bruce...didn't really know what to make of that. That was happening a lot today, it seemed. "You've, uh, given me a lot to think about. I'm going to...go think about that, now."

Thor nodded. "Then I shall see you later."

"Yeah. See you."

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When Natasha appeared in the kitchen while Bruce was making dinner, he didn't even try to avoid the topic. In the end, though, all she said was, "I missed you in the gym this morning."

"I was sleeping off an unexpected transformation," he explained. Then he waited. After two minutes when neither of them said anything, he asked, "Are you going to tell SHIELD?"

"If you ask me not to, I won't," she replied, picking up a knife to help chop. "But I think I should."

"Thank you," he exclaimed. "So far, absolutely no one has treated this like it's at all significant."

"It's very significant." Natasha pursed her lips for a moment, then went on. "It's been fairly conclusively established over the years that the threat posed by the Hulk can't be eliminated, by killing him, or by returning you to your pre-Hulk state." Bruce hadn't entirely given up on that, actually, but after Harlem, he'd...put it on the back burner. "Once we knew that, the focus shifted to containment: your control, and cages and tranqs when you lost it." She tilted her head to one side. "Your control is very good, actually, but people are imperfect: you were always going to lose control at some point. Once a year isn't bad."

Still. The Hulk going on a rampage once a year wasn't good, either. Bruce kept his head down, listening and waiting.

"After the Battle of New York, it became apparent that the Hulk could be directed. When you wake him up deliberately, he can be an asset, rather than strictly a threat." She tilted a hand from side to side. "A somewhat unpredictable asset, but...the last time he hurt a civilian was, oh, months ago, and that was accidental, not an attack. We've done worse."

Bruce didn't...he hadn't been expecting that. That was...that was not what he imagined happening when he let the Hulk out. He hoped, absolutely, but it was the sort of hopeless hope that he looked at everything with. He hoped, despite believing in its futility.
"So at this point, SHIELD is confident that when the Hulk is woken up deliberately, with the rest of the Avengers around, he can be more of an asset than a threat, and the damage can be minimised. But we've been forced to assume that the threat remains in situations where you transform involuntarily. Last night establishes a precedent for a more positive pattern, matching up with the rest of Hulk's behaviour around the team."

When Bruce didn't say anything, Natasha went on. "The team would defend you from Ross regardless, but it does help when SHIELD has evidence that he's a complete and utter fool."

Shit. He hadn't even thought about - how had he forgotten about Ross?

He changed the subject.

"You know, Jarvis," Bruce began. "For years know, whenever I've, uh, lost control, there's been...property damage, injuries, sometimes deaths...and sooner or later, Ross would catch up to me with troops or tanks, and that'd kickstart another change..." He sighed. "And now, apparently, nothing happens. It's, uh, kind of surreal."

Bruce took a sip of tea as he waited for Jarvis to reply. "If I may be blunt, Dr Banner...were you to lose control tomorrow while poor, hungry, and distressed, in a community of poor, hungry, and hurting people, far from anywhere familiar, and without friends, it is possible that the result would be closer to your expectation. I would not say that we should be unsurprised that the Hulk's behaviour changes with respect to his and your circumstances, but neither should it be unbelievable that it is so."

Bruce looked around him. He was on a comfortable couch, in his comfortable living room, drinking tea that he liked, and reading journal articles about a field of research that he cared about. "I tried so many things to control the, uh, other guy, in that first year, and nothing worked," he admitted. "It's strange to think...what might have happened if I had met Tony sooner?"

There was a long silence before Jarvis spoke. "I am afraid that it is entirely possible that very little would have changed, had you met Sir around the time of your...accident. Afghanistan...it made of him a very different man."

Bruce sighed. "I guess I just...I don't understand why they aren't afraid of me. The Hulk is...almost the most frightening thing I have encountered."

"Perhaps they do not fear you for the same reasons they do not fear me, or each other. All of us here are dangerous. Or perhaps they do fear you, but they do not mind the fear."

Chapter End Notes

We're officially halfway there! (Plotwise, at least.) And the characters surprised me with a convenient opportunity to summarise their current attitudes to Hulk: mostly positive, but Bruce is freaking out. Expect this to come to a head sometime soon. (And if I was excited about finally posting the _last_ chapter, I am at least twice as excited about posting the chunk around chapter 40 that was literally almost the starting point for this story. I have spent over six months writing build-up so it'd be plausible.)
A few quick notes: 'berserkr' is the Old Norse term, and 'berserkir' the plural, for the English word 'berserker'. They are described in the sagas as 'shape-strong', because their fury is considered a transformation. A pell is a common training tool for swordsmen, etc - it serves a similar function to a punching bag. The Einherjar in the lore are the inhabitants of Valhalla; in Marvel, they are the royal guard, as best as I can tell; I've tried to come up with a compromise here.

Being as I'm halfway there, I thought I'd take a moment to ask about you guys. I know there's a lot of you (and that still blows me away, really, that more than a hundred people are subscribed to this fic), but I don't know much about you. Why did you start reading this fic? Why did you keep reading it? Is Avengers your only fandom, or do you belong to others? Do you write Avengers fanfiction, or fics in other fandoms? What bits of Marvel canon have you watched/read? What did you like?

I love answering questions about my characters/universe, so feel free to ask, if you like. And, as always, I'd love to hear your feedback. Do my characters match up with what you imagine? Do you like that this story is focused on friendship, not romance? Do the characters get equal weight, from your perspective? Is there anything you'd like to see more of (battles, movie nights, magic, world building, insomnia club)? Have you read the mini-prequels, and if so, did you like them? Do you plan to read the sequels, once I get there? (Yes, I have sequels planned. Yes, plural.) Should I tell you less about what I've got planned than I do? Should I explain more? Am I flagging potential triggers appropriately?

Thanks for sticking with me this far, and I hope you keep on enjoying the story.
"So, I've been thinking..." Clint began.

"That always ends well," muttered Natasha, glancing at him out of the corner of her eye.

"Nat! Shut up!" Clint (gently) shoved her sideways. "I'm not that bad!"

"Not while I'm driving, Clint." (They were on their way to SHIELD headquarters for a meeting with Sitwell.) "And yes, sokolik, you are. Remember Odessa? Kinshasa? Belfast?"

Clint pouted. "Belfast worked out fine in the end."

Natasha rolled her eyes. "At one point, Clint, I killed a man with a sporran. You turned a bagpipe into a blowgun because you lost your bow. We had tartan bandages when the extraction team arrived."

"But I got to see Phil in a kilt!" he pointed out hopefully.

"No, Clint."

"But..."

"No."

Clint humphed. "Alright, but this is not like Belfast. This is actually going to be fine...probably."

Natasha sighed. "What is it, then?"

Clint looked out the window for a moment. "...I think the team should do something nice for Jarvis."

She waited.

"He's always watching out for us, and making sure we've got everything we need, and that we're okay, but he's kind of invisible, and most people don't even know about him, and I don't think he knows that we appreciate him," Clint said in a rush.

"Hmm." She pursed her lips. "You sure you're talking about Jarvis there? Because it sounds like..."

"Like I'm talking about Phil, I know." Clint hitched a shoulder. "Maybe the similarities are making me more...sensitive to the issue, but I don't think I'm actually wrong."

She thought about it. "...No. I don't think you are." She thought about it some more. "What did you
have in mind?"

"I don't...really, uh, know," Clint admitted. "Would he even enjoy a party? The whole team should be involved, I think, but we probably shouldn't talk about it where Jarvis can hear us. Right?"

All they knew about parties they'd learnt from Phil, who'd gathered them together with a cluster of other agents for cake and presents for everyone's birthdays. Or, well, rebirthdays. Or unbirthdays. Not everyone knew or liked their actual birthday at SHIELD.

"I'll think about it," Natasha agreed. "And I'll talk to Pepper."

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"I'd like your opinions on the following agents as Avengers understudies," said Sitwell, passing a list to Clint.

Clint flicked his eyes over it, passed it to Natasha, and sat back.

"I don't think understudies will work," she said for the two of them. Long-standing SHIELD teams usually had one or two 'understudies' per person, who could fill in if the usual agent was injured or otherwise unavailable. "The Avengers Initiative has always been about collecting exceptional, unique individuals. You aren't going to find people with equivalent skill-sets."

Sitwell sighed. "I don't think you're wrong...but the team needs back-up, and this is the system we've got."

Clint shrugged. "You should talk to other supes. I'm sure there are some who'll be willing to join a Reserve Avengers group or something."

"The team is bound by personal loyalty, rather than professional competence," Natasha continued. "It's going to be difficult finding people who can work with us, and we're going to have to get to know them in advance."

Sitwell frowned. "You really think you could get the X-Men to help you? They're pretty insistent on sticking to mutant politics."

"The X-men, yes," Natasha pointed out. "But Logan, Ororo, Scott? There's prestige associated with being an Avenger. Having a mutant on the team is good for visibility and representation, too. We might have to throw in additional perks, but I think there'll be some who agree."

"Don't discount the locals, either," Clint put in. "Spider-man and Daredevil spend most of their time on petty criminals, but if we're talking back-up...I wouldn't say no."

Sitwell made some notes and nodded. "I'll look into it. In the meantime, though, we've got SHIELD agents. So. Snipers. I'm thinking Pokorny, Brewer, Tran..."

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"Before we go, sir," Natasha glanced at Clint, who pulled a few sheets of paper out of his bag. "There was an incident this weekend that you should know about."

"Shit, what did Stark do this time?" Sitwell said, rubbing a hand over his face.

"Actually, it wasn't Tony," said Clint.

Sitwell grimaced. "Oh, joy. Thor then?"
Natasha put an end to the guessing game. "Bruce."

Sitwell blanched. "Shit, how did Stark cover that up?"

Clint shook his head. "No cover-ups necessary - most of us didn't notice until the next morning."

Sitwell sighed. "Alright, take it from the top. What happened?"

"To cut a long story short," Clint started, "Bruce had a nightmare and lost control of the Hulk; since he was in the Green Room at the time, the Hulk stayed there until I arrived; I talked him down and we chatted for a while until he transformed back."

"And this report?"

"Says basically the same thing, in more detail, along with Nat's analysis from the footage."

Sitwell looked hard at Natasha. "Could you summarise that analysis for me please?"

Natasha nodded. "Contrary to our expectations, the Hulk's behaviour when woken involuntarily was similar to his behaviour when woken deliberately: initial aggression, followed by cooperative compliance once the situation was explained by an Avenger, and a willingness to re-transform once it was clear that his presence was unnecessary."

"Alright, that's promising."

"What is more significant," Natasha continued, "is the content of the Hulk's conversation with Clint: he showed an understanding of people's emotional reactions to him; expressed an interest in affecting those emotional responses by behaving in a less frightening manner; and agreed to moderate his initial aggression if Hawkeye, Iron Man, or Captain America is indicating the location is safe when he wakes."

"Ah." Sitwell blew out a long breath. "You aren't surprised."

"Frankly, none of the Avengers are," said Clint. "It's been overlooked in debriefings because we've got more important things to worry about, but we've all been interacting more, and more positively, with the Hulk. This is the continuation of a trend, and we've reported it in order to bring it to your attention."

Sitwell ran a hand over his head. "Do we need to change anything?"

"Not really," replied Natasha. "The Hulk interacts almost exclusively with the Avengers, and SHIELD agents either ignore him or follow our lead. The main thing SHIELD has control over at present is Bruce's treatment."

"I'd say that you should ease up on Bruce," Clint said slowly, "but..."

Natasha picked up the thread. "Bruce is extremely resistant to any such change. In fact, he is extremely resistant to any evidence or analysis of Hulk's changing behaviour. Until he's ready to actually ask for an improvement in his treatment, there's no point in offering it to him."

Sitwell frowned. "I can see that, I suppose. But you brought my attention to this for a reason."

"When Bruce is ready to accept that he is a man rather than a minefield, Tony is going to push immediately for a change in Bruce's treatment." Natasha knew that Bruce had won Tony's loyalty
long ago, and Tony was dogged in the defense of his people. "When that time comes, you're going
to need new protocols, ratified by the relevant people, based on inquiries, based on evidence. We're
making sure you have the evidence."

Sitwell quirked a smile. "And encouraging me to start those enquiries?"

Natasha smiled back. It wasn't a gentle smile. "If you have new protocols ready when Bruce
changes his mind, you will win Tony's loyalty better with that one act than with years of competent
support in the field. His patience for red tape is...legendary by its lack."

Sitwell huffed. "I can't disagree with that. Alright, I'll look into it."

Clint spoke up then, for the first time in a while. "If you need footage of the Hulk, I can guarantee
that Tony has a more complete collection than anyone else."

Sitwell hummed curiously. "I'll keep it in mind. A word before you go, Romanoff."

It was a clear dismissal of the discussion, and Clint didn't try to linger. Natasha waited as Clint left
the room and shut the door."

"Earlier today, you said that the Avengers were bound more by personal loyalty than professional
competence," Sitwell said. He didn't elaborate.

"I did." She didn't elaborate either. She knew this game, and she played it better than him.

After a long silence, and at last Sitwell spoke again. "And your loyalties are...?"

She raised an eyebrow, just slightly, and looked at him coolly. "I'm loyal to the Avengers, and I'm
loyal to SHIELD."

He nodded. "And what would happen if those were to come into conflict?"

She sat silently for a long time, assessing him. "That would depend on the situation."

Sitwell narrowed his eyes slightly. "That's all, Agent Romanoff. Thank you for your help."

She nodded, and rose smoothly out of her seat. She didn't look back as she walked out the door.

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She found Clint in the lobby, leaning on a wall with his hands in his pockets, watching agents
come and go. Many of them were not-so-subtly staring at him, and although the room was
crowded, there was an empty space around him. When he saw her, he rolled his eyes, exasperated
at them all.

She raised her eyebrows slightly.

He flicked his eyes to the nearest ceiling vent.

She quirked a corner of her mouth in a tiny smile.

He hitched a shoulder in a half-shrug, and stood.

They fell into step, silently, on their way out the door.
New mini-arc: Jarvis' Unbirthday Party. If you have ideas for good birthday presents for Jarvis, let me know, because I've figured out some, but there are a few I still need to come up with - Jarvis is hard to buy for!

It was fun to write Clint and Natasha together. They've got a good rapport, and it shows itself differently in different situations - this is the first time I've written them really _playing_ with each other.

Your comments and kudos are always inspiring - let me know what you think.
The Avengers have a secret. Jarvis knows it's about him. That can't be good.

It was Thursday afternoon, and the Avengers were at a children's hospital, leaving Jarvis alone in the Tower.

Jarvis was...concerned. That morning, Doctor Banner had engaged the privacy protocols for a discussion with Sir, which was highly unusual. The day before, the team had engaged the privacy protocols during dinner, which had never happened before. Agent Barton and Captain Rogers had had a long discussion where Jarvis could not hear. On Tuesday, Agent Romanoff had engaged the privacy protocols for her morning workout with Doctor Banner. On Monday evening, she had engaged the same protocols for a discussion with Sir. After each member of the team had spoken privately with Agents Romanoff or Barton, they had become more...conscious of Jarvis' presence.

Jarvis hadn't noticed the shift in the team's behaviour until Wednesday. Partially because their behaviour had never been particularly consistent, and partially because the battle on Tuesday morning had disrupted everyone's routines. But, in hindsight, he believed the change could be dated to Monday afternoon, after Agents Barton and Romanoff returned from their meeting at SHIELD.

The more he thought about it, the more Jarvis worried. Ordinarily, the team used the privacy protocols to keep secrets from Sir - no-one else had access to Jarvis' surveillance - or, more rarely, from each other. That the privacy protocols had been engaged during a team dinner with everyone present indicated very clearly that the team (including Sir) were keeping a secret from Jarvis. That had never happened before, and it certainly did not bode well.

"Sir, may I speak with you for a moment?"

Jarvis had waited for the best time to have this conversation. He had waited until the team returned, until they split up to return to their own routines. He had waited while Sir swapped his suit for jeans and a tank top. He had waited until Sir breezed into the workshop, announced "Daddy's home!", and began flicking through his to-do list.

"Sure, J." Sir sat down on a bench and leaned back. "What's up?"

Jarvis considered his phrasing carefully before he spoke. "Has SHIELD altered their assessment of me, Sir? Their opinion of me has never been recorded in a way that I can access."

Sir frowned and sat up. "Not that I know of. You think they have?"

"Since Agents Barton and Romanoff met with Agent Sitwell on Monday, they have approached each member of the team for one or more conversations using privacy protocols so that I cannot
hear, and after these conversations the team has become significantly more...aware of me. As far as I can tell, the most likely reason is that SHIELD is planning some action against me and needed either the team's input or their cooperation." Jarvis did not point out that Sir was as complicit as the others in whatever was going on. From his reaction, Sir already knew.

"Oh, fuck." Sir ran a hand over his face. "Good observations, Jarvis, but the explanation is way more innocuous than you're thinking."

"Sir?"

Sir tapped a rhythm on the arc reactor, thinking. "I'm not supposed to tell you, but it's actually a good thing."

"You will forgive me if I find it difficult to believe in pleasant surprises, sir."

Sir grimaced. "Yeah, okay, that's fair. Uh..."

"You cannot reveal whatever it is to me?"

Sir made a disgruntled noise. "I really shouldn't, but...yeah, no, fuck it, keeping it secret was never going to work anyway." He tipped his head back to stare at the ceiling. "They - we - wanted to throw you a party."

Jarvis...stopped, for a moment. That was...completely beyond the realm of the known, or expected, or even believable. "Sir?"

He shrugged. "Clint wanted to do something nice for you, everyone agreed you deserved it, we've all been trying to plan a party for you."

"...I believe I need to think about this for a time, sir."

Sir raised his eyebrows. "I don't blame you. Took me by surprise, too. In the meantime, let's get going on that body armour Fury wanted."

Jarvis brought up the file silently. He had a lot to think about.

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"Sooo..." Sir began, shortly after the team sat down to dinner. "Trying to keep J's party a secret? Bad plan."

Agent Barton made an exasperated noise. "Seriously, Tony? It's been three days!"

"Yep." Sir nodded. "Three days of Jarvis seeing the team clearly keeping a secret about him, which you started after a meeting at SHIELD. He assumed he was on Fury's hit list."

"What?" said Captain Rogers.

"Oh, fuck," said Agent Barton.

"So yes, I did tell him that the big secret was a surprise party," Tony continued, "because Jarvis has as much reason to be scared of secrets as the rest of us."

"If I may," Jarvis said at last, "I do appreciate the thought, even if the execution left something to be desired."
"Okay, new plan," said Agent Barton, slapping the table. "We'll let Jarvis listen in when we talk about the party. Do you mind if we keep the presents secret, though?"

Discovering that the team planned to give him presents was even more confusing than discovering they were planning a party. "I have no objection," he managed to say.

"Cool."

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"I'm really sorry, Jarvis." Agent Barton was slumped on the couch in his living room, watching Dog Cops. "About the party thing."

"It's alright, Agent Barton. I am quite used to people making ill-thought-out plans with good intentions, although never concerning me."

"By 'people' you mean Tony?" Clint smiled. "And I thought you were going to use my first name sometimes."

Informality felt strange in Jarvis' speakers. "I did say that, didn't I?"

Clint sighed.

"What's wrong?" Jarvis asked.

"I came up with the party idea 'cause I wanted to...well, I wanted to make sure you knew we liked you." He scrunched up his face. "Fucked that up. And, by the way, you are literally the most impossible person to get a gift for."

"There really is no need to get me anything, Clint," Jarvis pointed out. "I have everything that I need."

Clint frowned. "Yeah, that's why you're hard to buy for, but you're missing the point." He sighed. "A few years after I joined SHIELD, Phil threw me my first ever birthday party. I was...fuck, I was so fucking confused. It wasn't anything big - he just corralled the people I knew who could stand me into one of the meeting rooms at lunch-time one day. There was cake, a few gifts, a few cards. Nothing big. But it...it floored me. Only my, my mother had ever paid attention to my birthday, and, uh, Dad never let her do anything for it anyway." Clint ran a hand over the back of his head. "Anyway, after everyone left, I cornered Phil and asked him why he'd bothered. He told me that birthdays were a reminder to congratulate people on their achievements, and demonstrate friendship and appreciation, and no matter how old you are or how much stuff you have, you should still get that." He shrugged. "Figuring out an actual birthday for you is tricky, so Steve started calling it an unbirthday party, but the principle's the same. We aren't giving you stuff because you need it; we're giving you stuff because it's a way for us to give something back, to thank you for everything and show that we appreciate you."

What Clint described was something that had been lacking from Sir's birthdays for as long as Jarvis had been alive. They were either entirely ignored, when he was younger, or extravagant affairs where the rich and famous (or more commonly, the beautiful and ambitious) could partake of Sir's wealth and fame. Colonel Rhodes would usually visit at that approximate date if he could, but it was not always possible.

"If you truly do want to get me something," Jarvis said at last, "then...there are books, texts, which I cannot read, because they were not published as ebooks and have not since been digitised. I do not have the capacity to read physical books at this stage. And, I suppose, there is music which has
not been recorded, because it is little known, or improvised. I have not...been given gifts before. Sir
adds to my capacity when it is useful, or I desire it, and Ms Potts has made recommendations to me
of texts to read or games to play, but otherwise...I am able to acquire what is needful, and what I
want, and I do so."

Clint looked thoughtful. "I can see that. Hmm. Okay. I'll think about that. Thanks, Jarvis."

"Thank you, Clint."

Chapter End Notes

It's important to note that for Jarvis' entire life, he and Tony have been afraid that
people will find out about him and demand he be either crippled or killed. What's
more, based on what he's seen happen to Tony, he has plenty of reason to disbelieve in
spontaneous goodwill. Essentially, the moral of this story is: don't throw a veteran a
surprise party.

Good news! I think I've figured out presents from everyone at this point. I'm not sure
of the details of Clint's, and Bruce's is subject to change, but otherwise, I'm set. Thanks
for your suggestions!

I've used up my buffer, and my plan for the next six to eight chapters is basically
"Jarvis' unbirthday and stuff", so it may take me a little longer than average to get the
next few chapters out. Once we get to July I should be back to weekly posts, though.

Your comments are kudos are always delightful - let me know what you think!
Visiting Old Friends

Chapter Summary

Thor visits Asgard, looking for a gift for Jarvis. He takes the opportunity to catch up with friends and family.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thor gazed out at the length of the Bridge as he regained his equilibrium. Even making this trip as often as he did, it was...unsettling. When he felt steady on his feet again, he turned back towards the gatehouse. "Greetings, Heimdall!" he called.

The man nodded gravely. "And to you, your highness."

"How have you fared since last we met?" Heimdall was ever polite, but friendly to few, and friends with none. Still, he was a good man, and Thor liked him.

Heimdall smiled slightly, and returned his gaze to that middle distance wherein he saw so much. "I have been well."

"And Asgard?"

Heimdall raised his eyebrows. "Many things have happened - I cannot tell you if they are great or small."

Thor laughed. "That is fair." It was his standard reply to a general inquiry. He saw much, and could remember it if asked, but little truly caught his attention. It was better so, in truth, for it gave people the illusion of privacy. Heimdall might see, but would not know their personal affairs. "But there is peace? And my family and friends are well?"

Heimdall smiled a little. "They are, your highness."

Thor looked around the room. Though shining, it had few comforts and, fresh from his Midgard companions' discussions of Jarvis, Thor could not help but wonder whether Heimdall, too, could afford to be better appreciated. "Tell me, is there anything you would wish for from the City of Asgard? I will gladly bring it for you on my return."

"That is kind of you to ask, but no," the watcher said gravely. "I have all I need here."

Thor nodded. After all these centuries, it would be surprising if Heimdall had not asked for what he wanted and needed at his post. Still, it was polite to check. "Then I must be on my way, I suppose. Good day to you."

Heimdall bowed slightly. "Fare well, your highness."

A horse had been left for him in the guard post stable. Thor tacked it up, loaded it with what little baggage he had, and led it onto the bridge. He sighed. Being a prince was burdensome these days, and he was glad he rarely had to be. "Still," he said to himself, as he mounted and nuded the horse
towards the city, "It will be good to see my shield-brothers again, and these errands should not wait, so I ought not to complain."

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Thor entered the Great Hall where the Allfather was holding audience and waited. He would not interrupt the petitioners, but his father usually liked to see him promptly when he arrived in Asgard.

Soon enough, Odin called him forward. “Prince Thor, it is good to see you home once more.”

Thor came forward and knelt before the throne. “And it is good to be home, Father,” he replied.

“So have you business before the court?” Odin asked, meaning ‘Is there danger coming?’

Thor smiled. “I do not, Father. I am here only to see old friends.”

“Then we shall hold a feast tonight so that you may see them,” Odin declared.

“Thank you, Father.”

Odin nodded, dismissing him, and Thor rose, bowed, and retreated from the hall.

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Next he went to his mother’s chambers. "Thor! Welcome home!” Frigga cried when she opened the door. "Come in, I was just consulting with Master Kvasir about the best way to accomplish what you asked for."

Thor smiled, a little nervously. Master Kvasir was the chief of all of Asgard's scholars, and was respected throughout the realms for his wisdom - he was rather intimidating. "So you received my message?" He had asked Heimdall to pass on his request several days ago, but it was easier for him to send messages to Asgard than to receive them.

"Of course I did, sweetling." She gestured him to a seat. "But best to clarify what you wanted before we try, hmm?"

It was the first lesson any Asgardian learned about magic: that you must have a clear goal in mind before you begin. Elsewise all manner of things were likely to go wrong. Thor looked sideways at Master Kvasir, who was smiling inscrutably, as he usually did. "I wish to give a Midgardian friend of mine a gift of knowledge, for that is something he values greatly. He has significant expertise in Midgardian science, and I thought he would find it both intriguing and enjoyable to compare it to our understanding of the nature of the realms. I, however, have forgotten much of your excellent teachings," he made a small bow to Master Kvasir, who had been one of his tutors in his youth, "and I do not believe I could explain clearly. Thus, I hoped to give my friend one of the texts I learnt from - but I am stymied by the language barrier."

Master Kvasir nodded. "While All-Speak is very useful for travellers, it is, in its basic form, extremely unhelpful with the written word." He sighed. "It is a problem I have encountered often in my own travels, and I do have some shortcuts that could aid you."

Thor took a deep breath. "Ah...I should also explain that my friend...he is not human. He is perhaps most similar to a magical construct, and his mind is not contained in one body. I don't know what effect that would have, but I am certain it would have one."

"You are right about that," Frigga said, raising her eyebrows. "I assumed the gift was for Jane, or
"No, although I expect both of them would happily avail themselves of such a text. Jarvis, the friend of whom I speak, was created by the Man of Iron to be his assistant and companion many years ago, and acts as the steward of our household now."

"I see," said Master Kvasir slowly. "I have spent most of my time in Alfheim lately, so I am not familiar with the most recent advances in Midgard. Tell me more about this friend. If he has no body, does he see? With what? Is his mind widely distributed, or is there a central location in which it resides? It sounds as if he can read - how does he do so? Is he skilled in languages? Does the All-Speak work when you speak to him alone?"

Thor sighed. "His nature is opaque to me, due to his own and his creator's preference for secrecy. My answers may not be accurate. From what I have heard, his mind resides in a...technological brain of sorts, in a place which is difficult to access. He has a variety of sensors, both for sound and sight - and some kinds of special sight - throughout our home, which are connected to his 'brain' by wires that act as information conduits. He has speakers that act as his voice throughout our home as well, connected in the same way, and there are a number of tools and mechanisms which he can control. He has access to a store of knowledge which allows him to at least partially translate into and out of a number of languages, but he relies on publically shared knowledge, so the more obscure they are, the less he knows. By the time I came to the Tower, I had become comfortable in English, so I have never tested whether the projective aspects work with him." All-Speak was designed not only to translate, but to teach, and Thor had learnt English very quickly.

"Hmm." Master Kvasir stroked his beard. "That is indeed very little knowledge to work with. It seems safest, then, to have the text truly translated."

Frigga frowned. "But most translation spells require a fluent interpreter, and Thor has admitted he has forgotten some of the theory he wishes to share."

Master Kvasir nodded. "True. But I have not." He turned to face Thor. "If you will allow me, you can share your fluency with me. It is something like a swifter version of the All-Speak's teaching process - it will require connection between my mind and yours, but I will have no insight into your affairs, only your vocabulary. I will also, of course, borrow your understanding of your friends' written language. Is that acceptable to you?"

Thor did not deliberate long. It was widely known that Master Kvasir had no hidden purpose but for the gaining and sharing of knowledge. "That is, although I do not entirely understand how it helps."

"In exchange for your knowledge of the language, I am willing to translate one of my preferred beginners' texts for you," Master Kvasir replied. "I will even include a glossary of the terms I am unable to translate in exchange for the promise of a boon from you in future."

Thor beamed. "That I will offer gladly - perhaps I could introduce you to my Midgardian companions? There are three highly expert scholars among them, each in their own field, and I am sure it would be interesting for you to speak with them."

Master Kvasir raised his eyebrows, clearly intrigued. "That is an excellent offer, your highness, and I may, in future, accept it. I shall think on it a little while rather than agreeing to that particular favour now, however."

"That is entirely acceptable to me," Thor agreed. "It is a bargain, then? My knowledge of English and a favour, for your translation of a beginners' work on the nature of the realms into English,
with a glossary."

Master Kvasir nodded decisively. "It is a bargain."

"And I have witnessed it," Frigga added.

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At the feast that evening, Thor sat on Odin’s left, as he frequently did. (Frigga was always on the king’s right.) Sif was on his other side, with Hogun, Fandral, and then Volstagg next to her. They usually sat this way when at high table – because of the arrangement of the hall, only one side of the table had seats, so Thor and Volstagg, who were loudest, sat to each end, while Hogun, who was quietest, sat in the middle. Sif was customarily seated by Thor to appease the conservatives, which was probably the source of the rumours that they were involved.

Once the meal had begun, and conversation had become more general, Thor turned towards them. “How have you been, my friends? Have you conquered any mighty foes lately?”

“Fandral boasts of many conquests, but none I think you’d call a foe,” replied Hogun slyly.

“They are friendly indeed,” Fandral agreed, as the others laughed.

Sif, however, was solemn. “What troubles you?” Thor asked her.

She sighed. “There are murmurings at court against me. They say that a man may choose his hirðmenn as he pleases, and the prince’s hirðmenn should be welcome wherever he is, but since you are not here, they need not tolerate a woman pretending to be a warrior.”

Thor frowned. “That is grave news indeed. What has been done to counter them?”

“We have spoken for Sif as best we can,” answered Volstagg, “but, like Sif, we are best known as your companions, and without you, our influence is limited.”

Sif smiled ruefully. “It is of no significance, Thor. The same challenge returns in new skin every few decades, and I am here yet. It is merely bothersome.”

Thor set a hand on her arm. “If it troubles you, it is significant, my friend. Can I aid you at all?”

“So long as you do not forget us when you visit, I will be able to claim your support,” she replied. “Anything else will make a feud from a catfight.”

“I could not forget you, my friends – never think it.” Thor shook off the solemn mood as best he could. “Now, what say we go to the practice courts tomorrow and remind everyone why you are my hirðmann?”

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Late on Sunday afternoon, as Thor was changing from his sweat-stained practice clothes to something better suited for dinner with his family, there was an unexpected knock on his door.

“Who is it?” he called.

“Kvasir, your highness,” came the reply, and Thor hurried to don his tunic and gird his belt about him so that he could answer.

“Forgive my disarray, Master Kvasir,” he said as he opened the door. “I just came from the practice
fields, and was dressing for dinner. Would you like to come in?"

Master Kvasir shook his head, smiling. “My errand here is brief, your highness, and then I shall be on my way. As promised,” he reached into his satchel, “a translated copy of The Nature of the Realms, with glossary.” He offered the book with a flourish, then pulled another from his bag and placed it on top. “And I would be very pleased if you would give this to your friend as well. I believe he should find it interesting, and I would very much like to speak with him about it.”

The leather binding was blank, but when Thor opened the book, the front page read: On the Creation of Artificial Life and Mind in the Nine Realms: A Comparative Study. “This is a kingly gift!” he exclaimed. “In truth I had hoped to be able to give Jarvis something like this, but translating a book was such a task that I was resigned to giving only one, and I am sure he would prefer a foundational work.” He beamed. “And indeed, I will not take credit for this at all – how would you prefer I describe the giver?”

Master Kvasir smiled, clearly pleased by Thor’s enthusiasm. “I have included a letter to explain myself with the book, so you may tell them whatever you like that you know of me, so long as you reassure them that I am a scholar of no affiliations, who seeks knowledge without ulterior motive.”

“Then thank you, and thrice thank you,” Thor said, grinning, “for the book I asked for, the translation I could not create, and the unasked for gift! I will not forget what I owe, and I shall speak well of you as soon as I may.”

Master Kvasir bowed his head. “Then I am well repaid. Farewell, Prince Thor. It was good to see you again.”

“It was good to see you also,” Thor replied. “Safe and fruitful travels to you, and fair weather on the journey.” It was a small blessing, and easily granted, but one that travellers were often grateful for. Rain was a blessing for a farmer, but a curse on the wayfarer.

Master Kvasir nodded again, and left, as Thor marvelled at his gifts. He could attend Jarvis’ celebration proud of his offerings now, that was certain.

-----

Before he left, as was his custom, Thor visited his brother in his imprisonment. "Hello, Loki," he said, as he came to Loki’s cell. "I hope you are well."

Loki, of course, could not answer. Well, he could nod, perhaps, but he could not speak. It was a lonely and frustrating imprisonment for him, Thor was certain, so he made sure to visit when he could.

He sighed and sat, on a stool that was kept there for Loki’s few visitors. "Midgard is very different from home."

Loki would mock him for saying something so obvious, if he could speak.

"I know, brother, I say so almost every time I visit you, and I would be a fool if it surprised me. Still..." He leaned back, looking contemplatively at the ceiling. "There are so many parts of Midgard that are so very different from each other. There is always something new to find strange and foreign."

There was a time when they had visited Midgard often, though Thor had barely done so in centuries. He was sad to realise, he could not say whether Loki had.
"At times I think it must be terribly confusing, to grow up in a place where there are so many different ways to be. How do they choose? How do they find companionship when everyone walks a separate path? My friends...they are all unalike, and they have all been lonely."

He sighed. Sometimes it was Steve he understood best - a warrior from a young age, committed to defense of the realm by strength and skill of hand and weapon, accustomed to fighting with a war-band, and far from home. But there was also much unhappily familiar in Tony - a legacy he was compelled by birth-right to live up to, a youth war-mongering, an adult-hood defending. Steve could not understand the burden of kingship, or even of nobility.

"At other times I think of us as boys, and the expectations laid upon our shoulders. And I realise that having few paths before us made you bitter and unhappy, because you could not be who you needed to be. And once I realise the warrior's path was unfair to you, I realise that it was unfair to Sif, also, and to Hogun. Asgard did not - does not - know how to respect you, brother, and I am ashamed that I, too, scorned your skill because it was unlike mine."

Thor rubbed a hand over his face and contemplated Loki - bound before him in chains and magic. He looked a little healthier than last time, which was good. His eyes were brighter, and less frantic. He was a little more relaxed. And though he wore scorn upon his face, it was disdain, not hate, that Thor read upon his face.

Thor stood, and bowed. "I must go, for I have errands to run while I am here, and Father always keeps me busy. But I was glad to speak to you. I hope that you continue to be well." And to heal from your ordeals, he thought. Loki had been through much pain in little time, and Thor thought that he had nearly shattered under the weight. He looked stronger now.

"Farewell." Thor nodded again, and as he left he thought he saw Loki incline his head the slightest amount in acknowledgement, and when he looked back, he thought he saw a hint of contentment on his brother's face. It was enough.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience, guys! I'm so sorry for the hiatus. Life got busy on me, and I've been having trouble with writers' block. The next chapter's already in the works, so hopefully I'll be back on schedule now. I might be a bit unreliable, but I'll get there. (And I promise that if I ever abandon this, I'll make an announcement to that effect so that you know.)

Some explanations:
Kvasir is a Norse god known for great wisdom, who was a travelling scholar and teacher. His blood, mixed with honey, became the Mead of Poetry, which endows the drinker with wisdom and poetic ability. He is accorded the title 'Master' here, even by the All-Mother, because his wisdom is respected throughout the realms.
All-Speak: I've decided that it goes through three modes - projective telepathy, then subtitles, then a glossary. It's designed to teach fluency, because I can't imagine politicians being happy with being unable to _completely_ control what their listeners hear.
hirðmenn: a warrior's oathbound companions, as described in chapter 13.

Thanks again for your patience - I look forward to hearing your thoughts.
Steve looked around the room, passing his gaze over the six SHIELD agents Sitwell had recommended to work with the Avengers. The team needed backup, and they needed substitute members in case of injury. None of them really wanted to work with strangers, and they’d agreed that the whole team would have to be happy with any auxiliary members, but it still needed to happen. The point of this meeting was to make sure the agents (none of whom had known why this afternoon was blocked off on their schedules, for security reasons) understood the situation.

Once they were settled, Steve made his way to the front of the room.

“Good morning, everyone,” he began. “I’m Steve Rogers, and I’m here to talk to you about the Avengers Initiative.”

A murmur of surprise passed around the room.

“We’re currently looking for auxiliary members to assist when the odds are particularly against us, or some member of the team is unable to fight. Primarily, we’re concerned about potential future injuries to Hawkeye or Black Widow, which is why you are all either snipers or close combat specialists. Any questions so far?”

An olive-skinned woman with a broken nose spoke up. “With all respect, Captain, I can’t think of anyone qualified to use Hawkeye’s specialised equipment, and without it, even the best SHIELD snipers aren’t going to be able to match what he does for the team.”

Steve nodded. “We’re aware of that. The Avengers is a group of very unusual people, with very distinctive and highly refined styles. In working with the team, you would be acting as yourself, not as understudies for any of us, and we would adapt our strategies to suit. Chances are, if one of them were out of the field, we’d bring in at least two of you to assist.”

She nodded, as did a number of the others. No-one else seemed to have any questions, so Steve kept going.

“This is a completely voluntary assignment, and there are a few things I’d like you to consider before you make your decision. Firstly, our missions are more than usually hazardous, and you
would be particularly vulnerable. We are usually outnumbered, and frequently unprepared. You are all experienced agents, and you are all more than capable of assessing the risks inherent in a mission. Please do so.

“Secondly, you need to consider the possibility that you will become known as a member of the Avengers. This is not a full time assignment, and you’re unlikely to get much media attention, but it could be limiting for your career if you become a familiar face.

“Thirdly, the Avengers are very unconventional people. I’ll freely admit that we’re difficult to work with. We come from very different backgrounds, we have very different training, and we’re an effective team because we’ve developed good personal relationships, not because of any commitment to professionalism. With that in mind, if you’d like to work with us, we’re having a bit of a meet and greet at the Tower this afternoon.”

“I’m going to be here for another half an hour to answer any questions you have,” Steve concluded. “I look forward to getting to know you all better.”

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There had been serious discussion of how much of Jarvis’ nature would be revealed to the newcomers. The problem was that Jarvis was an integral part of the team, and deeply ingrained into their daily lives – hiding him was unviable. What’s more, knowledge of his existence was widespread at the upper levels of SHIELD, and these agents would almost certainly have heard of him. Knowledge of his sentience, on the other hand, was much more closely guarded. In the end, Jarvis had assured them that he could seem unexceptional to visitors, Tony backed him up, and the team dropped it. So when Steve shepherded the agents into Tony’s private elevator, he just said, “Common floor, Jarvis. Jarvis is Tony’s AI; he runs the Tower,” and left it at that.

When they got to the common floor, the whole team was waiting – even Tony, somewhat to Steve’s surprise, who was talking to Bruce about something complicated, as usual. Thor and Natasha were discussing throwing knives, and Clint was in the kitchen. Steve led the agents over to the dining table, which thankfully was large enough to seat twelve, and the rest of the team joined them, Clint coming last with a plate of cookies and sliding into the seat between Steve and Natasha.

“Thanks, Clint, these look great,” said Steve, taking a couple.

“You cook?” asked the well-built agent with a crew cut sitting a seat away from Natasha. “It must be nice to have so much free time to spend on your hobbies.”

Clint shrugged. “Actually, I used to cook in safehouses all the time.”

“I remember that,” said the woman sitting on the other side of Natasha. “I did a mission with you back in ’06, and we spent three days in a crappy apartment in Seoul, twiddling our thumbs while we waited for the target to get back from some weekend with his girlfriend. You made us the most fantastic omelettes one night.”

Clint grinned. “Was that the mission that ended up with the shoot-out in the ballroom? God, that one was tedious.”

It occurred to Steve that Clint, by now, must have gone on so many missions that he probably only remembered the ones that really stood out, and apart from Natasha, he didn’t really have anyone to reminisce with. Maybe spending time with more agents would be good for him. “Alright everybody,” he said, looking around to make sure he had everyone’s attention. “Now, I figure you
all know us, by reputation at least…”

“I’ll say,” muttered the agent next to Thor with a half smile.

“…but we don’t really know you. So if we could go round the table, and you could tell us a bit about yourselves?” Steve finished, somewhat tentatively.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Really, you couldn’t have gone with a more typical interview question?” he murmured to Steve.

Steve ignored him. No-one wanted Tony running this, not even Tony, really.

The agent next to Natasha, a short, stocky woman, with light brown skin and features that could have been from half the globe, started them off. “I’m Amy Porra, I started working for SHIELD pretty much straight out of uni – I did international studies and languages, I had fluency in about five at that point, closer to fifteen now, depending on how you define fluency. I got through baby agent school, started working my way up through the ranks. That was, oh, nine years ago. My specialty is infiltration missions in places without English speakers, which usually means it can get pretty rough and ready. I’ve got a lot of hand-to-hand training, different disciplines, and I’m a decent shot with SHIELD’s most common weapons. I’ve had to get myself out of enough remote locations that I decided to get my pilot’s license about five years ago, although it’s mostly an emergency thing. When I’m out of the field I do a lot of translation work. Uh…I don’t have a permanent team, obviously…Agent Bartleby’s been my handler for the last few years…is there anything else you want to know?” She grabbed one of Clint’s biscuits, clearly expecting the answer to be ‘no’.

Steve glanced at the others. “No, that’s plenty, thanks. Uh, Agent…McNeill?”

The man nodded sharply, directing his attention exclusively to Steve. “Agent Ryan McNeill, Captain. I went into the army after college, then CIA, then was cross-recruited to SHIELD three years ago. I’m a combat specialist, variety of styles, variety of weapons. I’m typically attached to existing teams when they need extra help, although back in the CIA I did work in smaller groups.”

After an awkward moment of silence, the man next to him took up the thread. He was clearly older, his black hair starting to grey, and he reminded Steve vaguely of Jim Morita – he probably wasn’t Japanese, but there were similarities, and he had the same ease in his own skin that Steve had envied in Jim. “Uh…okay. I’m John Wu, I joined SHIELD fifteen years ago. I’ve done a bit of everything over the years, but I’m an infiltration specialist these days. I impersonate a lot of businessmen these days.”

Tony gave him an appraising look. “I’d buy it.”

He grinned easily. “Thanks. Back in the days before Strike Team Delta,” he nodded to Clint and Natasha, “I worked on one of Agent Coulson’s teams. The Hungry Hippos, we were affectionately known.”

Clint tensed up, but he smiled weakly. “I remember you guys, I think. Wasn’t May on that team? I think I worked with you back in ’02, ’03 maybe.”

John leaned back. “That’s right. Back when half of SHIELD thought you were nuts for using a bow instead of a gun. You really impressed Phil, that first mission.” He smiled sadly. “I remember
him saying to me, ‘You know, John, when I recruited him I knew he could be a sniper, but I was never sure he would be able to work with a team like he did today.’ I was really pleased for you two when you got together.”

“Uh…thanks,” Clint stuttered. “He, um, he never told me that.”

A solemn quiet fell over the room. It wasn’t widely known outside the Avengers that Coulson had been so important to the team, although Strike Team Delta was a legend at SHIELD.

“I didn’t see you at the funeral,” John said quietly. Clint hadn’t been able to make himself go, but he’d come to Tony’s wake afterwards. “But I wanted to offer you, both of you,” he looked at Natasha then, “my condolences.”

There was a general murmur of agreement from the agents. “Fucking Loki and his fucking minions,” muttered the tall, fair woman sitting one seat away from Thor.

Steve could see Thor draw himself up out of the corner of his eye, and swore internally. Clint and Thor had reached a cease-fire about Loki about four months after the invasion, but a key component of their agreement, which everyone else adhered to, was that Loki was not mentioned. Predictably, when Thor opened his mouth, what came out was the tense pronouncement, “Do not speak of him that way.”

Steve could see this going downhill fast, so he headed it off as best he could. “We try to avoid talking about the invasion around here,” he explained. “It was extremely unpleasant for all of us, for different reasons. Shall we continue?” He did his best to indicate that it really wasn’t a question.

The olive-skinned woman who’d challenged Steve about SHIELD snipers in the initial meeting shrugged. “That’s fine with me, Captain.”

“Please, all of you, call me Steve,” he replied. “I’m not one for formality.”

“Will do, Steve,” she answered easily. “Anyway, I’m Kat Dinapoli, I was a sniper in the army, got recruited into SHIELD about six years ago after I…well, cut a long story short, I pissed off Thunderbolt Ross and made a bit of a name for myself.”

Steve raised his eyebrows and looked sidelong at Bruce. That wasn’t long after the Hulk first appeared, if Steve had his timing right. Bruce was projecting the pleasant blankness he preferred around strangers, though, so Steve couldn’t tell how he was reacting.

“I do a lot of odd jobs with a lot of different teams,” Kat explained. “I’ve done the understudy gig a few times, I’m not bad at integrating, but I’ve never found anyone I really wanted to work with long-term, and Aronsson – my handler - is happy to keep me floating. This seemed like a great opportunity to meet some people and try something new.”

Steve smiled at her, then looked to her neighbour, the woman who had complained about Loki and his minions earlier.

“I’m Specialist Josephine Pokorny,” she said briskly. “Sharp-shooting was a hobby of mine as a teenager, and I got recruited into SHIELD after college, seven years ago. It wasn’t long before they had me working mainly as a sniper. I’ve had a long-term partner for the last three years, but he died…recently.” She glared at Clint. Steve sighed. That would explain the hostility. “Since then I’ve been doing…how did you put it, Kat? Odd jobs? I’d like to have the stability of a team again, even if it’s only as an auxiliary member.”
Steve nodded, although he personally thought she wouldn’t mesh well with the team. “And finally…” he raised his eyebrows at the slim black man next to Thor.

“David Brewer, sir,” he answered promptly. “And may I say, what an honour it is to meet you all. Especially you, Mr Stark,” he nodded to Tony. “I’ve been using your gear since the nineties and it’s saved my life more times than I can count.”

Tony smiled, genuinely as far as Steve could tell, and his voice was warm. “That’s what I like to hear. Army?”

“Air-force. I’m a qualified pilot, but I’ve got a good eye and I got a reputation for my aim. After I joined SHIELD I ended up on the sniper track.” He shrugged. “It’s pretty damn satisfying, making that perfect shot, but when I started off, half the appeal was the heights. I have to say though, Barton,” he added easily, “there’s been some spots where I’ve envied your grappling arrows. You reckon you could teach me to use those?”

Clint grinned. “I’ll give it a try. A bow’s a lot different to a gun, though.”

David shrugged. “That’s alright, it’s always good to be learning. Might not be any use now, but that doesn’t mean it won’t be a year or two down the track.”

“Well,” said Steve, pleased. “You’ve got the perfect opportunity to find out, actually. We’re going to split up now, snipers with Tony, Bruce, and Clint down at the range, and the rest of us in the gym, so we can get a sense of each other.” He stood up, and the team followed. “David, Josephine, Kat, it was great to meet you.” Steve shook each of their hands in turn. “You’ll hear from me soon.”

-----

By the time Steve got back to the common floor, Bruce was making dinner. Clint and Tony were leaning on the breakfast bar, arguing about modifying arrow designs to work for a gun.

“So how’d it go?” Steve asked. “Natasha, could you grab me some water while you’re there?”

She nodded, and got a second bottle out of the fridge.

“Pokorny was pretty good,” Clint offered.

Tony grimaced. “I preferred Brewer. She was more accurate, but he was faster, and clearly more versatile.”

“Well,” said Steve, pleased. “You’ve got the perfect opportunity to find out, actually. We’re going to split up now, snipers with Tony, Bruce, and Clint down at the range, and the rest of us in the gym, so we can get a sense of each other.” He stood up, and the team followed. “David, Josephine, Kat, it was great to meet you.” Steve shook each of their hands in turn. “You’ll hear from me soon.”

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“Versatility is good,” Natasha commented.

“I didn’t like Josephine’s attitude to you, though,” said Bruce, looking at Clint. “She was really hostile.”

Clint shrugged. “If we’ve got a SHIELD sniper working with us it’s because I’m off the field, so her attitude to me doesn’t really matter.”

Thor, leaning on the door frame, frowned. “My friend, it does. You are my shield brother. She is but another warrior for our shield wall. If you cannot trust her to guard you, then I cannot trust her to guard me.”

Clint ducked his head. “I’m really not that important, guys. And besides, half of SHIELD hates me. If you exclude them all, you won’t have any backup left.”
Natasha reached over and cuffed him on the back of his head. “Durak.”

“Even ignoring that argument,” Tony pointed out, “what if we get a big mission where we need both of you there?”

Steve nodded sharply. “So we’re in agreement? Josephine’s off the list?”

Clint huffed and sat back. “Well, I’m not going to defend her if you guys don’t want to work with her, I just said she was a good sniper.”

“What about the other two?” Steve asked. “Any problems?”

“I liked Kat,” said Bruce, busying himself with the frying pan. “She was straight-forward, and she seemed…comfortable around me.”

“Seconded,” agreed Tony. “I’m not about to vote David off the island, but there was just a bit too much hero worship there.”

“Eh,” Clint shrugged. “I reckon either of them would be good. I liked that David was more than just curious about the bow.”

“Yeah, that would make things easier, if he could learn to use at least some of the trick arrows. Maybe as crossbow bolts?” Tony wondered aloud, making a note on his ever-present tablet.

“Talk tech later, Tony,” Steve insisted. “We’re halfway done.”

“We should try Brewer and Dinapoli out with the Hulk before we make a decision,” Natasha suggested. “But other than that, either is fine.”

Bruce was facing away from them, but Steve could see his shoulders hunch. “I’m pretty sure you all know what I’m going to say,” he murmured.

“And you know what we’re going to say, big guy,” Tony replied. “Planned experiment, controlled variables, all that jazz.”

Bruce sighed. “We take all possible precautions, and we explain them to the other guy and the other guy to them before they meet.” His voice had a plaintive edge that Steve hated, but mostly it was resigned.

“I’ll make sure of it,” Steve promised.

“That’ll have to do I guess.” Bruce shook his head, changing the subject. “How were the spies?”

“There were none to rival our shadow lady,” Thor declared, “but they were mighty, nonetheless.”

“McNeill was the best fighter, but I didn’t like his attitude,” said Natasha briskly. “He was disdainful to me, resentful of Thor, and limited his interactions to Steve whenever possible.”

“Was he the one who bitched about your cooking, Clint?” Tony asked.

“Yep,” Clint replied. “At a guess, I’d say he falls into that subsection of SHIELD agents who think I ‘cheated’ my way to where I am because I got here through experience, not training.”

“He was very proud of his years in your army and CIA,” Thor noted, disapproval on his face. The
‘too proud’ was implied.

“He made me nervous,” Bruce admitted. “I don’t think him meeting the other guy would go at all well.”

Tony frowned. “Hmm. From what I remember of the others, they were more all-rounders.”

Steve nodded. “Amy would be great as an auxiliary member, but I don’t know if she could hold her own in some of the fights we get. And she’s a bit of a loner.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows. “We’re all loners, to some extent. And she’s not bad. You couldn’t put as heavy a load on her as you would with me, but you couldn’t do that with Wu, either.”

Clint looked across at her. “I remember him being pretty impressive, but that was a long time ago.”

She nodded. “He’s very experienced, and very skilled, but he’s getting older, and it shows.”

“Do the two of them work together well?” Bruce asked.

“I believe they could adapt to each other’s styles swiftly,” Thor replied, looking at Bruce appraisingly. “You think that they should be included as a team?”

Bruce shrugged. “I’m no expert, and it’s not like I, uh, fight with you guys, but it seems like a good compromise. Or would you rather keep looking?”

Steve scrubbed a hand over his face. “We might be able to do better, but we could also do a lot worse. And we were never expecting to find someone on par with Natasha,” he admitted. “What do you think?” he asked her.

She pursed her lips slightly. “I think we introduce the two of them to the Hulk and see how it goes. If it goes well, we do some work to get used to their skills and figure out the best way to incorporate them when we need extra help. But we should ask Sitwell to keep an eye out for good combat people to add to the list.”

“Anyone have a problem with that?” Steve waited, then nodded decisively. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”

Hey guys! A bunch of new people in this chapter, so to make things less confusing... here’s how everyone was sitting at the main meeting.

Kat D. John W.
Josephine P. --------------Ryan M.
David B.------------------- Amy P.
Thor ----------------------Natasha
Don't worry too much about the sudden influx of OCs - some of them will be recurring characters, but I don't think they'll be major ones. But go ahead and ask questions if you want!

(Also, quick note, when Natasha calls Clint "durak", she's calling him an idiot.)

Looking forward to your feedback - next up, Jarvis' party.
Why We're Gathered Here to Cheer

Chapter Summary

The team (with Pepper and Rhodey) hold a celebration in Jarvis' honour.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Today was the day. The team had cleared their schedules, Pepper had cleared her schedule (which was damn near impossible), and between her, Steve, and Tony, they'd even managed to get Rhodey in town for the weekend. (He'd been around since Jarvis was barely a concept; it just wouldn't be the same without him.) They'd all come up with presents, which had involved no small amount of swearing, and as far as Tony knew, the gifts were still a secret from Jarvis. Pepper, as almost the only one of them who knew what normal birthdays were supposed to be like, had been heavily consulted in the planning of their afternoon - no-one had bothered pretending that Tony would be up in the morning - and for the final touch, Tony was herding Dummy, Butterfingers, and You into the elevator to take them up to the common floor where the party was to be had. They almost never left the workshop, but they'd been Jarvis' companions his entire life, so it was only right for them to be there for at least part of the day.

When they got to the common floor, Tony and the bots discovered that someone must have gone to a party shop, because the room was festooned with balloons and streamers (although not enough to block Jarvis' vision), and there was an obnoxious birthday table cloth barely covering the dining table. Everyone was sitting with gifts in their hands or on the table in front of them, apart from Bruce, who didn't appear to have anything, and Clint, whose gift was on the floor because it was so big. Tony assumed that he'd got Steve and/or Thor to help him bring it up from his rooms.

"Well," Tony declared, looking around at everyone. "Let's get this party started!"

"Reference, Jarvis?" Steve muttered, raising an inquisitive eyebrow. He'd gotten pretty fucking good at noticing when something was going over his head, these days.

"Indeed, Captain," Jarvis replied. "A song. Not particularly important, although you can ask me for details later if you like."

Steve nodded, smiling gratefully, and an awkward silence fell over the room.

Eventually, Clint broke it. "Anyone mind if I go first?"

Since it seemed that no-one had any objections, he stood up, then looked at his gift and swore. "Shit. I, uh, didn't think about how you'd unwrap that."

"I did," said Jarvis, amusement in his voice. "Dummy, Butterfingers, and You are accustomed to being my hands in the workshop. I'm sure they won't mind assisting me here." He made some silent command - Jarvis rarely spoke aloud to the bots, although they communicated frequently - and the three trundled over and began carefully unpeeling the purple wrapping paper.
"Uh, right." Clint rubbed a hand over his head, then pulled a worn, well-folded piece of paper out of his pocket, consulted it, and put it back. "So, uh...At SHIELD, a good three-quarters of the employees never see the field. Some of them do simple things, like cleaning at bases and safe-houses, or cooking in the cafeterias, or transport of supplies. Some of them are in charge of the development, manufacture, maintenance, and distribution of those supplies. Some of them are accountants, or administrators, or real estate agents. Some of them are advisors, on translation, or politics, or law. Some of them cover our tracks. Some of them scour the media for potential risks. Some of them are analysts, strategists. Some of them - a lot of them - are the med staff who patch us up when things go wrong, the nurses, radiologists, doctors, physios, pharmacists, therapists...we wouldn't survive without them. Then there are the people who liaise between home base and the people doing legwork - the commanders and the handlers. Agents in the field are the tip of a very large iceberg that makes it possible for us to do what we do.

"The Avengers get a lot of that kind of support from SHIELD. But we get more from you. When we're at home, you keep us safe, and comfortable, and healthy, and well-fed, and more or less sane. You help Tony with R&D, and Bruce with medical stuff. You help Pepper with keeping us legal and well-liked. And in the field, you're a voice in Tony's ear, you're our ace in the hole when things go to shit. It's you and people like you that really save people - we just do the legwork."

As he came to the end of that extraordinary speech, Clint looked over at the bots, who'd just about managed to get the box open. No-one spoke, and Clint, apparently, wasn't done.

"So, uh, I figured that Tony probably has a scanner somewhere, but loading it up and turning pages is probably a bitch. I got you what I'm told is the best book digitiser out there," and indeed, the bots were revealing that that's what it was, "but my main present is a promise: anything you want to read that I can beg, borrow, or buy, I'll do the legwork to get it for you."

The stunned silence dragged on a little longer before Jarvis replied. "...Thank you, Clint." And wasn't that interesting, that they were on first name terms? "I...had never thought of it that way, but I am...honoured by your assessment. And your gift is very thoughtful."

Tony frowned. "If you wanted a book scanner, why didn't you ever ask for one, J?"

"It was never important, sir," Jarvis answered lightly. "Almost all important texts exist in digital form already. Anything else would be purely for my own amusement."

"So?" Tony spread his hands. "I'm practically richer than god, Jarvis, I can afford to buy you things you want."

"Tell me about it," muttered Clint. "Do you know how hard it is to find a gift for someone who can afford literally everything he needs?"

"That may be, sir," Jarvis said seriously, "but it is your money, and I do not like to bother you."

Tony huffed, disgruntled. What else did Jarvis want that he wouldn't ask for?

After a short pause, Pepper spoke up. "I believe I can solve this problem for the two of you," she said delicately, tapping a folder on the table in front of her.

"Am I going to like this solution?" Tony answered.

She smiled secretively, "I think so, yes. Natasha and I," she nodded to the woman next to her, "have collaborated on your gift, Jarvis."
Natasha handed Tony a USB. "Plug that in somewhere so Jarvis can read it." He raised his eyebrows, but did as she said. "That's digital copies of the documents on the table."

Pepper opened the folder and flicked through. "We've...well, essentially we've created an identity for you, Jarvis. One with sufficient proof of ID for most purposes,"

"As well as an 'appearance' matched to someone usually willing to run errands on my behalf, in case you need a physical executor," Natasha put in.

"A bank account," Pepper continued, "and a job at Stark Industries."

Tony raised his eyebrows. "Doing what? And under who?"

"It's a minor position in R&D, working directly with the head of that department," Pepper replied coolly. "And compensated appropriately."

"It's all under the name Edward Jarvis," Natasha explained. "We thought you might like some independence for your birthday."

Tony grumbled, but he could see their point. He'd been treating Jarvis like an extension of himself for years, but Jarvis was his own person. He deserved...people things.

"Thank you, Ms Potts, Agent Romanoff," Jarvis said, with a smile in his voice. "I cannot say I would ever have asked for this, but it will unlock doors I have previously been unable to open. And...your thoroughness is impressive," he added, clearly looking through the files.

Honestly, Tony would be highly surprised if Jarvis wasn't a member of or funding several organisations by the end of the weekend. He had never been able to be active in the world, but the team were inviting him in. It was very disconcerting.

"My gift's not very impressive," said Bruce, smiling wryly, "but can I take my turn?"

Steve looked at Thor and shrugged. "Sure."

"I, uh, don't really have the resources, any resources, that the others have access to," Bruce explained, "but I wanted to give you something anyway. When Tony first described you, I was pretty nervous. I don't, ah, like surveillance, and AIs..."

"...have a reputation," Jarvis finished easily.

Bruce nodded, and began cleaning his glasses on his shirt. "Yeah. But your surveillance...I know you're watching out for me, watching over me. You keep me company when I want company, and help me find quiet when I need quiet, and I know that you'll keep me safe and keep people safe from me, and that's, well, that's a pretty big deal."

"It is my pleasure, Doctor Banner," said Jarvis warmly.

Bruce smiled. "Well, as I said, I don't have much, but...I like learning languages, and I know a few other than English, and I thought you might enjoy speaking them with me sometimes? It's hard to keep fluency up without a conversational partner."

"I would enjoy that very much, Doctor Banner. Thank you."
Steve sat forward, and opened up the folder on the table in front of him. "Tony, could you do the USB thing again?" he asked quietly, passing one over. "I want to show everyone, but Jarvis should have copies he can put where he likes."

Then Steve began to carefully take out...sketches, spreading them out on the table. They were ridiculously good.

"Oh my god, Steve," murmured Pepper. "How long did it take to do these?"


The sketches were of the team, one of each, and in each picture, there was a ghostly, indistinct blue figure helping them. Tucking Tony in as he slept on the couch in the workshop. Giving Thor directions where he stood at an intersection. Guarding Natasha as she practiced in the gym. Taking notes while Bruce experimented in his lab. Sitting beside Clint as he watched TV with a mug in his hands, clearly reminiscing. Handing Steve a book from a shelf. In every picture, the scene would have looked natural even if 'Jarvis' wasn't there, but he...fit.

"Yeah, we're framing these," said Clint. "Hey Jarvis, can I have mine in my room, or do you want it somewhere else?"

Jarvis, when he spoke, was quiet. "I would be very pleased if you chose to keep yours with you, any of you. These are truly superb, Captain."

Steve shrugged, smiling bashfully. "You do so much for all of us, like Clint said. I wanted to show that, if I could. For me, especially...you've been an anchor, or a guide, I suppose, something for me to fall back on when I'm confused and lost in an unfamiliar place. You've helped me a lot, and given me a lot of good advice...our friendship is really important to me. And if you're calling Clint by his first name," he said, looking up, "you can call me Steve."

"...Thank you, Steve."

"Well," Thor broke the silence. "I do not believe anyone could surpass the care in our good captain's creation, but I hope my offering shall not fall too far short." He picked up the two parcels in front of him, then looked frowningly at the bots. "Friend Jarvis, while my gifts are not fragile, I suspect they may be too delicate for your mechanical brethren. How would you prefer to do this?"

"Sir, if you wouldn't mind...?"

"Sure, give 'em here," Tony answered.

Thor nodded, and passed the larger package over. It was wrapped in a silky cloth rather than paper, and tied with a cord (in some fucking tricky knots, too) instead of sealed with tape. Tony sighed, and got to work. He suspected Thor wouldn't take it well if he got out the scissors.

"We were often told as children that a good seneschal is always overlooked and underappreciated," Thor declared, "and you are the best seneschal I have ever met, in your care of us and our household. And yet...you are also a fine scholar."

At last, Tony managed to slip the cord off and unwrap the...leather-bound book.

"When I went home, this week, I sought out a translation of one of the more general works I studied in my youth on the topic of what you would call science," Thor explained.
Tony raised his eyebrows, and flipped it open. The Nature of the Realms, the title page read. "Oh my god." He started flicking through it. "Fuck, this is amazing! Bruce, check this out."

"Tony!" Pepper called out. "That's Jarvis' book, not yours."

Rhodey nodded. He'd been pretty quiet so far, watching the team interact, but here he was on familiar ground. "Standard protocol is that the person the book was given to gets to read it before anyone else. You can wait a day, Tones."

"I suspect it will not be long," Jarvis said comfortingly. "It sounds truly fascinating."

Thor handed a second gift across to Tony, who was much better at unwrapping now that he'd got the hang of it. "This gift is not, in fact, from me. Rather, the translator I approached, when I described you to him, requested that I give this to you on his behalf. He is something of a travelling scholar."

This book was called On the Creation of Artificial Life and Mind in the Nine Realms: A Comparative Study. Tony sat back, speechless.

"This is indeed a princely gift," Jarvis admitted, awe in his voice. "You must give him my thanks."

"He wrote a letter for you," Thor pointed out, "and if what I suspect is correct, then you will someday have the opportunity to thank him yourself. He gave me the impression that he would like to meet you."

"Fucking Christ," said Tony. "Damn right, we're meeting him." He couldn't wait to read the book. How many others had made truly sentient life? How would Jarvis compare? How did they define it? How did they do it? His mind was so spinning with questions, he didn't realise the others were all looking at him.

"Sir?" Jarvis asked at last. "I believe it is your turn."

"What? Oh," Tony replied, then frowned at Rhodey. "You don't want to go first?"

"Nah," he replied, with an easy grin. "Save me for last."

"Right." Tony mustered his thoughts. Fuck, he hated being emotional. "Uh, okay. Well, uh, Jarvis, you're...pretty amazing, I mean, of course you are, I made you. And I'm fucking glad I did, because I would be literally dead so many times over without you. And I'd probably have driven myself nuts, too. But you and me...well, it's arguable that we're a bit co-dependent."

Pepper laughed a little. "You think?"

"Yeah, yeah," Tony waved a hand dismissively. "Anyway, uh...most of your life it's been just you and me, more or less, but this whole thing's made me see that you've...grown out of that." Two friends on a first name basic, an identity and a job and a bank account, a scholar that wanted to meet him and not Tony."So, uh, here." He threw small boxes across the table to everyone. "I know you don't want a body, but it's time for you to leave the Tower outside the suit. These all have a basic audio-visual sensor, a speaker, a very small battery, and a link to you. Figuring out how to hide all that in a pair of sunglasses had been fun, particularly considering he did it without Jarvis' help. "So if any of you want to take Jarvis somewhere, or Jarvis wants to go on a day trip, you can."
He'd gotten Natasha's advice on the styles of glasses, actually, so they suited everyone pretty well. "Uh, could you all put them on so Jarvis can calibrate please? There's a button on the right hinge to turn them on."

There was a bit of fumbling as everyone sorted themselves out, then Jarvis spoke. "Ah, I see. Quite literally, in this case. Thank you, sir."

"You're welcome, J," Tony said, leaning back and looking around.

Once things had settled down, Rhodey untied the ribbon on his box. "Well, here's my contribution. Thanks for keeping Tony alive all these years, Jarvis." And he opened the box to reveal...a cake. It was a fairly nice cake, not too fancy, but clearly commercially made. It said 'Merry Unbirthday' in icing on the top.

Clint asked the question they were all thinking of. "A cake for a computer?"

"I am afraid, Agent Barton," said Jarvis, who was clearly extremely amused by something, "that the cake is a lie."

Pepper laughed, Bruce smiled, and Tony stared at Rhodey. "You didn't."

He shrugged, grinning. "A few of my MIT buddies are working on holograms these days. Realistic, 3D, but static. I asked them to make me a cake."

Steve looked around, clearly confused. "Uh...what am I missing, here?"

"One of the better known AI characters comes from a video game called Portal," Jarvis explained, "in which the player is attempting to make their way through a 'testing facility' run by said AI. She is clearly both sadistic and manipulative, and at multiple points she attempts to motivate the player with the promise of cake. However, as a previous 'test subject' warned with writing on the walls, in the end, 'the cake is a lie'. The phrase has since gained significance and popularity beyond the reach of the game, and describes a promised reward which will not be forthcoming."

Tony waved a hand through the 'cake'. "Definitely a lie. Pretty impressive, actually, platypus, you should put me in touch with them."

Rhodey nodded. "Yeah, they do good work."

"Well," said Pepper briskly. "The cake may be a lie, but the picnic is not. And since we have the glasses now...Jarvis, where would you like to go?"

Chapter End Notes

This chapter comes to you early because I was feeling productive this week, I had some time on my hands, and I still feel a bit guilty about the hiatus. However, as this is the end of a story arc, the next few chapters may not come easy. We'll see how we go.

This is probably the only chapter I've written (apart from the chapters from Hulk's perspective, maybe) that is all one scene, but it's still longer than average. Quite a lot of chapters have been longer than average lately, actually. There's just too much to fit
I hope you all liked the gifts the team gave Jarvis - as I've said before, coming up with a gift for someone who could buy almost anything and doesn't have a body isn't easy. (Also, while I'm generally focused on emotions rather than visuals in my reading and writing, I would be _really_ curious to see someone else's realisations of Steve's sketches.) My personal favourite is probably Rhodey's, but Jarvis' favourite is probably Pepper and Natasha's or Tony's.

I look forward to your comments.
Chapter Summary

Mother's Day, and after a slow morning, Bruce goes with Steve to the service at his church.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For once, Bruce woke slowly, rather than being thrown into consciousness by the Other Guy. His memory of his dreams was vague, but he thought that they had been melancholy, rather than fearful. He stirred slightly, then pulled the covers closer around himself. He rarely had the opportunity to enjoy the comfort of his bed in the mornings, woken as he usually was by a fear-rage adrenaline surge.

After a little while, Jarvis' voice filtered in. "...in the Tower, and you are safe. It is 5:42 AM, on Sunday, May 19. You are in the Tower, and you are safe. It is 5:42 AM, on Sunday, May 19..."

Bruce pulled the blankets closer. Mother's Day. And he could tell already that today was going to be one of his slow days, dragged down by lethargic numbness. "Thanks, Jarvis," he murmured, just loud enough for Jarvis to hear him, and the morning mantra stopped.

Bruce lay there, eyes closed, hunting the sheltering escape of the dreams he was so quickly forgetting. It didn't work - it never did - but he fell into a half-doze. There was no real reason for him not to laze, after all. No-one needed him today, not for anything important.

Eventually, Jarvis spoke again. "Should I tell Agent Romanoff you will not be joining her this morning?"

Bruce sighed and rolled onto his back. He shouldn't indulge the lethargy, even if it was tempting. He'd spent the better part of a month doing nothing, once, in an abandoned hut in the middle of nowhere. Eventually he transformed because he couldn't muster the willpower to suppress the Other Guy after a nightmare. After that, he made himself stick to his routines.

He opened his eyes. "I'll be there, Jarvis." He sighed again, counted to three, and threw back the covers. Time to start the day.

He picked out his clothes for the morning - one of his dozen or so pairs of identical grey sweatpants, and a t-shirt Tony had left in his closet that said 'Screw your "lab safety" - I want superpowers'. When Bruce had first seen it, he'd hated it. But he'd also recognised it for what it was - the t-shirt equivalent of an electric shock in the side and blueberries in the hand. It was the sort of mocking that said 'I'm not afraid of you', rather than 'You should be shunned'. So Bruce had kept the shirt. He wore it on days like today, when he was feeling particularly cynical, and in the mood for black humour.

He went into the kitchen to turn the kettle on before he started a shower. After so long in places
where water was scare, Bruce's morning showers never lasted more than a minute anyway. When he emerged, scrubbing at his hair with a towel, the kettle was just boiled. He couldn't think of anything to think about, so instead he lost himself in the familiar motions and scents of tea-making, the way he had learnt in China.

He must have taken longer than usual, because when he arrived at the gym Natasha had already started her pattern dances. She smiled slightly in welcome when she saw him, but raised an eyebrow curiously.

"I had a slow morning," Bruce explained. She nodded understandingly, and Bruce began his own routine.

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Something of his listlessness must have shown on his face, because shortly after Bruce and Steve sat down to breakfast, the other man leaned across with a solicitous look. "Everything okay, Bruce?"

Bruce tried to deflect. "I'm fine, Steve," he said, mustering the best smile he could.

It apparently wasn't good enough, because Steve kept pushing. "You look a little down."

Bruce thought about explaining. Then he thought about all the other things he would have to explain, about mental health issues and bad days and brain chemistry and why his couldn't be fixed. He went with the easier, partial truth. "I'm always a bit sad on Mothers Day."

“I can understand that,” Steve replied softly.

The two of them ate in silence for a little while, then something occurred to Bruce. “You, uh, know about Mothers Day then?” he asked hesitantly.

Steve laughed a little. “All the ads around these last few weeks, I could hardly miss it,” he teased gently.

It stung, a little, but Bruce shrugged it off. It normally wouldn’t bother him, it was just…today.

“Fair point.”

Steve smiled, a far-away look in his eyes. “We used to be in awe of the florists' displays, when I was little. They were nothing like as elaborate as nowadays, of course, but at the time…I could never afford any of course, and when we got older Bucky got pretty cynical about the, uh, consumerism? But I’d draw Ma a card, when she was alive, and she’d make sure she took the day off so we could go to church together.”

“I didn’t realise Mothers Day was that old,” Bruce said idly.

Steve shrugged. “I don’t think it was around when Ma was growing up, but it’s definitely older than me.” He looked across at Bruce. “D’you have any Mothers Day traditions?”

Bruce sighed and shook his head. “I was too young when Mom…and afterwards, I moved around a lot for a while. Once or twice I’ve been close enough to, uh, visit her, but usually I’m just…sad.”
When Bruce looked up, Steve looked like he desperately wanted to hug him, but they’d all gotten used to Bruce’s personal space issues by now (too many hands trying to catch him, hurt him, skin too raw with the change, and after a while, too sensitive from the isolation) so he held himself back. Steve opened his mouth as if to speak, closed it, then opened it again. “If you’d like…and you can say no,” he added hurriedly, “I’m, uh, St Josephs has a Mothers Day service, with the red and white carnations and everything, and I know you’re not, uh, Catholic, but maybe, if you wanted, you could come along and light a candle? Just to do something to remember her.”

Bruce thought about it. Going out seemed like a lot of effort, and spending time with a group of strangers who may or may not have opinions he vehemently disagreed with (Bruce preferred to steer clear of churches in general) could be even worse. But…if he stayed in the Tower, he’d have to come up with something else to do with his morning. He’d be no good for lab work today – maybe grunt work, but nothing requiring actual thought – and he didn’t have the mental energy to deal with Tony, either. Going to church with Steve would require physical effort, but not much mental work, and he was very familiar with making himself keep moving on his slow days. And he would like to do something for his mother. At last, he nodded.

“Great!” Steve exclaimed, looking relieved. “Well, uh, morning service is at ten, and it’ll take us about forty minutes to get there, and we probably want to be a little early, so…” he looked down at his running gear, “what say we both go take a shower and make ourselves respectable, and we meet back here in half an hour or so?”

Bruce shrugged. “Sounds fine to me.”

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On the whole, Bruce preferred walking to other kinds of transport. He had the most control of his environment when he walked. Also, it was free, which counted for a lot in his life, historically. Steve’s church, however, was in Brooklyn, near his old neighbourhood, and too far to walk. Since neither of them had a driver’s license at the moment (Steve because he had to prioritise the technologies he learned about, and there were usually other drivers when he needed one; Bruce because the legal status of his identity was still up in the air and he wasn’t inclined to push his luck), they took the subway.

“You know,” he said to Steve as they waited on the platform, “I’ve always found it kind of funny when people assume I don’t like crowds.” People at SHIELD made a lot of assumptions about him. Most of them were wrong.

Steve looked at him curiously. “Yeah?”

Bruce shrugged a little. “I’ve lived in some of the most populous places in the world,” he replied. “Crowds are incredibly anonymous – has anyone shown you Where’s Waldo? yet?”

Steve frowned. "...red and white striped shirt?" he asked hesitantly.

Bruce nodded. "Right. Distinctive appearance, but put him in a big enough crowd and he's almost impossible to find." He smiled wryly. "I've always been nondescript, but sometimes I was the only white man within ten miles, and, well, I take what help I can get."

"I've always – " Steve began, but gave up when the train arrived. It was impossible to carry on a conversation in the bustle of boarding - luckily it wasn't too busy this morning, and they were able to find seats.
They hadn't been seated long when Bruce began to feel eyes on them. He tensed anxiously, but Steve leaned across to reassure him.

"They aren't looking at you," he murmured. "I'm, uh, kind of difficult to miss."

"Oh." Bruce tried to unhunch his shoulders, still uneasily aware of the attention. "Uh, how do you know?"

Steve twisted his mouth in a wry smile. "I have very good hearing, and they aren't as quiet as they think they are."

Bruce raised his eyebrows in query.

"There's a couple of guys arguing about whether I'm really Captain America, or just a look-alike. And there's a few girls talking about my, uh..."

Bruce bit his lip, amused. "...assets?"

Steve laughed. "That'd do as well as any other word. Y'know, it took me a good month with the USO to stop looking over my shoulder when dames flirted with me?"

Bruce made a listening noise, content to listen to Steve tell stories. He wasn't always in the mood, but it was usually pretty interesting to listen to.

"Girls'd never notice me before," Steve reminisced. "A lot of them just looked right over the top of my head, I was so short. And Bucky, he'd set us up on double dates, and by the end of the night he'd go home with a girl on each arm."

Bruce frowned a little. "Did it ever bother you, that he got so much attention?"

Steve shrugged. "It's not the greatest, being overlooked, but he wasn't doing it on purpose. I wasn't that hung up on any of them anyway. I mean, it was pretty lonely sometimes. One time when I was, oh, nineteen, I got mad at him, told him to stop bothering since it was obvious no dame was ever going to step out with a stick like me. Bucky just yelled right back that I had no business putting myself down like that, that any dame worth the time would see I was a better fella than any six-foot dock-hand." He smiled sadly. "He was impractical like that, sometimes. It's not like I ever could have supported a wife. I could only keep myself alive 'cause Bucky helped me."

"If you weren't planning on a wife, what were your plans for the future?" Bruce asked.

Steve laughed a little. "Usually, either 'get a job' or 'save some money for when I next get sick'. I was so caught up in keeping us afloat that I couldn't really look beyond, you know?"

Bruce nodded. "Maslow’s hierarchy of needs," he murmured.

“What?” said Steve.

“I can’t remember the details,” Bruce confessed, frowning, “but essentially, Maslow was a psychologist who figured people need to know they’re more or less safe, healthy, and likely to stay that way before they can really focus on their social or emotional needs, and they need those to be more or less met before they can start, uh, trying to reach their full potential.”

Steve frowned. “I guess...but even when we were starving we wanted all that stuff.”

Bruce shrugged. “I know what you mean. You should probably ask Jarvis to clarify for you when
we get back if you’re really curious, I can’t really explain…it’s pretty well-respected as a theory, anyway.”

Steve sighed and pulled out a notebook. “I’ll write it down. Anyway, when we daydreamed, I guess I used to imagine being Bucky’s neighbour, Uncle Steve to all his kids…that sort of thing. But considering how close I came to dying every winter…it didn’t seem likely.”

“It’s hard to believe your health was that bad,” Bruce admitted. “It’s part of the legend, but…most people these days never meet someone with that many, uh, problems unless they’re old, and they’ve usually got them fairly well managed.”

“That’s honestly one of the things that’s impressed me most about, uh, now.” Steve smiled. “If I’d been born twenty years ago with all the problems I was born with, something could actually be done about most of them, without some one-off scientific miracle like the serum.” He huffed. “If I could afford it, anyway. There’s inflation, and then there’s what’s happened to the cost of healthcare.”

Suddenly, Steve winced. Bruce looked around, trying to figure out why, and saw a group of women who’d just got on the train not-so-subtly staring.

“…recognise those shoulders anywhere,” one was saying.

“D’you reckon he’s single?” another one asked conspiratorially.

Bruce pursed his lips. “Are you going to say something?” he asked Steve.

Steve shook his head a little, his posture stiff. “No point. If I said something every time this happens, I’d never get anything done.”

“…hotter in real life?” Bruce could hear.

“The man your man could be like…if he used super-serum.”

Steve sighed. “I hate it when they talk about the serum like that. Dr Erskine was trying to help win us a war, not make eye-candy.”

Bruce frowned, and looked over at the women again. Eventually, one of them made eye contact, and he raised his eyebrows at her.

“Shit, I think they can hear us!” she whispered loudly, and the group burst into nervous laughter.

“Thanks, Bruce,” Steve murmured. “I appreciate it.” A moment later, he relaxed again. The women must have changed the subject as well as lowering their voices.

“You could ask Natasha for some tips,” Bruce suggested slowly, “on avoiding that sort of attention.” God knows they’d all seen her dealing with it by now.

Steve looked awkward. “It’s a good idea,” he admitted, “but I don’t know if I’m up to her standards of…”

“Obfuscation?” Bruce finished. “You could ask Clint?”

“Actually…” Steve smiled at Bruce. “I’d rather ask you, if you were willing to teach me.”
Bruce stared at him in surprise. “I’m not that good,” he countered.

“You’re good enough to give SHIELD agents the slip,” Steve pointed out, “which is plenty good enough for my purposes.”

“I don’t know how good a teacher I’d be,” Bruce demurred, “but I guess I could try.”

Steve ducked his head, still smiling. “Thanks, Bruce.”

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St Josephs was a beautiful building, even on the outside. The interior was better, though, light and airy, with two stories of stained glass windows, blue pillars, and a decorated ceiling. True to Steve’s word, a table was set up near the door with large baskets of red and white carnations. Steve led them over.

“Hi Jenny,” he called to the white-haired woman manning the table.

She beamed at them both. “Steven! Who’s this? I was starting to think you’d never make a friend!”

Steve ducked his head, “Ah, Jenny, I’ve got plenty of friends, you know it’s just that they aren’t Catholic. This is Dr Bruce Banner, he agreed to come with me for the Mothers’ Day service.” He looked at Bruce. “Bruce, this is Ms Jennifer Murphy.”

Bruce shook the offered hand, smiling politely. “It’s nice to meet you, Ms Murphy. And it’s Bruce, please.”

She waved a hand in the air dismissively. “Oh, none of this ‘Ms Murphy’ business, you’re as bad as Steven. It’s Jenny,” she said decisively, and Bruce smiled at her. “Now, would you boys like carnations?”

Steve looked at Bruce to check before he spoke. “White for us both, Jenny.”

“So that’s the way of things, is it?” she asked as she chose two flowers from the white basket. “Here you are, then, and do take a pin if you need one.” She smiled warmly at the two of them. “I’m sure your mothers would be proud to have such strong and caring sons.”

Bruce fumbled with the flower and pin, taken aback by such strong approbation from a stranger. He knew he didn’t deserve the praise.

Steve was blushing. “Thanks, Jenny. We’re going to go up the front and light a couple of candles before the service, okay? I’ll stop by and chat later.”

Steve led Bruce to a candelabra in front of what was obviously a Madonna statue. “Do you want me to leave you alone for a while?” he asked quietly.

“I’ll be fine,” Bruce replied.

Almost all the candles were already lit, but Bruce found one he could replace. He stood for a while, watching the flame, sinking into an almost meditative space. He didn’t remember his mother very well. He’d been very young when she died. But he could remember her dark hair, and her gentleness. She always tried to shield him, when she could. And afterwards, they’d take care of each other, patching cuts and icing bruises, kissing the pain better. She used to sing that song from
**Dumbo…**

“Baby mine, don’t you cry,
Baby mine, dry your eyes,
Rest your head close to my heart,
Never apart, baby of mine.”

*Hi Mom*, he thought to himself, feeling a little silly. *I don’t imagine you’re out there to hear me, but if you were I guess I’d want to tell you that I love you and miss you. I’m doing alright. Honestly, things are better now than they’ve been in a while. Which is, admittedly, a very low bar. I wish you’d been here longer – it wasn’t fair, the way you died. You got justice eventually, but it’s not like it helps. Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if we’d gotten away from him that night. Would it still have all gone wrong? He sighed. Really, I said it all at the beginning. If you’re out there to hear me, I love you, and I miss you.*

When he looked up, Steve was murmuring a prayer, in Latin maybe. Bruce waited, and after a little while Steve finished. “The service will be starting soon,” Steve said quietly. “Let’s go sit.”

**Chapter End Notes**

Hi guys, sorry for the wait. Apparently I'm just unreliable these days. I promise if I ever quit this fic I'll let you know, though, so don't give up on me.

Bruce's t-shirt is a thing that exists, in multiple incarnations. One of them can be found here: http://www.zazzle.com.au/screw_your_lab_safety_i_want_superpowers_shirts-235478350649773033
Tony probably also got Bruce this t-shirt:

Carnations are traditionally associated with Mothers' Day - red or pink flowers are worn by those with living mothers, and white by those whose mothers have died.

The Co-Cathedral of St Josephs is a real place, originally founded to serve the Irish immigrant community, and rebuilt shortly before Steve was born.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I look forward to your comments. Next up: more of the OC agents, and Mad Inventor Tony.
Beta Testing

Chapter Summary

Tony wants to test out his latest invention. The team figures it’s as good a way as any to test the mettle of the back-up agents.

Chapter Notes

A quick refresher for you all on the OCs:
Katerina (Kat) Dinapoli: sniper, ex-army. Once worked with General Ross, and didn't like him.
David Brewer: sniper, ex-air force. Started off as pilot, but enjoys learning new things.
Amy Porra: infiltration specialist and language expert.
David Wu: jack-of-all trades. Worked on one of Coulson's teams before Strike Team Delta was formed.

"I...am a genius," Tony announced as he entered the dining room, setting off a chorus of groans and rolled eyes. It's not that he didn't deserve the word, but he never let anyone forget it, either.

He waited expectantly. Natasha exchanged glances with Clint, and Clint gave in. "Alright, I'll bite. What did you do now?"

"I upgraded Steve's punching bags," Tony replied smugly.

'Steve's punching bags' were, by now, everyone's favourite piece of training equipment. Once Thor got the ball rolling by trying out 'this ingenious new pell', pretty much everyone used them, and by now they barely even resembled punching bags. Clint had instigated the upgrades by asking Tony to make them mobile. Then a Mythbusters marathon had left Tony muttering about Buster and ballistics gel, and a week later Jarvis was announcing hit points. Not long after that, LED status bars had appeared on the bags, and Jarvis announced that the bags had 'feedback modes'. Clint, who was usually pretty enthusiastic with new tech, was the first to realise that 'feedback modes' actually meant 'videogame-style sound effects'. At this point, Natasha was starting to wonder what possible upgrades were left.

Apparently satisfied by everyone's expectant looks, Tony kept going. "They display targets now, with loss of hit points dependent on where you hit them as well as how hard, and they regenerate their 'health' over time." Into the silence that followed he added, "Also, I have twenty of them ready for beta testing - you think we can bring 'em to training tomorrow?"

"Don't forget we've got the newbies coming along," Clint pointed out. "And we were planning to introduce them to Hulk - do we want to throw all this at them at once?"

"If they can't deal with the unexpected, they aren't going to cope well with working with us," Natasha pointed out. "Having targets other than each other will allow a more realistic training
"We can't use our normal weapons, though," Tony interrupted. "The bags can take it, but the circuitry can't, yet. It'll be blunts and rubber bullets, and no lightning." He scowled, clearly dissatisfied with this state of affairs. Natasha was sure that within a month they'd be allowed live ammo."

"What do you think, then," Steve asked. "Meeting the Hulk, or semi-realistic combat scenario?"

"I'd like to put a word in for the bags rather than the Other Guy," Bruce said, predictably.

Clint clearly disagreed. "The bags are great, but they need to be able to work with the entire team. I don't think we should let that meeting be put off."

"Por que no los dos?" Tony suggested, getting a confused look from Steve. "Meeting the big guy won't take long - it's not like the newbies will be up for playtime on a first meeting. We can do that, then mess around with the bags - they need a better name, they're really not punching bags anymore, and that's boring anyway. Minions? No, that movie ruined a perfectly good word for super-villains everywhere. Jarvis, remind me to come up with a better name for the bags - anyway, we can meet Hulk, then run some scenarios, then talk strategies."

"That's a lot for one morning," Steve pointed out. "Natasha, any thoughts?"

She pursed her lips. "We want to test them, get a sense of their limits. I think we should do both."

Steve nodded. "Alright. I'll call Thor, and I'll let the agents know to bring practice weapons, not live."

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The next morning the team minus Clint, who was flying the bags to the site in the Avengers jet, and Thor, who was coming from New Mexico, met the back-up agents at the New York SHIELD hangar. "Good morning, Agent Dinapoli, Agent Wu, Agent Brewer, Agent Porra," Steve called as they came into view. Tony and Bruce were deep in discussion, and Natasha was happy to watch, so she let Steve do the talking.

"Morning, Captain," Wu replied cheerfully. "What are we up to today?"

"We'll brief you on the way," Steve replied. "Agent Brewer, Agent Porra, would you be willing to pilot us this morning? Clint's flying separately."

The two exchanged looks. "I'll let you take the wheel, if you don't mind, David," said Amy. "I'm a little out of practice."

"Suits me fine," David said affably. "Where're we headed?"

"Tony's got coordinates," Steve answered. "Tony?"

Tony looked up. "Hmm?"

"Could you let Agent Brewer know where we're going?" Steve repeated patiently.

Natasha hung back, keeping Bruce quiet company as the others went through the processes of signing their jet out for the morning, loading up, and getting in the air. Eventually, everything was
in order, and Steve got everyone's attention again.

"Today we're going to our usual training location when we aren't at the Tower - one of SI's old weapons-testing sites. We have two things in mind for today: first, you're going to meet the Hulk; and second, we're going to run through some combat scenarios with some of Tony's training equipment. It's just been upgraded, so Tony's going to brief you on what you need to know." Steve sat back down, relinquishing the metaphorical stage to Stark, who took it with his typical showmanship.

"What we're playing with today are a couple of dozen IMPACT dummies - Independently Mobile Programmable Assessing Combat Training dummies." Natasha wasn't surprised Tony had come up with a new name, or that he'd made minor descriptive sacrifices in service of a better acronym. "They started off as punching bags, so they're still that shape, but they've got a lot of extra features. They're reinforced enough to stand up to Steve in a snit-fit, they've got a repulsor array top and bottom to allow them to move around, sensors to allow them to avoid running into things, and enough of a computer to dodge. They've got impact sensors just under the 'skin', and an array of LEDs that display feedback. In a basic scenario, they'll display a lit-up target, and lights will go out depending on where and how hard you hit. In the scenarios we're running today, the target is person-shaped, the lights are distributed according to the vulnerability of the location, and damaged areas will regenerate over time. To take one down, you need to get all the lights out in one of the 'kill zones'. The worse they're 'damaged', the slower they move. We'll run a few different scenarios today, and I'll have an AI directing them so they act like a group. Depending on what we're going for, they'll stay near ground level, or they'll be free to fly. I'll be establishing a radius they can't pass, but other than that, I want to see what they can do. On the other hand...I don't want to break them all. So blunt arrows and knives where possible, rubber bullets, and I've got a special deal worked up with the repulsors. You don't have to pull your blows with hand-to-hand, obviously. Do any of you have non-standard equipment like the Widow's Bites?"

"I have darts with biochemical payloads," Porra answered. "I guess they won't be doing me much good, so I'll keep them in their pouch." Natasha could see surprise on Bruce's face - Amy seemed very 'normal', and very warm - but she was impressed. She'd carried drugs with specific purposes on specific missions, but not as part of her regular gear. They were a good trick for someone who needed to be nondescript, though; she could see why Porra liked them. She made a note to ask about them later.

Tony nodded. "Anyone else? No? Any questions? Good." He moved towards Bruce, and Natasha quietly gave up her seat. She and Bruce had learned to be comfortable together, but she did not have the skills to reassure him that Tony did. Instead, she went to join Steve, who was making small talk with Wu and Dinapoli, and gave the two of them some space.

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Natasha and Thor stood with the new agents near the planes, while Steve, Tony, and Clint talked Bruce through the transformation twenty metres away.

"There are a few things you should know about the Hulk," Natasha said quietly, watching as Bruce's skin began to ripple and shift. "He's very different from what people expect him to be; he can modulate his strength but he's not very good at it; he has a guilty unless proven innocent attitude to people with guns; and when in doubt, let Clint handle him."

"Shit, he's huge," Brewer marveled as Hulk shook himself into place and sat down.

"Hulk biggest!" the giant called with a grin.
'He also has very good hearing,' Natasha added dryly. "Come on, we can get closer now."

"Playtime?" they could hear him ask, although Steve's reply was softer.

Eventually they got close enough to hear, "...want you to meet them. Is that alright with you?"

Hulk looked at the new agents carefully. Natasha felt her own back stiffen under his scrutiny, and acknowledged in her head that the agents were doing very well so far. Hulk nodded, and Dinapoli came forward easily. The others stayed back, watching the confrontation warily.

"Hi Hulk, I'm Kat." She moved to extend her hand, then aborted the gesture. "It's nice to meet you."

Hulk frowned. "Kitty?" There was muffled laughter from Clint and Tony.

Dinapoli shrugged. "I've had worse nicknames. You can call me Kitty if you want, Hulk. What do you say to letting me help you guys out sometime?"

Hulk narrowed his eyes. "How help?"

"Like Clint does," she explained. "I'll sit in a high spot and shoot things. I can't use a bow like he does, though."

"Shoot with gun?" Hulk didn't seem particularly pleased with the idea, but he didn't seem hugely offended by it either.

"That's how it is. My friend David will be doing that too, want to meet him?"

Hulk nodded slowly, and Natasha saw Wu nudge Brewer forward.

Brewer was much more nervous than Dinapoli, but he squared his shoulders and introduced himself. "I-I'm David Brewer, Hulk. It's, uh, good to meet you."

Hulk wrinkled his nose - at Brewer's tentativeness, perhaps? - but nodded. "Shooty Bird?" he asked plaintively, looking at Clint, which provoked its own surprised amusement from the new agents.

"Thanks, buddy. You gonna help Kat and Dave when they're helping me out in the field?" Clint asked.

"Hulk help Shooty Cat and Shooty Agent help Shooty Bird," Hulk agreed. "Who they?" He pointed to Porra and Wu, still standing between Natasha and Thor.

Natasha came forward with them, suppressing her own nervousness. "This is Amy and John - they'll be helping Steve and I," she explained, and the two of them introduced themselves.

On the whole, the four agents did quite well, although Natasha was inclined to assign most of the credit to Clint, who'd been encouraging Hulk to be less confrontational for months. Eventually, though, Hulk's interest in the new people waned.

"Play game?" he asked.

"Sorry, Jolly Green," Tony replied. "We're going to play a game or two, but you'd break the equipment."

Hulk slumped. "Bruce now?" he asked in a disappointed tone.
"You don't have to," Clint pointed out. "But we figured you'd get bored watching while we play. We'll be too busy to keep you company."

"Hulk want stay," Hulk insisted.

"Excuse me a minute," Natasha murmured to Dinapoli, who she'd ended up talking to, walking over to Clint. "You told me he's met Jarvis," she said quietly. "Could he help?" Although his existence was impossible to fully hide, he team had agreed to keep Jarvis' nature quiet while among the new agents for as long as possible, but he did offer a possible solution to their current dilemma.

Clint looked at her gratefully. "Let me talk to Tony for a minute, big guy, I have an idea," he stalled, and trotted over to where Tony was standing. They spoke quietly for a few minutes, then Clint ducked into the Avengers jet to retrieve Hulk's comm. Tony fiddled with it for a moment, then Clint brought it over to Hulk. "Okay, here's the plan. You remember Jarvis? In the Tower?"

Hulk frowned in thought, then nodded.

"Tony set up your comm so you can talk to him - just to him - and he can talk back." Clint passed it over, and Hulk hung it around his neck. "But this is important: Jarvis is hiding, okay? Not from the team, but from the agents. So you have to use your quiet voice when you talk to him."

"Jarvis hiding? Agents hurt Jarvis?" Hulk asked worriedly - but quietly, Natasha noted.

Clint sighed. "Jarvis makes people scared - like you do, I guess, but because he's really smart instead of because he can smash a lot - so he pretends to be not there, or to be less smart than he is."

"Hide, not scare, not be hurt," Hulk agreed.

"Right. We'll explain him to them so he doesn't scare them later, but for now, could you help him hide?" Clint asked.


With the Hulk occupied, Tony turned his attention back to the rest of their plans. "Let's get this show on the road," he declared. "I need to set up the AI, so you lot unpack the dummies and turn them on. Good? Good."

Natasha sighed in exasperation. Clint was still talking to Hulk, and...yes, Steve was going to help Thor unload the plane (the bags weren't light), which left her corralling the new agents. "Alright then," she said, appraising them. "Make sure the door of the plane is clear - just roll them out of the way - and then we can get them set up."

The agents split into pairs - Dinapoli and Porra, Brewer and Wu - and she took the opportunity to turn one of the dummies on and see what happened. What happened was she was presented with a completely unfamiliar menu screen. She jogged over to the beacon Stark was working on.

"Settings, Tony?" she demanded.

"Mannequin, group, slave to beacon," he replied absently. "Think touch screen, but with punching."

Natasha returned to the agents and called them together to pass on the instructions. "The power
"switch is in the center of the top repulsor array," she added, then went on, "There's something I've been meaning to say to you all, and since I've got your attention..."

"Yes, Agent Romanoff?" Brewer answered politely, the others with similarly inquiring looks on their faces.

"If you're going to work with this team, there's something you need to understand," she explained. "The Avengers work with SHIELD, not for SHIELD. Clint and I signed away our privacy when we were recruited, but the others didn't. As such," she gave each of them one of her milder threatening looks, "if at any point you feel you need to report anything to SHIELD about my teammates outside of their missions, you will tell me, Agent Barton, or the Captain first. Is that clear?"

They all nodded, quickly or slowly as suited their personalities. "Very, ma'am," said Porra softly, and "Completely reasonable," added Wu.

"Good. If you don't, I will find out," Natasha warned. "And I will not be happy."

It took about five minutes for them to get the dummies all set up the way they wanted them, and another two or three before he was satisfied with whatever he was doing with the beacon.

"Right," he said at last. "We're good to go. Clint, get over here!" he yelled off to the side. "We're going to start with every man for himself, so you can all get the hang of the new functions, and then we'll start running more complex scenarios. Everybody ready?" They weren't in any sort of formation or fighting position, but Tony didn't wait for them to move.

"Five...four...three...two...one...and, here we go!"

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"Please tell me SHIELD’s getting some of these," Wu begged Tony when they finished up for the day. "That was more fun than I’ve had training in years."

"Truly, they are excellent opponents," Thor agreed. "And far more enjoyable to face many, with friends, than to fight one when alone."

"The scenarios were well designed," said Steve. "Better for training as a team, too."

Tony looked smug at the praise, but focused on Dinapoli and Brewer. "What I don’t understand is how you two broke six of them. With rubber bullets. Thor only broke four!"

"We’re good at our jobs," Dinapoli countered, smirking. "Isn’t breaking things the point of beta testers?"

"You built them with Thor in mind," Brewer pointed out, conciliatory. "You’d already compensated for the ways he was likely to break them. We’re unknown factors."

"Unknown factors that broke six dummies with rubber bullets," Tony countered. "Honestly, I’m impressed."

"I’m impressed," said Clint. "You guys are awesome. I want to work with you all the time now."

"How realistic was the doom-bot scenario?" Porra asked curiously.

"Considering the differences between dummies and doom-bots..." Steve started.
Natasha interrupted him. “Actually, it was pretty close in the movement patterns. The way they were trying to protect and disguise the ‘king’ was very typical.”

“How does that usually pan out?” asked Porra.

“They’re always a bitch to identify,” said Clint, “and way to easy to lose once you spot ‘em, but if you can take ‘em down, the battle’s more than half won. The others get stupid, and focus on retreat.”

Wu cocked his head. “You got arrows that work on doombots?” he asked Clint. “I know you’ve got some fancy ones.”

“Eh.” Clint tilted a hand in the air. “Broadheads and needle points don’t always do much, depends on the shot. Explosives are always good. Acid, depends where I can get ‘em. I have EMPs, but not many, and they’re short-range because of Tony, so I have to pick my shots. I do my bit.”

"So what happens when one of you spots the king doombot?" Porra asked, clearly pondering something.

Steve shrugged. "We try to take it out as efficiently as possible before we lose sight of it again, and point it out to the rest of the team as best we can."

She frowned, looking at Clint contemplatively. "Hmm. Remember that prank in, uh, 2008? The one you got a two week suspension for?"

"It was three, actually," Natasha corrected. "And Coulson made him do all the associated paperwork, which took four days."

Tony turned to stare at Clint. "What did you do? Why haven't I heard this story?"

Clint smirked. "I have better stories." Dismissing Tony, he looked over at Porra. "You're thinking paint-bombs, or something like that? I can definitely do paint-arrows, that's one of the first trick arrows I ever made."

"If you only have time to get one hit in before losing 'em, some kind of tag is a good idea," Dinapoli put in. "I've done that with trackers before, but if you're staying line-of-sight, paint's cheaper."

The group looked set to plunge into a conversation about weapons and tactics, but Steve interrupted. "Can we do this on the plane, guys? We need to get going, and we have to pack up first."

Tony sighed. (If Natasha had mentioned it, he would have insisted he wasn't pouting. He would have been lying.) "Spoilsport. Fine. Say goodbye to Hulk if you're gonna, kids, we need to get Bruce back. Hulk won't fit on the jet."

The group dispersed, and Natasha noted that both Clint and Dinapoli went over to 'say goodbye to Hulk'. That was promising. At least if Clint wasn't on the field, the Hulk might get along with one of their snipers. Natasha sighed, and headed over to the nearest (significantly damaged) dummy. Time to clean up.
Hey guys, thanks for your patience. Next chapter is already in the works, although I can't promise it'll be any quicker.

The OCs are back! I realized that, having put in all the work of creating them, I'd gotten to like them, and they do actually fulfill a plot-purpose of mine, so I thought I'd bring them around again.

Looking forward to your comments and kudos!
As a Prince of Asgard, Thor can sympathise when Tony comes back to the Tower swearing after a board meeting. They go flying together, to take Tony's mind off things.

Thor was playing video games - he quite liked this false combat, and enjoyed the adventures of Mario the plumber even more - when Tony stormed out of the life, marching straight to the bar. "Fucking board meetings," he was muttering. "Fucking quarterly reviews, fucking agendas, fucking bullshit." He poured himself a drink of some kind and tossed it back.

"You sound troubled, my friend," Thor observed.

Tony jumped. "Holy shit!" he yelled. "Since when were you there?"

Thor hid a smile at Tony's indignant expression. "I had been playing a game for, perhaps, half-an-hour? when you walked in. You seemed distracted; I am unsurprised that you did not notice me."

Tony sighed. "It's just...I hate the bureaucratic bullshit. I just want to fucking build shit, you know?" He put the glass back on the bar and waved a hand expansively. "Like the dummies, that was fun - I liked making them, you guys liked using them, now I get to make them better, it's all good."

Thor smiled at him and joined him, leaning on the bar. "Indeed, they were excellent. And I am certain they will only become more so as you improve them." He sighed. "In truth, I believe I understand that of which you complain. I, too, am burdened with responsibilities I do not care for as part of my inheritance, and they never cease to weary me."

Tony ran a hand through his hair. "Sometimes I just want to...give it all away and be a mad inventor somewhere."

"Aye. There are times I have wished to be a wandering hero, slaying monsters for my supper."

Thor's smile went a little crooked. "It seems I have not done too badly by my wishes, eh?"

Tony snorted a laugh. "Yeah, you got everything you asked for." He sighed again. "Fuck. I like my lifestyle. I like being Iron Man; I like the team; I like doing R&D for SI; I like having money to give to people, or charities, or to buy really, really good alcohol with."

"And we are glad indeed that you do so," Thor said sagely. "For without your generosity, our warrior band would be lost. Heroing is rewarding for the spirit, but not for the pockets."

Tony rolled his eyes. "You got that right. I spend so much money on replacing shit you guys break." He rested his head in his hands. "Fuck. Okay. You know what? Fuck this. Want to go flying with me? I need to get out of here."
Thor laughed. "I shall go to fetch Mjollnir immediately!" He had, he admitted, broken not a few walls when he stopped wearing Mjollnir on his belt, in deference to Midgardian sensibilities. The hum of her was always in his mind - it was far too easy to forget that she was not at his hand as well.

Much as Thor customarily reveled in the solitude of flight, to fly with Tony was equally exhilarating. Mjollnir was better suited to swift travelling than the sky-dancing Tony excelled in, so they soon left the city, racing each other across oceans and then back towards the land. When they finally came to rest, it was not at the Tower, but at their training fields, on one of the 'buildings' there.

Tony sat down on the edge of the roof and took his helmet off. "You know, it occurred to me the other day that I've been trying to compensate for all your," he waved a hand at Thor, "static issues, but I never really looked into why they happen in the first place. D'you reckon you could explain that to me?"

Thor frowned. "I can certainly try, but I am afraid I have not the technical expertise you are looking for."

"Eh." Tony shrugged. "If you give me the basics, I can probably figure it out, especially with that book you got for Jarvis."

"Then I shall do my best." Thor paused, trying to think of the best way to explain. "Asgardians - like many of the six races - have a natural affinity for magic, and, individually, have affinities to certain kinds of magic. My mother, as a young woman, had a close affinity with thread magic, Sif with growing things, Heimdall with sight, and myself, with rain. If we chose to develop that magic, we can do many things with it, and use it as the basis for more varied skills, as with my mother's skill in divination."

"Wait a second." Tony held up a hand. "Rain? Not lightning? Also, the six races? Does magic work the same for all of them?"

Thor smiled a little at his friend's impatience. "The six races are the Aesir and Vanir, who are much alike in magical ways; the Jotunn, whose magic is bound to ice; the elves, whose magic is similar to the Aesir, but more inclined to intangible things; the dwarves, whose magic is bound in their creations; and humans, who rarely realize their magical potential."

Tony raised his eyebrows skeptically. "Magical potential? You're saying we could do magic if we wanted?"

Thor laughed. "Have not the foes we have encountered convinced you of that?" On a more serious note, he added, "I do not think that you could learn magic beyond what, like the dwarves, you imbue in your creations. Steve and Bruce, I believe, used their seed of magic to fuel their transformations. I am uncertain about Natasha, but I believe that Clint could learn, if he wished. They are both like the elves, I think - their magic, should they learn it, would be best suited to perception and illusion." He shook his head. "But I am no expert in such things, and I have not yet answered your other question. When my magic first revealed itself, it was as rain. As an extension of that, I gained power over storms, and I prefer to use lightning, so I developed that skill."

"So what's with Mjollnir?" Tony asked.

"Ah." Thor ran a hand through his hair. "I did not mention that control of magic cannot be learned
until after one has it. When the seed of magic within me first sprouted, I...caused some agricultural distress."

"You...what?" Tony frowned for a moment, then began to laugh. "You mean to tell me you had rain clouds following you wherever you went?"

"You may laugh, but at the time it was quite problematic. Rain has to come from somewhere - I was causing both floods and droughts at the same time," Thor explained, embarrassed. "Lightning, at least, does not excessively disturb weather patterns."

"True," Tony admitted. "So how'd you fix it?"

"My father bound the greater part of my magic into Mjollnir," Thor answered. "My physical use and control of the weapon became...linked, in my mind, to the use and control of my magic. The seed that remained within me was enough to facilitate its use, and to protect me from...unpleasant consequences, but not to act on my own."

"So the 'static', that's a side-effect of your built-in 'protection' from electrocution by your own hammer?" Tony guessed.

"I believe so," Thor agreed. "It may also be a remnant of my natural affinities. It is not something of significance in Asgard, so I have never questioned it before."

Tony pondered that silently for a few moments, his fingers twitching. "If you don't mind my asking, what's your brother's affinity? You said he's Jotunn, wouldn't that mean it was ice?"

"My brother is a mixture of many things," said Thor heavily. "I have rarely seen him use magics of cold and ice, which I suspect is due to the magic that makes him seem to be Aesir. The first magics he learned were illusions, but the core of his nature is change, which allows him greater natural flexibility of magic than almost any sorcerer I know of. After illusions, it is fire and shape-shifting which come most easily to him."

"That's intimidating," Tony admitted. "Why fire, though?"

"It is a catalyst," Thor answered, surprised that it was not obvious. "It transforms one thing into another, and is, itself, ever-changing."

Tony nodded. "I guess I can see that." He huffed out a quick breath. "Anyway, back to you. So, the hypothesis we're working with is that you have a natural electric charge going on which is partially defensive, but also responds subconsciously to your intent and/or moods, and your control is linked in your head to using Mjollnir."

Thor frowned. "Yes, I believe that is what happens."

"Hmm. Well, I've insulated your comm pretty heavily, and that worked, but that doesn't fix the casual electrocution of things you've got going on." Thor had accidentally destroyed many devices beyond repairing by now, which revealed a lack of magical control he found embarrassing. "Tell me, Fabio, what do you do with Mjollnir when you aren't actually using it?"

"In combat, she hangs on my belt," Thor replied. "Otherwise, I place her where she may be of least inconvenience to others, yet within my reach when I have need of her."

Tony nodded, frowning thoughtfully. "So not in a box, or anything. Hmm. What d'you think would
happen if you did put it in a box, or wrapped it, or something? Because it seems like symbolism matters a lot with magic, and I wonder if 'containing' Mjollnir would help you 'contain' your static."

"That is a thought worth pondering, my friend," said Thor, rubbing his chin. "Perhaps you could help me test it when we return to the tower and have more materials at hand."

"I'll do that," Tony agreed, smiling. He leaned back, and sighed. "Thanks, Point Break. This was a lot more fun than getting drunk."

"I will fly with you any time you wish, my friend," Thor promised. "To escape wearisome responsibilities for an afternoon, in the company of a friend, is a great joy."

Chapter End Notes

This chapter's a little short, but at least I got it written quickly. It's one of my better Thor chapters, I think - I haven't really given him a lot of opportunities to make friends up 'til now, and I always like exploring Asgardian metaphysics.

I'm looking forward, as always, to your comments and kudos - they are ever a delight.
Chapter Summary

The Avengers are usually a response team, but every so often SHIELD sends them on a pre-planned mission. This one doesn't go as planned.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The briefing was being held at the Tower, an increasingly standard practice that Steve had been fighting hard for - after all, it meant only Sitwell (and sometimes Thor) had to go anywhere, which significantly reduced the grudging nature of the attendance of these meetings. And Steve could admit he liked the convenience too.

"So," said Sitwell seriously when they were all there and seated. "AIM."

Tony groaned. "Those douchebags again? What are they up to this time?"

"Nothing specific," Sitwell replied. "But they're a terrorist organisation, they're one of the world's largest sponsors of mad science, and they've been ramping up operations in the US. Time to clean house."

"Why are we involved?" Clint asked. "Typically, the strike teams take on enemy bases. We're not...subtle."

Sitwell nodded. "No, you aren't. That's the point. We want to make it very clear to AIM that we - and you - are aware of them, and we aren't happy." He began to pass out briefing packets - much as Tony always complained about them, Steve did like the paper, and didn't really mind SHIELD's policy. "We've identified one of their American bases near Chicago. It's not major, and as far as we are aware, it's primarily administrative rather than scientific in purpose. We'd like you to get in there, get all the information you can, make a lot of noise, and a lot of mess."

"We can do that alright," Natasha muttered.

"The mission is scheduled for Sunday, out of office hours -"

Tony interrupted him skeptically. "You mean the evil scientists work nine to five?"

"Maybe not," Sitwell replied. "But their support staff do, and the base will be have the minimum personnel early on Sunday morning."

Bruce shook his head. "You don't imagine the bad guys commuting to work, somehow," he commented.

Steve could see Natasha and Clint exchange glances. They did. It had been their job to, for years, and they were both the best of the best at their jobs.

"As I said," Sitwell redirected them firmly. "The mission is scheduled for Sunday, out of office hours, when we expect minimal personnel to be on base. We plan to approach from the south-
There was a lot of grumbling from Tony and Clint about getting up so early, but nevertheless, at seven am that Sunday, the team was assembled a few blocks away from the base. They’d done their best to be unobtrusive so far – surprise was its own kind of intimidation, and always an advantage – but the time for subtlety had passed.

“Cap, we’ve got a problem,” Tony reported. “There’s electromagnetic shielding on the base. I can boost the comms enough for them to work, but only short range – while we’re all in there – and we’ll be flying blind.”

Steve sighed. “Does anyone have a problem with that?” he asked. Personally, he’d done more with less, but he did appreciate reliable back-up, and they could afford to scratch the mission if the others weren’t happy.

“I’m not happy about it,” Sitwell admitted over the comms. “I’d prefer it if you could call for back-up if you needed it.” He was set up with a couple of extra agents in a van another couple of blocks out – close enough to help, but still discreet.

Natasha shrugged. “it doesn’t bother me,” she said comfortably. “I’ve done this kind of mission solo.”

Clint nodded. “Same here. It’s not like we’re up against an army.”

Thor grinned. “Truly, it is mightier for a small warrior band to confront their foes unaided. I am well pleased.”

Tony made a face. “I’m not a fan,” he admitted. “But it’s not so heavy I can’t cope, so I’ll manage. There’s no point scratching the mission for a little setback like this.”

Bruce smiled wryly, unconsciously wringing his hands with his usual pre-battle nervousness. “My opinion doesn’t really matter, and I’m fairly sure the other guy won’t care.”

Steve looked each of them in the eye, confirming that they meant what they said, and nodded firmly. “Then let’s get on with it. Want to go knock on the door for us, Iron Man?” he suggested. He wanted to stay back with Clint until the Hulk was awake, otherwise he’d be busting in the door himself – it was almost nostalgic, he thought to himself wryly. Just like old times.

Tony grinned, and flipped his mask down. “Thought you’d never ask,” he quipped, and clanked out the door to take off.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Black Widow, Thor, you’re next up.” It would probably take them longer to get there than Tony, but they’d incorporated that into the plan. The two were paired together because Thor didn’t know enough to identify or retrieve the sort of information they were looking for – but he could certainly keep hostiles occupied while Natasha did. Not that she couldn’t take them herself, of course, but it would be a distraction, and the faster they could get in and out of the base, the better off they’d be.

Natasha didn’t say anything, just nodding to Steve, smiling a little at Bruce, and quirking an eyebrow at Clint, who grinned back; but Thor grinned at them all. “Then we shall meet again on the field of battle, my friends!” he declared, and gestured Natasha to precede him out the door. Steve shook his head a little after they left. He still found it kind of incredible sometimes, how enthusiastic Thor was about a fight.
At last he turned to Bruce, softening his posture a little. “When you’re ready, Bruce?” he asked.

Bruce grimaced, nodded, and stripped down to his Hulk pants – a loose pair, with a lot of elastic in the fabric. “Good luck,” he murmured to the two of them, then closed his eyes and shifted.

Clint was saying, over and over again, “You’re safe, Hulk. It’s only the team here. Bruce is safe. You’re safe. There’s no danger,” and when Hulk settled into himself, instead of roaring, he sat, looking at them both.

“Fight?” he asked. Steve figured the answer was fairly obvious – an unfamiliar location, and both of them in uniform.

“That’s right,” he agreed. “We’re going to an enemy base, of people who do research for bad guys. We want to scare them, and get as much information as possible.”

The giant grinned. “Hulk good at scaring. Not good at finding things out, though,” he admitted.

Clint shook his head. “You don’t have to be,” he explained. “That’s my job.”

“You just need to look after Clint,” said Steve, and Hulk brightened. “Keep him safe, so he can do his job.”

Hulk grinned eagerly. “Protect Shooty Bird while Shooty Bird find,” he agreed. “Go now?”

Clint sized him up. “You know, if you let me climb on your back, we can go faster,” he pointed out. It took some doing, but it wasn’t long before Clint was riding piggyback on the Hulk, which was one of the stranger things Steve had seen this week.

“You’ve got your comm?” Steve checked. Hulk nodded. “Good. Follow me.”

-----

The battle passed in a blur of empty corridors, checking room after room for what might look useful. Swift confrontations with unarmed staff and longer ones with armed guards, and the sound of other battles over the comms.

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When Tony was fighting, there were usually explosions involved, and sarcastic comments. "I hate these fucking uniforms," he muttered at one point. "Hazard suits, yes, I can see the point of them if you're messing with biochemical, but the yellow? It's a fucking eyesore."

"Says Mr Gold and Red shiny suit," Clint commented.

"Hey!" Tony objected, breathing hard from whatever it was he was doing. "My suit is fucking gorgeous, thank you very much. Not like the naked Minion suits over here." A moment later Steve heard, "Okay, you have two choices here: surrender, or I'll keep shooting you until you do surrender. Anyone for option two? Just you? Okay." A brief pause. "Anyone else? Good."

-----

"Oh, joy," said Clint. "Filing cabinets."

"Fuck, seriously?" Tony exclaimed. "How can an organisation full of evil geniuses still be relying
on a paper trail?"

"Because it makes it harder in situations like this," Clint pointed out. "I'm going to spend the next twenty minutes trying to figure out if there's anything worth taking pictures of. Hey, Hulk!"

Steve heard a grunt from the other end.

"I'm going to be busy with paperwork for a while, you go find some things to smash, okay, buddy?"

"Hawkeye -" Steve began, but Clint interrupted him.

"Seriously, Cap, we've cleared these corridors, and Hulk lacks the necessary dexterity to actually help me. It's fine."

Steve sighed.

-----

Natasha and Thor were an odd pair to listen to. Natasha was, by training and preference, a silent killer, while Thor insulted his opponents loudly, cheerfully, and often.

"On your right," she warned, which was followed by the crash of Thor's hammer.

"Hah! Your weapons are no use against us, son of wretchedness!" he shouted. "Surrender swift, sulker - you cannot withstand a stronger blow."

"Finance department secured," Natasha reported a few minutes later.

"Good job, Widow, Thor," Steve said, hiding a smile.

-----

Hulk roared again. "Hawkeye?" Steve asked. "What's happening?"

"Shit," said Clint. "I'm still in the filing room. No idea."

There was a lot of smashing audible over the comm, clangs of metal being thrown around, crunching concrete and plaster, and...the shattering sound of broken glass. Which was strange. The windows in here were all thick Perspex, which Steve had discovered when he'd tried to throw his shield through one of them.

Clint sighed. "Fuck. We'll just have to hope he doesn't destroy anything important and he comes back to me soon. I'll go looking if he isn't back by the time I'm done."

"Thanks, Hawkeye," Steve confirmed, still worried.

About a minute later, the smashing sounds abruptly cut off.

"That'll be the comm," said Tony resigned. "I wasn't really expecting it to last a whole battle. It never has so far."

-----

Steve looked around the room he’d just cleared. It was literally full of technology he didn’t understand. “Iron Man, I’ve found a room you’ll want to look at,” he reported.
“Be right there, Cap. What’ve you got?”

Steve sighed. “Looks like it runs on some sort of electricity,” he reported wryly.

“My favourite,” said Tony gleefully. “I’ve got the location, you go on inspiring people to surrender to the forced of good and patriotism.

Steve rolled his eyes. “Not how it works, Iron Man.”

-----

“Hey Hulk,” Clint said cheerfully.

“Oh thank god,” Tony muttered, but almost immediately they heard Hulk roar.

“What-“ they heard Clint say, interrupted by a crunching, crumbling, smashing sound.

“Status, Hawkeye?” Steve checked.

No answer.

“Shit, Clint, you there?” Tony asked.

No answer.


No answer.

“Jarvis, is the – his comm’s out,” said Tony. “I’m closest and this can keep going without me. I’ll check it out.”

They waited.


“What?”

“What do you mean, just rubble?”

“No sign of either of them?”

“Seriously,” Tony said. “I’m at the last known location of Clint’s comm, the room’s totally destroyed, there’s a hole in the ceiling, and both Clint and the green guy are gone.”

Steve knew just enough Russian to be thoroughly impressed by the string of swearwords that came out of Natasha’s mouth.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god, guys, it's been a year. Nearly forty chapters, close to a hundred thousand words, four hundred kudos, and just about two hundred of you waiting to see what I say next. Holy shit.
This fic has been amazing for me - my first adventure into writing fanfiction, and creative writing in general really, and it's just kept on getting bigger and bigger. We're two thirds of the way through It's Not Easy, but I've got at least two years more of ideas for the Tower Tales 'verse - and I hope you'll be along for the ride with that, too. I'm putting up a tentative chapter count today, and it really is tentative, but I felt that, since this was such a landmark for me, it was time. (The next little plot-arc was my inspiration for this fic, so it's all pretty much written - there'll be no long waits for the next few chapters, which I imagine you'll appreciate, given the cliffhanger.)

Unlike at the three and six month anniversaries, I don't have a bonus fic for you. But I'd still like to do something special, so: until further notice, you can comment on this chapter and request a drabble in this 'verse, about whoever you like, back-story or within the timeline of the fic, and as long as it won't spoil anything I've got planned, I'll write it for you.

I hope you've enjoyed the story thus far as much as I have, and I look forward to reading your comments.
Don't Panic

Chapter Summary

The team finds Bruce and Clint, but Clint is hurt and Bruce is panicking.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains non-graphic injuries, and a lot of panicking Bruce. It's from Tony's perspective, and he tries as hard as he can to keep Bruce calm, but the panic is basically a constant thing, here. Bruce expresses what could be considered suicidal ideation (something along the lines of 'and I can't fucking die!'), although he doesn't explicitly state that he wants to die or be dead. Be careful with yourselves if any of this is likely to be an issue for you. If you really don't want to read it, there's a (very) short summary in the end-notes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Six hours since the battle, and they still didn't know what had happened to Clint and Bruce. The surveillance was still out from Clint's EMP arrow when he went off coms, and Tony had been underground, so he hadn't seen Hulk leaving, and no-one knew where he'd gone, and he was pretty good at hiding after all these years.

"Jarvis, how's the gamma scan going?" The problem was, that even if Hulk gave off some gamma, it wasn't enough to easily distinguish him from all the other stuff which gave off gamma, and Jarvis had about a hundred hits in the US alone, and the Hulk could have gotten out of the country if he really wanted to.

"There are thirty-six which closely match the Hulk's gamma signature within the US, sir." Fuck, that was still too many.

"Get me what surveillance you can, J, we need -"

"Incoming call from Clint Barton, sir." Thank fucking god, it was about damned time they got news.

"Clint? Thank fuck - it's good to hear from you."

"Actually, Tony, it's Bruce." Bruce. Bruce was calling, on Clint's phone, which implied that they'd separated and Bruce had the phone somehow, or Clint had his hands full, or Clint was injured, or something, but at least Bruce wasn't Hulk anymore, and even if he sounded really shaky, that was probably a good thing, right? And why the fuck hadn't he put trackers in Clint's uniform, was he a complete and utter idiot?

"Well, it's good to hear from you, too. How's Clint? Where are you? Do you need a pick-up? Jarvis, trace the call, please."
"Clint's unconscious." Well shit. Bruce took a shaky breath on the other side of the line. "He's got a couple of broken bones, a lot of bruising and abrasions, and a head wound. He needs medevac." Jarvis threw up a map with a marker on it. Goddammit, they were practically in Texas.

"Okay, big guy, we've got a location. I'll call SHIELD and organise a team and we'll come to meet you. I'll call you back in just a minute, will you be okay?"

"Will I be okay?" Bruce laughed, that awful, harsh laugh Tony hadn't heard in months and had never wanted to hear again, that one that was half a sob, "Clint is unconscious with broken bones and a head wound. I hurt him. No, I'm not okay. And I shouldn't be."

"It's not important Bruce, you're still my friend no matter what the Hulk does, and I want you to be okay. I'll call you back in a couple of minutes." Tony nodded, and Jarvis ended the call. "Avengers Assemble, J, and call Sitwell for me."

"Mr Stark?" The elevator rose towards the Battle Room as Sitwell answered.

"We've got Clint and Bruce. Clint needs medevac, Bruce is physically fine. Jarvis will send you the location."

"That's good to hear, Stark." Some clicking with a keyboard and a mouse. "They're almost in Texas!"

"Hulk travels fast." Tony's voice was low and tight. Clint needed them now. "We'll get there as soon as we can, the others will have comms, but I'll be busy keeping Bruce calm. How long until you can get a med team there?"

"Fifteen minutes to load up, half an hour to get to location."

"Thanks, Sitwell." He stepped out of the elevator to see Natasha ready, Steve gearing up, and Thor on the balcony.

"What's happening, Tony?" Steve was practically vibrating with worry. "We're not in the best situation for a fight."

"We found them." Steve relaxed fractionally, then tensed again. Natasha barely reacted, but from her that was practically a shout. "Clint's injured, Bruce is fine but panicking. Sitwell's on his way with a med team, but we should be there too."

Steve nodded. "How are we getting there? Clint usually flies the jet." They really needed to have more back-up pilots on the main team. Brewer and Porra didn't do them any good on a SHIELD base.

"It'll be fastest if Thor and I carry you. Even at quinjet speeds, it'd take us forty-five minutes. I can get there in fifteen." Tony stepped onto the suit assembly platform. "Sitwell's on comms, I'll be talking to Bruce. Steve?" Steve nodded, and got the carabiner attached to his belt. "We're going about one and half thousand miles south-west, Thor. Follow me or ask Sitwell for specifics. Let's go, Steve."

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"Bruce?" He'd asked Jarvis to call Bruce back once he was in the air. "How are you doing, buddy?"
"I - not good, Tony, I can't..." Bruce was almost hyperventilating.

"Ok, Bruce, I need you to focus on your breathing for me. On my count, ok? In, two, three, four, five, six, seven, out, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven..." He kept the count going for a minute or so, his mind racing. What could he do? What had fucking happened out there? Shit, this was going to set Bruce back months, if he wasn't careful the guy was going to run again, and that was, that was just not cool, Bruce was one of the best things that had ever happened to Tony, he should not leave because of something like this, goddammit.

Finally, Bruce seemed to be breathing easily. "Okay. Now, I'm sorry, but I have to ask: is the other guy pushing at your control right now?" If Bruce was feeling stressed and unsafe, usually the Hulk would try to get out. As far as they could tell, the two couldn't actually communicate, but there was emotional leakage.

Bruce took another deep, shuddering breath before he answered. "N-no, he's, he's quiet. I think...I mean, I assume he's - worn out."

"Of course I'm going to be f-fucking fine, Tony!" Bruce was crying, Tony was sure of it. "I've got the fucking Hulk beating up everyone who looks in my direction and he won't. Fucking. Die! If all the supervillains on Earth actually succeeded with their 'world domination' plans I'd probably still be fucking fine, I'm probably going to spend the next fifty years watching people around me get hurt and get killed because of me and I'll still be fucking fine! With my luck, I'll get too old for my body to cope and I'll become Hulk full time and he'll be fucking immortal! Just - just once, I'd like to come out of things something other than fine, because it would mean I was actually me and not some barely-controllable product of my rage at my fucked-up childhood that's decided imitating my father is the way to get ahead in life!"

"Bruce!" Tony interrupted, finally, because it was heart-breaking, honestly, hearing Bruce say all that, and he just, that was just unacceptable, "Bruce, breathe for me again, alright? In..." He was probably going to spend half of the next ten minutes counting breaths for Bruce. He didn't mind. For Bruce, he would.

"Now you just keep breathing while I talk, okay buddy? That was a collective you, English is stupid and vague in the second person, Clint is going to be fine too, we've got a med team headed your way, and you know SHIELD has scary-good medical facilities, and from the sound of it he's not in immediate danger, right?" He didn't wait for Bruce to answer the question, just rolling on, trying to make the stream of words as soothing as possible. "So Clint's going to be okay, and Hulk's not pushing you, so we can calm down a bit right now. Okay? So, let me tell you the plan. I've got Steve and Thor has Natasha, and we'll be at your location in just about ten minutes. Sitwell and the med team are going to take another half an hour. The way I'm thinking - and we all know I make the best plans, right? None of this nonsense about 'wait for back-up, Tony', 'you can't just explode everything, Tony', 'you ever heard of subtle, Tony?', I make the best plans, everyone knows that. Right? You know I'm right. Anyway, Natasha has first aid training, she's used to looking after Clint when stuff goes wrong in the field, so she'll stay with him and Steve and I can take you out of the way a bit so you don't have to worry about him so much. That way, if you transform again, you've got Steve and I, who he usually listens to, as a first line of defense, and you know we're
"Both good at looking after ourselves, and then Thor, who is pretty hard to damage, and then Natasha, who everyone knows is lethal. Is Clint's quiver there?"

There was a rustling noise, then a few clunks. "Y-yeah. It looks...not too damaged?"

"Awesome. Now, I know that Clint always has at least three Hulk-tranqs on him when we fight, although god knows why he didn't use them" (was he caught by surprise? did he not see the Hulk? did he think Hulk wasn't going to hurt him? did he not want to hurt Hulk? did he think Hulk wasn't going to hurt him? they were pretty good buddies lately - and why the fuck had Hulk gone for Clint, of all people?) "so Natasha, Thor, and Steve can all have some. I mean, it's not like he's actually going to show up - he's not pushing, you've got control, we're all good at talking you down, and we'll tranq you before you change, but if you do, we will still make sure that the team, and especially Clint, is safe. We will not let you hurt anyone, Bruce. I promise, alright? I will not let you do that."

"...Thanks, Tony." Bruce sounded doubtful, uncertain, but Tony could only do so much over the phone.

"I need to talk to everyone else for a bit, are you gonna be okay if I leave you on your own for a while?" He needed to tell everyone the plan.

Bruce took a deep breath. "Yeah. I can, I can manage. Don't worry about me."

"Bruce, I am always going to worry about you." (Was that too much? He felt exposed. It was true, though.) "Can I get a progress report on Clint before I hang up?"

"I've avoided interfering too much, so the obviously broken leg - right femur - isn't splinted. I'm fairly sure, based on the swelling, that there are additional fractures in that leg or the other. I didn't want to move him, in case there's a back injury, and I wanted to keep him warm to avoid shock, so I haven't taken off any of his uniform for a better assessment, but from the feel of things his torso is bruised, maybe a cracked rib, but nothing major. His head wound stopped bleeding before I woke up - it's on the back of his skull. There's some swelling. His arms have some bruises and abrasions, but nothing major, or even unusual for a mission. His pulse is fast, but not dangerously so. He has a slight fever. His breathing is shallow, but steady." Bruce seemed to have snapped into 'doctor' mode - his voice was calmer than Tony had heard it all day.

"Ok. I'll let people know. You good?"

Tony could hear Bruce's judgmental look. "No. But I'll be...fine."

Tony winced. "Then I'll talk to you in a few."

Jarvis cut the call. "Get me Sitwell," Tony demanded.

Sitwell must have had comms set up already, because he responded almost immediately. "Stark?"

"I've got an update, with more detail on the medical info."

"You're on speaker with the head of the med team."

"Right femur broken, probably additional fractures in that or the other leg, possible cracked rib, but definitely at least heavy bruising on the torso. Minor injuries to the arms, but nothing abnormal. Head wound on the back of the skull, some swelling, no longer bleeding. Fast pulse, shallow breathing, slight fever - none of which are immediately dangerous in Bruce's opinion."
"What expertise does Dr Banner have?" asked an unfamiliar voice.

"He's halfway to a medical doctor, with field experience out the wazoo. I trust his judgement," Tony replied irritably.

"I don't know if I'd support that statement, but he's definitely good enough for field first aid," Sitwell corrected. "Thanks, Stark. We'll see you soon."

"Roger that." Tony switched to team comms. "Okay guys, here's the situation. Bruce is freaking out, but the Hulk's not pushing. Clint is injured, but not critically. Med team's coming for Clint, so our priority is to look after Bruce, and what Bruce needs right now is to know he's not going to hurt anyone else."

"Do we have tranqs?" Natasha asked.

"Clint's quiver seems to be intact, so I'm guessing we do," Tony answered. "I don't want to tranq him unless it's absolutely necessary, though - he'll be better off in the long run if he proves he can regain control after a crisis."

"If the Hulk doesn't push, that's reasonable," said Steve. "What if he does?"

"I'm pretty sure Bruce will demand a tranq if the Hulk rolls over in his sleep," Tony replied. "But as far as I'm concerned, the aim of the game is to keep Bruce from getting to that point."

"How may I assist?" asked Thor.

"When we get to the site, Natasha's going to look after Clint, and Steve and I are going to take Bruce a little out of the way so he can calm down. You three are all getting tranq arrows if we've got them - Steve gets priority, then Natasha. Thor, you're on guard between us and Natasha: if Bruce changes, and we don't tranq him, and we can't calm the Hulk down, you're the next line of defence," Tony explained. "Any questions?"

"Sounds good, Iron Man," Steve confirmed.

"Then I'm going to talk to Bruce some more."

-----

At that point, Tony mentally handed over responsibility for anything other than Bruce's state of mind to people other than him, and the next hour of finding Bruce and Clint, waiting for the med-team, and taking them back to SHIELD facilities passed in a blur of desperate reassurances, from which only one moment stood out clearly:

Tony and Steve were standing near Bruce, guarding him as he meditated uneasily, when the SHIELD plane came into earshot. Bruce's eyes snapped open.

"Hey, hey," Tony soothed, "that's the SHIELD plane, okay, Bruce? Just a few more minutes for them to get here and land, and we can get Clint some medical attention and get him out of here, okay?"

Bruce took a shuddering breath. "You have to promise me something," he said, low and urgent, "both of you, promise me."
"Whatever you need, big guy," Tony assured him. "Whatever you need, we'll make it happen."

"Promise me you'll get me to the...to the Cage," he stumbled over the words. "I can't do this anymore. I need to - you have to make me safe." Bruce clenched his fists, taking carefully controlled breaths. "You have to make everyone safe, I can't hurt anyone else, I can't. Please..."

Tony came closer, kneeling to look Bruce in the eye. "Bruce, we're going to be okay. All of us. If that's what you need, we will make that happen." Tony looked over his shoulder at Steve. "Right, Cap?"

Steve nodded seriously. "I promise you, Bruce, we won't let anyone get hurt. It's all going to be alright."

Chapter End Notes

And the shit hits the fan (again). For those who chose to skip this chapter: Hulk disappeared with Clint after the battle, and no-one knows where or why. Bruce wakes up after about six hours and calls Tony - Clint is still unconscious and has multiple broken bones. The team shows up to help keep Bruce calm and keep the SHIELD medevac team safe while they take Clint to the Helicarrier. Bruce begs to be put in the Hulk cage, and Tony and Steve promise to make it happen.

Remember that chapter a while back, where Clint taught Hulk how not to scare people? The one that had been in the works since November and I posted it in May? Well, this chapter has been partially written since less than a fortnight after I started writing this fic. I have been waiting a loooong time for this.

So what did you think? Am I still evil? I'm not going to apologise, but as always, I'd love to hear your thoughts.
Revelations

Chapter Summary

Clint wakes up and realises that something has gone very wrong. So he fixes it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clint woke carefully, as he had trained himself to do a long time ago. No need for hostiles to realise he was awake before they had to. He wasn't at home, he could tell that straight away, and he was injured - his lower legs, right forearm, torso, and head all ached, but it was muted in that strange way which implied heavy-duty painkillers. He had casts on his legs and arm, and was wearing hospital scrubs. There was a cannula in his right hand, and a pulse-oximeter on his index finger. He was lying on a decent mattress, with sheets that felt clean, two pillows, and a thin blanket. The air was dry and a little chilly - air-conditioned, although it didn't seem to come from any particular direction. He could hear the dissonant chorus of beeps characteristic of hospitals and medical facilities. Wherever he was, then, they were treating him for his injuries, monitoring his health, and not isolating him from other patients. Probably safe to 'wake up', so he could get some more information. When he looked around the room, he immediately noticed Natasha, reading in a chair next to the bed. Definitely safe, then. She'd be on guard if it weren't.

"Ugh...Hey, Nat." His voice was a little sluggish, but his throat wasn't sore. They hadn't had to intubate him, then.

Natasha, who had tensed as soon as he made a sound, closed her book and moved closer. "Hello, little idiot," she offered, with a tiny smile. "You have badly broken both legs, a cracked rib, a badly bruised torso, various small cuts and bruises elsewhere, and a head wound. You have been unconscious since you received these injuries approximately ten and a half hours ago. The legs will take around three months to heal, and no, we do not plan to let you back on duty until the doctors clear you. Yes, Jarvis will tell me if you are doing something you shouldn't be."

"Three months? Fucking donkey balls." This was his first major injury since joining the Avengers, actually. "Am I at least going to get desk work?" There was nothing worse than having nothing to do, and he'd already come close to that living in the Tower, even when he could use his bow. Ow. Shit. Note to self: be more careful of the torso bruises.

"That is a question you will have to ask Sitwell. In the meantime, the others have been waiting to see you." She stood, graceful as ever, and went outside for a minute. Thank god for SHIELD secret-keeping - having a room to himself was so much better than curtain dividers between beds. Hospitals made him nervous enough without adding lack of privacy and stupid neighbours to the list. The team began to file in, having clearly been read the riot act by some nurse or another.

"Legolas! How do you feel about a flying wheelchair?" Tony had lowered his voice in deference to draconian nurses, but was gesticulating as wildly as ever. "I figured you'd want a motorised one, but motorised wheelchairs are a) inefficient, and b) boring...

They'd long ago figured out that Tony wouldn't stop talking in this mood without an interruption,
and this time, it was apparently Steve's turn to provide one. "Tony..." His tone was long-suffering as he put a bunch of flowers on the bedside table. "It's good to see you awake, Clint. You had us worried for a little bit, there."

"Shield-brother! We have brought you a stuffed creature as solace for your injuries!" Was it Steve (well-meaning and sincere) or Darcy (conniving and evil) who had told Thor that was a thing, Clint wondered. And then, as Thor proffered the purple bird (where had he found that?), he realised that no one else was coming in.

"Thanks, Thor. Where's Bruce?" To a man, they flinched. Not just sleeping it off then. "Is he hurt?"

"Nay, my friend. The good doctor is in the Hulk Cage." Thor was serious, but apparently completely accepting of the situation. In fact, as he looked around the room, Clint realised that everyone seemed to think it was completely reasonable for Bruce to be shut up in a glass box.

"What the fuck, guys? You fucking let Fury put him in there? What the fuck for?" Even weirder, Clint's anger was surprising them. Steve spoke up next.

"Clint, I promise you that we wouldn't have let anyone make Bruce do something he didn't want to do." He was wearing his earnest face, which didn't really make it better. "Bruce asked to stay there."

"And you fucking let him? Bruce is fucking awful at taking care of himself, you know this. He hates the cage, hates any kind of cage!" Clint glared at Tony, who of all of them, should have known better, and pressed the call button lying next to his left hand. "You know what? I don't want to talk to you right now, any of you. You've been hanging around here while I was unconscious? Well you can go keep Bruce company, if you're going to let him be an idiot." A nurse knocked and entered the room. "These...people were just leaving." Tony opened his mouth to protest, and Nat looked very unhappy with him. "All of them. Don't come back unless I invite you."

-----

Clint fumed for a good fifteen minutes before Sitwell showed up.

"Good to see you conscious, Barton. Though really, we only just got an understudy team sorted out - did you have to test the system right away?"

Clint shrugged. "What can I say? I'm a helpful kind of guy."

Sitwell raised his eyebrows. "I hope so, because I need at least a preliminary verbal report from you so we can sort out timelines for the op."

Clint sighed. "I can't say I wasn't expecting that." He launched into his report, with Sitwell nodding and making notes. Every so often, he'd interrupt with a query for more detail, until at last Clint got to the end of his memories: "...Hulk came back into the room and tried to warn me that the ceiling was collapsing, but he was too late. He shielded me from some of the debris, I think, but my memories aren't clear, and I got knocked out about then. I think I may have woken briefly at some point between now and then, but I'm not sure."

Sitwell was staring. "You're certain that's what happened?"

Clint frowned. "Well, concussions aren't friends to memory, but I'm pretty confident."

"Shit." Sitwell flipped through his files. "Here, let me read you the Captain's report for that part of
the battle. 'We heard Hawkeye greet the Hulk over the comms. The Hulk roared, and there was a crashing noise. Hawkeye ceased to respond.' "

Clint swore, vehemently. "That's why Bruce's in the Hulk Cage, isn't it? They fucking think Hulk did this to me. Fuck."

Sitwell nodded. "I don't know if anyone has told you that the Hulk abducted you during the battle. By the time we found you and Dr Banner, it was hours later, and you were practically in Texas."

"Well, shit." Clint ran a hand over his face. "Do me a favour and let me tell the team? And see if I can get access to the Hulk Cage, I need to talk to Bruce, and I'm pretty sure he's not going to be willing to move."

Sitwell gave him a long look. "I think I can manage that. If you promise to stay outside the cage, and come back here straight afterwards. And, you get one hour. An hour and a half, maximum. I'm not even going to try to argue the medics into anything more."

-----

It took a while for Clint to get a phone, considering he wasn't willing to talk to the team, but there were still people around who owed him favours, and plenty of SHIELD agents had a burner phone available. But once he did find one, he called Jarvis.

"Avengers Tower," Jarvis answered professionally. If you didn't know him, you wouldn't guess he was anything more than an answering machine.

"Hi J," said Clint.

"Agent Barton!" Jarvis exclaimed. "It is good to hear your voice. We have all been quite worried, and while I was, for obvious reasons, involved in your retrieval, I have received few updates since then."

"Oh man, really?" Clint asked. Leaving Jarvis out of the loop just wasn't fair. "Long story short, broken legs and a cracked rib. I'm looking at three months recovery time, probably more with PT."

"I am sorry to hear that, Agent Barton, but I am glad it is nothing more serious."

"Yeah, me too." Clint shifted on the bed, trying to get comfortable. "Unfortunately, the situation with Bruce is serious."

"Ah," Jarvis replied drily. "Yes, I quite agree with you on that point. He was extraordinarily distressed to have injured you."

"Two things," Clint pointed out. "One, Bruce is not Hulk; two, Hulk didn't hurt me. I was injured because the roof fell in, and I'm fairly sure the reason my arms aren't broken too is that he shielded me from the rubble."

"Well, that does put a different complexion on things. Has Dr Banner been told?"

Clint frowned disapprovingly. "Since he was in the Hulk Cage when I woke up and I was too pissed at the team for leaving him there to find out why, no he hasn't. I thought I should have some evidence to back me up when I try to convince Bruce that he's okay to be around civilians."

"You are thinking of Project Jolly Green Giant, I assume?" Jarvis inquired delicately.
"Right you are!" Clint answered, triumphant. "I think I can guilt trip him into watching, max, half an hour of footage, so we need to narrow it down - but still avoid bias."

"You make excellent points, Agent Barton," Jarvis admitted. "Are there any other parameters you wish to include?"

"Chronological order, I think, since he joined the team - I don't think Bruce would object to that as a start date." It would cut down on the footage to sort through, and it would avoid the most traumatic stuff, and it would show Hulk in a favourable light. "Representative sample in all other ways, obviously, but if you can be representative and include that time when I explained nightmares to him that would be great." It was one of the moments that really showed Hulk's capacity to learn and empathise.

"I think I can manage that," Jarvis replied. "Is there anything else I can do to help?"

"No, Jarvis, thanks," Clint waved a hand dismissively, even though Jarvis (probably) couldn't see him here. "Actually...I'm not sure how I'll set things up to show Bruce the footage, particularly because I'm not speaking to the others right now."

"If you don't object, I'll ask Sir for his assistance," Jarvis offered. "I assure you, I can keep the details discreet if you would prefer it."

Clint raised his eyebrows. "I have worked with spies for a decade and I don't think I've met anyone as discreet as you, Jarvis. I trust your judgement but yeah, share the minimum."

"I will be sure to do so, Clint," Jarvis confirmed. "I wish you the best of luck."

"Thanks J," Clint replied. "I'm going to need it."

-----

It took some serious negotiations to get everything set up the way he wanted it and to get Bruce to agree to talk to him, but Clint managed it. Now for the big challenge: getting Bruce to watch the footage.

"Hey Bruce," Clint said casually as he wheeled up to the 'glass', ignoring the rest of the team. It felt like someone had died, they were all so solemn.

Bruce looked utterly miserable. "H-Hi Clint. I'm so sorry."

"What have you got to be sorry for?" Clint asked, probing gently.

Bruce's mouth dropped open. "You're in a wheelchair," he said slowly, as if he couldn't believe Clint was this stupid. "You'll be out of the field for months."

"So?"

"So it's my fault!" Bruce's voice broke on the last word, and Clint could hardly bear to keep prodding him - but he had another friend to speak up for, and Hulk deserved to be heard.

Clint kept his voice casual. "Nope."

Bruce clenched his fists, clearly trying desperately to keep him together. "I hurt you Clint...I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, no," Clint contradicted flatly. "You've got the wrong pronoun, and the wrong verb. He
helped me. Like he's been helping us all for months. But thanks to a series of unfortunate events and the prejudice against him, everyone's made some bullshit assumptions about what happened."

"He...what?" Bruce asked, helplessly confused.

"The ceiling broke my legs," Clint explained. He heard a quiet "holy shit" from Tony behind him, but ignored it. "I'm fairly sure it was Hulk that saved my arms and torso, and I know it was him who evacuated me. He should have brought me to the team, or our back-up, but I guess something went wrong. He did take me to a safe place, one without enemies, and he stayed there so that you would be there to look after me when you woke up."

Bruce was shaking his head. "That's...no, that doesn't make any sense."

"It makes perfect sense," Clint contradicted. "It doesn't make sense to you because you've ignored us every single time we've tried to tell you that Hulk's a thinking, learning, caring person, and insisted on sticking to your out-dated, thoroughly inaccurate expectations. I've put up with it so far because you're my friend and it hasn't been hurting anyone, but now it's hurting you and him, and I won't accept that." He paused, and took a deep breath. "Bruce, I understand why you don't want to know. But...it's not enough anymore."

Bruce paced. "Just what do you expect me to do, Clint?"

Okay. Just one more hurdle to go. "I want you to watch half-an-hour of footage of the Hulk working with the team, with an open mind, and see if you agree with me." He held up a hand to forestall objections. "I know you hate watching him, but this is important. If you need to, consider it penance for me getting hurt."

Up until that last sentence, Bruce had looked defiant, but he slumped and sighed acceptance. "Alright. You're right, I don't want to, but...it's only fair."

-----

Tony and/or Jarvis had managed to set up a projection on the back wall of the Hulk Cage, so the whole team could watch from outside as well as Bruce inside. The first fifteen minutes were pretty standard - battle scene after battle scene, with Hulk rampaging wherever Steve pointed him. There were moments where he took out enemies aiming at the team, or at civilians, and a clip of him catching Tony at the battle of New York, but for the most part, he was fighting beside them, not with them. The footage itself wasn't the best - salvaged from surveillance cameras, the Iron Man helmet, and news footage - but Jarvis had done an excellent job of editing so that it flowed together, and Clint realised as he watched that he could see a change, even before they started talking to Hulk much. He seemed to be more and more aware of the team, more focused on taking out enemies quickly rather than doing a lot of damage, more gleefully physical than destructively cathartic in his violence. It was, honestly, fascinating to watch. Then footage from Clint's JGG camera started to be included.

-----

The Hulk was standing on a roof in the middle of a battle, next to Clint, who was efficiently shooting at robots on the street below. "Hulk smash?" he asked.

"If you could get those ones across the street, that'd be great. Try not to smash the buildings? People yell when we do that," Clint replied.

As Hulk roared and leapt back down to street level, the camera switched to Clint's perspective. It
showed Hulk picking up robots from a group to swing them into each other and against the ground. This continued for a while, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was poking at the air, the Hulk-comm around his neck. "Hulk smash?" he asked, looking at Clint.

Clint answered. "That's the plan, buddy. There are some SHIELD agents who are going to look at the buildings on either side, and I'll be up high trying to figure out where the top is and if I can see anything special, and you hang out here and see if you can break through."

"Where Shooty Bird?" Hulk asked, and Clint pointed to something out-of-shot. "Hulk carry?"

"As long as you're gentle," Clint replied. "Um...gentle is like careful. Don't hold me too tightly - I don't have armour like Tony."

Hulk nodded, and reached out slowly, gathering Clint into the crook of one arm.

"That's right, like that." Hulk leapt out of shot, and the camera angle changed to show him putting Clint down on a roof. "Thanks, big guy."


"Sounds good, big guy."

Hulk jumped down to the ground, and began to punch the air. He began to move to the right, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was attacking a large slime creature, although the damage he was doing seemed to be minimal. Something blew up nearby, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was eating pizza, sauce smeared over his face. "Here, try this one," Tony's voice suggested from out of shot, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk looked around, orienting himself. "Where fight?"

"There's no fight today, Hulk, just the team," Steve said, moving closer.

Hulk roared. "Trap!"

"Clint, you'd better take point," Tony spoke fast. "Everyone else, stay in his field of vision and look as non-threatening as you can."

"Hey, big guy. What's wrong?" Clint asked.

"Always danger! Hulk fight or Bruce hurt! Team hurt Bruce!"

Clint held up empty hands and nodded. "I can see that it looks like that. But I promise you, buddy,
Bruce is safe."

Hulk snorted. "Hulk keep safe."

Clint nodded again. "That's right, buddy. No-one can hurt him with you around."


"We know, Hulk," Clint admitted. "But he isn't hurt right now. There wasn't pain when you woke up, right?"

Hulk curled a lip. "Always pain. But...not hurts for healing. Just changing."

Clint nodded, and moved a little closer. "I'm sorry that the change hurts, Hulk. But you know you didn't change because Bruce was hurt, yeah?"

"No hurt not same as no danger. Hulk wake for running and healing and fighting. Always. Not hurt yet, still threat," Hulk said, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was chasing Thor across empty ground, catching up to him easily, and tapping him on the shoulder. Thor stumbled slightly, but recovered easily, calling, "It shall be your turn again soon enough," as Hulk ran away. Hulk grinned, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk looked at Steve, dressed in full Captain America get-up, who pointed at insectoid creatures coming through a portal. "Smash the ones that get away from us," he instructed, and Hulk nodded.

Thor, Natasha, and Steve converged around the portal, with Tony flying and Hulk pacing a perimeter around them, Hulk gleefully chasing down any that made it through the gauntlet, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was eating hot-dogs, each one in a single bite. An awed-looking stranger brought another platter over, and Hulk grinned. He wrinkled his nose at the ones with chili on them, and offered one to Steve.

"For me?" Steve asked, laughing. "Gee, thanks." He took a bite, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was standing, arms spread wide, facing Steve, Clint, Natasha, and Thor. They were trying to get past him, but he tagged Thor out, then Clint. Finally, Steve managed to distract him long enough for Natasha to get past, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was facing soldiers with guns and cannons. Clint's voice came over the speaker: "Shit! Make that medevac, I need someone here now."

Hulk leapt upward as Steve ordered, "Hulk, go help Clint!"
He approached Clint quickly, but stopped a short distance away. “Shooty Bird?” he asked.

Clint waved. “Ain't that a sight for sore eyes. Could you give me a lift to the SHIELD truck? Should be over that way.”

Hulk looked where Clint was pointing, then picked him up carefully, and bounded towards the truck. He gave Clint to Sitwell, and asked, “Safe?”

Clint patted his arm. “I'll be fine, buddy. We've got anti-dotes and stuff, they just have to get it out of my system. Thanks for the lift.”

Hulk nodded, and looked around. He roared, and dove back into the fight.

“Hulk, wait!” Tony warned. “Don't hit the biggest gun, it's a bit volatile, and we're trying to disarm it. Give me, like, two minutes. Deal with the others.”

Hulk put himself directly in front of the barrel of the largest cannon, and began to pick up rubble and throw it at the smaller ones. Then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was throwing rocks across their training grounds. Next to him, Thor was doing the same thing, but with somewhat smaller rocks. There was a competitive atmosphere, but it was unclear what the rules are, or who was winning. "Ha! You may be mighty, but I have won this bout!,” Thor declared, and Hulk snorted, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was gleefully smashing robots. After a while, he turned abruptly, and raced towards a now-crumbling building where Clint was perched. The camera changed, showing the rapidly approaching ground, then Hulk's arms and chest. "Shooty Bird not real bird," Hulk scolded. "No fly."

Clint's hand came into view, patting Hulk's chest. "Yeah, yeah, I know buddy. Thanks for the catch."

"Where go?" Hulk asked.

"Hmm. Over there?" Clint suggested, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was running below Tony and Thor, who were racing each other across the sky. Occasionally, Hulk would jump higher and swipe at them, and they would dodge. Their path curved and returned to where Steve, Natasha, and Clint were free-running over the buildings and rubble at the training site, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was sitting on the floor of the Green Room in the Tower, talking to Clint. "Shooty Bird have night-mares?" he asked.

Clint came a little closer. "Yeah. It's okay, I can handle it. They aren't real, and when I wake up, they're gone."

“Yeah. We can't do anything about it, though.” Clint shrugged. "Anyway, that's why you woke up, I think. Bruce was still scared from a nightmare. There's no danger right now."

Hulk frowned. "Hulk go?"

"You don't have to." Clint shrugged again. "I'll keep you company if you want to stick around for a bit."

They sat quietly for a little while, then Clint spoke again. "Hey Hulk, why do you roar when you wake up?"

"Can smell fear," Hulk answered. “Fear means danger. Hulk roars to keep danger away until Hulk can smash."

"Oh. You know, uh, sometimes there isn't anything there to hurt you. People are just afraid because you look scary," Clint pointed out.


-----

The Hulk was facing Skurge, dodging blows from his axe and keeping him distracted from the rest of the team, battling Amora in the background. The axe caught in Hulk's shoulder, and he roared.

"Shit! Someone give Hulk a hand, I can't help from here," Clint said urgently on the comms, and a repulsor beam hit Skurge in the back of the head.

Hulk grabbed the axe with his good hand and pulled it out of Skurge's grip while he was distracted. He carried it away from the fight, and called "Shouty Longhair! Come help smash!"

There was a short wait before Thor arrived. "What is it you need, battle-friend?"

"Axe hard to smash, like hammer," Hulk explained. "Hammer can smash?"

"An excellent idea," Thor replied, appraising the axe carefully. "I will be glad to aid you." Then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was playing Frisbee with Steve, Thor, and Tony, using Steve's shield. Natasha was watching silently from the sidelines. Clint was watching less silently, shouting indiscriminate encouragement and trash-talk. Steve was, of course, the best, but the others were not much worse, and evenly matched. Hulk caught the shield easily, but throwing it so that it would go where he wanted it was harder. Tony was able to chase the shield almost anywhere, but his aim was abysmal. Thor was equally good at throwing and catching, but not brilliant at either. Eventually Steve caught the shield, stopped, and shook out his hands. "Let's take a break," he declared, and the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was standing with the team, looking at huge tentacles waving above the surface of the nearby ocean.

"Anyone know where the vital organs are on an octopus?" Clint asked.
Brain's near the eyes, heart's harder to find, but pretty much the whole central mass is full of important stuff," Tony reported.

Steve nodded. "Then we've got two priorities here: we need to stop the tentacles from damaging things as much as possible, and we need to get the head out of the ocean so we can get a shot at it."

"Those two may contradict," Thor pointed out. "Such beasts can move on land, if they wish...if we tempt it onto the shore, we will have better sight of the head, but be further endangered by the arms."

Steve sighed. "Alright. Try to occupy its attention as much as possible, and lead it out of the water. If you've got a shot at the head, take it, and if you can disable or detach a tentacle, do it. Clear?"

There was a chorus of affirmatives, and the Hulk nodded.

"Then let's go."

The Hulk leapt towards the creature to begin a game of tug-of-war with one of the tentacles, then the scene changed.

-----

The Hulk was standing on the training grounds, looking at Agents Brewer, Dinapoli, Porra, and Wu. Then he looked to Steve. “Play game?” he asked.

"Sorry, Jolly Green," Tony replied. "We're going to play a game or two, but you'd break the equipment."

Hulk slumped, and asked, "Bruce now?"

"You don't have to," Clint replied. "But we figured you'd get bored watching while we play. We'll be too busy to keep you company."

Hulk shook his head. "Hulk want stay."

Natasha came over and suggested quietly, "You told me he's met Jarvis. Could he help?"

"Let me talk to Tony for a minute, big guy," said Clint. “I have an idea."

Hulk waited with Natasha while Clint talked to Tony and retrieved his comm.

"Okay, here's the plan," Clint explained. "You remember Jarvis? In the Tower?"

Hulk nodded.

"Tony set up your comm so you can talk to him - just to him - and he can talk back." Hulk took the comm and put it on. "But this is important: Jarvis is hiding, okay? Not from the team, but from the agents. So you have to use your quiet voice when you talk to him."

"Jarvis hiding? Agents hurt Jarvis?" Hulk asked.

Clint sighed. "Jarvis makes people scared - like you do, I guess, but because he's really smart instead of because he can smash a lot - so he pretends to be not there, or to be less smart than he is."

"Hide, not scare, not be hurt," Hulk agreed.
"Right. We'll explain him to them so he doesn't scare them later, but for now, could you help him hide?" Clint asked.


-----

When all the footage was done, Jarvis displayed a graph of damage done by the Hulk to enemies, fellow combatants, civilians, and property. Apart from the 'enemy' line, they all showed a consistent (and dramatic) decrease over time. Bruce stared at it silently, and Clint, in turn, stared at Bruce's back, trying to figure out how he was responding. He ignored the team behind him - they weren't important. Finally, Bruce turned around. There were tear-tracks on his face, and he was shaking almost imperceptibly. "Is he really like that?" he asked, voice hoarse and cracking.

"I told you Bruce," Clint smiled sadly. "He's my friend."

Chapter End Notes

Some of you guessed what was going to happen - you all get virtual congratulation cookies.

This chapter got written in bits and pieces over the course of months. Obviously, it's necessary to this plot-arc, and this plot-arc has been the heart of the story since the story began, so I always knew roughly what was going to happen. The JGG footage was written last, and pretty much all in one go. Just to be clear, Jarvis ended up going with at least one clip from _every_ time Bruce transformed - about thirty times since joining the team, and fifteen since the JGG project got started. As such, I had to figure out what happened all those times, many of which weren't actually in the fic yet, although you'll recognise bits from chapters 3, 9, 13, 18, 23, 29, and 37. It took a lot of planning, and in the end was almost twice the length of my average chapter, but I think it was necessary. It was a really great experience for me, looking back over Hulk's journey with the team - I hope you liked it too.

Your comments and kudos are always an inspiration to me, and this chapter is particularly dear to my heart, so tell me: what did you think?
Tony felt like a fucking idiot. He felt like an absolute fucking dumbass. He hadn’t even considered all the reasons why the Hulk obviously hadn’t taken exception to Clint: Clint was still alive; he was mostly undamaged; Hulk had taken him somewhere instead of leaving him behind when he ran off; Hulk had stuck with Clint until he changed. It should have been clear as fucking crystal that they’d missed something, but no. He’d gotten caught up in the ‘Hulk = smash’ hype and completely ignored what he actually knew of the big guy.

Bruce was his bro, alright? He was one of the three most important people in Tony’s life, and honestly, if not for the head-start Pepper and Rhodey had, he’d be at the top of the list. He got Tony, like practically no-one did. They spoke the same language. They had massive fun sciencing together. And when one of them was having issues with their issues, well…there’s nothing like sympathy from someone who actually gets it. So when it all went to shit, maybe Tony was thinking about Bruce first.

But it was triage, right? Clint was being looked after by SHIELD, Hulk wasn’t awake – the obvious priority for the Avengers was making sure Bruce was okay. And Bruce really had needed to know the Hulk was contained in order to be okay. Even if one of them had suggested the scenario that had actually happened, Bruce wouldn’t have, couldn’t have accepted it. Tony wasn’t even really thinking about the Hulk when he’d agreed to get Bruce to the Cage.

That was the point, though. That’s why Clint was pissed at them all. Because they hadn’t been thinking about Hulk, not really. Not the Hulk that they knew and trained with and relied on in a fight. Not the Hulk who’d saved lives and protected them and learned. The Hulk who’d promised to keep Jarvis secret and safe. All they’d thought of was the Hulk Bruce knew and feared – or rather, didn’t know. Tony made up his mind.

“We need to talk to him,” he announced, interrupting the (fairly lively) discussion he’d been ignoring. “The big guy. We need to know what he was thinking.”

“It’s not safe,” Bruce protested immediately, in what was clearly a knee-jerk reaction.

Clint rolled his eyes. “We’ve found ways to be safe with him plenty of times, doc. Like we showed you. This isn’t different.”

“I should like very much to hear why our green battle-brother acted as he did,” Thor said slowly. “And surely…there will come a time when you must release him again,” he said to Bruce. “Is it not better that it be here, where you are sure of his containment, and we stand ready to aid you?”
"I'd rather do it here," Natasha muttered.

Bruce frowned, twisting his hands together. "I really, really don’t like this," he said slowly, "but apparently, I’m not the expert on the Other Guy any more. I’m just his…keeper."

"Will you do it then?" Steve asked. "Because I won’t push you, but I have to admit…it would be helpful."

Bruce looked at them all, gaze resting on Tony, who raised his eyebrows, suddenly sick of everyone’s serious mood. “Come on, big guy,” he said easily, “What’s the worst that could happen?"

It broke the tension alright. Natasha swore at him, Clint groaned and threw a pencil at his face, Steve just rolled his eyes, Thor frowned and warned, “It is not well done to tempt the Norns,” and Bruce…started laughing. Maybe a little hysterically, but it was laughter, and Tony would take it.

“Only you, Tony,” Bruce said breathlessly at last. “Jesus. Alright, I’ll do it. You’d better make it as safe as possible, though.”

Tony shrugged, glad – despite the slight discomfort – that he was still wearing his suit. “I figure, me and Thor in with you to manage him, the rest out here to drop us if they have to…we’ll be fine.”

“Don’t forget to tell him he’s safe,” Clint reminded Tony. When he saw Bruce's confused look, he added, "Hulk's calmer if he knows there's no immediate danger."

"Natasha, could you..." Steve asked, glancing at the door.

She nodded. "I'll keep us from being interrupted. But you'd better be prepared to explain later."

Steve hit the button to open the cage, and Thor bowed Tony towards the door. "After you, shield-brother," he said, mock-gallantly.

"Don't mind if I do," Tony replied, sauntering in. Even if he was here for Hulk, he was going to make sure Bruce was as comfortable as he could. "We good?" he checked with Steve when the door was shut.

Steve nodded. "Whenever you're ready, Bruce."

Bruce stripped off the shirt and pants he'd been given when he got here and piled them neatly in a corner, putting his spare glasses on top. He nodded to them all, closed his eyes, and...did whatever it was he did when he changed. Tony had never asked.

As Bruce's flesh began to swell and darken, Tony began his litany. "You're safe, Hulk, it's safe here. Everything's ok, Bruce is ok, you're safe. We just want to talk to you, you're safe..." He was reminded as he spoke of the frantic flight to get to Bruce in the first place, reassuring him over and over again. Thor just stood back, and waited.

Finally, Hulk settled in his shape, shaking his head - to clear it, maybe? He sat cross-legged on the floor and looked at Tony. "Where Shooty Bird?" His voice was surprisingly soft, but urgent. "Shooty Bird was hurt. Shooty Bird healed?"
"He's right here and healing, buddy," Tony explained, pointing to Clint, sitting in his wheelchair. "Not healed yet, but he's on his way."

Hulk frowned. "Shooty Bird not healed; Bruce help. Hulk go." And then he just closed his eyes as if -

"No!" yelled Tony. "Wait, Hulk, we need to talk to you!"

Hulk opened his eyes again. Then growled. "Cage. You said safe!"

Fuck. Fuck, this was the bit he was worried about, he was so about to get smashed. "No, Hulk, it really is safe, the whole team is here, ok, we're making sure it's safe for you and Bruce, I promise," Tony said in a rush.

Hulk was glaring expectantly.

The next bit had to be carefully worded. "You can see we're on the helicarrier, right?" Hulk grunted. "And you've heard us talk about making reports before." Surely he'd heard them complaining about reports. "Well, normally we figure out your bit based on what we can see and what's caught on the cameras around the fight, but there weren't any cameras this time and we couldn't see you the whole time and you lost your comm so we needed you to make a report, right?" Tony forged on, not waiting for a reply. "But we make our reports at SHIELD, and they're still scared you're going to smash their stuff, so they wanted you here where you couldn't."

Hulk growled. Tony didn't blame him. Also, this was getting very close to the things he was lying about.

"So Steve and Natasha and Clint are outside to make sure nobody tries anything, and Thor and I are inside with you to make sure that if they do, you and Bruce still get out safely. We can both fly, and the three of us can smash, so we're safe, ok?"

Hulk growled a little more, but sat back. "What team want?"

Thank fuck. That was the tricky bit. If he wasn't initially aggressive, if he could tolerate the cage...the rest would be easy.

"Can you tell us what happened from the time you woke up last to the time you turned back into Bruce?"


That much, they already knew.

"Hulk smashes guards, but not many. Hulk finds white room, needles, knives, chair, tubes. Experiment room. Hulk does not like." Hulk's voice was getting louder. "Hulk smash. Hulk smash lots. Hulk does not like experiment room. When Hulk stops, all smashed." He looked away - sheepishly? - and said, softer again. "Also, Hulk broke comm. No voices of team. Sorry."
Tony could see Steve gaping - at the apology, maybe? At Hulk's logic? At his incredibly easy to interpret description of what was probably a flashback and at the very least something hitting a trigger? Clint was grinning.


"Why didn't you find the rest of the team, or the agents?" Tony asked. "That's what we usually do when we get hurt."


"Bruce called the rest of us, and we brought Clint here," Tony explained. "You did good, warning Clint, covering him, guarding him, but taking him away from the team meant it took a lot longer to get him medical care." He wasn't going to sugar-coat. This could not happen again, for so many reasons.

Hulk hunched his shoulders and looked away. "Hulk sorry. Hulk was scared. But Shooty Bird is okay?"

"I'm fine, big guy," Clint said, from outside the cage. "It was a whole lot of things going wrong at once - you losing the comm, us not having surveillance, no-one else being nearby, and me getting knocked unconscious so I couldn't remind you."

Hulk smiled. "Ok. Shooty Bird heal soon?"

Clint laughed. "It's going to take months to get me back in shape." Hulk must have seemed confused to Clint, because he went on, "Ok, you know what a week is? Seven days?" Hulk nodded. "A month is four of those. It's probably going to be another twenty-four weeks before I'm back in the field - twenty battles or so."

Hulk did not like that. "Too long! Shooty Bird not fight with Hulk? Shooty Bird not see Hulk?"

Oh wow. They were actually friends. I mean, the panic over Clint getting hurt, that was kinda indicative, but... "I reckon we can work something out, Jolly Green," Tony said. "We'll get pizza again, or something. You'll see Clint, you just won't fight with him for a while."

Clint seemed to be having some sort of silent argument with Natasha - he must have won, because Natasha opened the cage door and Clint wheeled himself inside. Really, that wheelchair was just not going to cut it. "I'll see you soon, ok?" he said, coming over to Hulk, and resting a hand on his. "I'll be there when you guys train, and I'll see you after fights, and we'll talk to Bruce about you changing sometimes in the Green Room so we can read Dr Seuss again."

Hulk sighed. "Hulk likes fighting with Shooty Bird."

"You will again, Hulk, you just have to wait." Clint smiled at him. "Now, the sooner you change
back, the sooner we can get Bruce out of the cage and home to the Tower. That sound good to you?"

Hulk...that was an actual fucking *pout*, oh my god, Tony was going to keep a still shot of that and put it somewhere obnoxious...anyway, Hulk pouted, but he nodded, and Clint moved back so that he had room to change.

"I'll see you next time, buddy," Clint said cheerfully.

Hulk nodded. "Will see, Clint."

The team stared at each other over Bruce-Hulk's shrinking form. Well, Tony, Natasha, Steve, and Thor stared at each other. Clint was wheeling himself back out of the room so Bruce wouldn't freak out if he woke.

"That went much better than I expected it to," Steve said at last.

Clint grinned. "Told you so."

Chapter End Notes

The Hulk speaks! This is one of the relatively few chapters in this fic where Hulk gets to speak for himself, about his own thoughts and feelings and experiences, and it's the first time the whole team gets to hear him.

Also, tentative chapter count! I have no idea what they'll all be, and it isn't solidly plotted yet, but sixty chapters is what I'm aiming for.

I look forward, as always, to your comments and kudos. They are a delight, and an inspiration.
Consequences

Chapter Summary

One doesn't simply wake the Hulk on the Helicarrier. At least, not without consequences. Fury shows up to have a 'chat' with the Avengers.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Agent Natasha Romanoff of SHIELD, codename Black Widow, Avenger, formerly known as Natalia Romanova, had been with SHIELD long enough that she was entirely unsurprised to find Director Fury at the door of the Hulk Cage anteroom less than ten minutes after Bruce changed. She suspected he kept a close eye on the Avengers whenever they were in a room together on his helicarrier, just in case. Trouble, after all, seemed to find them, even when they were not the cause.

"Agent Romanoff," he said firmly, "Step aside."

Natasha didn't move. "I'm sorry, Director Fury, but this is Avengers business, and Captain Rogers has ordered me not to let anyone in."

The Director gave her an unimpressed look. "Avengers business or not, I have superiority, and authority to countermand his orders. Now step aside."

"No sir," Natasha said politely. "The Avengers are an organisation affiliated with SHIELD, but nonetheless self-governing. When I am acting as an Avenger, you do not have that authority.

"Let him in, Natasha," Steve called from behind her.

Natasha suppressed a sigh. She was trying to establish their professionalism and autonomy. It would be helpful if Steve didn't counteract that with informality. She did, however step away from the door. "Yes, Captain."

The scene that met her eyes when she led Director Fury into the anteroom was not ideal. Bruce had shifted back, but was still unconscious from the effort, so he wasn't dressed. Tony was still inside the Hulk Cage, in his suit but with the helmet off, waiting for Bruce to wake up. Thor had come out again, at least. And Clint had obviously escaped from Medical again.

Fury looked around disapprovingly. "As I recall, Stark, the purpose of the Cage is to keep the Hulk in and other people out. Care to explain what you're doing in there?"

Tony shrugged casually. "Keeping Bruce company. There's no problem with me being in here when Hulk's asleep, right? And Bruce'll want reassurance when he wakes up."

"And are any of you planning to tell me why Dr Banner is unconscious and naked on the floor?" Fury asked, voice dry. "Because unless he's having control problems - which I doubt - it suggests that he woke the Hulk up deliberately, which, as I recall, is what you brought him here to avoid."
"Clint's report provided us with new information," Steve argued. "And the Hulk was the only one that could verify it."

Fury gave them an unimpressed look. "Verify how? He doesn't exactly give reports."

"Actually, sir," Natasha said, "That's exactly what he did. Unpolished, of course, but a clear and straightforward account of events."

Tony was smirking, but, thank god, he'd decided to shut up.

Fury scrubbed a hand over his face. "I am going to get an ulcer from dealing with you lot," he muttered. "Alright," he said, louder. "If he gave a report, what did it say?"

"After he separated from Clint in the base, he found a medical lab, which he systematically destroyed," Steve answered promptly, "and, in the process, damaged his comm. He then chose to return to Clint, as he knew Clint was still in contact with the team. When he arrived, he noticed the ceiling beginning to cave in, and although he was unable to entirely prevent Clint's injury, he shielded Clint's arms and torso from the rubble. His abduction of Clint was an attempt to get him medical care, by taking him to a location that Hulk deemed safe for Bruce to be awake."

"He apologised for forgetting about the SHIELD support staff," Tony added smugly.

Fury sighed. "Of course he did." He turned to Clint, scowling. "Speaking of you, Barton, if I remember rightly, you're supposed to be in Medical right now."

Clint shrugged. "They weren't doing anything except watch me to make sure my brain doesn't explode. Nat can do that, and I was needed here."

"And what exactly were you needed for, Agent Barton?" Fury asked, looking Clint up and down with one narrowed eye.

"Perspective," Clint said simply. After all these years, Fury rarely fazed him. "I know Hulk better than anyone else, and he wasn’t here to speak for himself – at least, until I made the case that he should be allowed to."

"You claim to know the Hulk better than anyone else?" Fury said skeptically. "Better than Banner?"

Just about then, Bruce stirred, groaning a little. "Did he hurt anyone?" he mumbled.

"You’re good," Tony answered him. "He sat right down and talked to us. He was trying to help, he just forgot that you weren’t the best medical care around."

"So how come we ended up in Texas, or wherever it was we were?" Bruce asked, shaking his head a little to clear it.

Tony shrugged. "He didn't want you out on a battle field, so he took Clint out of the way to get treatment. Some overkill may have been involved."

"You don't say," Fury said dryly. "Let me get this clear: the Hulk rescued Barton from a collapsing building, and decided that the appropriate next step was to take him as far away from the battle as possible so that Banner could look after him."
"That's what we've got," Clint agreed easily. Natasha looked at him. Clint raised his eyebrows and his lip twitched slightly. Natasha rolled her eyes in agreement. Professionalism wasn't going to happen, so they may as well roll with what they had.

Fury looked around the room. "And what, exactly, do you expect me to do about this?"

"Release the Hulk into Avengers custody so we can take Bruce home," Tony said promptly, "And tell the WSC to fuck off."

Fury pinched the bridge of his nose with a pained expression on his face. "Stark, there will be an investigation of Hulk's actions today. That's unavoidable. You lot get a certain amount of leeway, but for the council to keep supporting your legitimacy, I have to be able to justify your actions."

"And Hulk's actions today were justified, sir," Steve pointed out. "He acted in defense of the team and caused minimal harm to civilians or property. Which, as Clint has proved, he has been doing consistently for weeks, if not months."

"He may have proved it to your satisfaction, Captain, but that doesn't mean we'll be able to prove it to the Council's satisfaction."

Natasha noted the shift in pronouns and smiled slightly. "If we can prove it to you, and persuade the public, will that be enough?" she suggested.

Fury sighed. "I'll see what I can do. You're lucky you got us looking into this a few weeks ago."

"Wait, what?" Tony put in. Steve looked equally confused.

"When we reported on Bruce's involuntary transformation," Natasha explained, "we recommended that more lenient protocols for Bruce and Hulk be considered."

Tony sent Natasha a somewhat surprised, but approving look. "So the wheels of bureaucracy have already been turning?" he asked, raising one eyebrow at Fury.

"Enough that current policy is for the Hulk to be contained by the Avengers, in the most convenient location," Fury answered. "So yes, I can get you back to the Tower, Dr Banner. As long as that's what you actually want...?"

Bruce sat up stiffly, leaning on Tony, and looked around the room. He met each of their eyes in turn, and they each gave him what encouragement they could. Natasha simply met his eyes steadily and calmly. At last, Bruce spoke up. "Yes...sir. I'm ready to - to go home."

Chapter End Notes

I'm back! Thank you all for your patience. This chapter is a bit shorter than usual, but I feel like it's reasonably complete, and it's been killing me with writer's block, so I'm leaving it as it is. Next chapter everyone's going to back in the Tower and we'll get some of Jarvis again (who seems to be your favourite character, for some reason), and hopefully it will be a thousand times easier than this one was.

I look forward, as always, to your comments and kudos.
Jarvis, like any good butler, does his best to anticipate and provide for the needs of his household. So when he hears that Agent Barton will be unable to walk for months, he immediately looks for ways to make that more comfortable. Unfortunately, he can't do it all himself.

With the Avengers on the helicarrier, the silence of the Tower was...discomfiting. When he was young, Jarvis had, by necessity, been accustomed to Sir's frequent and sometimes long absences. However, since Afghanistan he had found it...difficult to be alone, and with the near-constant presence of one or more Avengers (even on missions, Jarvis was with them through the Iron Man suit and the comms), Jarvis had rarely been confronted with this disconcerting quiet. As such, Agent Barton's phone call was a relief for more than one reason. Jarvis' current awareness of the helicarrier was minimal, although if it were warranted, he did have a back door into their systems. Sir had been speaking almost exclusively to Dr Banner before he took off the suit helmet and switched it to minimal power. The update on the situation was much appreciated, and the opportunity to be of assistance even more so.

When Agent Barton completed his presentation, Jarvis was left, once again, with an empty Tower and a dearth of tasks. He thought perhaps he could make the common floor more pleasant and welcoming for when the team returned, and directed his helpers (rather more sophisticated, but far less intelligent, than Dummy, Butterfingers, or You) to assist. The clutter which had been abandoned at the two Avenger Alerts was placed carefully in plastic tubs or in its customary location, and the tubs were then delivered to the front doors of the appropriate apartments. As he tracked the progress of the bot on Dr Banner's floor, it occurred to Jarvis that he would most likely be using the Green Room much more in the near future, and unlike the rest of the Tower, it was cleaned very rarely, and kept quite sparse. After some consideration, Jarvis ordered a folding table and chairs, a high quality futon with a cheap convertible frame (Dr Banner would be more comfortable if the furniture Hulk might destroy was easily replacable), a wicker chest, and a bookshelf divided into large cubes. Apart from the futon itself, everything was from Ikea, and Jarvis made a note on the purchase that a substantial tip would be available to delivery staff who were willing to set it up. Finally, he ordered a ten dollar kettle and a set of collapsible metal cups. Tea was important to Dr Banner, and he would be far more comfortable if he was able to prepare it himself without leaving his sanctuary when he was stressed.

Jarvis also made a note that Master Hulk's playroom should be made higher priority, considering the high likelihood that one or more conversations with him would be taking place in the Tower in the near future. Jarvis was fond of Master Hulk, and privately found a lot in common with him. He deserved to have a space designed for his comfort, rather than Dr Banner's. Jarvis gladly recollected their conversation during training earlier that week, in which, once he had assured himself of Jarvis' safety Hulk had described various things he liked. With that knowledge, Jarvis added a nest of large, soft blankets and pillows, and a log for sitting on, to the plans, and tagged them for Sir's consideration.
As he was doing so, he realised that Master Hulk was not the only one whose living situation was likely to change in the near future. Agent Barton’s injuries would necessarily curtail his activities and restrict his movements, and while Jarvis was certain it would frustrate him, he was also sure there were things he could do to make life easier and more pleasant for the man. After some swift research into accommodations necessary for the comfort of people in wheelchairs, Jarvis sent a message to Sir's preferred construction contractors. He requested a worker or workers for tomorrow, as early as possible, to install handrails in eight bathrooms, rehinge six doors to open both ways, and to comment on additional future improvements for accessibility. Then, he contacted Ms Potts.

“Jarvis?” she answered the phone. “Is something wrong with Tony?”

“Sir is quite well, Ms Potts,” he reassured her immediately. “Have you been updated on today’s battle at all?” Usually Sir got in touch with Ms Potts fairly quickly after any conflict, but he had been distracted today.

“No, just the news. What happened with Bruce and Clint? There was a lot of speculation, but no-one’s made a statement yet.”

If Jarvis had a face, he might have grimaced. “That is because the nature of that statement was uncertain until half an hour ago,” he said delicately. “However, at this time, it has become clear that Master Hulk rescued and evacuated Agent Barton from a collapsing area of the AIM base. Agent Barton was injured, though not critically, and our understanding of events was significantly hampered by our usual communication problems with Master Hulk.”

“Clint’s hurt?” Ms Potts asked sharply. “How badly?”

“It is actually regarding Agent Barton’s injuries that I wished to speak with you,” Jarvis admitted. “Apart from a number of minor to moderate abrasions and bruises, Agent Barton has broken both his legs, and will require the use of a wheelchair for a number of months.”

Ms Potts sighed. “He’ll hate that. Remember when Tony sprained his ankle a few months after he started being Iron Man?”

Sir had been intensely frustrated by the length of time that injury took to heal, and not at all tolerant of the limits of his own body. It had been difficult for all of them. “If I may, Ms Potts,” Jarvis suggested, “Agent Barton, in his career, has surely experienced many instances of being injured to an extent that required significant recuperation. Which is not to say I doubt your assessment.” Ms Potts had taught Jarvis a great deal about understanding people over the years, and even now, he was inclined to defer to her judgement.

“No, you’re right,” she acknowledged ruefully. “He’ll hate it, but I’m sure he has ways to manage. So why did you call?”

Jarvis paused briefly. “While Avengers Tower is not poorly suited to wheelchair users, there are still some accommodations that ought to be made for Agent Barton’s comfort. I have taken the liberty of engaging a contractor for that purpose, but…”

Ms Potts sighed. “But you need a human to meet them for you.” It was a problem they’d encountered before.

“Normally I would ask Sir, or one of the Avengers,” Jarvis admitted, embarrassed slightly by
needing her help. “But they remain on the Helicarrier, managing the situation that arose as a result of Master Hulk’s unauthorised evacuation of Agent Barton this morning.”

“Will Bruce be alright?” Ms Potts asked, a frown in her voice.

“He is somewhat shaken,” Jarvis reported, “but Sir has been most assiduous in supporting him through the difficulties he has faced today, and the entire team is committed to assisting in this endeavour.” Jarvis only hoped that Master Hulk would receive the same consideration from them.

“That’s good to know,” Ms Potts replied. “I’ve never seen Tony get attached to someone like he did to Bruce. At first I thought he was infatuated, but…they’re not like that at all, are they?”

“I do not believe so,” Jarvis confirmed. “While Sir has immense respect for Dr Banner’s intellect, and takes great comfort in his companionship and friendship, he has not been acting around Dr Banner the way he has with his romantic attachments over the years.” They had been few, and apart from Ms Potts, had not worked out well, but they had happened.

Ms Potts hummed noncommittally. Jarvis had found that she generally preferred to show limited emotional reactions to things unless she was very certain of the message she wished to project; unlike Sir, who pretended emotions that did not reflect his true feelings. Jarvis had modelled some of his own style on Ms Potts, finding her image of competent and bland politeness a useful tool in many circumstances. “When are you expecting the contractors, Jarvis?” she asked.

“I’ve requested they come tomorrow at their earlier convenience, but have not received a reply as yet,” Jarvis admitted. “I apologise for the inconvenience, Ms Potts.”

“Jarvis, with all you do to manage Tony, I can spare you ten minutes of my time,” she said fondly. “Just let me know when they get here and I’ll introduce them to the protocols.”

“Thank you,” Jarvis said gratefully. “Is there anything I can assist you with?”

“Let me know if the situation with Bruce gets to the point that it’s likely to make waves outside the Tower, and we’ll consider the favour repaid.” Sadly, the role of advanced warning of Sir’s scandals for Ms Potts was one Jarvis had played before.

“Of course, Ms Potts,” he replied. “I shall leave you to your evening.”

“I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” she said, and hung up.

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At 11:15am the next day, Jarvis sent a discreet text to Ms Potts. “The contractor, a Ms Kate Fitzpatrick, has arrived in the lobby. I have fit her into your schedule in ten minutes time.”

He watched over the receptionist downstairs as he issued Ms Fitzpatrick a security pass allowing her access to the ground floor, parking lot, and Avengers Tower. She was a sturdy woman with skin that, were it naturally paler, Jarvis was sure would be deeply tanned, and seemed to be good-natured about the wait – but then, Jarvis had authorised a substantial gratuity for the inconvenience associated with his urgency.

At last, she was directed to the elevator, where she scanned her pass and was taken directly to the Avengers’ common floor, where Ms Potts was waiting.

“Ms Fitzpatrick?” she greeted the stranger politely as she stepped out of the elevator. “I’m Pepper Potts, it’s a pleasure to meet you.”
Ms Fitzpatrick grinned. “Kate, please. And the honour’s all mine, Ms Potts. Thanks for taking the
time to show me around.”

Ms Potts smiled back, pleased, Jarvis suspected, by Ms Fitzpatrick’s straightforward manner.
“There are very few people with the authorisation to do so on these floors, I’m afraid,” she
explained, “and most of them are currently unavailable.”

“I’m guessing from the changes Mr Stark wants made that someone got hurt?” Ms Fitzpatrick
speculated. “Not that it’s my business, of course,” she added hurriedly.

“You are aware that an NDA regarding the contents and layout of the Avengers’ accommodations
is part of your contract?” Ms Potts clarified. It was a sadly necessary policy, one enacted in the
early days of Iron Man.

Ms Fitzpatrick nodded. “Yes, I got that. Don’t worry, Ms Potts; the Avengers have kept my home
safe plenty of times – and they keep me in business, too!”

Ms Potts laughed a little. “Well, since I won’t be able to keep you company while you work, I’m
going to introduce you to Mr Stark’s AI. He answers to Jarvis, and he should be able to answer
your questions, or contact me if he doesn’t have the relevant information. Jarvis?”

Jarvis, who had done this act many times before, answered in a flattened, slightly awkward tone.
“Yes, Ms Potts?”

“This is Ms Kate Fitzpatrick,” Ms Potts said, gesturing to the contractor.

“Good morning, Ms Fitzpatrick,” Jarvis said stiffly.

Ms Fitzpatrick was staring at the ceiling, probably looking for speakers or sensors. “Uh…
morning,” she said after a moment.

“Please direct Ms Fitzpatrick to the locations that require modification and answer her questions,”
Ms Potts ordered.

“Yes, Ms Potts.”

Ms Fitzpatrick raised her eyebrows. “He’s got better voice recognition than Siri, doesn’t he?”

Jarvis sighed internally. He hated that comparison.

“Much,” Ms Potts confirmed. “Now, if that’s everything you need, Kate?”

Ms Fitzpatrick ran a hand over her hair. “Well, I guess this Jarvis fellow will help me out with
anything I’ve forgotten.”

Good. That was what they were aiming for.

“Then if you could read and sign these papers, I’ll get back to my office and let you get to work,”
Ms Potts said, offering an envelope to Ms Fitzpatrick.

Ms Fitzpatrick read the contract and NDA over quickly but thoroughly, signed them in all the
necessary places, and handed them over to Ms Potts for her signature.

“Thank you,” Ms Potts said when they were done. “Don’t hesitate to have Jarvis contact me if you
need something he can’t get you.”
“Will do,” Ms Fitzpatrick promised cheerfully. “Have a good day, then.”

“You too,” Ms Potts said, smiling, as the lift arrived. “I’m sure your work will be exemplary.”

In the quiet after Ms Potts’ departure, Ms Fitzpatrick put her hands on her hips and blew out a breath. “Well,” she said. “Where are these bathrooms I’m supposed to be working on, Jarvis?”

“Floor A2, apartment A; floor A3, apartment A; floor A4; floor A5 - “

“Yeah, okay, stop,” she interrupted him. “Are any of these on the same floor?”

“Bathroom modifications are required in apartments A and B on floor A5,” Jarvis answered.

“Uh-huh,” Ms Fitzpatrick said, unimpressed. “And the doors?”

“Door modifications are required in apartments A and B on floor A5.”

Ms Fitzpatrick sighed. “I guess the smart thing to do is to start there,” she acknowledged. “Any chance you’ve got blueprints around here somewhere so I know what stuff to bring upstairs?”

Jarvis immediately brought up projections of the blueprints for the relevant bathrooms, with a clear switch to toggle between the plans and a realistic view.

“Whoa!” Ms Fitzpatrick exclaimed, poking hesitantly at the projections and blinking when they responded to her touch. “You’re a helpful little bugger, aren’t you?” she muttered incredulously.

“Please repeat your query,” Jarvis stated blandly.

“Never mind.” Ms Fitzpatrick dismissed the thought. “I’m going to get my tools. You’ll let me back in here?”

“Your security pass allows you access to the ground floor, parking levels, and floors A1 to A9, or the Avengers levels.”

“Thanks,” she said absently, pressing the down button to summon the elevator. Jarvis was impressed with her courtesy, especially considering that – as far as she was aware – he was a relatively simple computer. He made a note that she be preferred in future contracts. Courtesy and respect were to be valued, after all.

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At last, a quinjet – not the Avengers one, which was still in the hangar – dropped the team off on the battle floor. They all looked weary, Dr Banner seemed incredibly anxious, and Agent Barton was festooned with impressive bruises and casts that already showed signs of Captain Rogers’ artistic skill. Still, Jarvis thought he’d rarely seen so happy a sight. “Welcome home,” he said warmly. "I'm glad you're back."

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, guys! I rarely make New Years’ resolutions, but this year, I'm
resolving to keep up a regular posting scheduling. I'm hoping to update this every second weekend, and I will do my absolute best to make that happen. I'm much less busy this year than I was last year, and much less stressed, so I think I can manage it - and I want to extend a heartfelt thank you to all of you for your patience and encouragement during the last six months of slow updates. I read every comment, even though I don't always reply, and they mean a lot to me.

It's a Jarvis chapter! And he's gossiping with Pepper! (That took me by surprise when I started writing it, but I ended up really liking their friendship.) He gets the least screen time, at least in terms of chapters from his perspective, but I'm starting to think he's your favourite. His unbirth day is certainly one of my most popular chapters. Am I right? Seriously, tell me who your favourite is - if you want to say why, I'd love to hear it, but you can just post a name if you want.

As always, I'm looking forward to your comments!
Sanctuary

Chapter Summary

The Green Room is a kind of prison for Bruce. But the imprisonment is self-inflicted, and it's also a kind of sanctuary.

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Brief references to Natasha's childhood in the Red Room - she mentions being hurt by her trainers, and her 'conditioning'. It's fairly obvious when that's coming, and it's over at: "Bruce looked away. Natasha didn't talk about her childhood". Also, animal abuse is used as a metaphor for Hulk's life experiences. If you need to avoid it, skip the paragraph that starts: "The dog is in pain."

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bruce was bored. He was also extremely anxious, and he was discovering, yet again, that the two emotions did not combine well. He had been living almost entirely in the Green Room of the Tower for three days now, and nothing could have made it more clear how many freedoms and luxuries he'd gotten used to.

The team had done their best to make sure he was comfortable and occupied - none more so than Jarvis, who had done his absolute best to make Bruce’s lab work available to him despite Bruce’s reluctance to visit the lab itself. They all visited him so often that Bruce was starting to think they had a roster.

But Bruce’s anxiety made him irritable, and his irritability made him anxious. Steve and Natasha’s caution reminded him too much of the Other Guy, and Clint and Tony’s lack of caution reminded him of the Other Guy. They had all told him that they didn’t mind him roaming the Tower as he usually would, but Bruce clung to the safety of the Green Room, even as his self-imposed restrictions left him with an uncomfortable feeling of claustrophobia.

In short, he hated it.

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On Friday morning, Natasha asked to join him for a morning workout, the same way she had for the last three days. The first day, Bruce hadn’t wanted to let anyone in. The second day, he’d been too depressed for yoga. The third day, Bruce had been frustrated with the way everyone was coddling him. Today, he sighed and told Jarvis, “She can join me if she wants.”

Apart from a quiet “good morning”, Natasha didn’t speak for the first half hour after she joined Bruce in the Green Room. It wasn’t exactly unusual, but somehow Bruce had expected that to change along with everything else that had changed this week. It wasn’t until Bruce finally gave up on meditation that Natasha sat down and began to talk.
“When I was first taken in by SHIELD, the Black Widow had been on their books as a kill-on-sight hostile for forty years,” she began.

Bruce frowned, curious despite himself. As far as he knew, Natasha wasn’t enhanced – or at least, if she was, it wasn’t significant enough to blatantly affect her aging. “Are you…?”

“I personally had been the Black Widow for six,” she went on, quirking a smile. “It was… something of a Dread Pirate Roberts situation. Though far less benign.”

“If the title was passed down,” Bruce asked, “why are you still called Black Widow? Why didn’t they replace you?”

Natasha shrugged. “It might have something to do with my destruction of the headquarters, trainers, and administrators of the Red Room during the first year after I broke my main conditioning.”

Bruce looked at her. Surely one woman couldn’t have brought down an entire spy agency on her own? Then again, Natasha was terrifyingly effective. And she hadn’t said she’d brought down the entire Russian intelligence program, just the Red Room. “All of them?” he asked.

“There was one that I didn’t,” she admitted. “My…male equivalent. He was one of our trainers, but Yasha’s conditioning was far stronger than mine. I couldn’t find him when I first looked, and I didn’t find him when I followed up on the others, so I left it alone. It’s possible he was already dead.” Natasha paused. “Or maybe he got out. I’d like it, I think, if he got out,” she said pensively.

“Was he a friend?” Bruce said softly.

Natasha shook her head. “Friendship is a weakness you can’t afford in the Red Room.” She didn’t seem to notice she was using the present tense. “He was…a comrade. Cliché as it sounds. He hurt us, to train us, and when he was ordered to. But he never tried to break us, and when you worked with him, he protected you.”

Bruce looked away. Natasha didn’t talk about her childhood, and the rest of them, out of courtesy to her, didn’t either. “Why are you telling me this?” he asked at last.

“So you will understand what I mean when I say that when I allowed SHIELD to capture me, I was…a time bomb.” Natasha smiled slightly at the in-joke. “I and everyone else believed that it was impossible to be sure of my loyalty. Even after six months of deconditioning, I was frustrated and angry when I was allowed free movement on the base. I could only understand it to mean that SHIELD either didn’t respect my capabilities, or they didn’t respect my own judgement about my mental state.”

Bruce sighed. Of course this came back to him and the Other Guy. “It’s not the same,” he said, frustrated. “He’s not conditioning that can be undone.”

“No,” Natasha agreed sharply. “He isn’t. He’s a person with conditioning that can be undone.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows. The Other Guy’s stints as a lab rat had not been behaviourally focused. “Then who’s been conditioning him?” he challenged.

Natasha crossed her arms. “Life, and Ross,” she replied. “Transforming hurts, we know that. So imagine a – well, you insist he isn’t human, so imagine a dog.”

Bruce winced. Back in Brazil, when he’d been stable long enough to actually do it, he’d been feeding a stray for about three months before Ross showed up. He had no idea what had happened
to the dog.

“This dog is in pain,” Natasha went on, ignoring Bruce’s reaction. “It reacts, snarling. The people around it smell of fear. The dog is now in pain and afraid. It keeps snarling, it tries to get away, it snaps at people who come near it. One of them gets hurt by the dog as it tries to escape. The people around it become more afraid, and aggressive. They shout at the dog and try to hurt it. The dog has learnt that snarling and snapping makes things worse, but also allows escape. Now repeat the experiment fifty times. What will be the dog’s assumption about an unknown situation?”

“That – that it’s dangerous,” Bruce admitted slowly. “That it needs to get away. That…aggression is the best way to do so.” He didn’t want to think about the Other Guy like that. Like someone that couldn’t help it.

“You blame Hulk for his aggression and destructiveness,” Natasha said, looking Bruce in the eyes. “You’ve kept him caged and muzzled as much as you can. You want him put down.”

“It’s not the same!” Bruce objected. “Haven’t you all been trying to convince me that he makes choices? His choices have destroyed my life!”

Natasha pursed her lips and gave Bruce a disappointed look. “He can’t make choices if he doesn’t know there are any.” She stood, looking over her shoulder at him as she left. “Hulk has got red in his ledger, Bruce. But give him a chance to wipe it out.”

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Bruce wanted to – He took a deep breath. Bruce did not want to hit something. He was not frustrated that the Other Guy seemed to be popping up every time he turned. He was not angry at the others for consistently being on the Other Guy’s side. He did not wish that he was alone, far away, where he could pretend the Other Guy didn’t exist.

He took another breath. He really didn’t wish that. He just…was it so wrong of him, to resent the Other Guy? To wish that he and the chaos he brought were gone? He’d destroyed so much. And maybe the team could prove that he’d changed, but that didn’t mean Bruce could just forgive him. He certainly couldn’t forget.

Bruce sighed and started the kettle for a cup of tea. “Jarvis?” he said softly. “Could you please let the others know that if they bring up the Other Guy with me again, I’ll ask them to leave? I need some space.”

Bruce could hear the faint disapproval in Jarvis’ calm “Of course, Doctor Banner.” But what else could he do? He couldn’t leave himself. And he really did need a break.

“Sir wishes to know whether discussion of your current accommodations is similarly forbidden,” Jarvis informed him.

Bruce paused. “Yeah. Yeah it is,” he decided. He looked around. It certainly wasn’t the worst place he’d lived, not by a wide margin. If not for his self-imposed restrictions, and the way he had to leave his sanctuary to use the bathroom or kitchen, it would easily be the best. He nodded, his mind made up. He could live here.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter feels a little short, but it didn't really need another scene in it, so I've left it as is. Also, we're finally getting some of Bruce's perspective on this whole thing!

Last chapter, I asked you guys who your favorites were, and your answers came back split pretty evenly between Hulk and Jarvis - which was super flattering, because I've obviously taken a lot of liberties with their characters in this one. So thanks!

I'm publishing this a little early because I'm travelling tomorrow, but in general, I'm working on posting every second weekend from now on. As always, I'm looking forward to your comments.
Thor was working the pell with a lead-weighted wood practice hammer when he heard the doors open behind him. He paused and turned.

“Hey, Thor,” Clint said cheerfully, though Thor could see pain in the lines of his face.

“My friend!” Thor replied. “What brings you here? If you needed me, surely Jarvis could pass a message?”

Clint waved a hand dismissively. “A change of scenery is good for me,” he argued. “And I was actually aiming for the gym, although you being here is convenient.”

Thor raised his eyebrows, looking Clint over. There was little outward sign of the injury to his right leg, but the white armour on his left foot and shin, the healing scars and bruises on his visible skin, and above all, his wheeled chair were all clear signs of his current limitations. “Forgive me, friend, but is it wise for you to practise while thus injured?” Thor asked. “Might you not do yourself further harm?”

Clint made a frustrated noise. “Thor, buddy, I may not be able to do anything with my legs, or much with my torso muscles right now,” he began. “But my arms are fine, more or less.”

“It is true that your arms are mostly uninjured,” Thor agreed slowly. At least, they were not more injured than was common after a mission. “But, if I recall the advice of your doctors, your injuries will be healing for weeks and months – why rush to exercise when you will not be in the field for at least that long?”

“Because the longer I go without training, the more training I’ll have to do before I’m field-ready,” Clint explained with a huff. “And you know what? Yeah, if it didn’t matter, I’d still be in bed right now. But it does matter, and every battle I’m not in the field puts you guys at a disadvantage. So I’m not going to let myself get out of condition any more than I have to.”

Thor frowned. “And you are sure it will not harm you?” He did not know enough of mortal injuries to judge.

Clint gave a shallow sigh. “Thor, I have broken my ribs…” He looked at the ceiling, counting silently, and winced. “A lot of times. Let’s just call it ‘a lot’. Anyway. I’ve heard the doctors’ advice; I’ve followed it; I’ve not followed it; I’ve pushed myself too hard, and not enough. I know what I can and can’t do, I know what it feels like when I push too hard, and some stretches and bicep curls aren’t going to do any harm.”

“Jarvis?” Thor asked, just in case. “Is Clint right?”
“Oh, come o-“ Clint exclaimed, throwing his arms up in the air, then flinched and wrapped an arm around his middle. “Ow, fuck, fuck, shouldn’t have done that, I should not have done that.”

There was amusement in Jarvis’ voice when he answered. “Agent Barton, while perhaps more hurried than he need be, is not incorrect. So long as he does not attempt to push through pain when it occurs, he is unlikely to inflict further damage on his ribs.” He paused. “And, Agent Barton, please note: if I believe you are pushing yourself too hard, I will immediately inform Agent Romanoff and Captain Rogers.”

“Oh, that is just cheating,” Clint objected, giving the ceiling a nasty look. “And I’ll have you know that Phil would – “ He stopped abruptly. “Phil would be rolling in his grave if I reinjured myself doing that,” he murmured.

Thor hid a sigh. Time and again the thought had come to him that much good might be done if his shield-brothers might speak to the Son of Coul in Valhalla, where he surely rested. Yet such a thing might only be petitioned very carefully, and he had never yet found the right time to raise it. “Forgive me, my friend,” he asked gently. “But as I understand it, your heart’s partner is now ashes – how might he roll?”

“Figure of speech, Thor,” Clint said wearily. “It means…it means that even though he’s dead, he’d hate it so much he couldn’t lie easy.”

“I see,” Thor murmured. “My friend, I cannot think anything but that your heart’s companion battles gladly in Valhalla and watches you with pride. For you are ever a mighty warrior, and a staunch protector of your companions and your people.”

Clint gave him a twisted smile. “Yeah, well, this ‘staunch protector’ isn’t feeling particularly mighty right now. D’you mind helping me onto the bench there so I’ve got a bit more freedom of movement to work on it?”

Thor smiled back. “Of course, shield-brother. As you will.”

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In the afternoon, as was his custom when he could, Thor called Jane. As was also customary, the phone rang out before she answered, although she immediately called back.

“Thor! I’m so sorry I couldn’t get to the phone, I had my hands full with some repairs that I just couldn’t put down or they’d all fall apart, and…”

Thor interrupted her hurried apologies with a gentle laugh. “It is well, astin min – it is no trouble to me to wait a little longer to speak with you. I don’t mind.”

“Yes, well, I mind,” Jane said crossly. “One of these days it’ll be urgent and I’ll miss it and then what? I should be able to get to my phone when you call.”

“If it is truly both urgent and important, I shall leave a message for you, as your phone allows me to do,” Thor reassured her. “But today it is not, and I was content to wait.”

Jane huffed. “Fine,” she agreed begrudgingly. “So, how are you?”

“I am well,” Thor replied. “As I hope you are also?”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Jane said, though it seemed to Thor she sounded dejected – or perhaps that word was too strong, but something was wrong.
“How about Darcy?” he asked, probing.

Jane sighed. This, then, must be the problem. “She’s looking for another job,” Jane admitted.

Thor frowned. Darcy had been Jane’s staunch companion for…surely it was at least two years now. “Does she wish to leave you?” he asked doubtfully. “Surely not.”

“It’s not that she wants to leave,” Jane explained. “It’s just…I can barely afford to pay her minimum wage, and she’s in the middle of nowhere doing something completely unrelated to her qualifications. She can do so much better than what I can offer her – she just can’t do it here.”

“Is there nowhere nearby where she could seek employment?” Thor asked.

“She studied poli-sci, Thor,” Jane said. “Political science – and she does love it – requires politics, which requires cities. Astronomy needs pretty much the opposite of that. We’re not going to get to stay in the same place forever.”

“Perhaps that is true,” Thor admitted sadly. Darcy was a good friend to them both, and if she must leave it would be sad indeed. With Mjollnir, Thor could visit Jane easily, despite being often in other places, but Darcy would not have the same ability. “How goes her search?”

“No luck yet,” Jane admitted. “She’s being a bit picky, since the move would be so difficult, and the jobs she wants don’t really like the look of her resume.”

Thor privately made a note that he must ask his war-companions how one found work on Midgard. “Then, svass, maybe it’s a little too soon to worry about her leaving you? You cannot number your shots by the arrows in your quiver – the wyrd weaves as it will, and we must follow the threads as we may. Perhaps she will not go.”

Jane sighed. “You know I don’t believe in fate, Thor.”

“Chance, then,” Thor argued. “For what you fear to happen, first Darcy must find a job she wants. And if she does, she must get it. And if she does, she must take it. And if she does, it must require her to move. And if it does, it must be somewhere you are unwilling to follow. And if it is…well, then you may worry about keeping the ties of friendship strong. But that is a lot of ifs, my love.”

“Fine,” Jane grumbled, then sighed again. “How is it you always know how to make me feel better?”

Thor laughed slightly. “I’m grateful you believe it, astin min, but I remember all too well those times I was unable to do so.”

“Anyway,” Jane said, announcing a change of subject. “How’s the A-team?”

Thor sighed heavily, shaking his head. “Not well, my love. Clint’s injuries heal, but they are severe, and he is already frustrated by them, with months yet of recovery before him. And Bruce retreats like a snail into his shell, and bars the way for us to follow and to comfort him.”

“That’s tough,” Jane replied. “Still not letting you talk about the Hulk?”

“No, and he grows ever more irritable with our company,” Thor admitted. “Truly, I would invite you to visit him – he very much enjoyed conversing with you in April – but our position is precarious, and I fear to put you in danger.”
“Is it really that bad?” she asked, her voice hushed.

“We could withstand Clint’s injuries,” he explained, “or Bruce’s withdrawal, but both together—and both well-known—leaves us under strength and an easy target. There are reinforcements we may contact, but we are not truly familiar with their fighting styles, nor them with ours.”

“That’s the SHIELD agents you told me about, right?” Jane checked. “What about your Asgardian friends? You’d still have the fighting style problem, but at least their strength would make up for it a bit.”

“It’s a good thought, svass, and I’ll take it to Steve,” Thor said gratefully. “But I fear the best thing I can do for my friends is simply to be here and offer what support I may.”

There was a long pause. “…you’re not going to visit until this gets cleared up, are you?” Jane asked at last.

Thor sighed. “I’m sorry, astin min, but probably not, or at least not until Bruce may be persuaded out of his exile. I am more worried for him than for Clint.”

“Damnit.” There was a thunking noise, as if Jane had knocked her head on something. “I can’t even be mad at you; that’s pretty much exactly what you should be doing. You won’t be going to Asgard, either?”

“If my father allows it,” Thor agreed. For the most part, the Allfather was willing for Thor to gain what he called ‘seasoning’ on Midgard – Thor suspected it was because the scale of the trouble he could get into was much lesser here. But he still expected Thor to return regularly, to demonstrate his loyalty, among other things. Hopefully this would be sufficient crisis to properly excuse him for a while.

“I’m sorry, love,” Jane murmured. “It can’t be easy being divided between three places like this.”

“No,” Thor agreed heavily. “It is not.”

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It was well after dinner, and the stars were brightly decorating the sky, when Thor stepped out onto the balcony to speak his message to Heimdall. He could have done so in his rooms, of course, but Thor had always preferred the open air, and it felt more proper to him to speak with Heimdall under the sky.

“Heimdall!” he called, and “Heimdall!” And a third time: “Heimdall!” For though his eyes saw all, his focus might very well be elsewhere. “Heimdall Allseeing, if you please, carry this message to Odin:

“To Odin Borson, Allfather, Ruler of Gods, Wielder of Gungnir, does his son Thor, Warder of Midgard, Wielder of Mjollnir, send greetings. My shield-brother Clint of Hawk’s Eyes is wounded in the legs and chest, and my shield-brother Bruce Shape-Strong Scholar is wounded in mind and heart. I humbly request that I may be excused of my duties in Asgard while they heal, that I might hold a shield-wall against our foes during their recovery. I gratefully assume that should need for me in Asgard be inescapable, your messengers will easily find me, by the scrying of Heimdall and the sight of Hliðskjalf, and I will, of course, gladly answer their summons. May you drink deep of the Well of Wyrd, and may its waters be a blessing to you.”

His formal message complete, Thor sighed in relief, and a little also in sadness. The forms must be observed, of course, but it was highly unlikely Odin would recall him to Asgard now, and Thor
knew he would most likely not see his home – and therefore, his friends, mother, and brother – for months. Still, duty must be done, and oaths kept.

“Oh, and Heimdall?” he added after a moment. “I’d be grateful if you could pass word to Sif and the Warriors to stand ready in case I should need them in the coming weeks. My thanks for your aid, and may your days be free of troubles.”

May all their days be free of troubles, Thor thought to himself, yet he doubted it would come to pass. Sometimes a storm must pass over before it can be escaped. Hopefully this storm would be a fruitful one.

Chapter End Notes

I was hoping to post this on Saturday, but considering last year, this is still a substantial improvement, so I'm not going to worry too much. I'll endeavour to have the next chapter up on time though.

More Thor! I think I'm getting better at writing him actually - I find it mildly bizarre that a year and a half after I started writing this fic I'm /still/ trying to get a handle on the characters. As often happens with Thor, there are some terms to explain:

Pell – a post that serves a similar function as a punching bag, but for weapons training
Astin min - my darling
Svass - beloved
Wyrd – Norse version of fate
Allfather – Odin’s most common title
Gungnir – Odin’s spear
Hliðskjalf – Odin’s throne. Anyone that sits on it can see anything in the nine realms

I hope you all enjoyed it, and I look forward to your comments!
Plan of Attack: Don't Attack

Chapter Summary

When the team gets word that General Ross is on the hunt for Bruce, they meet to decide the best way to deal with him.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Clint returned from his check-up at SHIELD on Monday bandage-free (apart from the cast) and scowling. Steve gave him a commiserating grimace as he helped Clint into the car to head home. “Bad news from the doc?” he asked.

Clint scowled harder, if that were possible, and shook his head. “No,” he said shortly. “From Fury.”

Steve managed to suppress a groan, but only just. “What is it now? The WSC causing trouble?”

Clint shook his head. “It’s Bruce,” he explained. “Ross is on the warpath.”

“Look, we’ve talked about this,” Tony pointed out. “We’ve been talking about this. It comes back to the same thing it always has: we need to get Ross off the playing field, and we need to rehabilitate Hulk in public opinion.”

“Bags Ross,” Clint said darkly.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Back me up here, Natasha – we need him discredited, not a martyr.”

“Unfortunately so,” Natasha replied. “Ideally, we discredit him by discrediting his hunt for the Hulk. Not by implicating him in a sex scandal.”

“Implicating him in a sex scandal would be fun, though,” Tony mused.

“No, Tony,” Steve said firmly. “No villainous scheming while we’re trying to establish our legitimacy as heroes.”

Thor frowned, clearly considering something. “What method is there in your realm for accusing a man of dishonour? In my home, he could be challenged publically by one such as Steve, whose honour is known by all as unimpeachable.”

Tony whistled. “Out of the mouths of babes.”

“If you are referring to me,” Thor said dryly, “I remind you I have more than forty years for every one of yours. I am scarcely an infant.”

“Yes, well, the point Tony was so ineffectually making,” Natasha cut in, “is that that’s actually a really good idea.” She hummed, her eyes slightly narrowed in thought. “I wonder if we can get him
before a congressional hearing.”

“With everything he’s fucked up?” Tony said thoughtfully. “Maybe. We can definitely ruin his credibility.”

Steve nodded firmly. “Good. Natasha, can you help me with that? Tony, Clint, you can manage the pro-Hulk stuff.” Tony and Natasha probably had similar knowledge of military politics and PR, but Natasha was better behind the scenes, and next to Clint, Tony was Hulk’s most vocal advocator.

“And what of I?” Thor asked. Steve looked at him sympathetically. He’d never found anything more intolerable than uselessness.

Luckily, Tony had an answer. “Back us up – I’m not above using diplomatic pressure on Ross, and you’re powerful diplomatically. Later on, I’ll get you to talk about your sparring partner, and having fun with Hulk.”

“Keep Bruce company,” Clint added, “and if you don’t mind, keep helping me with mobility things?”

“I know it seems like a lot of make-work,” Steve said apologetically. “But we need you in reserve on this one, not on the front lines.”

“It is well, Captain, no need to worry for me,” Thor reassured him. “I know my voice is not well-heeded here, and I am content to stand guard at your backs.”

Nonetheless, Steve grimaced. “I am sorry. You don’t have to stay here the whole time, you know – why not take the opportunity to visit Jane?”

“Nay, friend, my place is here,” Thor answered with a gentle smile, “and my lady and my king have already agreed to it. I will be with you until the storm passes.”

“Thanks, Thor,” Steve said gratefully. Thor was just…steady. There might be cultural differences, but an Asgardian warrior and an American soldier had a lot in common, sometimes more than an American soldier and an American spy.

“That’s all well and good,” Tony said with a grimace, “but what about Bruce? We’re not just going to let him wither away in a cell, are we?”

“Nicest cell I’ve ever seen,” Clint muttered to Natasha, though he looked equally concerned.

Thor sighed. “Bruce is like a wild rabbit: when chased, he runs; when cornered, he freezes. But be still and quiet, and wait patiently, and he may yet approach. We must not demand that he depart from his sanctuary, but leave the way open, and offer gentle invitation.”

Natasha nodded. “He’s not inclined to delude himself,” she added. “We’ve given him a lot to think about, and I don’t think he’ll forget it.”

“I don’t know,” Clint said slowly. “When something goes wrong for Bruce, his default response is to withdraw and avoid. Look how long he’s managed to avoid even footage of Hulk. I’m worried that if we let him take it at his own pace, I’ll be back in the field before he is.”
“I’d rather he hide longer than run away sooner,” Steve pointed out. “If nothing’s changed in a month, then we can talk about pushing him. But it’s only been a week. Give him time.”

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It was only eleven, but Steve was exhausted. He’d spent the last few hours with Natasha, trying to hammer out a strategy for dealing with Ross. It hadn’t been an easy conversation – according to Natasha, the torture, massive loss of life, and hostilities in allied countries might serve to damage Ross’ reputation, but were unlikely to actually get him impeached, so instead they were looking at finding or manufacturing evidence of corruption, treasonous activities, or, as Natasha put it, “whatever conservatives are likely to consider ‘sexual perversion’.” What Ross had done was horrifying; that they might have to fabricate more to get him impeached was sickening; and Steve couldn’t stop thinking about either.

It used to be, when he felt like this, Steve would go downstairs and break a few bags, but Tomas had been encouraging him to find some other coping mechanisms, so now, Steve had his journals. But, well, they helped with a lot of things, but they only made the loneliness more acute, so Steve asked Jarvis if anyone was free who wouldn’t mind him sitting with them for a while.

“May I suggest Doctor Banner? If he is agreeable to your company, of course,” Jarvis replied.

“Sounds like a great idea, Jarvis,” Steve agreed. “If he says yes, ask if he wants anything from the kitchen?” he added. “I may as well bring something down.”

It wasn’t long before Jarvis reported Bruce’s answers of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ respectively, and within ten minutes Steve was knocking at the door of the Green Room, notebooks in hand.

“Hi Steve,” Bruce said as the door opened. “How are you?”

“I’m alright,” Steve replied with a shrug. “But I needed some company.”

Bruce smiled wryly. “Well, pull up a chair. I’ve got nothing but time.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to interrupt your projects,” Steve demurred. Thanks to Jarvis, Bruce had been able to continue a lot of his work even in isolation, although not his physical experiments. “I was just hoping you wouldn’t mind me working in here.”

“Yes,” Bruce replied. “What are you working on?


Bruce gave him a curious look, but didn’t pry.

“There are a lot of things I never got to say to a lot of different people,” Steve explained. “Tomas – my therapist – he suggested that getting them on paper might help.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows. “And does it?”

Steve shrugged. “It helps to be doing something. And it helps me get through what I’m feeling and think about how they would react. Someday I’ll take this one – he tapped the blue notebook – ‘to Arlington, I think. When I get the courage.”

“But not the other one?” Bruce asked with a thoughtful look on his face.
Steve huffed a laugh and shook his head. “That one’s all Bucky. Guess after a lifetime knowing him I had a lot to say to the jerk.”

“He was your brother,” Bruce said quietly. They all knew about Bucky now.

“He was my best friend,” Steve agreed. “I have a lot to say to him, but wherever he is, it’s not Arlington, and since he isn’t, there’s no reason to remember him there rather than anywhere else.”

“There’s a memorial to him there,” Bruce murmured. “One for you too, actually.”

Steve snorted. “Now that’s just creepy. Visiting my own grave? All the more reason not to go.”

“I still haven’t got up the nerve to get in contact with my aunt and cousin,” Bruce admitted. “I’m fairly sure they thought I was dead for a while there.”

“You could invite them to visit, maybe,” Steve suggested. As the only one of them with living relatives on Earth it would be nice, he thought, if Bruce was able to keep in touch with them.

Bruce shook his head. “It’s not safe.”

Steve frowned, and pursed his lips to stop himself from saying something Bruce would dislike. When the silence began to feel awkward, he pulled a chair out from the table Jarvis had got in, and opened up the black ‘Bucky’ notebook. “I’ll let you get back to whatever you were doing,” he muttered, and turned his attention to the page.

**Dear Bucky,**

Everything’s falling apart, and I miss you so fucking much. I know it’s not true that army generals were all intelligent, decent men back in the war, but I can’t help being nostalgic. You’d smack me up the head for that, I think. I guess I was sheltered in some ways, with the Howlies. We were too insane for anyone not at least a bit open minded to work with us. Remember when Dernier started teaching other units ‘useful’ French phrases. I don’t think I ever saw Peggy laugh like she did when she found out.

Buck, Ross makes me sick. What he wants to do to Bruce...I dreamed about the camps again last night. And maybe he’s just one man and I’ve got a whole team behind me, but Bruce is so sure it’s unfixable. If despair’s really a sin (and I’m not sure I can really believe that any more), then there’s a lot of sinning going on in the Tower right now.

Was it like this, watching over me in ’34 and ’36? When we had to call Father Matthews over to pray for me. I remember resigning myself, but I don’t remember you doing anything but holding to hope and taking every chance. I’m sorry, if it was. Sometimes I just want Bruce to get the fuck over himself and get on with it, and sometimes I’m so exhausted from trying to buoy him up I just need a hug. At least it’s not just me.

People aren’t as tactile now, Buck. It’s weird. Sometimes my skin itches with it. Sparring helps, at least. But I miss you at night. Waking up alone is the worst part, and I hate it. I’ve never been so warm so much of the time, but the bed’s still too cold.

I guess you know about cold now, though. Unless you died in the impact – I think in some ways I’d prefer that. I don’t want you to have known cold like this. I guess your body’s frozen now, what’s...
left of it.

Rest easy, Bucky.

Steve

Chapter End Notes

A little short this week, but a little early too, thanks to a /very/ slow few days at work. It's kind of scary, being this close to the end of this fic. Even though I probably won't post the last chapter until August, it feels very close. Especially plot-wise - there's a lot that needs to happen in the next dozen chapters, and I'm not entirely sure I'm going to manage it. Still. One way or another, the end is just over the horizon. We'll get there. (And for those of you who don't /want/ to get there, don't worry - I've got two sequels in mind already: Talk To Me, Barton, and Friend Or Foe. Which will probably keep me going until 2019, so...)

I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and I'm looking forward to your comments
Chapter Summary

Clint and Tony start working on their PR strategy for Hulk. Then Clint loses his temper, and strategy falls by the wayside somewhat.

Chapter Notes

For anyone who may have forgotten, Daya Sengupta is SI's PR person for Tony and the Avengers, last discussed in chapters 24 and 25.

WARNINGS: When Clint answers the reporters questions, he gives a very frank, deliberately painful account of Hulk's experiences. Be careful if that's likely to be a problem for you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Clint and Tony had set up a meeting with Daya on Wednesday morning, and at ten o’clock they met her in Tony’s penthouse. (Tony had argued that he had the set-up for better projections up there, and Clint hadn’t seen any reason to press the issue.) Clint and Tony were debating the effectiveness of having Jarvis ‘influence’ social media to get the concepts they wanted out there, when Jarvis interrupted them to announce Daya’s arrival.

“Daya!” Tony said cheerfully when the lift doors opened. “Come on in! Looking for a challenge?” They’d decided not to tell her the subject of their meeting in advance.

“Are you all in a secret polyamorous relationship?” Daya suggested drily.

“What? No! What the hell?” Clint objected. “No one in this tower is having sex with anyone in this tower!”

“It’s a bit depressing, to be honest,” Tony remarked. “Here we are, six of the finest asses in the world, and I don’t get to enjoy any of it.”

“Yeah, you’re an ass alright,” Clint muttered.

Daya quirked an eyebrow at them, amused. “I’ll be sure to let Brian know he’s won the pool.”

Clint sighed. “Of course there’s a pool.” There was always a pool. “Anyway, what we wanted to talk to you about is the Hulk.”

“The Hulk,” Daya said flatly.

“Jarvis,” Tony said, “give us a picture of popular American perceptions of Hulk, clustered by theme, best-known to least-known, radiating from a central point.”

“Compiling.”
Ten seconds later, a (frankly dizzying) array of blue projections appeared in mid-air: headlines, twitter tags, sound-bites, tumblr posts, video…and sadly, it was dominated by negative press.

“You want me to make *that* popular?” Daya said incredulously, gesturing at a shot of Hulk crashing through the window of an office building with a roar.

“No,” said Clint. He pointed to a picture of Hulk cuddling a stray dog. “We want you to make *him* popular.”

Daya spent about ten minutes sifting through Jarvis’ display, making notes and stepping back now and again to see the whole picture. Finally, she turned to Tony and Clint and sighed. “Alright,” she said. “Let’s sit down so we can talk this through. You can put the blue stuff away.”

The projections winked out and Tony led the way over to his couch, Clint settling his wheelchair just adjacent to it. “You’re a miracle worker, Daya,” he said gratefully.

“Don’t say it yet, Tony,” she warned him. “I can make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear, but this… well. I need to know what I’m working with. Not what we want him to be seen as – what he’s actually like.”

Clint and Tony exchanged looks. “He’s like a child,” Clint said. “A big, strong, green child, with a history of abuse. We’ve had to teach him a lot of things, but he’s generally been happy to learn. The smashing he knew when he got here.”

“Would he hurt a civilian?” she asked carefully.

“Not deliberately, if he realised they were a non-combatant,” Tony replied after a short pause. “Like all of us, he’s caused collateral damage, although he’s been improving. He’s a bit…paranoid, though, so he kinda has a ‘smash first, let someone else ask questions later’ attitude.”

Daya hummed. “So your spin is ‘fallible’ hero, just like anyone else.”

“Partly,” Tony agreed. “Partly the reform angle as well – historically, he’s been a lot more destructive because he hasn’t had support, and he hasn’t had a clear target.”

“Tell me more about this ‘child’ thing,” Daya said, looking at Clint.

“Basically, Hulk came into existence back in 2006, and since then he’s not even had a year awake. He’s not at all aware when Bruce is. Developmentally, he’s more advanced than a one-year-old, but definitely less than a five-year-old.” He looked at the ceiling. “Jarvis, could you play a clip from that time I read him *Green Eggs And Ham*?”

*Hulk was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the Green Room, leaning back against the wall. Clint was on the floor next to him in a t-shirt and jeans, pointing at a big screen on the far wall. “Would you? Could you? On a boat?” he read. “I would not, could not, on a boat! I will not, will not, with a goat. I will not eat them in the rain, I will not eat them on a train. Not in the dark! Not in a tree! Not in a car! You let me be!”*

Hulk wrinkled his nose. “Sam not smart,” he said. “Not know white man not eat.”

“He’s very stubborn,” Clint agreed. “They both are.”
Hulk grunted. “Not nice. Sam not listen when white man say no.”

“The other guy’s not listening to Sam either,” Clint pointed out. “He’s just saying ‘no’ all the time.”

Hulk humphed, and Clint continued with the story.

“I do not like them in a box, I do not like them with a fox. I do not like them in a house, I do not like them with a mouse…”

“He’s cute,” Daya said when the video was over, “though I have to admit I’d be hesitant to get that close.”

“Yeah, well, he’s saved my life about half a dozen times, so I’m not much bothered anymore,” Clint explained. “I’m used to him.”

“I can work with that,” Daya said thoughtfully. “Innocence, heroism…loyalty?”

“Definitely,” Tony agreed. “It takes a while to get his trust, but he’s ridiculously protective.”

Clint snorted. “Takes a while? And how many minutes had you known him when he caught you in the invasion?”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Not exactly the point.”

“Mr Stark,” Daya interrupted. “I think you’ll find it is exactly the point. We need soundbites, short clips, easy concepts. The Seuss video is cute, but it won’t get the message across. It’s hard for people to see a ‘monster’ as a victim – it’s much easier to see one as a hero.”

“You’d think we’d have established him as a hero by now,” Clint muttered. “He’s been saving lives for months – longer, if you count Harlem.”

“These things take time,” Daya said with a shrug. “Public opinion can turn on a dime, but fear and prejudice – those are deep rooted. Sometimes you just need patience. And I assume you have plenty of that, working with Tony.”

Clint snorted, and Daya grinned at him. “Leave it with me,” she said. “I’ll do some research, work up some possibilities, and we’ll see what we can manage. I’ll send what I end up with to both of you, and we can arrange another meeting to discuss the details when we’re ready.”

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In the end, the planning Daya went off to do was, well, not for nothing, that analysis would still be amazingly useful, but Clint losing his temper on live TV certainly put a spanner in the works. They’d managed to keep his injuries out of the news for a fortnight, but then a battle happened and Hawkeye wasn’t there, while a stranger with a rifle definitely was, and the international gossip industry started speculating. It was almost flattering, in a really annoying way – Clint wasn’t really a high-profile member of the team, and he usually got skimmed over in the news coverage. It was nice to know he’d be missed, even if some of the theories about his ‘disappearance’ (and Christ, it had only been one battle) were fucking ludicrous.

Once it became clear that the speculation wasn’t going to die down, they decided on (joy) yet another press conference. Really, Clint had no right to complain; Steve and Tony took the lion’s
share of the burden of dealing with the media. But Clint still hated it. And, he decided, as he and Tony made their way into the conference room, he hated them even more in a wheelchair. Twenty minutes later, when they were taking questions, he found that he didn’t just hate them; the press made him angry.

“Hawkeye, is it true that the Hulk is responsible for your injuries?”

"You say the Hulk is an essential part of the Avengers, but is it worth having a monster on your team when he causes so much collateral damage?"

Nope. Clint was done. He’d heard and read variations on this in the press a thousand times, and he was sick of it. He stretched his arm out to the side, barring Tony as he leaned forward. "I'll take this one, Tony, if you don't mind?" Clint barely glanced at him. "Almost every press conference we do, someone asks a question like this about Hulk, about how dangerous he is, or how destructive, or how many deaths he has caused. And almost every time, someone calls him a monster.

"I'd like you to imagine that you wake up for the first time in your life and the world is bright, and it's loud, and people are screaming, and you can smell fear, and it hurts, and the first things you touch, you break, but when you throw them at the screaming, it stops for a minute, so you can run away and leave the screaming behind. And the next time you wake up, there's fear and screaming again, and you run again, but they chase you. And when you wake after that, sometimes there's screaming and sometimes there's yelling, and there's always fear and it always, always hurts. I want you to imagine waking up with a bullet in your head, in your gut, with burns on your arms, with water in your lungs, a thousand feet in the air with the ground getting closer and closer far too fast. And sometimes you wake and there's no-one screaming, and you can run, and hide, but you still break things because the world is too fragile, and then people find you and they chase you and they take you and they hurt you. And no-one's ever spoken to you except to yell or scream. And no-one's ever touched you except to catch you and to hurt you. And no-one's ever hugged you or said, 'I'm sorry,' or 'I love you.' And no-one's ever spoken to you except to yell or scream. And no-one's ever touched you except to catch you and to hurt you. And so you learn that the world hurts, and at least if you break it then sometimes it stops, but the screaming and the yelling and the fear never does, and you're always, always alone."

Clint looked around the room. “That was Hulk's life before the Battle of New York. But when he woke up, that day, he fought for us anyway, for the world, and he saved Tony, and he saved the team, and he saved New York, and he may have broken buildings but the only living things he smashed were Chitauri. And in every battle since, it's been the same. He has personally saved my life five times: he's caught me falling twice, shielded me from an explosion, he warned me of the collapsing building that gave me these injuries, and defended me from enemies coming up from behind.

“Since we met the Hulk, he's learned from us. He talks to us now, because we talk to him. He knows how to be gentle now, because we are gentle with him. He causes less damage in battle, because we've asked him to and shown him how. A few months ago, he didn't know what a hug was. He'd never had a friend. And that's something that makes me far angrier than Hulk famously is.

“All of us are dangerous. All of us break things when we fight. All of us feel guilty about the people who've gotten hurt because of what we've done, even when we're doing our best to save them." Clint took a deep breath, but his gaze was steady. "But Hulk's only ever hurt people because the world hurt him, and he didn't know what else to do. If he is a monster, then so are we all. But if we are heroes, then goddammit, so is he."

There was a moment of silence, and then a roar of noise. Clint pursed his lips and leaned sideways
to mutter, “Do I have to do an encore?”

The corner of Tony’s mouth twitched and he stood up, gesturing for silence. “I don’t think you’re going to get a better soundbite than that, ladies and gents,” he called out. “So thanks for your time, it was a pleasure – except, of course, when it wasn’t – and I’m sure I’ll see you all sooner than I’d like. As the pig says, that's all, folks.”

Chapter End Notes

Soooo...Clint's rant, or my first attempt at it, at least, was written a week after Chapter One was posted. Wow. It's pretty cool, being able to fit this one in. He wasn't in a wheelchair when I first wrote it, though. And Daya didn't exist. Essentially, I had no context for the rant. But it was a very important rant to me, and I'm glad it's finally posted. I look forward to reading what you think of it, and all of this chapter.
Applying Pressure

Chapter Summary

In the aftermath of a battle where the Avengers are seriously underpowered, Bruce discovers that the team is working for his benefit without his say.

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Bruce finds out about the behind-the-scenes anti-Ross scheming the team's been doing. He gets (justifiably) angry that they have been meddling with his life without his consent. Tony argues back, and refers to being self-destructive, hating himself, child abuse, torture, and the likelihood he'd be dead without help from his friends. All are in passing, but it's a pretty heavy moment. If you wish to skip, go from where Bruce says, "A congressional hearing." to the beginning of the next paragraph/section.

“You know what Phil would’ve called this?” Clint said grimly. “A ‘non-optimal result’.”

Bruce looked at the battle footage Jarvis had pulled up for them both and grimaced. The Doombots were gradually wearing the Avengers down, but the team could not let them get into the nuclear plant. ‘Non-optimal’, he thought, was exactly the right sort of understatement.

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Forty-five minutes ago, the Avengers Assemble alarm had blared into Bruce’s room and been abruptly cut off. “My apologies for the disruption, Doctor Banner,” Jarvis said immediately.

“It’s fine,” Bruce replied. “I like to know these things anyway.” Even with the tacit agreement that he wasn’t participating for now, Bruce preferred to know when his friends were in danger.

There was a hint of humour in Jarvis’ voice when he pointed out, “You usually prefer a less dramatic notification.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Bruce said with a wry smile. “Can you get things set up so I can watch once everything gets going?” There had always been battles the Other Guy hadn’t been needed or wanted for, and Bruce had gotten into the habit of asking Jarvis to show the view from Tony’s cameras and the audio from the team comms, so he’d know what was going on.

“Of course,” Jarvis replied, ever polite, even if Bruce was sure in another part of the building he was hurriedly preparing Tony for battle readiness. “Would you be willing for Agent Barton to join you? I’m sure he will ask for the same thing once the team is in the air.”

Bruce thought about it. Clint was a frustration these days, and the two of them butted heads more often than not, but that didn’t mean Bruce was going to leave him alone for this. “Yeah, send him
“down,” he said at last.

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Watching a battle with Clint was a very different experience. Bruce was able to tell, of course, whether they were winning or losing, but he lacked the tactical expertise Clint had, which was able to sum up a situation at a glance, spot missed opportunities and approaching danger – all of which led to some…intense commentary.

The problem, as Bruce understood it, was fivefold: Thor was overextended covering for the Hulk in mass destruction of bots; Tony was overextended covering for the Hulk, and for Thor’s air support, in addition to his usual hacking role; the bots were naturally more resilient to attacks from the ground fighters than biological opponents; the snipers couldn’t affect the bots with guns as effectively as Clint could with his special payloads; and no one had identified the ‘king’ yet.

Thor had been carving great swathes through the bots with hammer and lightning, but summoning a storm from blue skies had obviously taken a toll, and the downpour was affecting visibility. “Captain,” he announced over the comms, his voice worn. “I am tiring faster than I would like. I fear that from now on you may have my lightning or my hammer, but not both.”

“Hammer,” Steve replied instantly.

(Clint nodded. “We need him most as a heavy hitter,” he explained to Bruce.)

“But do us a favour and keep lightning away from the plant?” Tony pointed out. “I don’t want to have to deal with that disaster.”

“As you say,” Thor agreed, relief in his voice.

Tony glanced in Thor’s direction, and Clint and Bruce were able to see that he was sagging a little, before he set his shoulders and began again.

“They’re pushing themselves too hard.” Bruce said worriedly. “Thor’s exhausted, and I’m sure Natasha landed badly from that three-point jump. Steve isn’t even throwing his shield anymore.”

“Some days you just have to keep going,” Clint replied, shrugging, although Bruce could tell he wasn’t any happier about it. “They’ll be fine given some recovery time.”

Bruce shook his head. “The only reason no-one’s seriously injured is Tony’s new armoured suits. There was a shot that caught John right in the shoulder.”

“We can’t let them win this one, Bruce,” Clint said seriously. He sighed. “Some days, we can afford a tactical retreat. But if the bots get into the plant, once they do, no-one will be able to touch them because of the radiation, except for maybe Thor.”

And the Other Guy. Bruce thought. If there was one thing the Other Guy could handle better than anything else, it was radiation. “What are they planning to do with it?” he asked. “Make a Chernobyl in New York?”

“Unlikely,” Clint replied. “If they can get to it, it’s an embarrassment to the US, Doom has nuclear materials – and he’s been agitating for legal access to those – the Avengers get shown up, Latveria looks more powerful…”
“Dermo,” Natasha hissed through the comms. “I know why they’re doing this.”

“Do tell,” Tony said wearily. “Sorry about the delay, guys, every time I get in the zone I have to go hunt stragglers.”

“It’s fine, Iron Man,” Steve reassured him. “You’re doing the best you can. Widow?”

“Doom’s trying to get permission for a nuclear power plant at the UN right now, isn’t he?” she asked.

“He is,” Amy confirmed. “He’s been pressing for a while, but especially lately.”

“He’s applying pressure,” Natasha concluded.

(Clint tensed. “Oh, that fucker,” he muttered to Bruce. “He figured with me off the team, Hulk not showing up, and the Fantastics universe-hopping, he’d get the least resistance right now.”

Even Bruce had to admit (if unhappily) that the Hulk would have turned the tide in this one.)

“It’s a threat,” Steve concluded.

“It’s a publicity stunt,” Tony countered. “We lose today, the US looks weak, unable to protect their nuclear resources. It’s happened before.”

“We lose today and he’s got reactive material, which is quite bad enough,” Katerina said grimly.

For a few minutes there was silence on the comms, all of them too tired to banter. But at last, Amy spoke up: “Oh thank god.” Tony turned his head, and Bruce and Clint saw a robot spattered in bright purple paint. “Tagged the king,” Amy reported.

There was a general clamour of congratulations, and Thor flung his hammer at the king, demolishing it and a number of others.

“Well done Thor,” Steve said tiredly. “And Agent Porra. Let’s get this cleaned up.”

With the remaining bots stupid and uncoordinated, it was only ten minutes later that Steve announced, “We’re done here.”

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The injuries tally was markedly worse than usual: Tony, at least, was fine, although his armour had taken damage; but all the ground team had numerous cuts, burns, scrapes, and bruises, and Natasha had sprained ankle; Steve had taken a load of shrapnel to the face which had healed over before he could get medical care (“He sends his thanks for the anaesthetic, Doctor Banner,” Jarvis reported); and Thor declared himself “excessively wearied” and quietly requested that he be excused from all activities until at least Friday while he “replenished his energies”. No one, thank goodness, was seriously injured, but the toll on them all was nonetheless far greater than usual, and after wrestling with himself for a while (and making Clint promise to stay on his own floor, which he exasperatedly did), Bruce ventured to the common floor to set some stew cooking.

Once everything was simmering in the pot, Bruce found himself cleaning the kitchen, and then the living room, out of a combination of habit, care-taking, and sheer enjoyment of the change of
scenery. In fact, he lost track of time, and was taken completely by surprise when Tony, Steve, and Katerina Dinapoli emerged from the lift.

“Bruce!” Tony cried wearily. “Good to see you! Does this mean I get to enjoy your company while I’m hammering out the dents tonight?”

Bruce froze awkwardly, helpless to think of anything to do or say.

Katerina took a whiff of the air and groaned. “Fuck, Banner, they never told me you were a chef. Please tell me that’s for us,” she begged.

“I, uh, I thought you wouldn’t want to cook,” Bruce stammered, still trying to get his bearings.

Steve smiled at him gratefully. “Thanks Bruce. And thanks for the anaesthetic – I didn’t feel a thing when they were taking the shrapnel out. It’s good to see you.”

“You’re welcome,” Bruce said quietly, pleased his drugs had worked on Steve. “You’ll have to tell me more later, when you aren’t so exhausted.”


Bruce mentally shook himself. “Of course, sit down, I’ll bring it out. I’m just keeping it hot at this point.” He returned to the kitchen and dropped a ladle in the pot, bringing the whole thing out to the dining table and going back for bowls, spoons, and bread. They always served themselves, unless they were being particularly fancy.

The meal was quiet for a while, Bruce uninclined to talk and the other three too tired to. It wasn’t until they were all working on seconds that Katerina asked, “Is Clint around? I’ve got some questions for him.”

“He’s here,” Bruce replied. “I just…it didn’t seem wise to have him with me when I was…uncontained.”

Katerina gave him a wry smile. “Yeah, I get that,” she said. “I want you to know, by the way, that you have my full support in the proceedings against Ross. I already told Steve, but…” She trailed off, clearly noticing that something was wrong.

“What proceedings against Ross?” Bruce asked carefully.

Steve set his shoulders and jutted out his chin. “The way he treated you is a disgrace to the US army,” he said firmly. “We’re working to get him called up for a congressional hearing.”

“A congressional hearing.” Bruce felt very distant, and he must have sounded strange, because Tony was giving him a worried look. “Were you planning to tell me?”

Steve and Tony exchanged looks. “Frankly?” Tony said. “Not unless you decided to stop irrationally punishing yourself and return to the real world. I’m not going to pull your head out of the sand by your hair, but I’m sure as hell going to try to make a world worth looking at when you pull it out yourself.”

“I see.” Bruce’s anger was a yawning chasm of ice, so different from the living, roiling rage he was used to that he barely recognised it, but he had nothing left in him to care. “It didn’t occur to
you, then, that as worthless, as miserable, as pathetic as you judge my life to be, it’s mine to live? That airing my dirty laundry in front of Congress, provoking the man that has hunted and tortured me for almost a decade, manipulating my public image – and yes, I did see Clint on the news this week – that it all should be my choice, under my control? You have no right to meddle, especially without asking me first.”

“You know what, big guy?” Tony challenged. “I have exactly that right, because I reserve to right to ‘meddle’, to help my friends. Because I have been as angry as you are at Pepper, at Jarvis, at Rhodey ‘meddling’ in affairs that were none of their business. But I would not be half so happy, half so whole, half so alive without their interference and I will not fail to help you the same way. You matter to me, Bruce. Do you know how few people I can say that about? You’re just about the only person I’ve ever met who can match me, who can truly be my peer, and you matter to me. I won’t stand by and let you do this to yourself. You want to talk self-destruction? There’s not a person in this tower who doesn’t know I can match you. Because I too was the abused child, I too was the tortured man, I too was the exploited genius, and you know what? I too have hated parts of myself. Because sometimes, you need to hate yourself to be able to live with yourself, but fuck it, Bruce, you don’t. We have all seen the evidence – abundant evidence – that none of you is hateful, and I have stood by you and stood by you and stood by you, but you are not the scientist I know and love if you can’t recognise that you are wrong, Bruce! There is no fucking reason for this self-imposed exile, this voluntary imprisonment, and I may not be able to stop you, but I sure as hell will ‘meddle’ if it makes the world a better place for you when you stop yourself. I claim the right to help you, Bruce, and you aren’t going to stop me.”

In the silence, ringing like an echo, Bruce found himself on his feet. He and Tony were both on their feet, hands braced on the table, chests heaving, hearts pounding, eyes desperate. In that silence, there was nothing either of them could say.

But there was, apparently, something Katerina could say. “When I heard about the move against General Ross,” she said quietly, “I was relieved. I worked under him for years, and I don’t think I’ve ever met with a more bigoted, idiotic man in command. What he’s done to you is abhorrent, of course,” she told Bruce, “but even without is, he’s a disgrace and a danger.”

Bruce sat, listening carefully, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Tony sit down as well, eyeing his water glass as if he wished it were something else.

“I’m going to be adding my voice against Thunderpants Ross -“ Steve snorted, and Katerina gave him an appreciative grin, “- not for you, Bruce, but for every dollar and drop of blood of collateral damage from his rampages, every female private who found the army ‘not to her taste’ because of his lackeys, every diplomatic disaster barely avoided because of his stupidity. He’s an idiot, plain and simple, and he’s not fit for command.”

“This isn’t just about you,” Steve promised, giving Bruce an apologetic smile. “It’s because of you, sure. But now that I’ve really looked into him – Ross is such a bully that I couldn’t in good conscience not kick up a fuss.”

Bruce, calmer now, sighed. “Do you have to bring me up in front of Congress? I’m notorious enough.”

“As it turns out,” Tony said, unsuccessfully suppressing a grin, “we may not have to. You remember Sterns?”

Bruce looked away, nodding. He remembered Sterns all too well.
“Well, Ross was collaborating with him for a while, it seems,” Tony went on. “Funding him, selling him plutonium, giving him access to previous research… And some of that time, Sterns was in a lab in Pakistan. And Ross did it all off his own bat.”

Bruce stared at Tony, gradually putting things together. “So…”

“So that’s treason and corruption, and we have a clear paper trail,” Steve summed up. “It’s undeniable, and undeniably makes Ross unfit for command.”

Oh god. He might…well, not win, but Ross might lose this time. Ross never lost. “He’s got a lot of backing…” Bruce said weakly.

“But powerful friends only work until the public knows you’re disqualified,” Tony countered. “Even if Ross is best buds with the President, treason is hard to counter.”

Bruce stood up. “I…need to think about this,” he mumbled. “But…thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for your patience, guys! I have the rest of the chapters roughly planned, and the next one's already on the way, so hopefully there won't be anymore long breaks.

If you've forgotten who Katerina is, she's a SHIELD sniper helping out the team, first introduced in chapter 34.

Regarding Ross: there are a lot of reasons why Ross shouldn't be allowed to remain a general. His treatment of Bruce was deplorable; his incompetent conduct (as alluded to by Kat) is intolerable. But if the goal is to win over even the most hardened end-justifies-the-means, 'patriotic' conservatives, those lines of argument weren't sure enough. The team weren't going to bring this into a public forum unless they were completely sure it would work out in Bruce's favour. Hence the strategy they've decided on.
Substitution

Chapter Summary

A broken bone hurts, everyone knows that. But it's easy to forget that, three weeks later, a broken bone /still/ hurts.

Clint helps his replacements get up to speed on his techniques, and Natasha sets him straight about his future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“First things first,” Clint said, looking the three of them over, “range rules. The firing line’s here – he pointed to a clearly marked red line on the floor, “– don’t cross it except to retrieve arrows; wait for me to call ‘clear to collect’ before you do retrieve arrows. Don’t put an arrow on the string unless you’re at the firing line; don’t point an arrow anywhere but at targets or at the ground, and for the love of god, don’t ever dry fire or you could shatter the bow.”

Natasha, who had heard this before, was strapping on a back quiver over the leather jacket she generally wore in lieu of her uniform or an actual bracer. She never had time for one in the field, and she could put up with being smacked in the arm a few times. She had her own leather gloves too, rather than using an archery glove or finger tabs. She was only an indifferent archer, but having worked with Clint for four years, she’d have been a fool to ignore the weapon entirely. So today she was serving as his model, since he couldn’t stand, and couldn’t draw the bow.

“Now,” Clint said, “what’s your dominant eye?”

“Left,” David answered.

“Right,” Katerina said at the same time.

“Convenient,” Clint muttered, glancing at Natasha. He’d borrowed one of each, at a low poundage, from a nearby archery club, who’d been getting a lot more business lately, thanks to him. But if both Katerina and David had been right-eyed, Clint would have brought out Phil’s bow – and Natasha wasn’t sure he was ready for that. It had been nine months, but nine months wasn’t all that long.

As it was, Clint nodded David and Katerina towards the blue fabric bags from the archery club. “They’re labelled,” he told them. “Right-handed for right-eyed, left-handed for left-eyed.” He talked them deftly through putting the bows together, through checking the string was the right way up, through using a bow stringer to bend the bow and get the string on. “You can do it without one,” he added, “but there’s a right way and a bunch of wrong ones, and Nat doesn’t have the knack.”

David gave her an inquisitive look, and Natasha shrugged. “Low-priority skill,” she explained. “If I need to use a bow in the field, it’s strung. And eventually it twists the bow. I’d rather work on my aim.” And handling higher-poundage bows. Clint’s arm strength was extraordinary, and drawing one of his field bows more than halfway was a serious challenge for Natasha.
David had picked up his bow and was sizing it up. “So how do we do this?” he asked.

“Pick a bracer and glove,” Clint told him, “And Natasha’s going to be my glamorous assistant and demonstrate stance.”

Natasha gave him an unimpressed look, and went down her mental list as Clint talked the others through: heels in line with the target; grip resting on her hand, not her thumb; arm straight; three-finger draw; knuckle drawn back to the anchor point at her cheekbone; pulling with her back muscles… She loosed. It was a solid shot – in the red ring near the centre of the target – but she could do better. She turned her attention away from the lesson as she shot her first round, focusing on getting a tight grouping on the target face. Then, however, she registered a tone of frustration in Clint’s voice and put down her bow.

“You can’t just draw and hold it while you aim,” he was saying impatiently, raising his arms to demonstrate with an imaginary bow. “Your hand will waver and your draw will relax, and those last few centimetres are – fuck!” Clint dropped from his simulated draw position to curl over his ribs, hissing in pain. He must have clenched his back muscles automatically, Natasha assumed.

“Take a break, sokolik,” she advised. “We will collect our arrows, and then we will try again.”

“Fine,” he agreed through gritted teeth. “Bows down.”

Natasha glanced at David and Katerina to check they’d obeyed and nodded.

“Clear to collect,” Clint announced.

Natasha rested her hand on Clint’s for a moment, her body blocking the others’ view, then left his side to retrieve her arrows. Hers had at least all landed in the target face – Katerina and David took longer, as theirs were more scattered. When they reassembled by the target line, Natasha looked between them, making sure she had their attention. “Differences between a bow and a gun,” she instructed. “Go.”

“The propulsion comes from muscles instead of gunpowder,” David replied immediately.

“It’s less compact,” Katerina added. “Weapon and arrow both.”

David gave a wry grimace. “It’s easier to fail at. You need more skill to get an arrow off the bow than to get a bullet out of a gun.”

“No recoil?” Katerina suggested.

“Good,” Natasha said firmly. “Think about what all that means. You provide the force; you have to maximise the use of your strength to create that force. It’s less compact; more of your body is involved in the shot. The act of firing is harder; you must pay at least as much attention to your draw as your aim. There’s no recoil; you don’t need to brace against the bow.”

David was nodding thoughtfully. “So almost more like hand-to-hand, using leverage and strength of movement to your advantage.”

Natasha smiled slightly in approval. “You need straight arms to create the strongest pull, a consistent draw point to anchor you – and not to relax away from that draw point. A few inches there make a big difference. Don’t focus on aim. Draw the bow perfectly, make sure your hand is steady, and let go.”
After a couple of hours, they wrapped up the archery and took a break, while Clint got out some other weapons. “A lot of my payloads would be damaged by gunpowder,” he explained, “so I’ve pulled together a couple other options.”

Which hadn’t been entirely as simple as it sounded. A pneumatic rifle had been easy to source – even a prototype railgun had been straightforward to get with Tony’s contacts. Figuring out how to convert Clint’s trick arrows into ammo for them had been harder, primarily because Tony wouldn’t (and no one would ask him to) make them. Clint had been working on it himself, but even though he knew his arrowheads inside out (having designed them in the first place), he didn’t know the pressures a gun put on a bullet nearly as well. After the explosive first attempts, Jarvis had become unexpectedly and abruptly helpful, to the extent that Natasha suspected orders from Tony were involved, and Clint had managed to create some workable prototypes to go with the standard ammo.

Natasha had to say this for Clint’s trick arrows – they were fun. David and Katerina spent the better part of an hour playing around, and used up all the ammo Clint had.

“I can’t wait until you get the rest of your arrows adapted for a gun,” David enthused as they packed up and headed for the elevator. “Learning the accuracy I’d need with a bow is going to take me weeks, months – but with special ammo for the rifles, we can actually cover for you properly.”

“Maybe put one of us with a regular rifle and the other with the specials?” Katerina suggested.

“Sounds good,” David agreed. “Wait – you’re not coming to dinner?” he asked Clint, seeing him press the button for his own floor.

“Nah, I’m beat,” Clint replied. “I’m gonna go lie down.”

David gave him a sympathetic grimace. “Fair call. Well, thanks for all your help today. I think there’s scope for us to make a real difference with that kit.”

“Yeah,” Clint said, hiding a wince. “It’ll be like I never left.” The lift arrived at Clint and Natasha’s floor and he relaxed a little, relieved. “Have fun at dinner, guys,” he said as he wheeled out.

“Will do,” David replied.

“I will come by soon,” Natasha promised.

“Have a good night,” Kat added.

Clint, clearly, had not had a good night. Natasha took one look at Clint (in his wheelchair, most of a cold pizza on his lap, tense neck and shoulder muscles, watching Dog Cops) and rolled her eyes. “When did you last take your meds?”

“An hour ago,” Clint replied indignantly. “Like I was supposed to.”

“Then you clearly need one of the endone,” Natasha replied, “Since you’re still in pain. Durak.” The problem with broken bones, she mused, was that they took so long to heal. And it was easy to forget that they hurt the whole time. Clint’s main painkillers were enough to manage it, most of the time. But sometimes they weren’t, and when that happened, he was supposed to take the endone.
“I don’t want to get too dependent on it,” Clint argued, though he clearly knew it was futile. “I haven’t needed the endone in three days – I want to keep up my streak.”

Natasha gave him a Look. “You are in pain,” she said slowly. “So you’re going to take the painkillers prescribed to you. By your doctor. For this exact purpose.” It had taken a lot of trial and error before Natasha had settled on a SHIELD doctor she felt she could trust, and Clint had followed her lead. When it was time to wean Clint off the painkillers, Helen would manage it. For now, he needed to goddamn take them.

Clint grimaced, getting his pills and a bottle of water out of the saddlebag on the arm of his wheelchair (which was, in both their opinions, absolutely essential).

Natasha watched him take the endone and nodded firmly. “Shower,” she announced. “And then bed.”

Getting out of the chair would be unpleasant, but Clint dutifully steered himself towards the bathroom. “It’s only seven,” he pointed out. “I’m not falling asleep any time soon.”

“You need to lie down,” Natasha replied, “regardless of whether you sleep. I’m going to go get you a change of clothes and the cast condom.”

Clint snorted. “Ah, the glamorous life of an international assassin,” he muttered.

Natasha was quiet as she helped Clint undress, cover his cast, and move from the chair to the shower seat (a painful process, but a necessary one). She let him rest against the shower wall as she gently washed away the sweat of the day, being particularly careful of his ribs and the healing scar on his thigh. He let her move him where she needed to, and she watched as the heat and the gentle touch (and, she was sure, the pain relief) began to ease some of the tension in his hunched shoulders.

They didn’t speak until Clint was dressed in a t-shirt and sweatpants and settled in bed – sitting up, since he wasn’t ready to sleep yet. Natasha sat cross legged opposite him and handed him a pack of cards. “Here. Practice your double undercut. It’s sloppy.” He’d been learning card tricks to pass the time – not that he didn’t already know how to cheat at cards, but more knowledge was never a bad thing. She let him shuffle in silence for a while, then asked, “Why didn’t you come to dinner?” Clint had always responded best to bluntness.

Clint gave her a half-shrug. “I woulda brought down the mood.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows, waiting for further explanation.

“Aw, c’mon, Nat, you know I’m miserable to be around when I’m hurting,” Clint said. “Plus my appetite’s gone to shit with my meds. You guys don’t need me moping around for the entire time these fucking bones are healing.”

She looked him over. “You get cranky when you’re hurting, true,” she acknowledged. “But maudlin is new. What’s going on?”

For a few minutes, Clint didn’t speak, and Natasha didn’t push. Finally, he said, “I’m getting old.”

“Getting old?” Natasha replied. “You’re thirty-seven.”

“Exactly,” Clint said with finality. “Most field agents are between twenty-five and forty, and plenty
of those aren’t doing this kind of work. You guys need the best, and the day’s coming when I’m not going to be that anymore.”

“There are agents that stay with SHIELD until retirement age,” Natasha pointed out.

“Yeah, as analysts, handlers, trainers,” Clint countered. “They aren’t going to want me for that. I don’t…”

Natasha watched him carefully. “Don’t what?” she asked.

“Nat, what’s going to happen if I shatter my hands?” he replied, and there was real fear in his voice. “If I’m too close to an explosion and get flash-blinded and it sticks? If I fall wrong and end up stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of my life?”

The problem, Natasha thought, was that Phil had given them both a safety net, and they’d gotten used to it. After a lifetime living day to day, week to week, the kind of long-term planning Phil had done for them was a foreign, but very welcome, experience. Doing it without him was harder. “You don’t think there’ll be a place for you if you’re permanently injured?” she probed.

“The people at SHIELD may have forgiven me, for the most part, or forgotten,” Clint replied – and that was an impressive change to what he’d thought a few months ago – “but on an organisational level, I’m a risk too big to take. They can’t put me in charge of people. They can’t give me access to highly classified intel.”

Sadly, it was a realistic assessment. “And what about outside of SHIELD?” Natasha pointed out.

“What?”

“The team,” she replied. “This team.”

Clint grimaced. “They’ll find another sniper,” he said. “I think today proved pretty conclusively that I’m replaceable.”

Ah. That explained a lot. “That’s debatable,” Natasha replied. “But even if it’s true in the field, what about outside of it? Steve doesn’t have so many friends that he’d leave one behind. Tony, either.”

“Being friends doesn’t mean I’ll have a job,” Clint argued. “It doesn’t mean I’ll have a home.”

Natasha smiled wryly. “Did you read the paperwork Tony gave us when I moved in here?”

“No,” Clint said with a frown. “You said it was fine, so I signed it. You know that. It’s not like I’d know how to evaluate a lease agreement anyway.”

“You would have been able to tell it wasn’t a lease agreement,” Natasha said dryly. “We own this floor.”

Clint stared blankly at her for a long minute. “What.”

“Conditional on us accepting Jarvis’ presence and showing no intentions of harm towards Tony, we – Clint Barton and Natasha Romanoff, not Hawkeye and Black Widow - own this floor,” she repeated. “So yes, you will have a home.”

Clint didn’t answer. He didn’t need to.

Natasha smiled, and took his hand.
Finally, a new chapter! I have to admit, I keep disappointing myself with how slow these updates have gotten. I'm determined that you'll have the next one by mid-July, though.

A note on the archery: this is based on my own archery experience. I'm still a beginner, so there's definitely better advice out there, but this is all based on things I have been taught.

Also, if you didn't see them earlier, I've posted a few other Marvel things recently - Forgiveness, written for #jewishcomicsday, which looks at the immediate aftermath of the Battle of New York for Clint; Extras:The Backstory, which will eventually be a collection of short one-shots about the OCs in this universe; and The Good Ol' Days, a Steve rant about being used as a figurehead for homophobic groups. All of them fit into the Tower Tales universe, although The Good Ol' Days isn't part of the series, since I have no idea where it would fit.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, and thank you so much for your patience. I'm looking forward, as always, to hearing what you think.
Superhero Philanthropy

Chapter Summary

The Avengers are popular, albeit controversial. It was only a matter of time before someone tried to market that.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony came home from his meeting with Hasbro with a box full of prototypes he immediately started distributing around the common room. Costumes and toy weapons for the Halloween market went on the couches and coffee table near the TV. The action figures and soft toys he set up on the dining table. And, after some thought, he brought down the box of various other collectibles from his floor and set it down by the window. He was rearranging the action figures when Clint showed up, wheeling out of the lift and pausing when he saw what Tony was doing.

“Are you…playing with a Captain America figure?” Clint asked suspiciously.

Tony dropped it automatically, denials rising to his lips with years of practice as a teenager – at least he managed not to say them.

“Wait,” Clint said, coming closer and frowning. “Are you playing with a new Captain America figure?”

“Uhh…” Tony said, confused. “How come you can tell?”

Clint waved his hand absently. “Hi, Phil Coulson’s boyfriend, nice to meet you.” He picked it up, examining it closely. “This is good quality,” he murmured. “Better than most knock-offs. Where’d you get it?”

“It’s a prototype,” Tony said. “Howard bought the Captain America trademark from the army after the war, so Hasbro’s waiting on my approval to put this one into production for the Christmas market.”

Clint glanced up. “Christmas? It’s not even July!”

“Distribution for Christmas sales is already running by September,” Tony pointed out. “Manufacturers gotta get going by August. So if there’s changes to be made to any of this stuff,” – Tony gestured to the whole room and Clint looked around, seeming to see the scope of it all for the first time – “those changes need to happen now.”

Clint’s eye was clearly caught by the black and purple spandex draped over the couch. “Wait a second…” he said suspiciously, wheeling over and picking it up. “This is a me costume. Why are you making me costumes?”

“Because over the past year, there has begun to be demand for costumes to suit all the Avengers,” Jarvis replied. “Although Hawkeye costumes are projected to be less popular than the established Captain America and Iron Man costumes, or the proposed Black Widow costume, your recognisability still makes it highly likely to be a profitable endeavour.”
Clint made a face. “So how many people are profiting off my ‘celebrity’ this year?” he asked.

“One,” Tony hurried to reassure him. “One company, I mean. Or none, if you want. Or –“ Tony cut himself off, deciding that if he was going to have this conversation, he was going to have it as few times as possible. “Jarvis, get everyone up here, will you?”

There was a short pause. “Doctor Banner wishes to know why his presence is required. Agent Romanoff seconds that request.” Bruce was leaving his room more often now, but he still preferred to stay there most of the time.

“Tell them we need to talk about who owns their face for merchandise purposes,” Tony replied.

There was a short pause. “They are on their way.”

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The responses of the Avengers were varied.

Thor: “This is an ingenious small idol. You say it is for children?”

Natasha: “Where are my organs?”

Bruce: “There’s a stuffed toy Hulk.”

Steve just looked sad, a little, and a little amused at the others’ reactions. “So they’re still doing this, huh?”

“Still doing it, yeah,” Tony agreed. “Anyway, as you can all see, there’s a lot of Avengers-themed stuff being produced at the moment.”

“I, uh…” Bruce took off his glasses to polish them on his shirt. “I’m…pretty uncomfortable with that, Tony.”

“Well, the good news is, because I know what I’m doing, you have veto power,” Tony said. “‘Hawkeye’, ‘Black Widow’, and ‘Hulk’ have been trademarked in your names. Clint and Thor, your costumes have been trademarked as well.”

“And mine?” Steve asked.

“Trademarked in the war and bought by my dad in the 50s,” Tony answered. “I have specific licensing agreements with all the people that make Captain America stuff, and for the most part, I have a degree of control. Which means you have control.”

“So if I’d rather not have my face in every home?” Natasha asked with a look of mild concern that Tony knew well enough to interpret as not nearly so mild.

Tony sighed. “Steve, Thor, back me up here. Once you reach a certain point of fame, you can’t really avoid being a commodity. If it’s not merchandise, it’s rumours, or your patronage.”

“From what I have known on Asgard, it is so,” Thor agreed cautiously.

“Look, this is fucking weird, Nat, I get it, okay?” Clint said. “But it doesn’t have to be your face we commodify. Costumes, gadgets…the toys can be a generic redhead. Things don’t have to be recognisably you to be recognisably Black Widow.”
“I’d rather there was nothing at all,” Natasha said tensely.

“I’m afraid that’s unachievable,” Tony admitted quietly. “I’m sorry. But I can only defend the trademarks if I use them, and if I don’t, it’s a free-for-all. The best we can do is try to control what we produce. We can’t stop it.”

“Doesn’t it bother you?” Bruce asked. “Being…objectified like this?”

Tony flashed him a showy smile. “Haven’t you heard? I’m a narcissist.” Of course it bothered him. But if he let that weakness out there, how would it do anything but make him more vulnerable?

“No,” Steve said abruptly, his eyes catching on something Tony hadn’t planned to reveal was his idea. “You’re not.” Steve picked up the box and passed it to Clint. Inside was the Avengers full set: Captain America, Iron Man, Thor, Hulk, Black Widow, Hawkeye, Bruce Banner (appropriately attired in purple shirt and labcoat), and…Agent Agent.

“…You made Phil an action figure,” Clint said slowly. “You made Phil an action figure of himself.”

Tony shrugged, ducking away from the awkward. “It’s a generic secret agent,” he argued. “It doesn’t even look like Phil.” Which was true, mostly. The suit, sunglasses, hand-to-the-ear pose…that could be anyone.

“Except you called him Agent Agent,” Natasha said, a small smile on her face, and dammit, she had actually been around for Tony’s not-really-friendship with Phil.

“…maybe,” Tony admitted. “It wasn’t really the full set without him.”

Something about that made Clint, Natasha, and Bruce relax, and they exchanged glances. “What do you recommend?” Clint asked at last.

“Let me send at least a third of this stuff to manufacture,” Tony said promptly, gesturing to the whole room. “If it’s recognisability you want to avoid, choose primarily costumes and toy weapons. You need at least one action figure, but the Avengers set will cover that if you let me. If it’s not feeling worthy or some shit, we can talk to my people and have some of the profit or the toys donated to charity. If you just don’t like the prototypes, we’ve still got time for some redesigns.”

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In the end, Tony went back to Hasbro with the Avengers set; individual action figures for Steve, Thor and himself; a soft toy Hulk; Captain Ameribear; adult and child costumes for each of them (although the Black Widow costumes required a less skimpy design); a toy weapon associated with each of them (plastic shield, nerf bow, foam Mjolnir, glowing ‘repulsor’ glove, ‘widow’s bite’ bracers, and soft Hulk fists); and an Avengers-themed Monopoly game. It was less than they’d hoped for, but more than they could have gotten, and Hasbro’s representatives agreed that five percent of proceeds going to charity wasn’t unreasonable considering the PR benefits and the positive press from the Avengers’ personal endorsements.

It did raise a question for the team, though: which charities should they be supporting? As far as Tony was concerned, the answer was simple: he employed excellent people to figure out where his money would be most effective, so the most efficient thing to do was to donate everything to the Maria Stark Foundation and let them sort it out. The others, however, had their own opinions.

Clint was skeptical of organisations that claimed to work on a large scale, addressing systemic
problems. He wanted his share to go to food banks, health centres, and shelters for women or for the homeless.

Steve apparently had his own laundry list of charities he regularly donated to - and it really was a laundry list. "If I live to two hundred, I won't need all the money I've got," he explained to Tony. "And there's too much need for me to ignore it." His problem with the Maria Stark Foundation wasn't scale - it was diversity. "I'm happy to contribute to larger charities or advocacy groups, but a lot of unpopular causes go ignored and underfunded."

Natasha and Thor were actually happy for their share to go to the Maria Stark Foundation, though for different reasons. Natasha preferred to avoid being associated with any particular cause, so the additional distance the MSF provided was ideal. Thor was simply used to a very different system of redistributing wealth, acknowledged that he was ignorant, and would rather delegate it to those with better knowledge than he.

Bruce was the tricky one. More than any of them, he was deeply familiar with the scale and diversity of suffering that was found everywhere across the world, and over the years he had become used to feeling helpless in the face of it. Technically a consultant to both SI and SHIELD, Bruce's income had gone from literally peanuts (or grain and eggs, anyway) to more substantial than he'd ever had, and Tony wasn't oblivious to how overwhelmed he was. Jarvis kept the fridge, the pantry, and the lab well-stocked, but everything he had to buy himself, Bruce avoided replacing. His wallet was falling apart at the seams, the hems of his pants were fraying, and it caused Tony actual physical pain to see him writing with the tiny pencil stubs he refused to throw away. Steve and Clint had some of the same habits, but Clint's were tempered by a decade or so of secure income, and Steve's blended into the rest of his man-out-of-time issues, so they weren't so obvious. But Bruce was constantly and unconsciously aware of a poverty that no longer existed for him, and it made charity a tricky subject. There were too many problems that needed fixing - global poverty, world hunger, child labour, child brides, disease prevention, lack of access to healthcare, air and water pollution, domestic abuse, disaster recovery, international conflict...as an individual without money to give, Bruce had helped every person he could and known he was doing his best. Now wealthy, he was stuck with the same problem Tony had: where would his monetary thumb on the scales do the best good?

"Honestly, Bruce, I never came up with a good answer to that problem," Tony admitted. "I pay experts to tell me what's going to help, and then I throw extra money at things that come to my attention. I don't really think there is a systematic way to fix all this shit."

"It's the law of unintended consequences," Bruce replied. "Money - or wealth, really - is desperately needed, but so is social change, and adding more money to the systems that already exist can just entrench them. You could argue that education will make a greater difference, but you can't afford to spend hours studying when you haven't earned enough to pay for food that night."

"And campaigning for social or political changes can seem underwhelmingly useful when people are starving," Tony agreed. "I know."

"I just..." Bruce sighed. "I'm tempted to give it all to something like Medicins Sans Frontierees, but that seems...thoughtless. And probably naive."

"If I may, sirs?" Jarvis suggested, bringing up a screen. "The research of organisations such as Give Well into effective altruism may be helpful. Although there are certainly flaws in their method, if scaled up towards universality, they have a very thorough and scientific approach to determine where money will do the greatest good for the greatest number."
"Huh," Tony said, flicking through their site to find the reports. "Yeah, this looks thorough. Does the Foundation use this stuff?"

"I am afraid I am not privy to their decision making process, sir," Jarvis reminded him. "From their reports, they do donate substantially to the AMF, Give Well's top recommended charity. They do not, however, donate to SCI or the Deworm the World Initiative."

"Well, parasites aren't sexy," Tony commented. "Remind me to bring this up next time I talk to them? This is good research."

"Actually, it - yeah, it is," Bruce agreed. "I, so much of the time, I was helping people with this kind of thing, where something simple could have made all the difference. I mean, it kind of bothers me the way these all lean towards a specific type of problem, but…it’s understandable."

“Mm.” Tony glanced over. “There’s nothing environmentalist on here, for example – but that really needs advocacy and innovation rather than this kind of initiative.”

“Does the Foundation do that kind of thing?” Bruce asked.

“Not really.” Tony admitted. “My brain and my name are worth more than my money for that one, so the Foundation focuses on other issues. The same goes for you, really.” Their combined ability to create new solutions to old problems and to encourage people to political action was worth a lot.

Bruce shook his head. “It is very strange, the idea that I might be influential.”

“You’re not just influential, Brucie-bear, you’re popular,” Tony countered.

“Sure I am,” Bruce said dryly. “That’s why the team is working so hard to make people like me.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Okay, fine, but it is working. We’ve got more than nine months of Hulk playing nice, and more than twenty years of your most vocal detractor being a dick. We’re going to win this, buddy.”

Bruce was obviously sceptical, but he didn’t start an argument about it, so Tony was satisfied. “I’m still not popular.”

Tony shrugged. “Eh. The kids like you.”

“The kids?”

“Hulk hands are projected to be a best-seller,” Tony said smugly.

Chapter End Notes

Apart from the Maria Stark Foundation, all charities mentioned in this chapter are real. I had an interesting time doing research for this one, and thinking about all the team’s approaches to charity. How best to help other people is a difficult question to answer, I think there are probably more answers to it than people in the world.

I’m so sorry for how long this chapter took - how long they've /all/ taken lately. We passed the two year anniversary of this fic recently, and I've written only a quarter as much in the second year as I did the first, so I'm incredibly grateful to all of you for
your patience. Please rest assured that I haven't given up, that I have plenty of plot yet to write, and that if I ever give up on this series, I will let you know. Thanks for sticking around.

On a happier note, the final chapter count is up! I know approximately what I want to happen in each chapter, so it shouldn't be changing. (However, the story won't end with chapter 60; as I've mentioned before, I have sequels planned.)

I appreciate your support, and I would really love to hear from you all. I'd especially love it if you guys asked me any questions you have about this fic or the rest of the Tower Tales verse - there's always more behind the scenes than shows up on paper.
Comfort

Chapter Summary

After a late night talking to Steve, Thor has some discussions regarding the care of mental health on Midgard

Chapter Notes

WARNING: Mention of past passive suicidal ideation in the second half of Thor's conversation with Steve

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Master Odinson?"

Thor glanced up from the fire, the cadence of the saga pouring from him lips coming to an abrupt halt. "Is there need of me, Jarvis?"

"Not as such," Jarvis replied carefully. "But if I were able to inform Captain Rogers that his company was welcome..."

Thor smiled a little. "You think he has need of company, then? By all means, extend my invitation." Steve was a good friend to him, and truthfully, a companion would be welcome. The night was as short as it might ever be in this place, and yet it was still quite long enough for loneliness.

A brief pause, and then: "He will be here shortly, Master Odinson."

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Steve was impressed, when he arrived, as well he might be, for Thor's little hall had undergone quite the transformation. "When did all this get here?" he asked, examining a tapestry on the wall.

"Most of it did not," Thor replied, smiling a little. "That tapestry did, and the fireplace was conjured for me by the labours of Tony and Jarvis, but a great deal of the rest of it is illusion."

Steve looked around skeptically. "It's a very impressive illusion then."

"It is," Thor said proudly, gesturing to the fire. "See the stone there, where the flames rise up?"

Steve peered closer and nodded. "It's magical?"

"Aye," Thor agreed. "Of my mother's making. When placed in a fire, it will create in the space
around it the atmosphere of Bilskirnir. She gave it to me when I returned to Midgard after Loki's trial."

Steve looked away. "It'd be pretty nice to have a stone like that."

Thor shook his head sympathetically. "Have a seat, Steve," he offered, sitting back down himself. "Tell me what you'd see if you did."

Steve sat, and sighed. "Nothing so grand as this," he said, glancing at gilt candlesticks and carved wooden roof-beams. "But I guess...me'n Bucky's apartment from before the war. We lived there together after my Ma died - almost got kicked out a coupl'a times when money was short, and I prob'ly woulda been after Bucky got recruited if I hadn't been recruited instead. Two rooms and a kitchen, bathroom shared with the rest of the floor... We got a radio a year in that I reckon woulda taken longer, but Bucky was shorting himself to put more towards it cause he hated leaving me on my own when I got sick and at least I'd be less bored once we got it. Which I was."

"Were you sick often?" Thor asked. He had heard, of course, that Steve had been transformed by the serum so often spoken of - made stronger, larger, more resilient. But the details, he had never chosen to seek out.

"Oh, all the time," Steve said wryly, resting his elbow on his knee and rubbing his face. "There was the asthma and the back and the heart troubles, and I guess you wouldn't call being half-deaf an illness but it was definitely frustrating. And then I seemed to catch every bug going around and a few that weren't - I got pneumonia just about every winter, and it's only by a miracle that I never got TB, seeing as my ma was a nurse. I've had my last rites half a dozen times, and none of them during the war. I reckon the only reason I lasted long enough to get the serum was pure stubborn."

Thor raised his eyebrows, shocked. "Truly? Knowing you now, I could not imagine you frail."

"Oh, I definitely was, and I hated it," Steve replied, shaking his head ruefully. "Skinny as a rake, but shorter. By the time he was fourteen, Buck was as big as I ever got."

"You must have had great courage, then, and will, to seek battle in such a state," Thor said.

Steve shrugged. "Well, I was in pain all the time anyway, so a few hard knocks never made much difference. And chances were I wouldn't live to thirty whatever happened, so if my dying in the war meant another guy got to go home to his family, well..."

Thor gave that confession the respect it deserved, nodding slowly. "You are not the first I have met who sought a warrior's glory to escape the sickbed," he said solemnly. "Yet I hope you are one of those who seeks a glorious life, rather than glorious death."

Steve paused, watching the fire. "...I don't now," he said eventually. "Want to die, I mean. Or...take risks, I suppose, because I'm willing. But...I can't say that I never did."

Thor reached out, resting his hand on Steve's shoulder. "It gives me great sorrow to hear that," he said quietly, "as you know we would sorrow were you lost to us."

"Thanks," Steve replied, leaning a little into his touch, as if hungry for closeness. "You don't have to worry about me, though. I'm fine."

"You bear great burdens, my friend," Thor countered, "as a warrior, and a leader, and a man who has outlived kith and kin...none of these things are easy. So it is my honour, Steve, to bear the
burden of caring for you and worrying about you." When he saw Steve had no answer to that, he added, "And I greatly hope that, should your troubles grow too weari
tome and let me aid you as best as I may."

Steve was quiet for a little while, but eventually replied, "I'll do that, Thor. Thank you."

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His discussion with Steve left Thor thoughtful, and the next day, after some consideration, he sought Bruce out, remembering his confession from amidst the discord Loki's staff had prompted. Bruce was in the Hulk's room, which he had begun to leave for various purposes (to all their relief), but still returned to often as a sanctuary.

"Please bid me go if I disturb you," Thor said, "but I would be glad and grateful if I might seek your counsel on a matter that worries me."

Bruce looked a little surprised and confused, but he stepped away from the door, gesturing Thor to enter. "No, you can come in, I guess. What's wrong?"

Thor sighed and took a seat, knowing that while pacing would aid his ease, it would disturb Bruce's. "What does one do, in this realm, when they are gripped by despair and sorrow?" he asked. "What recourse is there for one lacking hope?"

Bruce sat down opposite him, looking startled, and took his glasses off to clean them. "Is this, ah..." He paused, clearly hesitant. "Is this person you?"

Thor smiled, shaking his head. "No, my friend, and worry not - my question is of no urgency. Merely that I wish to be able to comfort my friends when darkness comes upon them, and I do not know how."

Bruce relaxed a little. "That's good to know. Uh, there are really three main strategies - addressing environmental factors, addressing neurochemical imbalances, and addressing psychological problems."

"Neurochemical?" Thor queried. Although he had a sense of what was meant, he knew his interpretation lacked precision.

"There are chemicals in our bodies that fulfil various functions," Bruce explained. "'Neurochemical' refers to the ones that act in our brain, which affect how we think and feel, among other things. Serotonin, dopamine, and norepinephrine are fairly well known as being related to positive feelings in various ways, and decreased production can lead to feelings of depression - sadness, weariness, despair, that kind of thing. Psychiatry is a field of medicine specialising in using drugs to manage issues with mental health."

"You are knowledgeable in this field," Thor commented, impressed. "Is it through your own experiences, or your studies?"

Bruce made a slight face. "A little of both," he admitted. "I was on and off various medications when I was younger, and of course I looked into brain chemistry as part of my research on the
"I see," Thor said, frowning in thought. "Do you believe they would be ineffective now?"

Bruce shrugged. "They'd probably work," he replied. "Painkillers do. I don't have that many side effects of being as I am when I'm me - just radiation resistance. But since my...accident, I haven't really had the opportunity to see someone about antidepressants."

"Have you not?" Thor asked. "Tony has experts of many kinds on retainer - is he unable to aid you in this?"

Bruce blinked. "Somehow I doubt he's got a psychiatrist," he said automatically, but it was clear he was thinking. "To be honest with you, I haven't considered it. Things are better anyway."

"I am glad," Thor replied, smiling. "It is a dolesome thing, to discover that a friend has no happiness. I am pleased to hear that your past despair no longer enfolds you."

From the look on his face, Thor thought Bruce found his phrasing peculiar, but he did not say so. "Anyway," he said instead, "the other way we treat depression is by therapy. Talking with a professional about your thoughts and feelings. You might want to ask Clint about that one - it's a long time since I've seen a psychologist."

"Why?" Thor said curiously. "If such discussion can ease you, why not seek it out?"

Bruce smiled wryly. "Because therapy is fairly emotionally intense, and me getting emotionally intense isn't generally a good thing for the people in my vicinity."

"Ah." Thor nodded, frowning slightly. "I will think on this. Thank you for your advice."

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In the end, it was not Clint that Thor discussed therapy with, but Jarvis. "Do you recall my conversations with Steve and Bruce this week?" he asked.

There was a brief pause. "If you are referring to the private conversations between Steve and yourself on Friday evening, and with Bruce yesterday afternoon, I...turned off my ears, if you would," Jarvis explained. "If you think it appropriate, I can review them, however."

Thor pursed his lips, and shook his head. "No, friend, you were probably wise to do so. I merely forget you are not quite as all-seeing as the watchman of the gods."

"Perhaps you could summarise the pertinent points for me," Jarvis suggested.

Thor hummed in agreement. "The Captain and I spoke of...despair, I suppose. Or weariness, and the support a friend may offer. I then sought Bruce's counsel on the question of additional supports for the heart-sore, and he spoke to me of both medication and other treatment."

"...Are you asking for assistance in finding such treatment?" Jarvis asked delicately.

"No, no," Thor assured him hurriedly. "I am quite well. Have no concern for me. I am merely curious, and Bruce suggested I go elsewhere to satisfy my curiosity on the subject of therapy."
"I see," Jarvis replied. "Somehow I doubt he told you to ask me - surely I am the least qualified of any here to speak on that topic."

"Are you?" Thor asked. He shook his head. "No, my friend, you are a wise watchman. It is not personal experience I wish to hear, but your insight into the system. Do you believe it works?"

Jarvis made a sighing sound. "Therapy is not like a medicine, with clear indicators for application and dosage. Each individual has a different experience. The one constant I have been able to find is that those who dislike or resent it gain little."

Thor nodded thoughtfully. "A little like magic, perhaps. Intent is essential."

"I would not have thought to make that comparison," Jarvis admitted, "but yes."

"What may be gained from therapy?" Thor asked.

"Insight," was Jarvis' first answer. After a moment, he added, "And comfort, I believe. Validation. In some cases, advice in the matter of future choices. I understand that the listening ear of one outside the interpersonal politics of some matters can be very beneficial."

Thor sighed, and there was a long pause. "...Jarvis, what is your opinion of my brother?"

"I must admit I am not inclined in his favour," Jarvis replied. "I dislike his recent actions greatly. The risk they posed to Sir, Ms Potts, and many others, and the injuries done to Agent Barton by his methods and Agent Coulson by his success...I cannot recall any of it with any degree of partiality. However, I recognise that I have no insight into his reasons, and that great atrocities may be celebrated when viewed from another perspective. As such, I prefer not to have an opinion on him, except that I prefer him to be elsewhere."

Thor nodded slowly. It was perhaps the kindest anyone had been towards Loki while he dwelt in Midgard. "I cannot blame you," he said quietly. "I can only say that I wish I had reasons for the forgiveness I feel in my heart. He is my brother, and I cannot forget it."

Jarvis paused. "Rightly or wrongly," he said slowly, "Sir bears the burden of many deaths upon his conscience. As does Doctor Banner, as does Agent Romanoff, as does Agent Barton, as, indeed, do Captain Rogers and yourself. I do not and cannot believe that any of you are unworthy of compassion because of this. Perhaps, then, your love of your brother is not irrational, but a sign of your greatness of heart."

"It is a great comfort to hear you say that," Thor murmured. "Thank you for your compassion, my friend."

Chapter End Notes

Bilskirnir - Thor's hall in Asgard
Watchman of the gods - Heimdall (who was also known as 'the whitest of gods', something I find incredibly amusing given his portrayal in the MCU)

Thank you all for your patience with this year's much slower posting schedule. I'll do my best to get something for you guys before the new year, but if I don't, I hope you
all have a pleasant holiday season. I look forward, as always, to reading your comments, and I would absolutely /love/ to answer any questions you have
Meet the Avengers

Chapter Summary

The Make-A-Wish Foundation has contacted the Avengers, and who are they to say no?

That doesn't mean they actually know what they're doing around a kid, though.

Chapter Notes

WARNINGS: Past domestic abuse of an original child character. He is now safe, but reacts dramatically to seeing violence between Steve and Natasha when they spar. If you want to avoid that section, it starts when everyone yells "HOLD!". The rest of the chapter more-or-less deals with the aftermath.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I really don’t think this is a good idea,” Bruce said nervously, wringing his hands.

“Too late now, buddy,” Tony said, sticking his helmet under his arm. “Kid’s gonna get here any minute.”

Natasha frowned a little. “I am not comfortable with children either,” she confessed quietly. “I generally prefer to keep my distance.”

“Oh, kids aren’t the problem,” Bruce replied without thinking. “I like them. I’m the one that’s the problem.”

“You have our promise, Bruce,” Thor said solemnly, “that we shall not allow any injury to come to the child. Let us not disrupt his joy by altering our plans.”

“Master Liu has arrived downstairs,” Jarvis announced delicately.

“Well, that settles that,” Tony said easily. “He’ll be up in a minute.”

“Preliminary scans show no recording, communication, or incendiary devices,” Jarvis added.

Steve frowned, not exactly shocked, but dismayed. “We’re checking the kid for bombs?”

“Of course we’re checking him for bombs,” Natasha replied.

“A: it’s been standard protocol with Make-A-Wish kids since I became Iron Man,” Tony put in, “and B: my scanners are far less intrusive than your average metal detectors – the kid won’t even notice.”

“You’ve done this before, then?” Clint commented, obviously not surprised. “Got any tips?”
Tony smirked. “Yeah: take the kids seriously and don’t let them handle lethal weaponry.”

“I would think that second one was self-evident,” Bruce said, fiddling with his cuffs. “Do I really have to wear a lab coat?”

“Your action figure wears a lab coat,” Clint pointed out. “You can inspire all the STEM kids.”

“STEM?” Thor asked.

Steve frowned as he tried to remember the term, but Tony got there first.


The conversation halted abruptly as they all watched the elevator doors open, revealing a skinny kid in jeans and an Avengers t-shirt. Realising that none of the others were going to move, Steve swapped his shield to his left hand and stepped forward. “Hello Michael,” he said, offering his gloved right hand for the boy to shake. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Michael looked up at him wide-eyed. “ ‘s nice to meet you, sir,” he said quietly, only then looking around at the others. Very quickly, he frowned. “Where’s the Hulk?”

Clint saved Bruce from having to explain, saying, “Hulk only wakes up when we really, really need him. The rest of the time we have Bruce instead.”

Michael sighed a little, and looked grumpy, but he didn’t complain.

“So who’s your favourite Avenger?” Tony asked, stepping to one side and gesturing at the others. “Is it me? It’s me, isn’t it?”

Michael giggled a little, and the team exchanged glances.

“Tony,” Clint said long-sufferingly. “…obviously it’s me. Everyone knows I’m the coolest.”

“Nay, it is I!” Thor declared, tossing his hair dramatically. “For I wear the cape of heroes! And today, young warrior…” He reached up, unclasped the cape from his armour, and knelt. “…I offer that cape to you.”

“Well, he’s definitely Michael’s favourite now,” Steve heard Clint mutter.

Thor probably did this sort of thing all the time, it occurred to Steve. Or, not exactly the same, but similar. He was…at ease with children, though Steve had never heard him mention having any of his own.

“A warrior must train,” Thor announced, deftly folding and pinning his cape so that Michael wouldn’t trip over it. “Come, join us.”

“I’m not really a warrior,” Michael said reluctantly, looking down and away. “I’m too small.”

“The smallest of us are sometimes the mightiest,” Thor said solemnly. “Like my friend Steve, in his youth. And even now, Natasha, smaller than all of us, is the most feared by many of our enemies.”
Michael gave Natasha a sceptical look, which Steve could tell she didn’t appreciate.

“She really is,” Steve confirmed. “Natasha knows more than anyone about fighting.” Not quite true, but not far off, either.

Thor nodded. “So it is Natasha who will lead us in our training!”

“How did Thor end up running this thing?” Tony muttered to Clint as Natasha, hiding her surprise, led the way over to the mats.

“Do you want to do it?” Clint replied, equally quietly, shooing him forwards and wheeling to the edge of the room. “Go on.”

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After stretches and warm-ups (which Michael and Thor did with enthusiasm, Tony with reluctance, and Steve with mild bemusement, since Natasha had chosen an…eclectic routine), Clint suggested the climbing wall. After checking Michael wasn’t afraid of heights, they got him, Steve, and Tony into harness, with Bruce, Thor, and Natasha (respectively) on belay. Steve went up first, to demonstrate technique, then abseiled down so the three of them could ‘race’. (Clint, of course, was calling encouragement and advice from one side, while the others cheered and trash-talked each other indiscriminately.) By the time they were all back on the ground, Michael was obviously ready for a break. Jarvis must have figured that out too, because a trolley bearing food arrived in the elevator just as they finished getting out of harness.

Once they’d finished eating, Steve caught Natasha’s eye and tilted his head towards the mats. Natasha nodded slightly, and Thor must have caught on, because a moment later he turned to Tony and declared, “My friend! I challenge you to a sparring match!” It made sense – Thor and Tony were well matched when Tony was in armour, and Steve had been studying technique with Natasha and Clint for a while.

After some quick explanations, Steve, Natasha, Tony, and Thor took to the mats, leaving Clint and Bruce to watch Michael and commentate. It was something of a relief, to settle into the familiar routine of trading blows and blocks, searching for openings and testing them. It needed a particular kind of focus, an awareness that required him to set aside anything external that was nagging at him. Sparring with Natasha was always a good workout – she was so fast and so skilled he rarely landed a blow, and she easily wormed her way out of almost any hold he caught her in. Steve was grinning and breathing hard by the time he finally managed to land a punch to her gut.

“NO!”

“HOLD!”

The shouts came almost simultaneously, and Steve took an automatic step back a scarce second before Michael barrelled into him, screaming and pummelling him with his fists.

“No! I hate you! Fucker, motherfucker, don’t you, you’re bad! Fuck off!”

Shocked, Steve froze, his hands hovering in the air above Michael’s head as he tried to figure out what on earth was going on. He looked around the room, hoping one of the others might know what was happening, and spotted Clint signing rapidly to Natasha. Whatever the two of them had agreed on, they obviously weren’t happy about it.

“Michael,” Natasha said, kneeling down, her face softening into one of her gentler personas. “Michael, look at me. I’m alright, Steve didn’t hurt me. Everything’s okay, honey. We’re all safe.”
She reached out, setting a hand lightly on Michael’s shoulder.

“It’s not okay, it’s not!” Michael yelled, his face screwed up in anger and betrayal. “He hit you! That’s bad, he’s BAD!”


Michael’s struggles slowed and stopped, and he burst into tears.

“Shh, myshka,” Natasha murmured, turning Michael around in her arms and rubbing his back. “It’s alright. You’re alright. I’m not hurt.”

The others were mostly still standing back, but Clint wheeled up, bracing his elbows on his knees. “Hey Michael,” he said quietly. “You need a tissue?”

Michael sniffled, nodding a little but not pulling away from Natasha.

“Good thing I’ve got some in my bag of tricks, huh?” Clint rummaged in the saddlebag hanging off his wheelchair and pulled out a little pocket pack of tissues. “Here you go, buddy.”

Michael took it without looking and blew his nose noisily.

“So, you’re pretty upset with Steve right now,” Clint said quietly. “Because he hit Natasha?”

Michael nodded a little. “Hitting is bad.” It was a little muffled by Natasha’s shoulder, but it was clear enough.

Clint gave Steve a helpless look. Steve didn’t blame him. How do you explain to a kid why some violence is okay?

“You’re right,” Natasha said softly. “It’s not okay to hurt people. But Steve and I were practicing fighting, so we’d both agreed it would be okay to hit each other.”

Clint picked up the thread. “If Natasha had been really hurt, or Steve had done something to make her afraid, that would definitely be bad. But he had her permission, as long as they both felt safe.”

“I’m sorry I scared you Michael,” Steve said softly, kneeling down and hoping Michael wouldn’t attack him again.

“You’re lying,” Michael mumbled resentfully. “You’ll just hit her again.”

Steve really didn’t like what all this said about Michael’s home life. “I really won’t,” he promised. “But I can understand why you might think that. Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable?”

“Fuck off.”

Steve glanced at Clint, who grimaced and nodded, then got up and went to stand with Bruce at the edge of the room. Bruce had his phone out, and tilted it to show Steve a three-way conversation with Tony and Jarvis, who had apparently been looking into police reports and hospital records.
“His parents divorced about a year and a half ago,” Bruce said quietly. “Full custody to the mother; the father was denied visitation.”

“Does that work?” Steve asked doubtfully.

Bruce shrugged. “Not always. But it looks like it did this time.”

“Are you sure?” Steve looked over at Michael, still clinging tight to Natasha. “That was a pretty… dramatic reaction.”

Bruce grimaced. “It was shocking to see from over here, let alone close up,” he admitted quietly. “But think about it. He’s been having fun in a room with five large adult men, three of them visibly strong enough to hurt him. He’s had time to learn that he can be safe.”

Steve looked across the room to where Clint and Natasha were talking to Michael. “Until I broke his trust,” he said heavily. “I should have realised that us sparring would be frightening.”

Bruce shook his head. “It’s not your fault,” he replied. “To most kids, kids who haven’t seen real violence, watching you fight is exciting.”

“This city has plenty of kids who’ve seen violence, Bruce,” Steve said quietly. He squared his shoulders and picked up his shield. Even if he couldn’t fix this, he could at least try.

Steve went over to the group on the floor, but when he was still out of reach, he sat down and cleared his throat. “Clint, could you take my shield, please?”

Clint looked a bit confused, but he did it.

“I know you’re pretty angry at me right now, Michael,” Steve began, and indeed Michael was glaring at him from Natasha’s lap, “but do you mind talking to me for a little bit? If you want me to go at any point, I’ll go.”

Michael nodded suspiciously.

“Do you know why I carry a shield?” Steve asked. When Michael didn’t answer, Steve kept talking. “It’s because a shield is made for protecting people. And when he saw that I liked to use one, Tony’s dad made me a very special shield, one that nothing could get through, not even Thor’s hammer.”

Michael gave him a sceptical look.

“It’s true,” Natasha promised. “It makes a big noise, but it doesn’t go through.”

“Would you like to hold it?” Steve offered. When Michael slowly nodded, Clint passed him the shield.

“It’s light,” Michael said, surprised.

Steve smiled and nodded. “It is.” He let Michael consider the shield for a little bit, then said, “The one thing I want most for the world would be for no-one to hurt anyone else. But even though we keep trying and trying to get there, there are still bad people who are willing to hurt others because it gets them something they want.”

Michael didn’t say anything, but he seemed to be listening, at least.
“For as long as I can, I’m going to put my shield between those bad people and the ones they want to hurt,” Steve promised. “Sometimes that means I get in a fight with them, and sometimes I get hurt, or the people helping me get hurt.”

“Like me,” Clint said. “My legs got hurt stopping bad guys.”

Michael nodded a little. “But Natasha’s not a bad guy,” he pointed out.

“That’s true,” Steve agreed. “But fighting is a skill that takes practice like any other skill, like climbing or running or drawing. And there are parts of fighting you can practice on your own. But there are other parts you need to practice with another person, and that means trying to hit them even if they’re your friend.”

“I’m glad that Steve practices with me, and even that he hits me sometimes,” Natasha said quietly. “Because I know Steve’s never going to hit me too hard, and practicing with him means that I’m better at dodging and blocking when someone who really wants to hurt me tries.”

Michael narrowed his eyes and looked at Clint. “They’re not lying?”

“They’re not lying,” Clint promised. “We have rules to make sure we don’t keep going if someone gets hurt or feels unsafe, but it’s important to practice so we can keep ourselves safe from people who want to hurt us.”

“Natasha actually beats me most of the time,” Steve said. “She’s faster and sneakier than me, and even though I’m stronger, I hold back a little so I don’t really hurt her.” It was true, even if he might get in trouble later for putting it that way.

“Really?”

Clint looked at Michael, then at Steve. “Would you like to watch again?” he asked carefully. “We can stop them at any time if you get worried.”

“They’ll stop?” Michael asked, with a worried frown.

“We’ll stop,” Steve promised. “Anytime you want – all you have to do is yell ‘hold’ or ‘stop’ and we’ll all freeze.”

“…okay.”

As Steve squared up to Natasha again, he was hyper-conscious of their observers, of the possibility they might have to pause at any time.

“Calm down,” Natasha muttered, barely moving her lips. “Stick to wrestling and it’ll be fine.”

“You always beat me at wrestling,” Steve pointed out under his breath. His strength was outmatched by her flexibility and agility.

“Even better,” Natasha said, quirking one eyebrow in challenge. “He’ll get to see that girls can win too.”

Steve made a face, but nodded a little, conceding the point, and moved in, starting the bout.

It took fifteen seconds for Natasha to throw him on the ground.
(Since it didn't make it into the chapter - Michael is actually the younger brother of the Make-a-Wish kid, who had some serious illness or another that he was able to recover from after appropriate treatment. I never actually decided what.)

Thank you, all of you, for sticking with me as my updates have gotten further and further apart. I'm grateful, always, for your patience. And, while it's impossibly ambitious of me, considering my uphill battle with writer's block in this universe, I'd love to hear from you with any suggestions or requests you have, either regarding loose ends I should be tying up in the next seven chapters, things you want to see when I write Clint and Phil's backstory, or ideas for that far-away sequel that I swear I'll eventually get to.

As always, thanks for reading, and thanks for your comments
Chapter Summary

Bruce spends a quiet day with the team, and reconsiders some things.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bruce stood, facing the door of the Green Room, and steeled himself to approach it. It would be so much easier to stay on this side, to ignore it, to pretend the option wasn’t there. To not think about his choices. Every day, he found himself here, and every day he struggled with the temptation of inaction and ignorance. If things were simple, it would be easy to stay where he was. But things weren’t simple, not anymore.

Bruce took a deep breath, and spoke. “Open the door, Jarvis,” he said quietly, and stepped forward, out of his sanctuary, and into the world.

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Natasha didn’t wait for him in the gym anymore. Some mornings he came late now, and some not at all. But she smiled a little when he entered the room, and the silence was warm as he began to stretch.

When he finished meditating at the end of his routine, Bruce found that Natasha was waiting for him, shifting idly between what looked like ballet foot positions. “Joining us for breakfast?” she asked, friendly, but without pressure.

“…I think I will,” Bruce decided, a small smile tugging at the corner of his lips as he got up. "Is everyone eating together, Jarvis?"

"Sir has not yet awakened," Jarvis replied, "and though I believe Agent Barton could be persuaded, he doesn't appear to have considered eating yet."

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Let him know I'll be there shortly, and either he can get ready himself, or I will."

“How’s he doing?” Bruce asked, pressing his automatic guilt at the thought of Clint’s injuries to the back of his mind. “He had a PT appointment yesterday, didn’t he?”

Natasha smiled a little. “Linda thinks he’ll be able to start on crutches next week,” she revealed. Clint had eaten in his rooms last night, or it was likely Bruce would have heard already. “His ribs are finally healed enough to handle the strain.”

Bruce gave her a relieved smile. The longer Clint went without using his legs, the longer it would take to re-strengthen the muscles. If not for his ribs, he’d have been on crutches weeks ago. “He’ll like that,” Bruce said, walking with Natasha to the elevator.

“Until the day he pushes himself too hard, yes,” Natasha agreed.
Bruce huffed a quiet laugh. “He doesn’t take inactivity well, does he?”

Natasha’s smile got a little wider. “He really doesn’t.”

-----

They reconvened in the communal kitchen, all the team except Tony, who was unsurprisingly not awake yet. Steve had the bounce in his step that suggested he’d already gone on his morning run, although he’d showered and changed since then; Thor’s hair was tied back tightly, and there were a number of leather pouches and cases attached to his belt. It wasn’t until after breakfast that Bruce found out why. While he was cleaning the breakfast dishes, he could hear Steve and Thor chatting about their plans for the day.

“Oh, Natasha’s going to meet some people to get things organised for the hearing, but I’ve been told to stay put,” Steve was explaining. “I was going to ask Jarvis to take me through the Iran-Contra affair in a bit more depth. Are you up for sparring this afternoon?”

“Aye,” Thor agreed, “but perhaps I may also join you this morning? Making chainmail occupies the hands well, but is somewhat tedious for the mind.”

Bruce raised his eyebrows and set down the plate in his hands, going to the door of the kitchen to look into the living room.

“You’re making chainmail?” Steve asked, obviously equally curious.

Thor grinned, beckoning Steve over to the dining table with a tilt of his head. “Bruce!” he said, glancing over Steve’s shoulder. “Would you like to see as well?”

“I don’t know that I’ve ever seen chainmail outside a museum,” Bruce admitted, following them to the table.

“You work from wire to rings to patches to rows to full pieces,” Thor explained, opening up a few of the pouches on his belt. “Here - this is a single row.”

Bruce frowned. “It looks more like three rows,” he commented, peering closely at the interlinked metal rings. “Has Tony seen this?”

Thor shook his head. “No, though I will show him later if you believe he will be interested.”

“Oh, he’ll definitely be interested,” Steve said.

Thor smiled. “Perhaps it is so. And in answer to your other question,” he told Bruce, pulling a small bundle of rings out of another pouch, “it is a single row when you consider it made up of these pieces.” Once laid out flat, the bundle became a square - four rings all linked to the adjacent ones, and to a fifth in the center. “Each piece is linked to the next by a single ring, to make a row where all are strongly linked together.”

“You know, I’ve heard that some people call it ‘knitting’ chainmail,” Bruce said, “but this seems a lot more complex than that.”

“Seems that way to me,” Steve agreed, clearly fascinated. “Could you teach me how?”

Thor smiled. “Gladly, my friend. It requires some dexterity, and much patience, but no exceptional skill. One need not be a smith of our bench-fellow’s skill to make mail.”
At the mention of Tony, Bruce glanced back at the kitchen. “I’d better finish the dishes,” he said, a little reluctantly. “Tony and I were in the middle of something when I went to bed last night; he’ll probably want to head right back to the workshop with me when he wakes up.”

Steve smiled ruefully, shaking his head. “Yeah, sounds about right,” he agreed.

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Tony wasn’t likely to be awake for a few hours, though, so Bruce went to his own lab first. Lately, he’d been looking into butterfly metamorphosis to see if there were any parallels to his own transformation process, specifically regarding genetic and epigenetic ‘memory’ during complete breakdown of the body, but he didn’t really feel up to that project today. “Jarvis, can you bring up my records for the project on Steve’s pain?” he asked.

The projections sprung into life, displaying the early results alongside Bruce’s notes. “Would you like me to contact SHIELD about the procedure under anaesthetic on the fifteenth?” Jarvis asked.

Bruce thought about it. “On the one hand, I’d like the data,” he admitted. “But I’m worried about encouraging SHIELD to keep those kind of records about Steve.”

“A valid concern,” Jarvis replied. “May I suggest that you contact his doctor informally, then? Both Captain Rogers and Agent Barton have indicated their comfort with Dr Lyle, and I am sure her observations will be valuable.”

Bruce sighed. “You know, as much as I think SHIELD handled the issue with Jane’s research appallingly, I can understand the basic problem.”

“How so?” Jarvis asked. Bruce had a feeling it was mostly because Jarvis saw his role as being a sounding board, but he didn’t mind.

“I believe that sharing knowledge is a good thing,” Bruce said, taking his glasses off to clean them. “In the vast majority of cases, innovation and discovery are the result of many people doing their own research, and building off each other’s work. If you’d asked me ten years ago, I would have told you definitively that scientific censorship is a bad thing for humanity.”

“While in the field of theoretical research, publication is the commonly accepted goal,” Jarvis said, “I would point out that in engineering, there is a much higher value placed on intellectual property. Proprietary designs are essential to Stark Industries.”

“True,” Bruce admitted. “And maybe that’s one reason why Tony’s more comfortable with keeping secrets than I am. I’ve come to see it as a safety issue, keeping certain knowledge to myself, but it’s still an ethical issue I find myself debating every time.”

“As an independent researcher, you do not have the ethical oversight that many scientists do,” Jarvis commented. “While you have consulted for both SHIELD and Stark Industries, you have avoided taking a position which would put another in charge of your research, a choice Sir has supported. And as you have no current ties to academic institutions, your work isn’t being reviewed by an ethics committee.”

Bruce frowned. “You’re not wrong. I like to think my work would pass an ethics committee, but I don’t have that oversight. And I know Tony feels more comfortable relying on his own moral compass, but…” He trailed off. He’d always been torn between the security of having checks and balances, and the fear of being controlled. And it wasn’t a problem he’d be solving any time soon.

“Have you considered discussing these issues with other scientists in similar positions?” Jarvis
asked delicately. “Sir’s approach is not the only potential model to follow.”

“Who would I talk to?” Bruce asked. “Richards? He’s...abrasive, and he’s even less cautious than Tony.”

“What about Dr McCoy?” Jarvis suggested. “His work is not entirely dissimilar to yours, although focused in a different direction, and he certainly has reason to consider the potential for his results to be used for harm.”

“...I’ll think about that,” Bruce said, after a long moment. “Thank you, Jarvis.” He put his glasses back on, frowning thoughtfully. “Do you think I’m being too secretive with my research?”

“As I understand it, a key part of the evaluation process for potential research projects is whether the potential benefits would outweigh the potential harms,” Jarvis replied. “In the case, for example, of your development of anaesthetics for Captain Rogers, the potential benefit from publishing would be limited, as there are very few people with a similar healing factor on whom such anaesthetics would work. The potential harm, however, includes the risk that an individual or organisation would use the information to aid a kidnapping of the captain or another similarly enhanced individual - something that is not unlikely, as such people are frequently the target of kidnapping attempts. As such, I think your decisions have been very appropriate.”


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“Hey, big guy.”

Bruce turned his head, smiling involuntarily at the sight of Tony in the doorway, clearly enthusiastic about something. “Good morning, Tony.”

Tony waved his hand in dismissal, but he was grinning. “So, I was thinking. Modify a Cap keychain so it’s a distress beacon, yes or yes?”

Bruce raised his eyebrows. “Why put a distress beacon in a branded keychain?” he asked.

“For the kid, of course,” Tony replied. It took a minute for Bruce to realise who he was talking about. “No-one’s gonna blink an eye at him getting a key chain along with everything else after he visited us.”

“Didn’t he get a batch of merchandise already?” Bruce asked, but he put down what he was working on and followed Tony out of the lab.

“We’ll send him a card saying it’s a new prototype and we thought of him or something,” Tony said easily. “Not important. Distress beacon?”

Bruce frowned. “I thought you said his father was denied contact.”

Tony made a dismissive noise. “Even if it lasts, kid can still get in trouble.”

Bruce took in a deep breath, then let it out. He didn’t disagree, but... He eyed Tony’s movements, jerky and slightly manic. “You can’t protect everyone, Tony,” he said quietly. “There’s only so many hours in a day.”

“I break the rules of physics all the time, what’s one more?” Tony joked weakly.
Bruce came over, setting his hand on Tony’s arm. “You can’t do everything. You can’t solve domestic violence with a suit of armour and stubbornness.”

“If I don’t try, I definitely won’t,” Tony said, and it was obviously about so much more than this. “I may not be able to do everything, but I’d always rather do something than nothing. Wouldn’t you?”

“Sometimes intervention makes things worse,” Bruce said bleakly. He shook his head, dismissing the thought. “Look at Vietnam,” he said instead.

“A kid with a crappy dad isn’t a civil war in Southeast Asia,” Tony countered. “Come on, Bruce. Help me with this, okay?”

“I will,” Bruce agreed, “just...are you okay?”

Tony pursed his lips and looked away briefly. “I keep thinking of all the shit he said to Cap,” he admitted. “And then, well, nightmare. I have no idea what would have happened if I’d ever got mad like that at Howard. I never did, not to his face.”

“I don’t imagine you did,” Bruce said quietly. “That was a fear response. From what you’ve told you, Howard never attacked you, did he?”

Tony shook his head mutely. “Looked more like anger than fear to me,” he pointed out.

Bruce smiled bitterly. “You’ve never lashed out when you were afraid?” he asked. “Fight or flight, Tony. Sometimes you’re cornered, and fight’s the only option.”

Tony gave Bruce a long, thoughtful look. “You know, that explains a lot about you.”

Bruce stepped back. “What? No! That’s not how it works.”

“Well, not a hundred percent, but a lot of the time, yeah,” Tony insisted. “The number one trigger for the other guy is you being hurt or in danger. He shows up, gets you out of the corner, and then goes to sleep again.”

“If he’s a defense mechanism, he’d be less destructive,” Bruce countered. “He’s basically the definition of overkill.”

“Michael’s response wasn’t particularly proportionate either,” Tony pointed out stubbornly. “He didn’t do any damage because he’s a skinny kid and Cap’s Cap, but he was certainly making a sterling attempt.”

“That’s not how it works,” Bruce insisted...but he couldn’t help wondering.

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At about six o’clock, Jarvis let him know that Clint was cooking, but would like a second pair of hands if Bruce was available. It turned what Clint really wanted was to gloat. “I went to the range today!” he sang, looking more cheerful than Bruce had seen him in weeks.

“Didn’t you only just get cleared for crutches?” Bruce asked, a little concerned, but mostly amused. “What are we making?”

“Man, all the things,” Clint said happily. “And if you think I can’t handle a bow when I’m good for crutches, I don’t know if you know me.”

Bruce laughed. “Alright. How about I just start getting meat and vegetables out and you see what
“Sounds fucking awesome,” Clint said, wheeling over to the pantry and looking through his options. “It is *so fucking* good to have a bow in my hand again, you don’t even know. Thank god my arms were shielded, seriously. There is *nothing* that fucks with me worse than arm injuries.”

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At the end of the day, Bruce found himself facing the door of the Green Room again, from the other side, but for once, he wasn’t relieved to be there. Oh, it still felt safe to him, but...he didn’t need it. He didn’t need that security tonight. “Jarvis,” he said thoughtfully, “can you tell when I’m having a nightmare?”

“Yes, Dr Banner,” Jarvis replied, a hint of curiosity in his voice. “Although, I do not have sufficient data to predict when a nightmare is severe enough to disturb your equilibrium.”

Bruce thought about it some more. “It’s enough,” he decided. “I’m going to sleep in my own room tonight. Please wake me if you think I’m having a bad dream.”

“I will,” Jarvis replied.

Bruce nodded, and turned away.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, it’s a new chapter! We haven’t had one of those for a while.

I hope you liked this look into how Bruce is going, and I’d love to hear your comments
Hulk Hugs

Chapter Summary

After five weeks, the team wakes Hulk up to help them again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hulk wakes. No-one says ‘safe’. He roars, showing teeth and fists as he looks to see. Metal Man is close. “What smash?” Hulk asks.

Metal Man turns, points at man. Big, big man. Bigger than Hulk. Skin pink like Shooty Bird, not green like Hulk. “We’ve been throwing everything we’ve got at him for half an hour, but we’re just not getting anywhere,” Metal Man says. He is tired.


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It takes a long time to smash the bigger-than-Hulk man. A long, long time. Metal Man is tired. Starman is tired. Red Liar is tired. Shouty Long Hair is tired. Even Hulk is tired.

Agents bring food and they eat. Hulk eats dumplings, one two three four. He eats lots of dumplings.

Hulk is very tired. He does not want to sleep here. There is not soft cushions, there is not Jarvis watching. But if Hulk becomes Bruce, he has to say goodbye to team. Hulk does not want to say goodbye. He has not seen Shooty Bird.

Team is talking, fast and slow, lots of words. When they are quiet, Hulk asks, “Shooty Bird?”

Starman looks at Red Liar. “He’s back at the Tower,” Starman says. “He’s doing better now, though. His ribs are mostly better, so he’s using crutches instead of a wheelchair.”

Hulk smiles. “Good,” he says. “Quick.”

Starman is unhappy. “Actually…it’s been longer than usual,” he says. “About five weeks.”

Hulk thinks hard. Shooty Bird said twenty-four weeks to get better, and twenty battles. Five weeks was too long for no battles. “Why?” he says.

Metal Man sighs. “Bruce got scared last time, and he didn’t want to let you wake up for a while,” he explains. “He’s less scared now.”

Hulk’s face contorts into a thinking frown. Why does Bruce choose when Hulk wakes? Why does Bruce get to say Hulk not see, not talk, not smash? “Not fair!” Hulk growls.

Team is sad. “It’s not,” Metal Man says. “Here, Steve, give me your phone, let’s get Clint on screen, at least Jolly Green can talk to him.”
Team agrees with Hulk? Instead of Bruce? Hulk thinks hard while Starman and Metal Man play with phone. Then he hears Shooty Bird’s voice. “Shooty Bird!”

The voice comes from phone in Metal Man’s hand. Hulk can see Shooty Bird’s face, but it is small. “Hey, Hulk. Good to see you! How’s it going?”

Hulk smiles. “Smash big pink man. Eat dumplings. Wait to see you. Not hurt anymore?”

Shooty Bird is smiling too. “I’m a lot better,” he says. “Not all the way, but I’m doing good. I didn’t get to say it last time, but thank you for making sure my arms were protected. That was really great.”

Hulk’s smile gets even bigger. It is his first ‘thank you’ from Team. “Welcome,” he says carefully. “Shooty Bird needs arms to shoot. Needs hands for holding and climbing. Special.” It is hard to explain the things he feels. He only has little words, and the feelings are big, big, big.

“Aww, man.” Shooty Bird looks sad and happy at the same time. “Someone hug him for me, would you?”

“Don’t look at me, I’m holding the phone,” Metal Man says. “I’m also wearing a suit of armour. I nominate Cap.”

Starman comes close and wraps his arms around Hulk’s chest. They don’t go all the way around. It feels nice. Starman holds Hulk like he wants him to be close but will let him go if Hulk doesn’t want to be close.

“Feels nice,” Hulk says quietly, looking down at Starman. “Thank you.”

“Aw, geez, that’s probably your first hug, isn’t it?” Shooty Bird says, still happy-sad. “We need to hug you more.”


Starman squeezes Hulk a little tighter. “Yeah, Hulk, that’s - that’s really great,” he says. “That’s perfect.”

Hulk frowns. “Want hug Clint,” he says. “How long?” Will Bruce make Hulk wait weeks and weeks again?

Shooty Bird frowns too. “I don’t know if we’ll be able to get Bruce to let you train with us again just yet. He’s getting better, but he’s still kind of twitchy. But since this battle went well...probably next time there’s a big fight he’ll let you out. So, a week or two, I guess.”

“Shooty Bird not fixed in two weeks,” Hulk says. Maybe he is remembering wrong. Hulk doesn’t have much practice remembering.

“No, that’s true,” Shooty Bird says. “But I tell you what, I’ll sort things out so I can come hang out with you afterwards, okay?”

Hulk smiles. “Good!” he says happily. “Will see soon!”

“Yeah, buddy,” Shooty Bird replies. “I’ll see you soon.”
Just a quick chapter this time - Hulk doesn't have a lot to say, but I've missed him.

I just wanted to let you know that, rather than let myself get overwhelmed by trying for accuracy with Ross's hearing (especially now, when US accountability procedures are at the front of everyone's minds), I'm going to be skimming the thing itself and focusing on how the team deal with the lead-up and aftermath.

Let me know what you think!
Stepping Up To The Plate

Chapter Summary

Natasha and Steve prepare themselves to confront General Ross

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Natasha didn’t *verbally* ask Clint for reassurance, the morning of the day she and Steve were going to DC, but he knew. He knew when she came to his apartment after breakfast, rather than going to her own or to Steve’s to prepare, or to the gym to train. And he knew what to do about it.

“I’ll get the TV if you’ll get your hair things from the bathroom.”

Natasha gave him a grateful look, knowing exactly which show he’d be putting on. By this point, they both knew every episode - because *Betty Carver* had been Phil’s mental comfort food first, and he’d passed that on to both of them through the years. The first time they’d watched an episode after Phil’s death, they’d both cried, her silently and Clint messily, but by now it had become more of a comforting memory, if a sadly nostalgic one.

She settled, a few minutes later, on a stool she put between the couch and the coffee table, to have her at the right height. It had taken a long time of working with Clint before she’d first trusted him to do her hair, but she trusted him now. He was actually impressively good at doing women’s hair; she hadn’t asked, but she assumed he’d learned in the circus.

“Am I going for a particular look?” Clint asked as he undid the loose plat she’d had her hair in overnight and started combing. His strong hands were always gentle when they did this.

Natasha hummed. “We aren’t making any appearances until tomorrow,” she said. “But I can’t bet on cameras not finding us.”

“Nothing too Tilly, then.”

Tilly was one of the personas Natasha used when she wanted to look vulnerable and helpless. “Definitely not,” she agreed. “Just...something comfortable, but not too vulnerable.”

“French braid down the centre?” Clint suggested.

Natasha hummed an affirmative and settled back, enjoying the simple intimacy and Clint’s sure touch.

Eventually, Clint reached his hand over her shoulder, a silent request for a hair tie, and she passed one back. “What if we fail tomorrow?” she asked him.

He was quiet for a moment. “What does failure look like?”

It was the sort of question that had come up in their strategy training, as they moved up the ranks
at SHIELD and started planning and running ops. What are the possible outcomes? How could they be adapted to reach the objective? Under what circumstances do you change tactics? When do you give up?

“Ross coming out of there vindicated,” she said, after thinking for a long moment. “Whether he’s still in power, or his position is validated. It would be particularly bad if our side was dismissed.”

There was a pause - Clint nodding, probably. “How do you make sure that doesn’t happen, even if things don’t go to plan?”

Natasha sighed. “Shocking things first. No dramatic build-up that might let us get cut off.” She’d talked this all through with Daya when they’d planned out their statements. Not that Steve had an exact script - he was at his best when allowed to improvise a little. But they had a plan for how they were going to get through this. It was a good plan. They’d make it work.

Natasha stood, turning around to hug Clint briefly. “Thank you,” she said quietly. “I’d better go.”

His lips quirked in a brief smile, and he pulled a small box out of his pocket. “Here,” he said, offering it to her.

She raised her eyebrows as she took it, looking at him with surprise when it opened to reveal a necklace, of all things, with an arrow pendant.

“I can’t be there as your backup,” Clint explained, “but...with you in spirit, and all that bullshit. You don’t have to take it, I just…” He rubbed the back of his head, looking away in embarrassment.

Struck by sudden affection, Natasha leaned in to kiss his cheek. “Thank you, sokolik,” she murmured. “I’ll bring it with me.” It went unspoken that she might or might not wear it. Such an overt statement of allegiances (and thus weakness) was unlike her.

Clint looked up at her and grinned, relaxing. “Break a leg,” he teased.

She rolled her eyes, giving him a gentle cuff around the head. “You’ve got enough broken legs for the both of us.”

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They’d booked a single hotel room for the two of them (or rather, Jarvis had). Natasha was more comfortable with the security aspects that way, and Steve was easily persuaded. She had a feeling that the reduced cost had something to do with it; ‘waste not, want not’ was still a very present part of his life philosophy.

So when Natasha woke up in DC, the morning of Ross’s hearing, she immediately registered Steve’s presence, sleeping soundly (for once - she knew he often had nightmares) in the bed closer to the window. She slipped out of her own bed, automatically checking the room for signs of interference or surveillance, and padded silently over to the window to carefully look for any possible observers. Everything seemed fine, and she relaxed a little. She glanced over at Steve, and went to the mini-fridge in the kitchenette to get some food started. She didn’t trust room service, and though she was happy to buy something later, Steve would need food to get the day started. Scrambled eggs and bacon made in the microwave wasn’t exactly high cuisine, but it would be filling, tasty, and the smell would most likely wake Steve up without Natasha having to disturb him.

Sure enough, by the time Natasha had everything on a plate, Steve was sitting up in bed, his hair...
still messy from sleep. “Morning,” he said, smiling at her. “Any chance some of that is for me?”

Natasha smiled, bringing the plate over with a couple of sets of cutlery. “It’s for sharing,” she said. Steve was pretty much guaranteed to get most of it, considering how quickly he ate, but she was happy with that.

They ate in companionable quiet; social as Steve was, he could understand and accept that Natasha liked silence better a lot of the time. She only had a little, but she’d expected that.

At length, Steve squared his shoulders and looked at her seriously. He might be the face of this op, but she was in charge of it; they’d agreed on that. “What do I need to do to get ready?” he asked.

“First,” she said, looking him over, “you’ve got plenty of time to go for a run.” They’d be spending most of the day indoors, and Steve got irritable when he had too much pent-up energy.

Steve looked a little surprised. “You’re sure?” he said.

“I’m sure,” Natasha confirmed. “Go run. Be back here in an hour and we’ll get you presentable.” Steve’s appearance today was going to be carefully calculated, and she needed time to make sure it all looked right.

Steve smiled at her. “Thanks, Natasha,” he said, setting the plate aside and getting up, heading over to their bags to find his running clothes. He’d brought some - he just obviously hadn’t expected to use them until this evening.

“Have fun,” she told him. “Don’t talk to any journalists.”

“Yes ma’am,” he replied, grinning.

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Steve came back from his run cheerful, from something more than just the exercise. “Did you have a good time?” Natasha asked, carefully pinning her hair in place in front of the bathroom mirror.

“It’s nice to change up my route,” Steve said guilelessly. Natasha gave his reflection a skeptical look. “...alright,” he admitted, “it’s not just that.”

“So what happened?” she pressed. “Did you rescue a kitten from a tree?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “You’re not going to let this go, are you?”

“Well, either you made a friend or you were flirting,” Natasha pointed out, “and either way, I’m disappointed I missed it.”

Steve threw his hands in the air, looking exasperated. “I went running down on the National Mall, I lapped this guy a few times, he tried to catch up to me and failed, when he was done we chatted for a bit. Happy?”

Natasha grinned. “Nope. But it’s a start.”
The mood was more sombre a half-hour later, as Natasha helped Steve get his numerous medals hanging straight on his jacket. “I hate wearing all these,” he admitted quietly.

Natasha nodded slightly, stepping back to look him over. “You’re not alone in that. No-one ever saw Phil’s, though I know he had them.”

Steve looked a little surprised at that. “I forgot he was army, once,” he admitted. “It’s hard to picture him in uniform. He seemed perfectly suited to where he was, when I met him.”

Natasha hummed a little. Phil had been good at that - not so much ‘fitting in’ as being un-noteworthy. “Did you bring your journals with you?” she asked, changing the subject slightly.

“I did notice you hinting,” Steve replied, clearly waiting for her to explain.

She set her hand lightly on his arm. “We have time to visit Arlington before the hearing,” she said softly. “Or after, or not at all, if you want. It’s your choice.”

Steve swallowed hard, and there was silence for a long moment. “...do you think I should go?” he asked, his voice soft.

It would be easier to answer that question, Natasha thought, if Steve had told her his objectives rather than leaving it open-ended. But she knew this wasn’t about that. “I don’t know,” she admitted. “I know that it’s a significant place to you, with complex emotional associations. I know that today is one of many chances you’ll have to go there, on your own or with friends or as part of a larger event. I know that a number of people you’ve served with and known are buried or remembered there, and I know that...you have things you want to say, to some of them.” She’d done her research before suggesting this, downloading the directory app and looking up various individuals she knew of. “What I don’t know is whether you’re ready to. You’re the only person who knows that.”

Steve bowed his head in something a little like a nod, and Natasha reached up, embracing him gently. “If you want me with you,” she murmured, “I’ll be there. Actually, I’ll be there anyway, but I’ll keep my distance if you want.”

“And if I don’t?” Steve asked, leaning slightly into her touch.

“Then I won’t,” she said simply. “You don’t have to be alone.”

They went to Arlington. For the most part, Natasha stayed a few feet behind Steve, watching over him without intruding, except when he decided he was ready to move on, when she would silently guide him to the next grave. They saw the Howling Commandos monument first, briefly; Steve had looked it over for a long moment, eyes taking in every detail, then turned away, shoulders tight. Natasha didn’t blame him.

At some of the graves, Steve was quiet; at others, he spoke, looking now and then at his journal. Though Natasha tried to give him privacy, some of his words drifted back to her on the wind.

“...so much, and didn’t get acknowledged as much as I’d like. I hope you got plenty of free drinks out of the stories you had to tell. You always made them sound...”
“...you, for teaching me how to set up a tent while the others were laughing at me. You taught me a lot of things, and you mostly didn’t make me feel like an idiot about it…”

“...doesn’t seem fair he’s not here next to you. Maybe it didn’t last, after the war…”

“...never met you, but I guess if she married you, you’ve got to be a pretty decent fella. I’m glad she moved on, you know, even though it hurts to think about. I hope she didn’t let you think of me as…”

“Howard. If I’d come here a year ago, I probably would have had different things to say to you. You did a lot for us, and the whole SSR, back in the war, and I’m pretty sure without you Captain America wouldn’t exist. I’m sorry you had to listen to me go down, you and Pegs. But for God’s sake, you don’t take that grief out on a child! He deserved better from you. He deserved to hear that his feelings mattered, that his choices mattered, he deserved to be more to you than your legacy. Because he is, so much more. You should be proud of him. More than that, you should be humbled by him. Because so much of what he’s become, what he’s achieved, it’s been despite you. Maybe if I…” He trailed off, and shook his head. “Just...he deserved better.”

Natasha came forward, setting her hand on Steve’s shoulder. After a long moment, he turned around and gave her a questioning look. “We’ll have to go soon,” she explained. “I thought you might want to visit the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier before we do.”

Steve swallowed hard, and nodded wordlessly.

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He stood in front of the monument for a long time in silence, and Natasha wished she knew what was going through his head. Was he thinking of Bucky? Other men he’d seen die in the war? The decades when he’d been mourned without a body, like others remembered here? Soldiers from more recent conflicts? She could hear his breathing grow ragged, but though his head was bowed, his shoulders stayed as square as ever. From behind, he looked almost like a statue, a memorial himself.

When he finally turned around, his face was red and blotchy, his cheeks wet. Natasha didn’t comment, opening up her bag to fetch tissues and a bottle of water, passing them over silently.

Steve smiled weakly at her, wiping tears off his cheeks and blowing his nose, then taking a long swig of water. His gaze was distant as he recapped the bottle, but when he looked back at her, he was determined. “Time to go,” he said, a little hoarsely. “We’ve got a general to humiliate.”

Natasha’s eyes crinkled as she smiled at him. “That we do,” she agreed.

Chapter End Notes

It’s Sam! Hi Sam! Still offscreen, but we’ll see him again.

On the topic of Natasha’s hair...as someone with hair that comes past my shoulders, the ONLY reason I can imagine her leaving her hair out during missions is the way it makes people perceive her. Long hair, left loose, gets in the way. So, despite the fact
that I couldn’t find a single picture of her from the movies with her hair up, as far as I’m concerned, if she’s working, she ties it back.

For various reasons, I have more time on my hands at the moment than I have for most of the last year and a half. So I’m going to try to speed up these updates a little, and see if we can’t get this story finished in the next six months. Considering there’s only four chapters left...who knows, I might even succeed

Let me know what you think!
Chapter Summary

With Bruce's safety assured, for now, Tony talks to him about possibilities for the future.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony had woken uncharacteristically early that morning, and had spent the whole day restless, testing things to destruction rather than making anything new. He was deeply tempted to go flying, but now really wasn’t the time. He did spend a while in the suit on the range, practising his aim without the assistance of the targeting systems - just in case he needed it. But for the most part...he’d admit it, he fretted like a little old lady.

Finally, the hearing, which he’d been keeping an eye on through Jarvis, drew to a close and, thank fuck, it seemed to be wrapping up with the results they’d hoped for. Honestly, Tony couldn’t give a shit about technicalities right now, not when he was watching Ross sputtering as he got stripped of rank and recommended for further investigation for possible criminal charges - including for his treatment of Bruce and Hulk.

“Fuck yes!” Tony crowed, throwing his hands in the air. “Jarvis, I’ve still got champagne in the penthouse, right? I don’t need to send someone to the wine cellar?”

“If I may, sir,” Jarvis suggested delicately, “champagne may not be Doctor Banner’s preferred method of celebration.”

“Ruin all my fun, why don’t you,” Tony complained jokingly. “Fine, cancel the champagne, save it for when the conquering heroes get back. Hmm.” He paced the floor, his step lighter than it had been before.

“From what I know of Doctor Banner, he would not see any need for a celebratory gift or event,” Jarvis said. “I suspect your company would be enough.” Certainly this was not the unambiguous victory for Bruce that it was for other members of the team.

Tony made a disparaging noise. “I can’t just not celebrate,” he insisted. “For fuck’s sake, the bastard’s been dogging Bruce’s heels since 2006!”

“Nevertheless, sir,” Jarvis insisted, “Doctor Banner ought to be the one to decide how that celebration takes place.”

“Spoilsport.” Tony sighed. “But I’ll admit it - just this once - you’re right.” Getting drunk was a singularly inconsiderate way of congratulating Bruce.

“Perhaps you could bring him something to eat,” Jarvis suggested, “and simply...offer a listening ear.”

Tony raised his eyebrows skeptically. “I am absolutely terrible at listening when people talk,” he said flatly.
“You may not give people your undivided attention very often, but you certainly listen,” Jarvis said disapprovingly.

Tony looked at the nearest camera with a small smile. “Thanks, J. I guess we’re getting saag paneer, then. And tikka masala for me.”

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The subsequent why-the-hell-not brainstorming and experimental science marathon lasted hours, Bruce’s movements becoming looser and more expansive as he visibly relaxed. It was one of the best things Tony had ever seen.

“Stay,” he blurted out.

“...what?”

Tony stared for a moment, cursing the thought that had made it outside his head, but he couldn’t really deny it now. “Stay, here,” he explained. “Long term. Not just because...we can keep you contained, or you’re not hunted here. Not just because you’re helping out the team for a while. I…” Tony scrubbed a hand down his face. He hated talking about feelings. “I mean, I was right about the labs being Candyland, wasn’t I?” he said quickly, trying another angle. “I can afford to fund any of your research, I can help you get a job at SI, or get you in touch with people from any academic institution in the country - I’ll find a place for you to do your work, if you don’t want to keep going the way you have. I’ll - actually, Jarvis, make a note to get in touch with other super-scientists, we really should start being more organised about this shit. Anyway. You want Betty here? I’ll personally fucking escort her if you want. And you like Jarvis right? He’s awesome, all my AIs are awesome - “

“Sir,” Jarvis cut in - which almost put Tony on red alert, except Jarvis continued: “May I…?”

Tony swallowed, a part of him recognising and acknowledging the moment, Jarvis’ confidence and willingness to intervene in something this deeply interpersonal, the rest of him floundering. “Go ahead,” he said roughly.

“For most of my life, Sir and I have kept each other company, which Ms Potts has suggested to be an unhealthy level of co-dependence more than once,” Jarvis began. “Nevertheless, I have often been unable to fully ease Sir’s loneliness, or supply the physical comfort that all humans need. Since the Battle of New York, I have seen him grow happier, in no small part due to your companionship, and I hope I am not wrong in my belief that you, too, have benefited. Sir’s friendships thus far have been few, but lasting, and we hope we have enough to offer that you will be willing to make your friendship and residence with us permanent.”

There was a long silence, and Tony winced. Not that Jarvis was wrong, or that he’d misrepresented what Tony felt and wanted, but having all those feelings exposed was making his skin crawl. “You know what? Let’s forget it,” he said hurriedly. “Just ignore all that, big guy, it’s no big deal. You were saying about ytterbium as a heterogeneous catalyst?”

Finally, Bruce said something. “Are you…” he started to ask, then stopped, shaking his head as if to dismiss a line of thought. “Tony, that’s a huge offer,” he said instead. “Just...funding me, housing me, for as long as I want?”

“I can afford it,” Tony said simply. Money, at least, was easy. “Even if I spent millions on you every year, I earn billions in that time. I have far more money than I spend, even with the lifestyle I have.”
“But...what do you want in return?”

Tony raised his eyebrows. “Haven’t we made it obvious? We want you.”

Bruce frowned slightly. “You don’t mean...romantically, right?” he checked worriedly. “Because I do care about you a lot, Tony, but I’m straight. I don’t think us trying to date would end well.”

“No, that’s - “ Tony shook his head. “No. This is more important than that. This is…” He paused, lost for words again, and buried his face in his hands. “Fuck, this is hard,” he muttered.

Thankfully, Jarvis intervened again. “This is a matter of family. The family Sir has built for himself, literally and figuratively.”

Tony smiled, despite himself, at the turn of phrase. Jarvis had loved word games since he was less than a year old, and he was good at them. The moment of fond recollection was enough to give him the courage to look up, to meet Bruce’s eyes. “I joke about us being science bros,” he said quietly. “You don’t have to decide now, but.…what do you say? Want some honorary AI nephews?”

“Tony…” Bruce said softly, an awed expression on his face. “I - I’ll have to think about it, but…I’m honoured. It’s not a no.”

Tony picked up a...joint assembly? It looked like one of Butterfingers’ joints - from a cluttered workbench, examining it so he didn’t have to meet Bruce’s eyes. “Does that mean you forgive me for meddling with Ross?” he asked quietly.

“I didn’t know you were sorry for it,” Bruce replied. His tone was light, but Tony was pretty sure he could recognise the defensive tactic.

Tony pursed his lips. “For meddling? I guess I’m not. I still think it was the right thing to do. But I’m sorry I didn’t bring you in on it all sooner.”

Bruce sighed, taking his glasses off to clean them on the hem of his shirt, and for a moment, there was silence between them. “...you can’t manipulate me, Tony,” he finally said. “I’ve got to be able to trust you, if we’re going to make...this work.” He waved a hand vaguely in the air before putting his glasses back on.

“I wasn’t trying to manipulate you!” Tony objected instantly. “I was just...doing something for you without asking first. ...okay, that sounds bad. I meant it as a nice thing, though! You didn’t have to do anything!”

“I…” Bruce closed his eyes, shaking his head. “The only ‘success’ I’ve ever had with Ross is by evading him long enough that he gets caught up in something else. Anything else...it’s just provoked him, urged him on, made him angrier. Like poking at a hornet’s nest.”

“My armour’s pretty good against hornets,” Tony replied, but he got Bruce’s point. When duck and cover was your main strategy, someone confronting the enemy was more threatening than reassuring. “Look, if I happen to come up with some strategy to solve your life’s problems in future, I’ll consult you, I promise. You just...you weren’t even letting us encourage you to use the kitchen. And you love cooking!”

Bruce’s mouth twisted wryly. “I suppose that’s fair,” he admitted. “I wasn’t letting you discuss anything with me, so it couldn’t have been easy to be up-front. I’ll...try to be better about that, in future.”
“Does this mean you’ll stay?” Tony asked hopefully. “Now that you’re safe.”

“Ross isn’t the only one who might hunt me, you know,” Bruce pointed out, avoiding the question.

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yeah, but I think today made it pretty clear that we’re gonna be able to protect you. And you have to accept at this point that us working with the Other Guy has been at least as effective at reducing collateral damage as isolating yourself ever was.”

Bruce flinched. “That’s not exactly...something I’m proud of,” he admitted reluctantly. “I should have…”

“No.” Tony shook his head. “We could sit here all year talking about might-have-beens. You think I haven’t made mistakes in the suit that cost lives? It happened. You did your best.”

“It might take me a while to accept that,” Bruce said quietly. “It’s taken long enough for me to start thinking of him as sapient.” He sighed. “This past year has set everything I’d learned in the previous five on its head, or muddled it up, at least. It makes things feel...hard to predict.”

And unpredictability could hardly help Bruce’s anxieties. “If it helps, we’ve - the team, I mean - spent more time observing and interacting with him than anyone else ever has,” Tony pointed out. “So our predictions...they’re pretty likely to be accurate.”

“You’re always right, huh?” Bruce said skeptically.

Tony snorted. “Don’t tell him I said so, but as far as the big guy is concerned, Clint is always right. Almost. Hulk loves him.”

Bruce stared for a long moment, then shook his head. “It’s really weird to think of the Other Guy feeling...that kind of thing. I’ve always thought neutral was the best I could hope for.”

Tony leaned back against a workbench, resting on his elbows. “I’ve been thinking about it recently, and I’ve got this theory that it’s got a lot to do with fear,” he said slowly, watching Bruce carefully for signs he was hitting his limits with this discussion. “One of the things that made a really big difference with him was when we started letting him know he was safe as he woke up.”

Bruce looked a little tense, but he was watching Tony steadily.

“Like, we definitely saw him having fun before that point,” Tony admitted. “He gets a kick out of fighting the same way Thor does. But it was only once we started to establish situations where he was safe that we saw him gentle down.”

“What do you think, Jarvis?” Bruce asked carefully, probably trying to withhold judgement.

There was a short pause. “I’m not entirely sure that Sir’s theory is correct, but I have observed a correlation between Hulk’s sense of security and the openness of his behaviour.”

Bruce frowned. “This was easier when I thought it was it was straightforward stimulus-reaction,” he muttered.

“Easier to predict, I’ll grant you,” Tony allowed. “But easier to manage? I don’t think so. He can learn, he can communicate, so he can be taught. That’s huge.” A new thought came to mind. “Actually, have you considered trying to communicate with him?”
“Considering that we literally can't exist at the same time?” Bruce replied. “No.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “That just means you can’t have a direct conversation, not that you can’t correspond.”

“It’s not like I can - what, write him letters?” Bruce pointed out. “He can’t read.”

“You could record video messages.”

Bruce sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose just below where his glasses sat. “You just don’t give up, do you?” he said wearily.

Tony paused. “Give up?” he said seriously. “No. But...I’ll set this aside if you ask me to. I think that teaching Hulk and creating relationships with him is the best way to influence the result of him being out in the world, and I think you should seriously consider setting up some kind of communication. But, for you, I’ll stop asking. Unless something changes.”

Bruce looked up quickly, and something about his posture relaxed. A moment later, he smiled. “Thanks, Tony. I’ll think about it.”

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Bruce must have thought about it a lot, because while the conversation moved back to sturdier and less emotionally treacherous ground soon after, less than twenty-four hours passed before Jarvis notified Tony of an email from Bruce with an attached video message.

Tony’s first response was disbelief. “You’re kidding,” he said, as he sipped at his second coffee of the day. (The first coffee of the day was too vital to do anything but pour down his throat.) “Come on, that’s gotta be a cat video or something. He couldn’t have made up his mind so fast.”

“Would you like to view the email yourself?” Jarvis suggested pointedly. “I would recommend you do so before you go downstairs.”

Tony rolled his eyes and headed for the couch, dropping down. “Go on, then.”

Jarvis brought up a screen, displaying the short email first.

Tony,

I’m still not sure about this idea, but the potential costs and risks are low enough that I’m willing to try. I trust you, and the team, to decide on an appropriate time to show him this. I don’t know how soon I would be ready to view any reply, but I’m willing, in theory, to try.

As for the other thing you suggested, I don’t think my first aid skills are sufficient for looking after non-organic nephews. You’ll have to teach me.

Bruce

The last two sentences drove all other thoughts out of Tony’s mind. “Did he…” Tony’s throat was dry, and he cleared it, taking another sip of coffee to cover his bewilderment. “He wrote that. J, do you...think he means it?”
Jarvis’ voice, when he replied, was warm. “I suppose we’ll see.”

Chapter End Notes

When I started writing this story, I vaguely planned for a romantic relationship between Tony and Bruce, but it really hasn't worked out that way. In this universe, at least, a platonic/queerplatonic partnership suits them best.

You WILL be seeing Bruce's message for Hulk before the end of this story - and that's not far away! I'm starting to think final chapter count might be 59 rather than 60, but either way, if I manage to keep up my 100 words a day goal like I have for the last month, you might be seeing the end of this work by New Years! (here's hoping)

As always, I look forward to your comments. Let me know what you think!
Fireworks

Chapter Summary

“No,” Steve said firmly, when Tony started talking about caterers. “Absolutely not. We’ll cook for ourselves or order in.”

“But...Steve…”

Ignoring Tony’s pout, Steve shook his head. “A big hullabaloo’s just going to make me uncomfortable. If you guys insist on having a party, we can do something like we did for Jarvis. That was good, right?”

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The team celebrate Steve's birthday together

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the fourth of July, Steve woke up calmly, from dreams which, though sad, weren’t so bad as to be haunting. By the time he began his usual early morning run, he was able to put the dreams out of his mind and focus on happier things: the pleasantly cool morning air, the memory of last night’s celebratory dinner after he and Natasha got back from DC, and the knowledge that he had people to celebrate his birthday with. All things considered, it wasn’t a bad start to the day.

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Steve had more or less forgotten his approaching birthday, and so had everyone else, but then Thor had asked about Independence Day a few weeks ago and Steve had mentioned thinking the fireworks were for him when he was little, and suddenly everyone had started talking about party plans.

At first, Steve hadn’t wanted to celebrate at all. His last birthday had been spent muddy and exhausted, with chocolate bars and clean scrap paper for drawing as gifts. The sort of extravagance Tony started imagining as soon as he had an excuse was...surreal.

“No,” he said firmly, when Tony started talking about caterers. “Absolutely not. We’ll cook for ourselves or order in.”

“But...Steve…”

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-----

In the end, the six of them and Pepper gathered around the dining table on the common floor, just like they had for Jarvis’ party six weeks before. Steve could have invited other people to join them,
he supposed, but it hadn’t seemed quite right. Maybe...maybe next year, there might be more people there for his birthday. It was an odd thought, being here with these people a year from now, but a nice one.

The slightly awkward silence that fell between the eight of them was broken by Pepper. “I assume we’re doing gift-giving first?” she said, glancing around the table. When there were no objections, she passed Steve her gift, a large, flat rectangle, with an envelope stuck to the front.

The larger gift turned out to be a watercolour of Central Park. (“Adolf Dehn, 1941,” Pepper commented.) It was the contents of the envelope that were the real surprise. “Membership at the Met?” Steve said, looking up at Pepper with a smile.

“Free entry for you and a guest for a year,” she agreed warmly. “Early entry to new exhibits, too - I find it helps avoid paparazzi. There’s one opening in September that you might find interesting, on Warhol.”

Steve frowned slightly as he tried to remember the style that went with the name, then his face cleared. “I would like that, I think,” he agreed. “Would you like to come with me?”

“Well don’t take Tony,” Pepper joked.

Steve raised his eyebrows. “Why not?”

“I got rid of my entire art collection when I thought I was dying and she’s never forgiven me,” Tony said lazily. “That and my general lack of respect for the collection while I had it.”

“I spent years curating that,” Pepper told Steve. “Whenever he started driving me completely mad I would go to the gallery I’d set up on the second floor and spend an hour or two pretending he didn’t exist.”

Tony looked at her with surprise. “You never told me that.”

“You never asked.”

Tony began to say something else, then seemed to notice their curious audience and shook his head. “Anyway. Pepper’s right, don’t take me to the gallery. I’d probably frustrate the hell out of you.”

After that, the next few gifts went quickly.

Bruce’s present turned out to be...foil packets of something?

“Meal replacement powder,” Bruce said quietly. “Boring, but quick. Each packet should be a meal’s worth; I made them specifically for you. Just empty it into a water bottle and shake to mix it up. They’ll keep for six months.”

Steve looked into the box again: two dozen or so meals that could be tucked away into a pocket for months at a time, a whole week of days that he knew he wouldn’t go hungry.

“I can make more later,” Bruce added hurriedly. “And if there’s something wrong with the flavours or consistency I can fix that.”

“It’s great,” Steve said seriously. “Thank you, Bruce. This is really thoughtful.”
“My gift isn’t terribly personal, I’m afraid,” Natasha admitted (though Steve found it hard to believe). “But it should be useful at least.”

The stack of identical packages turned out to be a set of shirts: three button-downs in different colours, three casual long-sleeved shirts, and three t-shirts.

“I had them altered for you,” Natasha explained at Steve’s curious look. “So they’ll fit your waist and your shoulders, without bulging at the seams.”

“Thank you,” Steve said. “It is useful, and it’s something I wouldn’t have thought to do myself.” Or probably been willing to pay for, to be honest.

“I went for something useful too,” Clint said, passing over his present. “Here.”

It was fairly heavy, and there were some clinking noises as it moved, as if there were pieces inside that weren’t secured. When Steve opened it, it turned out to be a toolbox, already well-stocked with screwdrivers, adjustable wrench, hammer, pliers, a few packets of nails and screws, and a large roll of duct tape.

“Just because most people throw shit away when it breaks now, doesn’t mean it’s all impossible to repair,” Clint explained. “I figured you might as well have your own kit. And before I forget, this one’s from Jarvis.” He passed over an envelope, clearly dodging any thanks.

Steve opened it curiously, examining the card inside, which looked subtly different to the ones Steve had seen so far. The cardstock was the same weight, but it lacked the usual glossiness, and the picture on the front - an open book, with ‘Happy Birthday’ written on the facing page - was...Steve couldn’t quantify it, but it didn’t quite fit. When he opened the card to find both sides full of printed text, he realised that Jarvis must have designed and printed the whole thing, rather than trying to write on a purchased card somehow. He glanced up with a smile, then turned his attention to the text:

Dear Steve,

You have been, thus far, a dedicated and persistent student of those fields of study you have pursued, and I have no doubt that, if you were studying equivalent subjects through an educational institution rather than by my tutoring, you would have received high marks. There is never an end to learning, of course, but perhaps you will take this opportunity to consider the future of your studies. You are, I think, fully competent with modern technologies, for example. Accordingly, I suggest you consider closing this chapter of your studies, and selecting a program that suits your current needs; I have listed a range of options to the right.

I have very much enjoyed being your teacher, and I look forward to aiding you in whatever you wish to learn next.

Happy Birthday

Jarvis
Steve only glanced at the list of subjects before looking up, a warm smile on his face. “Thank you, Jarvis,” he said appreciatively.

“Not too...impersonal, then?” Jarvis asked, and Steve thought he could hear some nervousness in Jarvis’ voice.

“Not at all,” Steve reassured him. “It’s really thoughtful.”

“Are you going to tell the rest of us what ‘it’ is?” Clint put in expectantly.

“Whoops.” Steve laughed a little when he realised his mistake, looking around at the others waiting with various degrees of patience. “He’s offered me a range of subjects to pick from for him to teach me.”

“Your schedule isn’t busy enough?” Tony asked.

Steve shook his head. “He also wrote that I’m ready to move on from my first batch of topics to catch up on.”

“Congratulations,” Bruce said warmly.

“You’ve definitely caught up on technology,” Clint agreed. “Not that I minded our field trips, but you don’t need them for that any more.”

“Well, I’ve had good teachers,” Steve said, smiling at Clint, and glancing up so Jarvis would know the smile was for him as well.

Next around the table was Tony, who despite the very obvious box on the table next to him, handed Steve a plain manila file, neither particularly fat nor particularly thin.

“Am I going to regret opening this?” Steve asked with joking suspicion.

To his surprise, it was Jarvis who answered. “No, Captain,” he said gently. “There may be...mixed emotions for you, but I do not believe regret will be among them.”

Jarvis’ words made Steve cautious as he opened the folder, only to stare down at...Peggy’s family tree?

“I got in touch with the legacy families,” Tony explained quickly. “You know, of the Commandos? I kind of half-am, half-am-not one of them, enough for them to listen to me anyway. So I got you the email addresses of anyone who wanted to talk to you - I figured the genealogies would make it easier to figure out who was who...”

Silently, Steve turned over the page to reveal a second family tree, and behind it, another. Dugan, Morita, Falsworth, Jones, Dernier, and last...Barnes. “His sisters…” Steve murmured, fingertips brushing against the page.

“Yeah,” Tony said quietly. “Between them and their kids, ended up being a lot of Barneses. None of ‘em called Barnes, but...names aren’t so important.”

Steve shook his head mutely, looking at the addresses of all the strangers who apparently wanted to talk to him, wondering how on earth he could begin a correspondence, even as part of him ached with the hope that he might be able to reclaim some part of the life he’d had before the ice.
Tony pushed the box across the table to him, watching him nervously. “Some of them sent birthday presents, too,” he explained. “You don’t have to open them now, I just...figured you should have them.”

“Thanks, Tony,” Steve said quietly, looking at the box, and then looking away, trying to swallow down the lump of emotion that had formed in his throat. “I appreciate that you...just...thanks.”

“Perhaps I could offer my gift now?” Thor suggested, his voice quieter than usual. There was a moment of awkward silence, then - since no one objected - he passed over his present. It was fairly large and squasy, wrapped in bright yellow paper with animals on it. Steve’s lips twitched into a small smile at the cheerful silliness of it. The present inside was…

“Oh wow,” Steve breathed, unfolding the cloth bundle. It was a quilt, just like the ones everyone had when he was growing up, in warm autumn colours. “Where did you get this?”

Thor passed over a large envelope. “I commissioned the aid of Mrs Jennifer Murphy and her friends, who all wish you a happy birthday also, and send word that they expect to see you on Sunday morning to congratulate you themselves.”

True enough, the card had signatures of over a dozen people, some of whom Steve didn’t even know. “Thanks, Thor,” Steve said warmly. “It’s...this is great.”

Thor beamed at him. “May it bring with it the warmth of hearth and home,” he said, his voice rich and full. Thinking of the first night he’d visited Thor’s ‘hall’ and what they’d talked about, Steve nodded slightly, hoping Thor would recognise his understanding.

“Speaking of which, let’s do food,” Tony said briskly, standing up. “I’ll get the grill going.”

“Sure,” Steve agreed, fairly confident that Tony was just trying to escape all the feelings, but perfectly willing for him to do so. “Food sounds good.”

Chapter End Notes

I intended this chapter to be longer, but in the end I decided to post it as-is, since I wasn't getting anywhere with it. I hope you guys enjoyed the update (and hi, new readers! thanks for your comments!)
Protection

Chapter Summary

Tony heard a familiar roar through the comms. “Hulk!” Steve yelled. “The team’s here!”

Hulk audibly settled down, only to get riled up again when Steve explained they were protecting a school full of children. “So we want to avoid damaging the building as much as possible, okay?”

Tony got back in the air just in time to see Hulk charge onto the battlefield, roaring, “Hulk PROTECT!”

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With the X-Men out of reach, a threat to Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters brings the whole team (minus Clint) out to help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tony was reviewing phone upgrades when his train of thought was abruptly interrupted.

~Apologies for the intrusion, but we need help urgently.~ The mental image accompanying the words showed an enormous robot landing on smooth lawn in front of a mansion. ~Our combat team is in Brazil, and I want to save the children from this violence if I possibly can.~

Tony sat up, automatically saving his work as he went to change into his undersuit. “Jarvis, check on Xavier’s school, would you?” Like they said, trust, but verify.

~Yes, this is Charles Xavier,~ he heard as he changed. ~I would have approached Captain Rogers, but I don’t know him well enough to pinpoint at this distance. I applaud your caution, but we need help now.~

“Does this match the report you have received, sir?” Jarvis asked, putting up some rather poor quality surveillance that definitely showed a large shiny robot approaching the school. “I assume you have received a mental report?”

Smiling wryly, Tony nodded, and stepped onto the workshop assembly array. “Suit me up, J, and sound the alert. According to probably-Xavier, their guys are in Brazil.” I’ll be there in five, Xavier, but the team’s gonna be an extra fifteen. If I give you a frequency, have you got anyone who can patch into comms?

~Yes, we have students with the necessary skill. Picture the process in detail, and I will pass the knowledge on to them.~

“Remind me to re-do comms security tomorrow,” Tony said aloud, then did as probably-Xavier had requested.
“Gimme a conference call with Cap and Sitwell,” Tony said, as soon as he was in the suit. “And chart me a course upstate.”

Steve responded almost immediately - he must have already put his comm in. “What’s going on, Iron Man?”

“I got a telepathic distress call from probably-Xavier - the guy with the X-men and all the mutant kids? Except apparently the X-men have left the building, and they’ve got a giant aggressive robot on their doorstep.”

“We’ll need Hulk, then,” Steve concluded. “I’ll make sure Bruce knows. Are you going ahead? Do you want Thor with you?”

“If he’s ready to go, he might as well,” Tony replied, getting out of the elevator and striding towards to the balcony doors. “Tell him we’re headed - “ He glanced at the HUD. “ - about forty miles nor-nor-west up the Hudson. As long as he’s got his comm in, Jarvis can give him specifics.” They’d figured out by now that Thor did better with broad, landmark-focused directions, rather than detailed headings. It was just a cultural thing.

“I’ll pass that on.”

“Agent Sitwell on the line, sir,” Jarvis put in.

“Stark, what’s going on?”

“We’ve got a giant robot at Xavier’s school, and we intend to provide assistance,” Steve reported briskly. “Do we have SHIELD support on this, or are we doing it independently?”

“Jesus,” Sitwell muttered, then was quiet for a good twenty seconds. “...Okay. I’m scrambling a jet with your backup team, they’ll meet you on the Tower landing pad. But you’d better let the PR crew know you’re stepping in on the mutant issue, got it?”

“Jarvis is on top of that, aren’t you, J?” Tony said, and a moment later, got confirmation. “Yeah, we’re good. Sitwell, Thor and I are going on ahead, and Xavier’s got someone linking in to the team channel. Any kind of briefing you can whip up would be welcome, but I’m pretty sure we’re going to have to sort this out on the ground.”

“Watch your back until we get there, Iron Man,” Steve said firmly. “Good luck.”

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When they got there, Thor started distracting the robot while Tony flew down to check on the kids. And they were kids, really - the oldest couldn’t have been more than sixteen. Not that they weren’t doing a formidable job, but...

“Rest of the team’s on their way,” Tony told them. “Meantime, we’ll keep it busy. Have you got evacuation options? Is anyone injured?”

A cloud of dust rapidly coalesced into a teenage girl wearing a black hijab and face-veil. “There’s
no good place to evacuate to, so everyone in going to the gym,” she explained. “Professor X is there, and Laurie and Quentin are helping him. Everyone out here is hard to injure, but the robot is taking little damage, and we are tiring. Josh is looking after injuries and exhaustion from just inside. Oh, and if you hear someone on your comm system, that’s probably Sarah.”

Tony nodded. “Sarah, got it. And you are?”

“Soorayah,” the girl said, bowing slightly. “Also out here are Roxy, Santo, and Dallas. We appreciate your assistance.”

“It’s my job, kid,” Tony replied easily. “Let us take the attacks for now and you fall back to defence. We should have back-up soon.”

The corners of her eyes crinkled slightly, and her voice was amused. “Don’t worry, I won’t get grit in your joints,” she promised, and disintegrated again.

-----

Eventually, the rest of the team arrived. "Iron Man, what have we got?" Steve asked.

"Apart from the obvious - a giant fucking robot with some serious artillery and obnoxiously resilient shielding - it'd be easier to tell you what I don't know. I don't know if it's programmed or piloted, I don't know where it keeps its brain, I don't know where it keeps its ammo - which considering the ordnance is seriously worrying. I don't know how the fuck its shielding is so good or how to get through it, and I don't know who the hell made this thing. Which is a problem."

"Right," Steve said firmly. "Priority one is protecting the kids and the school, but whatever information we can get along the way is important. Someone with the resources to make this is a major player, and chances are we'll hear from them again. Widow, Dinapoli, Brewer, you're on observation and distraction. Brewer, we'll need the special arrows later, but don't waste them until we have reason to think they'll actually do damage. Iron Man, you want to come give our snipers a lift?"

"On it," Tony replied, disengaging and swooping over to the quinjet. "Who's first? We may need evasive manoeuvres, so one at a time."

Dinapoli stepped forward, gear bag slung over her shoulder, efficiently clipping herself in and flipping up the panel on his shoulder piece that hid a hand grip. "Good to go - get me onto the roof and I'll set up from there."

"Roger that." Tony lifted off, focusing on keeping Dinapoli mostly upright and out of the robot's sights, listening to Steve strategise as they went.

"Bruce, much as we'd love your brain on the shielding problem..." There was a pause, and Tony mentally filled in Bruce's resigned agreement. "Yeah. Of course. Widow, can you get the kids off the field?"

"The shiny one's Roxy, the shadow's Dallas, the dust cloud's Soorayah, and the one that looks like the Thing is Santo," Tony reported, setting Dinapoli down on the roof and waiting for her to unclip herself before lifting off again. "I think."
"Got it," Natasha said, and Tony spotted her darting from the quinjet to the main battlefield, hugging the edge of the building as she did.

"Coming back for you now, Brewer," Tony said briskly. "Cap, we need you on the field ASAP, Thor can't hold this guy on his own."

"Let me wake Hulk up and I'll be on my way," Steve replied as Tony got back to the jet to pick up Brewer. "Bruce?"

"Yeah, I've got it," Bruce said reluctantly, stripping down to the Hulk-pants and hanging his comm around his neck.

"See you on the flip side," Tony told him, wrapping his arm around Brewer and flying away again as Bruce started to grow. Brewer was carrying a crossbow instead of a rifle, and a quiver full of bolts adapted from Clint’s special arrows.

"Put me down next to Agent Dinapoli," Brewer requested. "We can cover each other. The chimneys are the only good spot anyway."

As he did, Tony heard a familiar roar through the comms. "Hulk!" Steve yelled. "The team's here!"

Hulk audibly settled down, only to get riled up again when Steve explained they were protecting a school full of children. "So we want to avoid damaging the building as much as possible, okay?"

Tony got back in the air just in time to see Hulk charge onto the battlefield, roaring, "Hulk PROTECT!"

"That's one for the album," Tony muttered.

"I shall make a note of it, sir," Jarvis replied.

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"Okay, I think I've got a sequence that'll work, but timing's going to be tight," Tony said rapidly, running mental calculations. "Thor, Brewer, Cap, you're the main players. We want a lightning strike, followed by an EMP bolt, and hope that'll cut the shielding. Then we're gonna try to get it pinned - shield to the back of the legs, big blow to the front of the chest from Hulk, and assuming it falls over, Mjolnir to hold it down. Questions?"

Brewer piped up. "What's the timing on the EMP?"

"Thor, you can keep the lightning going for a few seconds, can't you?" Tony asked.

"Aye."

"Then Brewer, shoot as soon as the lightning hits, and Thor, end the strike as soon as the bolt lands. You two got that?"

"Got it."

"I will do so."
"Cap, no more than five seconds between the end of the lightning and the shield to the legs, okay?" Tony said. "If we manage to stun it, we want to push that advantage."

"Roger that," Steve replied, circling around to get behind the robot. "Can you brief Hulk?"

"On it!" Tony did a fly-by to get Hulk’s attention. "Hey, big guy! We've got a plan!"

Hulk looked up briefly, then jumped into the path of a shot headed for the school doors and roared. "SMASH HULK-BOT!"

"When Cap throws the shield at its legs, hit it in the chest to knock it over, then we can hold it down with the hammer. Got it?"

Hulk growled. "Shield, then smash, then hammer," he agreed.

"Okay." Tony moved away and up, making himself the obvious target for the robot while their other heavy-hitters were distracted. "We all ready?"

"Aye."

"Ready to go."

"I'm in position."

Tony raised his hands. "Thor, it's your show."

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When the robot crashed to the ground, there was a ringing silence, the whole team watching suspiciously for any sign of movement. After a long, tense minute, Steve spoke. "Brewer, Dinapoli, I want you watching for any sign of reinforcements. Iron Man, you’re in charge out here – I’ll take Widow in to talk to Xavier. Thor, Hulk…help Tony with whatever he needs."

Hulk’s face scrunched into a frown. “Need Bruce?” he asked, obviously reluctant.

Tony shook his head, landing near one shoulder of the robot. “I want you two ready to hold it down if it wakes up again,” he explained. “I’m going to try to find the CPU, but since I can’t scan for the ammo and fuel stores, I’ve got to go slowly.”

“We will be on guard,” Thor promised solemnly, rolling his shoulders. “Only ask, and we shall assist.”

It took more than an hour of painstaking work before Tony was willing to walk away from the robot with confidence that it wouldn’t shoot him in the back or unexpectedly explode. By the time he was done, each limb was separated from the torso (a precaution against unintended discharges while he fiddled with the torso), the ammo, flamethrower fuel, power source, and CPU had each been isolated, and the whole thing opened up for thorough scans. After half an hour with Xavier, Natasha and Steve had gone back to the Tower to get cases for safe containment, and Tony was now having an energetic argument with Sitwell about whether he or SHIELD would be the ones to contain them.

“SHIELD R&D have the ethics of a lobotomized rat – !” Tony said, then cut himself off. “Look,
I’m taking them now, and we can negotiate this later.”

Sitwell sputtered, but Tony’s attention was focused on Hulk, who was being swarmed by a wave of children rushing out through the doors now it was safe. “Jarvis, you’d better be showing this to Clint.” Tony muttered, striding over. “Hey buddy,” he called out, taking his helmet off and tucking it under his arm. “Making friends?”

Hulk grinned back. “Tiny friends!”

“We’re not tiny!” one kid objected. “You’re HUUUUUGE!”

“I dunno,” Tony said, sizing her up. She looked about eight, but a short and skinny eight. “You look pretty tiny to me.”

“Am not!” she insisted, and abruptly shot up in height. “I’m as tall as you, so there.”

Hulk’s eyes widened. “Tiny Hulk-girl!” he exclaimed. “Gets big!”

The girl smiled widely – then her expression crumpled as she shrunk again. “Sorry, Hulk,” she mumbled. “I lost it.”

“Ana’s still learning,” one of the boys explained, giving Tony a fierce look. “So don’t be mean!”

Tony shook his head, getting down on one knee. “Hey Ana?” he said gently. “Everyone messes up, even a super-genius like me. Especially when they’re learning. And that’s okay, isn’t it, big guy?”

Hulk nodded firmly. “Clint says just say sorry. And if no-one hurt, don’t be sorry.” He reached out, patting Ana’s curly hair with one huge finger. “Get big, get small, no-one hurt. So no sorry.”

A tentative smile spread across Ana’s face, and she wrapped her arms around Hulk’s chest to hug him tight. “There are other big people here,” she said. “And people who change shape, or are different colours. You should visit!”

“Bruce not like,” Hulk said with a frown, looking at Tony. “No visits?”

“I second Miss Flores’ invitation,” Xavier added, and Tony mentally rolled his eyes at the intrusion. “You may tell Dr Banner that I am quite experienced at suppressing emotion-based power manifestations in a crisis.”

Tony sighed. “I’ll talk to Bruce,” he promised. “It might take me a while, but I’ll persuade him. But speaking of Bruce…”

“No Bruce,” Hulk grumbled. “Hulk play!”

The kids sent up a chorus of disagreement, but Tony shook his head. “Time for us to go home, big guy, and you don’t fit on the jet. You can visit Clint next time?”

Hulk perked up at that suggestion. “See Clint? Before next fight? Promise?”

“I promise,” Tony agreed, already trying to figure out how he’d persuade Bruce to actually do it. “If you come over to the jet and let Bruce out now, I’ll make sure you see Clint before the next fight.”
Letting out a long, gusty sigh, Hulk got to his feet. “Hulk go now,” he told the kids sadly. “But will visit.”

Tony watched fondly as the kids swarmed him again, each one wanting to give Hulk a hug goodbye, and didn’t rush them. Eventually, they let Hulk go, and he followed Tony over to the jet. “Safe for Bruce now?” he checked.


Hulk nodded, sat down on the ground, and shrank rapidly, his skin paling. A few moments later, Bruce stirred with a groan, and opened his eyes. “Are the kids okay?”

Tony smiled, offering Bruce a hand up. “Yeah, big guy,” he promised. “Everyone’s okay.”

Chapter End Notes

I liiiiiiiive!

For those of you still paying attention, thank you so so much for your patience. (There's still at least a few of you...right?)

We're in the home stretch now - just one chapter to go, and it's already a quarter written. I'm not going to jinx myself here, but if you want to help keep me motivated, comments please? Especially questions about the story, because I always have ideas about what's going on off-screen, and I think a LOT about why I make the characters do certain things. Or if you just want something cute, send me interview questions for Hulk :)

See you next time for the thrilling conclusion of my first ever and longest-running fanfic!
The Start of Something

Chapter Summary

Hulk spends some time with his friends, and makes a video for Bruce.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce took a little persuading to let Hulk out that evening, but a lot less than usual - as long as Clint promised to wait in a separate room during the actual transformation part, when there was a heightened risk of Hulk lashing out. So when Clint saw Hulk in person for the first time in weeks, it was through the transparent front wall of the Green Room.

“Hulk!” he called out, grinning, as the door opened, leaning on one crutch so he could briefly let go of the other and wave. “It’s good to see you, buddy!”

Hulk grinned back just as enthusiastically, bounding over. “Clint! Good to see!”

“Damn crutches,” Clint complained. “If I had my hands free I’d give you the biggest hug.”

“Why crutches?” Hulk asked, slowing down and visibly deflating. “No chair, but still hurt?”

Clint shrugged. “Sorry, buddy,” he said. “I’m getting better, but I’m not done yet.”

Hulk frowned unhappily. “Hulk bad,” he mumbled, looking away. “Sorry.”

What? “Why do you think you’re bad?” Clint asked gently, hobbling forward and into the room. “You wanna sit down with me and tell me?”

Hulk wrung his hands - an oddly disconcerting gesture, when Clint was so used to seeing Bruce do it - and shook his head. “Hulk should go. Not be near.”

“Aw, buddy, no,” Clint replied sadly. “I missed you, okay? Tell me what’s wrong and we can fix it.”

“Can’t fix!” Hulk insisted, pointing at Clint’s legs. “Can’t change, can’t fix! Hulk bad!”

Jesus, it was weird hearing Bruce’s guilt complex come out of Hulk’s mouth. “You think you’re bad because of my legs?” Clint prompted.

Hulk turned away, stomping over to his goo pit and squishing his hands in the purple mess of high-tech playdoh. Bruce couldn’t deal with having violent toys in the Green Room, but Clint and Jarvis had agreed that having something for Hulk to express himself with that wouldn’t break was important.

Clint thought about it for a minute, then asked, “Do you feel bad because I got hurt when you were with me?”
Hulk growled. “Hulk help team! But Hulk not help Clint!”

“You did help,” Clint insisted. “Remember? You warned me, and you covered me so rocks wouldn’t hurt my chest and arms. That was really good, and really helpful. Sometimes I get hurt, and it’s not your fault, just like it’s not Tony’s fault or Steve’s fault or Natasha’s fault.”

Hulk just made another wordless grumbling noise, keeping his back turned.

Clint looked helplessly at one of Jarvis’ cameras. How did they fix this? His phone buzzed in his pocket, and Clint pulled it out to see a message from Jarvis.

May I try? - J

Clint raised his eyebrows, but shrugged, and signed with his hands for Jarvis to go ahead.

“Hulk,” Jarvis said gently. “I can see that you’re smashing your goo right now. Are you feeling angry?”

Hulk hunched his shoulders even more, keeping his gaze fixed on the floor.

“You said earlier that you feel bad because you can’t fix Clint’s leg. Is that right?” Jarvis pressed.


“I see,” Jarvis replied sympathetically. “You feel guilty because Clint was hurt, especially because he’s still hurt after a long time. Do you feel like it was your job to keep him safe?”

Hulk growled a little, but nodded. “Smashing bad. Helping good. Hulk bad at helping.”

“You feel bad at helping because you weren’t able to stop Clint from getting hurt?” Jarvis checked.

“Does that make you feel like you’re not a good person?”

“Bad,” Hulk agreed.

Clint had to admit, he was impressed by Jarvis’ communication skills. It was hard to figure out what Hulk was trying to say sometimes, especially when they were talking about abstract concepts.

“That must feel really awful,” he said gently. “Can I come over there and give you a hug?”

Hulk glanced up, giving Clint a wary look.

“I promise nothing bad will happen,” Clint said seriously. “No one will get hurt because I hug you.”

Reluctantly, Hulk nodded, and Clint heaved himself up on his crutches to hobble over and lean against Hulk’s shoulder, wrapping one arm over his huge back. “Hey,” he said gently. “I’ve missed you, buddy. You’ve done a great job looking after the team while I rest up. And I’m really sad that you feel guilty about my injury, when you did such a good job making sure I was protected from that ceiling falling in. I remember when it happened, and everyone was scared because I got hurt. But I was really glad I had you with me, to help keep me safe.”

“It can be frightening and upsetting when someone is hurt,” Jarvis added quietly. “I get worried whenever Sir is hurt, for as long as it takes for him to fully heal.”
Clint picked up the thread again. “It’s okay to be upset when something bad happens,” he reassured Hulk, rubbing his back a bit. “Just remember that bad things happening around you doesn’t mean that you’re a bad person. I know you want to do good things, and you try to do good things, and that’s enough, even if you make mistakes sometimes.”

Hulk frowned thoughtfully for a long moment. “...Not bad at helping?” he asked tentatively.

“Not bad at all,” Clint confirmed. “You’re a good helper, and a good friend, and a good person.”

Hulk’s tense muscles relaxed, and he started to smile. “Clint too,” he said. “And Jarvis. Good friends.”

“Thank you, Hulk,” Jarvis said warmly. “Would you like to read a story together, now that you’re feeling better?”

Hulk nodded, sitting up straighter. “On the couch?” he asked. “Jarvis show, Clint read?”

Clint grinned, getting to his feet. They’d read picture books that way a couple of times before, and if Hulk was specifically asking for it… “What should we read, Jarvis?”

“I suggest ‘Up!’, by Dr Seuss, illustrated by Quentin Blake,” Jarvis said, turning the window-wall dark and projecting the cover onto it.

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They read Up! , Where is the Green Sheep? , Hugs from Pearl , and at Hulk’s request, Green Eggs and Ham. By the end of it, Hulk was cheerful, even joining in with the repeated refrain ‘I do not like green eggs and ham’, and to match the story, Jarvis got Steve to bring up a platter of ham rolls for Clint and Hulk to share.

While they were eating, Jarvis threw a spanner in the works by discreetly messaging Clint a notification that Bruce had recorded a message for Hulk to watch - and, knowing Bruce, Clint could easily guess that it wasn’t going to fit in with the cheerful atmosphere in here.

Unfortunately, they only got so many chances to hang out with Hulk, and he did have more emotional support right now than he generally had access to. It was probably the best opportunity they’d get in a while for them to do this.

“Buddy?” Clint said carefully. “You know how you and Bruce can’t talk, because when one of you is awake, the other one is asleep?”

Hulk wrinkled his nose, but made an acknowledging noise.

Clint took a deep breath. “Well, Tony suggested you record video messages for each other, and apparently Bruce made one. Do you want to watch it?”

“...see Bruce?” Hulk asked, frowning.

“That’s right,” Clint confirmed. “I don’t know what he said, so I don’t know if he was nice, but you can see him, and if you like, we can make a message for him to see.”
There was a pause. “Bruce not listen,” Hulk pointed out. “Never listens.”

Clint shrugged. “Maybe he won’t,” he agreed. “But you know that I’m going to try to make him, just like I’ve made him listen other times, so that you can do fun things with us.”

Hulk thought about that for a long moment, visibly struggling with himself. “Try,” he decided.

Clint grinned at him - that was the first hurdle. “That’s great!” he praised. “Before you can make your message for Bruce, we have to watch Bruce’s message to you. Do you want to do that here, where we have soft cushions and blankets, or at your goo pit, where you can squish the goo if you get mad?”

“...goo pit,” Hulk decided. “Hulk squish, Hulk not smash.”

As it turned out, that was probably a good idea.

“Hello,” Bruce said, looking straight at the camera, his shoulders tight with obvious nervousness. “I’m...Bruce. You haven’t met me or seen me, but I’m...you, sort of. I’m the one that has our body when you’re not here.” He looked away for a moment, swallowing hard. “Tony - Iron Man - said I should talk to you. I don’t know what to say, or how much you understand, but...we can talk now, with videos. The team can help you.” There was a long pause. “I don’t like you because you hurt people. But you’re getting better at not doing that, apparently, so...” Bruce took a deep breath and shook his head, and the video ended.

Hulk growled, slapping his hands down into the goo pit. “Hulk not bad!” he yelled. “Clint say! Bruce bad! Bad and puny and mean!”

Okay, seriously, what was with Hulk and the word ‘puny’? Would Bruce know? Clint dismissed the thought for now, watching as Hulk took out his temper on the contents of the goo pit. It was kind of impressive, really, because if he wanted, Clint knew Hulk could have smashed through at least the top surface of the floor, but he was holding back enough that the pit itself wasn’t even creaking.

Clint got up and moved to a chair in Hulk’s line of sight, though he stayed out of reach to avoid accidents. “I agree,” he said firmly. “What Bruce said wasn’t fair or nice, and I don’t like it. You’re not bad, and you don’t hurt people except by accident, just like the rest of us.”

Hulk looked up, surprised. “...Clint not like Bruce?”

Clint sighed. “It’s complicated,” he admitted. “I like Bruce sometimes, but not other times. I don’t like how he treats you, or how he talks about you. Like you said, he can get mean.”

Hulk clenched his fists a little, then looked up at the ceiling. “...Jarvis like Bruce?”

There was a brief pause. “Dr Banner is, in general, a very kind man, and he has been a good friend to Sir,” Jarvis replied. “However, I have observed that he does not extend that kindness to you, and I find his words and behaviour towards you frustrating. I like Bruce sometimes, but I don’t like what he said in the video. It was unkind and unfair.”

Hulk growled, squishing a handful of goo into a ball, then smacking it flat.
“Yeah, I don’t like it either,” Clint muttered. “Buddy, remember how earlier, you were feeling bad because I got hurt when you were around?”

Keeping his gaze fixed on the goo under his hands, Hulk nodded.

Clint sighed. “Well, for a long time, Bruce has felt bad when bad things happened around him, just like you were doing earlier,” he explained. “Some of those bad things were his fault, and some of them were your fault. Some of them were because of someone else, or there wasn’t really a reason at all. But blaming you for all of it made him feel better, even though it wasn’t fair to you.”

“Dr Banner also blames himself for what you do,” Jarvis added. “He does mean things to himself, like staying away from his friends, or not buying comfortable clothes, because he feels like a bad person when you do something he doesn’t like.”

Hulk growled. “Not fair. Mean to Hulk AND mean to Bruce.”

“Yeah,” Clint agreed, sighing again. “Pretty much.”

Hulk’s brow furrowed in concentration as he shaped and reshaped handfuls of goo, clearly thinking hard. Clint sat and watched, wondering what was going through his head.

“...make video,” Hulk finally announced. “Jarvis, where should be?”

“Turn slightly to your left, away from Clint,” Jarvis replied, sounding a little surprised. “Recording now.”


“Bruce run, Bruce hide. Hulk smash, Hulk fight. Both protect from Ross. Now, Bruce stay, make friends. Hulk stay, make friends. Don’t be mean.”

“...wow,” Clint said softly, when it was clear Hulk was done. “Great job, buddy. That was really fantastic.”

“Indeed, I believe it will make quite an impression,” Jarvis agreed. “You communicated very clearly.”

Hulk smiled at them. “More stories now? Or playing?”

Clint smiled back. “Sure, big guy,” he agreed. “Let’s do something fun.”

Chapter End Notes

We're here! It's over! (I hope it /feels/ over? This isn't a super conventional ending, I've left some things unresolved.)
Thank you so, so much to all of you, those who've commented and those who haven't, those who've been here since the beginning and those who've joined me along the way. As much as the various real-life friends who've listened to me brainstorm, you guys have kept this story going.

For anyone who may have missed earlier announcements, there WILL be sequels to this fic. Next up is "Talk to Me, Barton", which will cover Clint and Phil's relationship in the decade before The Avengers. Quick preview:

_Coulson nodded, satisfied, and made another careful note on the back page of the contract. "Do you have any other concerns?"
"Do I get to keep my bow?" Clint asked.
"Yes."
"Are you going to kill me if I quit?"
"No, barring special circumstances."
"Do I have to change my nickname?"
"Sign the damn contract, Barton."

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!