Dangerous Liaisons and Unwanted Alliances
by Comicsohwhyohwhy

Summary

Reed thinks that Tony moving in with the Fantastic Four at the Baxter Building is a great idea. After all, Tony really needs a place to stay as all of his assets have been frozen following him turning quasi-villain. If only Steve didn’t try to interfere…

Angst, Adventure and Awkwardness at the Baxter Building. Reed is dense and Steve and Tony are working some things out. Set post-Superior Iron Man and incursions. Expect fluff. But only after a lot of pain.

Notes

Thanks for the great beta for the whole fic and for being an enabler as always to Iloome :)
Hopeful Beginnings

When it was over, it was arranged for Tony to come and stay with Reed and his family at the Baxter Building. Steve had finally seen reason and obtained a ticket of leave for Tony after the horrible inversion-business had been cleared up, reverting Tony to his old self. Which left him with a recent past in which he had committed morally hugely dubious acts he fully remembered, but couldn’t identify with, and without a team, or a place to stay, as all his assets had been frozen following his... downfall in San Francisco.

As Reed was driving to the Raft to collect Tony, he thought of the man he had known, before everything had fallen apart. A tough man capable of dealing with almost anything, but also a man who had known great lows (lows in which he had in all probability failed to properly help him, Reed thought. But not now. Now he knew better.). He frowned. He only hoped Tony would keep it together.

When he stopped in front of the huge doors of the prison, he already saw Tony standing outside, guards by his side, and a box with his apparently meagre private belongings in both hands. Tony smiled when he saw him get out of the car and gave a little wave.

“Hi Reed. I am really grateful for you picking me up. Those very reliable guards here” – he indicated the people at his side – “wouldn’t let me get out without a babysitter, you know. It’s amazing how being in prison makes you feel like a naughty teenager again, I am telling you. Nothing better if you want to feel young again.”

Reed gave Tony a smile, taking in his appearance. He seemed to have lost weight and was rather pale, but at first sight, he seemed to be okay. Steve had not granted Reed visitor rights, mentioning them allegedly “conspiring” against world security, which had upset Reed. He was sure that Tony could have used the distraction, being incarcerated like that, maybe a game of chess here and there and some scientific discussions... Now that he had Tony in front of him for the first time in weeks, apparently safe and sound, he felt a weight lift from his heart.

“Tony. There’s nothing to thank me for. Come on, let’s go. Unless those gentlemen” – Reed turned to the guards – “have anything else they’d like to tell us?”

The guards, a young man and woman, looked at one another nervously. Finally the woman spoke up. “Well, Dr. Richards, just one thing – Captain Rogers gives his regards and reminds you of your duty to regularly report to his office as to the whereabouts and mental state of Mr. Stark.”

Reed heard a sharp intake of breath, but when he turned to Tony, he was seemingly unperturbed. When he looked at Tony’s hands, though, he saw them shaking slightly. Reed frowned. “Of course, I am well aware of the obligations I have to meet while Mr. Stark is staying with me. Goodbye.”

He turned around and walked towards the car. When he was at the door, he realised that Tony had only been following him reluctantly, glancing back over his shoulder at the guards ever so often. When Tony saw him look, he gave a half-shrug and smiled once more, but this time, his smile was clearly a little brittle. “Let’s go, before St-... Commander Rogers changes his mind and decides that it is too unsafe to let me go after all.”

Reed put a hand on Tony’s shoulder (he flinched a little, Reed registered) and opened the passenger door, motioning for Tony to get in. “He won’t, Tony, believe me. This has been discussed rather intensively.”
Tony nodded, casting his eyes down, and got in.

During the drive, Tony was mostly silent, but Reed saw him looking out the window, seemingly fascinated by everything they passed by. It must be like a whole new world to him, Reed realised; first, he hadn’t really been himself for months, and he had left New York anyways, and now he had been locked away for weeks, unable to see the outside world. And it had changed greatly – Manhattan was still in the process of being reconstructed after the horrible events of the last incursion. Tony’s eyes were wide, and when they passed Avengers Tower in the distance, mostly charred and ruined, he put a hand on the window pane, as if trying to reach out and touch it.

But suddenly, Tony seemed to notice that Reed was shooting him a look, and he lowered his hand into his lap and leaned back into his seat.

“So, how have things been going for the Fantastic Four of late?”

Reed smiled. “We’ve had some tough times, but everything is alright again, now.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Reed, you are the king of vague answers that don’t really explain anything.”

“Oh, you know, the usual, some enemy trying to break us apart, but we dealt with it to everyone’s satisfaction.”

He heard a little snort. “Thanks, that was much better.”

Reed hesitated. But maybe it was best to just get it over with. “Tony, you are aware of the deal I made with Steve?”

Tony tensed visibly. “Deal?”

“You can stay with us at the Baxter Building, but I have to report to Steve as to your whereabouts, and I am not allowed to give you full access to my labs. Also, you have to refrain from using any of your own tech, be it Iron Man tech or… Extremis.”

Tony didn’t say anything. When Reed looked over, he saw that Tony’s eyes were cast down and that his hands were balled into fists in his lap. He could see his knuckles, white from strain.

“Tony?”

“Yes, Reed, it’s okay. I didn’t know the details, and to be honest, I thought I would be able to do some scientific work again, maybe trying to fix… some of the things that… I have done with Extremis, but okay, I can see where Steve is coming from. It’s just…” He fell silent.

Reed maneuvered the car into the garage, and didn’t know what to say. Tony was visibly upset. Maybe simply confronting him would be the best thing to do. “Just what?” Reed asked as gently as possible.

Tony turned to him and looked at him fully, and there was a strange intensity in his eyes. “Reed, I don’t know what to do with myself if I can’t work. If I can’t work to undo some of the things I’ve done.”

Reed stared. Of course. Tony was feeling guilty, and, just like himself, he was a scientist through and through, his mind always busying itself with inventions and intricate mathematics. Reed couldn’t imagine not being able to do his work, and so he could hardly expect Tony to handle being restricted like that any better.
He had deactivated the security protocols of the Baxter Building and led Tony into the entrance hall. “I am sure we’ll find a solution. I think Steve would be okay with you assisting me in some of my projects?”

Tony smiled at him gratefully. “Yes, maybe he would. I think…”

Before he could say anything else, the door on the other end of the hall flew open and the rest of the Fantastic Four burst through, greeting Tony with varying shades of excitement (Johnny, who obviously liked the idea of a famous party animal staying with them) and emotional warmth (Sue, who, despite taking issue with some of Tony’s opinions and decisions, had always ultimately liked him).

As Reed watched his wife hug Tony, he thought that this had been a good idea. Here, in this sheltered space, Tony would be back to fully being his flamboyant, confident self again in no time. Reed was sure of it.

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The next morning, Reed, Sue and Johnny were sitting together in the kitchen, Johnny serving slightly soggy pancakes, all of them lost in probably rather foggy early-morning-thoughts. Ben was already out, being an early riser. Reed was pondering his latest project, a device storing energy from the negative zone and capable of transforming it into electricity. He was chewing slowly, absentmindedly, when he felt a hand on his arm. Sue was looking at him intently.

“Reed, where is Tony?”

“Hm?” Reed turned to his wife and saw that she frowned slightly, concern in her eyes.

“Have you even shown him to his rooms yesterday? I mean, I only saw the two of you disappear into your lab, without you first showing Tony where he could settle, have a shower and so on… And I know how you two can be. Did you tell him to get some sleep?”

“Oh.” Reed swallowed. In fact, he had not shown Tony to his quarters. Thinking about it now, this might have been a rather unlucky oversight. Johnny, having caught on the conversation, snickered.

Sue, who had obviously recognised his guilty expression immediately, rolled her eyes. “Where is he now?”

“I don’t know, my love. I showed him some of the things I am working on yesterday, and he wanted to stay up a bit longer to ponder some questions… But don’t worry, he doesn’t have full access to my lab, he can’t do anything dangerous.”

Sue sighed audibly. “Reed, I am not worried about Tony doing anything dangerous, at least not for us. But have you even looked at him yesterday? He seemed to be on edge, and knowing his obsessive nature…”

“Obsessive nature?” came a slightly hoarse voice from the doorway. “Is anyone talking about me, by any chance?”

Tony entered the kitchen, not walking in an entirely straight line, and gave them all a radiant smile and a little wave. He had a stack of loose paper in his arms. “Reed, I have to talk to you. I stayed up to solve this mathematical non sequitur you’ve been having problems with…”

Sue had gotten up as soon as she had seen Tony, and before he could sit down next to Reed and show him his equations – he had already dropped his papers pretty much on Reed’s plate,
scattering little bits of pancake all around them –, she had pressed a cup of coffee into his hands. “Tony. Good morning.”

Tony looked at her dazedly, then his eyes darted to the cup in his hands, and he positively groaned with delight. “You are saving my life.”

Sue rolled her eyes yet again. “I shouldn’t have to save it. Have you slept at all?”

“Noo, Tones isn’t one for sleeping, is he?” said Johnny through a mouth full of pancakes. He was obviously enjoying the show, Reed thought.

“I tried to sleep on the desk, but it didn’t work. Look, Reed, the algorithm you used was –”

“Muuuumyyyyyyyyyyyy!” Franklin hurried into the kitchen. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Tony sitting at the table, hair disheveled, face practically hidden behind the cup that he was downing at world-record speed, Reed was sure. “Is that…?”

Reed smiled. Ever since Valeria had left for Latveria, Franklin had been a bit lost, probably bored without his fiery sister. Tony staying with them was just the thing to pull him out of it. He had a collection of Iron Man action figures and had always adored the armoured Avenger (“He’s a genius like you, Dad, but he’s also so coool”, he used to say, and Reed told himself he didn’t resent that in the slightest).

Tony suddenly seemed to notice that the focus of attention was on him once again. He lowered the cup and gave the boy a lopsided grin. “Hi, Franklin.”

Franklin was wide-eyed. Of course he had seen Tony before, mostly at official events that both the Avengers and the Fantastic Four attended, or very quickly when Tony was passing through to get to Reed to work with him in the Baxter Building, but having him sit at the breakfast table in a crumpled shirt must be a whole new level of realism. He was glad he hadn’t told Franklin Tony would be arriving; the wonder in the boy’s eyes was more than worth it.

“Hi, Iron Man,” Franklin breathed. Sue ruffled his hair from behind. “Come on, little man, stop staring, you are making Tony uncomfortable, sit down and get something to eat.”

Franklin sat down rather reluctantly, all the while still staring at Tony. Tony had gotten up again to get himself another cup of coffee. Reed started looking through his notes. When he came back to the table, Reed wasted no time.

“Tony, this is great! So you think with some slight modification to the controller we could double the output?”

Tony nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, and if you decide to incorporate another set of variables into the matrix, you could yield even better results!”

Within seconds, they were lost in a profound scientific discussion. Reed saw Johnny roll his eyes, Sue smile fondly and Franklin still stare in fascination.

It was however brutally interrupted when Reed’s beeper went off. He looked at the screen. Steve Rogers. Oh.

“Excuse me…” Reed got up to leave the kitchen. He turned slightly at the door to see Sue shooting him a questioning glance. Tony was scribbling away on his papers, using a pen he had stuck behind his ear, and Reed just shrugged. He didn’t yet know what this was about, but he could guess.
“Dr. Richards,” came the brisk voice of Steve through the communicator while the image of the Captain’s serious, unsmiling face appeared on the holoprojector. Reed winced a little. He had still not gotten used to the tone of voice Steve had been using on him ever since he remembered what the Illuminati had done to him.

“Captain Rogers,” he replied, careful to observe all formalities. “How can I help you?”

“Is Stark with you now?”

“Yes, he is.”

Steve sighed, suddenly seeming tired. “And?”

“He has been working on some mathematical equations that gave me trouble,” Reed said truthfully. He didn’t really know what Steve expected him to say (he did recall Steve wanting to be updated on Tony’s “mental state”, but what that meant and how he was supposed to fulfill that task, he really didn’t know).

“What?” Steve seemed to positively jump. “Do you recall me telling you he is under no circumstances, I repeat, no circumstances to get access to your lab?!”

“Oh, he wasn’t using the lab,” Reed hurried to clarify. “I just told him about a problem and he started working it out on paper.”

Steve visibly calmed down. Reed felt a little spark of anger inside of him. Of course, he realised that Steve, working that closely with S.H.I.E.L.D. now, was responsible for world security, and therefore, it was also his responsibility to make sure that Tony didn’t do any harm (any more harm, a little voice in his mind added). But there was no need for him to talk to Reed as if he were some idiot unable to hold up his end of the deal. After all, he understood: he had to keep Tony under close watch, make sure his friend kept it together, and keep him away from the full potential of his lab for fear of what Tony might do then. It was all perfectly manageable.

“Okay. I suppose that is fine. Let me know if anything changes. And, Reed…” Steve seemed to hesitate, and for the first time during the call, he looked insecure. Reed waited patiently until the Captain spoke up again.

“How is he?” It apparently cost Steve some strength to get the question out.

“You mean, is he insane or apparently stable?” Reed asked coldly.

Steve sat up straighter in his chair, looking utterly alert. “Yes. How is he?”

Reed sighed. “He is fine, Steve, I think. He hasn’t tried to take over the world since he arrived here, if that’s what you mean.”

Reed realised it had been a low blow, what with what it had cost Steve – and all of them – to subdue Tony after the inversion spell had unleashed… something from within him. But he couldn’t stop himself from saying it, seeing how Steve seemed to treat both him and Tony like children.

Steve had pressed his lips into a thin line. “Okay. Thank you for the update, Dr. Richards. Get in touch with me if there’s any significant developments.” And without further ado, the holoprojection disappeared.

Reed stayed in the corridor for a moment longer, staring at the spot where Steve’s face had been. Tony seemed… okay. But what if Steve’s doubts were justified? What if Tony was another
catastrophe waiting to happen?

When he entered the kitchen again, lost in thought, he saw Franklin sitting in Tony’s lap. The boy’s voice was high-pitched and a little breathless with excitement. “Iron Man, what suit do you like best?”

“The good old Dolce & Gabbana,” Tony said drily. Johnny grinned at him, conspiratorially, and Reed could practically hear how delighted he was at Tony staying with them. And sure enough, he interrupted: “Tones, talking about fashion, how about going out tonight? There’s this new club down on 5th that’s supposed to be ace…”

Before Tony could answer, Franklin piped in, pouting. “No, I mean, your favourite Iron Man suit!”

Tony smiled and started counting on his fingers. “Well, first, the Bleeding Edge tech was really great, because I had my suit with me all the time then. No bulky suitcases to carry around. Second, I will forever love the old Mark II. I mean, it had its downsides, but on the whole, it –”

Tony was obviously getting ready for another longer explanation, when Franklin interrupted. “What about the silvery one? The one you’ve been wearing of late? With the cool blue eyes?”

Reed flinched. They hadn’t told Franklin about Tony’s recent stint into villain-territory, but of course, the boy had seen pictures and once, before things had entirely spiraled out of control, he had even crossed ways with Tony in his new tech in person at the Baxter Building.

Tony abruptly set his mug down. He tried to smile at Franklin, but it didn’t look quite natural. Sue motioned to Reed to get their son away. Reed cleared his throat. “Franklin, come with me, I have to show you something…”

Franklin only got up reluctantly, but he got the hint, and as they walked out of the kitchen, Reed looked back and saw that Tony was pinching the bridge of his nose. Sue was sitting down beside him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Come on, I’ll show you your rooms…” Reed heard, as he was exiting the kitchen.

So maybe this was going to be more difficult than he had anticipated.
Communication is difficult and Tony is a mess.

When Tony came down into Reed’s lab later that day, he looked better; he had obviously taken a shower and put on some new clothes. Reed recognised an old shirt of his that Sue must have given him. He made a mental note to ask whether it would be possible to transfer some of Tony’s personal belongings, such as a bigger selection of clothes, from San Francisco to New York, in case they weren’t pledged together with all his scientific equipment.

Tony immediately sat down at a desk and started taking notes again, every now and again getting up to fetch something or just pace around nervously. Reed smiled to himself and ran another simulation on his terminal. For a while, they worked in companionable silence, and it almost felt like old times again. Then, suddenly, Reed heard a thud.

When he looked up, he saw that Tony had dropped a pad on the floor and was staring at the TV screen affixed to the wall to his right. Reed hadn’t bothered to switch it off; it was on mute, though, and the news were on.

Reed saw some footage of Tony in his silvery suit, giving a speech, in front of a huge screen that read *Extremis: making the future*. Then the image changed, and he saw a crowd of people in the streets of Manhattan, looking terrified as a huge black cloud slowly enveloped them. When the fog cleared, it was hell. There were bodies lying around. The report cut to interviews with desperate, panicked citizens. Apparently, there had been an Extremis attack in New York, the first one outside San Francisco, where Extremis had already been used in small-scale terrorist attacks more than once. Things were escalating.

Swearing under his breath, Reed cast around for the remote. Somewhere, maybe under that stack of paper… No, this wasn’t right… This was taking too long… In the end, Reed simply extended an arm and switched the TV off directly. The images faded to black.

When Reed turned to look at Tony, the man seemed frozen. He had taken a step back from his desk and stared at the blank screen. Reed hesitated for a moment, then put his extended hand on Tony’s shoulder. Tony flinched again, and the motion seemed to break his state of shock.

Suddenly, Tony buried his head in his hands.

“Tony?” Reed said softly. No reaction.

Reed bit his lip and wondered what he should do. Maybe get a little closer, so that he could hug Tony should he not regain his composure really soon? Reed inched closer, and when Tony’s head stayed buried in his hands, he reluctantly reached out his other arm, wrapping him in some sort of half-hug.

Tony looked up, eyes wide. He looked down at Reed’s hand, then back up at his face. Reed let go of him immediately. He was relieved to see that Tony wasn’t crying – his cheeks were dry and there was a fervent glint in his eyes. Reed opened his mouth to say something, he didn’t quite know what, but Tony was faster.
“Reed, I need to fix this.” His jaw was clenched and Reed realised that he was… angry. He wasn’t sure if Tony was just using the anger to cover up some other, more complicated and nuanced emotion, but whatever it was, right now he seemed enraged, and Reed should deal with that. It reminded him of the weeks during which Tony had been different, prone to angry reactions, dealing with his emotions in a way clearly unlike his normal behaviour.

He cleared his throat. “I understand. But how? I told you I am obliged to…”

“To restrain me and keep me subdued and well-behaved?” Tony interjected. He laughed, but it sounded hollow. “I have to, Reed. You understand, I know you do.”

Reed hesitated. Yes, he understood, somewhat, but the fallout of the Extremis crisis was being handled. Of course, he knew that Tony blamed himself, but in the end, it hadn’t really been his fault, it had been a spell messing with his head. Maybe he should tell him as much.

“I do. But Tony… This wasn’t you fault, and maybe it isn’t your mess to clean up.”

Tony looked at him disbelievingly. “Not my fault? Last time I checked, the Extremis app was launched by me. Did you see my smug face just then?” He made a jerking motion in the direction of the TV.

Reed swallowed. “Yes, it was your face, but it wasn’t… you. I don’t have to tell you that. You know what the spell did to you.”

Tony gave another little laugh, but it didn’t sound more cheerful than the last. “The spell unleashed my deepest wishes and darkest desires. That’s what it did. It exposed them for the world to see. But it was my darkness, Reed, and nothing else. And you know very well that I liked being that – that thing enough to not want you to reverse the effect.”

He had started scrabbling about the desk, aimlessly moving stacks of paper. There was a little pause. Reed didn’t know what to say. He knew he should object, but… What if Tony was right? What if that version of Iron Man had really been nothing more than a Tony stripped of his insecurities and scruples? It was certainly true that Tony had seemed to enjoy his new personality, to the point of not wanting to change back when they had found a way to revert the inversions the spell had caused…

Reed had been more than a little frightened of Tony after the spell got to him. Because indeed, it had been Tony, his genius, his good intentions, ultimately trying to better the world, but everything turned up to a degree Reed had never seen. Tony had been quicker on the uptake than ever, never faltering in his scientific pursuits, daring to do things he had never done before, unafraid of anything (the drinking). It had been as if some dam had been broken. As if Tony had become the man he could have been had he not hit rock-bottom more than once. And that man had been utterly sure of himself, cold and calculating in his pursuit of what he perceived to be best for everyone, such as releasing Extremis on the unsuspecting population of San Francisco. And later apparently also delivering the full version to any well-paying clients, which made the people in power feel the need to take him down. The same Extremis that was then altered by… some people and used in terrorist attacks.

And now… Reed looked at his friend and saw the man he had known for years, only more drained, a palpable sadness hanging over him Reed hadn’t seen there for quite a while. Tony didn’t seem overstrung anymore. But what… what if he lost it again, in a desperate attempt to rectify what he had done wrong? What if the man that had given the world the Extremis-app was still in there, only waiting to be unleashed?
Tony looked back, but after a moment, he cast his eyes down and sighed. His shoulders slumped.

“Listen, Reed, I am quite tired. I think I’ll go and lie down for a while. Let’s talk later.”

He turned on his heel and left. Reed didn’t try to hold him back.

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When Reed came up out of his lab, Sue was in one of their living rooms, reading a book. He smiled and put his hands on her shoulders from behind. She turned to kiss him.

When they had been sitting on the sofa for a while, talking about nothing and everything, Reed’s thoughts went back to the conversation he’d had with Tony. Maybe he hadn’t been entirely fair. Maybe what Tony needed right now was Reed showing him he unconditionally believed in him, not hesitating to assert that faith, instead of remaining silent and insinuating he wasn’t sure that Tony was fully in control again…

He turned to Sue. “Have you seen Tony?”

“Well, he went up a few hours ago, said he’d go to his quarters… I was glad, at least he’ll get some sleep that way.” Sue shook her head slightly, smiling.

“Okay.” Reed stared into space, wondering whether he should go up and ask Tony how he was, maybe try and figure out a way to make him feel as if he could do something about the Extremis attacks? Especially now that they had reached New York?

“What’s up?” Suddenly, Reed realised that Sue was looking at him, frowning slightly.

“Nothing much, dear. It’s just… I talked to Tony, and he wants to try and help fix things with Extremis. I think he got upset when he realised I could not let him do it.”

Sue’s brow was furrowed. “And you can’t?”

Reed frowned. “What do you mean? Of course I can’t, you know the orders that Steve gave me.”

“Reed, helping him fix certain things does not necessarily mean giving him full access to your labs, you know. You could, I don’t know, go with him to the site of the latest Extremis attack to check out the situation at the moment and maybe allow him to help in a very hands-on manner?” Sue seemed slightly exasperated.

“Oh. I suppose you are right,” Reed answered slowly.

“Of course I am. Go up and seek him out, Reed. It’ll make you feel better. I can tell you are worried and feel bad about whatever happened between you two this afternoon. Work it out.” She gave him an encouraging smile that Reed reciprocated. He got up, gave Sue another swift kiss, and went to the elevator.

When he stood in front of Tony’s quarters, he hesitated for a moment. What was he going to say? Well, maybe asking Tony if he had slept well was a good beginning. He knocked.

No answer.

After a few seconds, Reed knocked again. Still no reply.

He frowned. Tony could still be sound asleep and in this case Reed should leave him to it. As he turned to walk away, however, Reed suddenly noticed something.
Tony’s door was very slightly ajar. Okay, that was strange. Carefully, Reed extended a hand and pushed it open further. “Tony?” As there was still no answer, Reed extended his head to peer around the corner.

The room seemed to be in perfect order. But it was also perfectly empty. On the bed, there was a note. Reed went to pick it up.

Dear FF,

I’ll be gone for a while. Don’t worry. There’s some stuff I have to take care of. Expect me back here tonight.

Best,

T

Reed swore under his breath as he crumpled the note in his hand. This wasn’t good. He had to find Tony, and find him before he drew attention to himself. Reed wasn’t sure what Steve would do if he found out that he hadn’t kept a close eye on Tony, but he certainly wasn’t keen on finding out.

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Reed hurried back down into his lab and started scanning the immediate surroundings for Tony’s energy signature. But there were no results, which either meant that Tony had left the area, or that he had somehow concealed his signature. Both were bad.

Reed pinched his nose tiredly when he heard Ben’s rumbling voice behind him. “Hiya, Stretcho, how’s it going?”

“Ben,” Reed said, relieved at his old friend being here. Maybe he could help him out. Hastily, Reed told Ben about what had happened. Ben’s face darkened.

“So now Tones is basically off running around who-knows-where and if Steve finds out, we’ll be in hell?”

“Not just us, Ben, I really don’t know what he’s going to do with Tony if he finds out that he didn’t play by the rules. He isn’t allowed to in any way meddle with Extremis. And it was hard enough to convince Steve to let Tony out on probation.” Reed let his shoulders sag. So much for helping his friend. Tony had fled his house the first day. Well done, Reed.

“Hey, don’t worry, we’ll find ’im and get ’im back here.” He felt Ben’s rough hand on his shoulder and smiled at him gratefully.

“Yes… I hope so. Ben, could I ask you to get in touch with some of your more street-savvy friends and find out if anyone’s seen him?”

“Sure, genius. On it. I’ll see you aroun’.” Ben turned to leave.

Reed turned back to his research and decided to try and make some leeway there instead of worrying and pacing his lab aimlessly. And after a while, he actually managed to really focus. Sure enough, before he knew it, some hours had passed. Ben hadn’t gotten back to him. Reed looked at the time. It was 11 pm. And Tony obviously wasn’t back yet. Damn.

He went up to the kitchen, where he updated Sue, who was just as worried as him. Ben, who got back while they were having their tea, told them both that he hadn’t heard anything. In the end,
they decided it best right now to just go to bed and wait. After all, Tony was an adult, they couldn’t exactly expect him to be home at curfew. Maybe in the morning, everything would have cleared up and he would be back.
Chapter Summary

A confrontation in a hospital room. And things are getting worse.

Reed woke up to the frantic beeping of his holoprojector. Still half asleep, he looked at it, and saw that it was Captain Rogers calling. Reed sat up in bed immediately. Steve. Yet again. What had happened?

He hastily pulled a shirt off a rack and left the room – Sue was groaning something unintelligible, more asleep than awake – and accepted the call. “Captain Rogers?”

Steve’s jaw was clenched, his lips were a thin line. “Richards. I am at your door. Open, now.”

Reed swallowed and checked the security panel on the wall. Indeed, Steve was there, standing at the door. At least he was alone. But why… “Of course. I’ll be down in a moment.” He let the entrance doors slide open.

When he left the elevator, Steve was striding towards him. He looked furious. “Do you want to explain to me how that happened?”

Reed raised his hands. “Captain, I don’t know what you are talking about. Could you enlighten me?”

Steve bristled with anger as he pulled a tablet out of the bag he was carrying. He switched it on and Reed saw a news report.

“– want to know how the convicted felon Tony Stark, who many blame for the loss of people close to them because of the Extremis attacks, could be out and about, endangering people with what we can only refer to as ‘unknown technology’ –”

Reed saw an image of Tony in a hoodie, what he immediately recognized as one of his energy readers in hand, trying to fend off a crowd of reporters as he was hurrying down a street somewhere in Manhattan. The street was packed with people who were screaming at Tony. Suddenly, a bottle flew towards him. Tony dodged it narrowly when someone jumped into the field of vision and grabbed him by the throat. The image started shaking, people were yelling, Tony seemed to be basically smothered by a big group of people. Then the reporter who had been filming was apparently fleeing the scene. “– those who hold Captain Rogers responsible, as he promised after World War Hate that the problem was contained and everyone would be held responsible –”

Steve switched the report off and glared at him. Reed bit his lip. This wasn’t good, Steve being mad at him like that. But whatever had happened, what was more important right now was how and where Tony was. “Where is he?”

“He’s at an undisclosed hospital because they beat him up. Still unconscious. Do you have any idea of the problems you are causing me, letting him wander about like that, using God-knows-what technology?!” Steve was gripping the tablet tightly, but now Reed could see that he wasn’t
just furious. He was worried.

“What do you expect me to do, control his every movement as if he were a child? You know I can’t do that. And I don’t want to do it either.” Reed crossed his arms and gave him a determined look. Yes, he knew that their relationship hadn’t been the best ever since the disaster with the Illuminati, but now that the crisis that had caused their confrontation back then had been averted (at least one thing), Steve had better stop talking down to him and treating him like someone to be held in check.

Steve seemed to realise his tone of voice had been inappropriate. He averted his eyes and sighed. “But you have to, if you want him to stay with you. Don’t you get it? He is responsible for letting Extremis get into the hands of, in all probability, various terrorist organisations, because he wanted to make profit.” Steve basically spat out the words. “The people need to know he is being held responsible for his actions.”

Now it was Reed’s turn to sigh. “His actions? You know as well as I do that the man who did those things wasn’t really… him.” Reed was getting tired of this. Now that he had finally gotten close to convincing himself that he should simply trust Tony, it was Steve hammering away at that confidence.

“Not him? Well, I for one don’t know who he is anymore.” Steve’s eyes suddenly looked empty and tired. Reed felt a little sorry for him. Maybe he was simply in over his head with all the things he had to deal with and was held responsible for after the debacle with the Skull.

“Let’s not discuss that right now. I want to see him and take him back” – Steve looked up sharply – “back to the Baxter Building with me. Could you lead me to him?”

Steve started dialing something on his communicator, all the while keeping him fixed with his gaze. “I can. But I am telling you one thing, Reed. If you want him to come back, we’ll have to find another solution. And you probably won’t like it.”

Reed frowned, but before he had much time to reflect on what Steve was insinuating, he heard a vehicle pull up front of the entrance. Steve motioned for Reed to follow him and as he got out, he saw a discreet black car waiting on the street.

The drive to the hospital was quick and uneventful, if a little tense because Steve and Reed weren’t talking. Small talk seemed out of place, somehow, what with their recent past and the occasion for their meeting now.

At the reception, Steve asked for “Antonio Strong” – subtle, Reed thought – and was sent to the 3rd floor. When they were at the door to the room the nurse had indicated, Reed hesitated. He turned to Steve, who was standing behind him.

“Steve, I am not sure this is a good idea.”

Steve crossed his arms. “What isn’t a good idea?” His brow was furrowed and he yet again seemed a little annoyed, but at least just a little.

“You coming in with me now. If he’s awake… Have you even seen him since you and your team took him down?”

Steve didn’t immediately reply. He just stood there in his tense posture, apparently thinking about what Reed had said, eyes dark. Finally, he seemed to make a decision. “Okay, Reed, you are right, at least partly. Tony and I haven’t talked since we captured him. Maybe you should go in and talk
to him first, tell him I am here, and I’ll come in then.”

Reed nodded curtly. He hadn’t fully expected Steve to agree, so he was glad that he was given the chance to at least prepare Tony for Steve’s presence, instead of just shocking him, especially if he was still weak from whatever injuries he had suffered. Quietly, he opened the door and entered the room.

The room was bright, looking out onto the parking lot, and in the big bed Reed saw Tony’s prone form, facing away from him. So apparently he was still asleep. Reed walked around the bed, treading carefully, and looked at Tony for a moment. He had a bandage around his head and one of his hands, placed in front of his body, was also wrapped in gauze, but he seemed to be sleeping peacefully. There was an IV going into his other hand.

Reed pondered whether he should wake him, feeling bad for disrupting his rest, when Tony started rustling with the blanket. So he was waking up anyways. Good, then.

But instead of waking, Tony started moaning quietly. The next moment, he was tossing and turning on the bed, arms wrapped tightly around his body, and sweat started covering his forehead. He was shaking. Nightmares. Of course.

Reed extended his hand in order to carefully wake Tony, and the moment he touched his shoulder, Tony gasped and sat up in bed, eyes wide open and unfocused, apparently completely disoriented. Reed raised his hands.

“Tony, it’s me, everything is okay!”

Tony looked at him wildly, then recognition seemed to dawn on his face. He let out a shaking breath and raised his uninjured hand to his face, running it through his hair. His breathing was slowly returning to normal. “Reed. I’m sorry.”

Reed frowned. “What for?”

“For making you see this. Nightmares… Not a big fan.” Tony smiled bitterly. Reed wanted to object – after all, nightmares were only normal, especially after having gone through the things Tony had gone through lately, but before he could get a word in, Tony continued. “And as I am already doing the ‘things I am sorry for’ list, I suppose I should also add that I am sorry for getting into trouble. That wasn’t the plan.”

“Yes, well, what was the plan, then, if you don’t mind telling me?” Reed said sternly. When he saw the look in Tony’s eyes, a somewhat hopeless look, he immediately felt bad for asking, especially in that tone of voice. But Tony didn’t give him a chance to relent.

“I wanted… Look, Reed, I went to the site of the latest Extremis attack as I am sure you’ve heard. And unfortunately, some people recognised me there, hence the concussion and this souvenir.” He indicated the bandage around his hand.

So he was simply concussed, then. Things could have gone a lot worse, on the whole, and Reed was relieved. “Okay, Tony, glad to hear it’s only a concussion. But what did you want at the site, anyways?”

Tony had shuffled into a half-sitting position and had his hands in his lap. Now he looked at them, eyebrows drawn together. “I took an energy projector with me from one of your storage rooms that I broke into – sorry, again – because I wanted to run an analysis on the workings of the Extremis probe they used.” Tony grimaced. “You know I don’t have any data anymore, but if there’s anyone
who can figure out a counter-measure, well, except for Maya” – he sounded sad and Reed recalled having heard about the death of his friend and the creator of Extremis a while back – “it’s me. I should be able to do it, Reed, I can’t just idly stand by and watch as things are going to hell.” Tony looked at Reed almost pleadingly.

And Reed understood, he really did. Of course Tony wanted to do something about Extremis being used in various terrorist attacks around the globe. Only Reed knew he wouldn’t be allowed to. He didn’t know what he was supposed to tell Tony, especially with Steve waiting outside.

Speaking of which, he should really get down to making Tony aware of the presence of the Captain.

“Let’s talk about all of that later, okay? I am not alone here.”

Tony frowned. “Someone else who wants to chastise me for not being a well-behaved inmate?”

Tony’s words stung a little, comparing his situation at the Baxter Building with being in prison, but Reed ignored them. “Something like that. Steve is here.”

Tony’s eyes widened. “Steve? But… why?” He looked positively terrified. Reed put a hand on his shoulder to soothe him.

“He’s the one who updated me on your… situation. And he isn’t exactly pleased. I think he wants to talk to both of us.”

Tony seemed to deliberately be taking long, slow breaths, probably to calm himself down. He had paled, though, and it was easy to see that he was distressed. “Okay. Where is he now?”

“Outside. Can I ask him to come in?”

Tony smiled, but it didn’t exactly look convincing. “Of course.”

Reed went to the door and motioned for Steve to get in. Steve entered the room and stopped immediately upon seeing Tony in bed.

Tony didn’t look him in the eye, but he quietly said “Hi”.

After a second, Steve seemed to get it together and came closer. He breathed out. “Hi.”

Reed looked from one man to the other. Tony had his eyes cast down and his hands fisted into the blanket. Steve looked down at him with a strange expression on his face, and the tension was palpable in the air. After a while of nothing happening, Reed sighed.

“Steve, there was something you wanted to talk about with the two of us, I think?”

Steve seemed to shake himself out of his stupor. “Yes, of course. Tony, I don’t know what you’ve been thinking, but I can’t let you go back to the Baxter Building if today is indicative of your future behaviour.”

Tony looked up at Steve, for the first time, eyes wide. “What?”

“I gave Reed here” – Steve made a jerking motion in his direction – “very clear rules, should you stay with the Fantastic Four. And you being out on probation does not mean that you can just wander about, investigate those Extremis attacks and upset people… after everything you’ve done.”
Reed swallowed. This wasn’t good. He was thinking about how he could justify taking Tony with him again when he noticed that Tony had a spark of anger in his eyes.

“So basically, what you are telling me is that by being ‘out on probation’, you mean in another prison, and Reed is supposed to be my guard?” His voice sounded tight.

Steve balled his fists. “What else did you expect, Tony? Did you expect me to make more exceptions for you?”

Tony laughed bitterly. “More exceptions? What exceptions do you fancy you have made for me, so far? Pray tell.”

Steve was bristling with anger now. Well, this was escalating quickly, Reed thought nervously. Maybe he should interject. But the words rushed out of Steve’s mouth before he had the chance to do so.

“What exceptions? Tony, do you even for a second think that if it weren’t for me intervening with the judges, you’d even be allowed to get out on probation? After everything? Do you honestly think anyone else would be inclined to cut you some slack and consider that maybe what you did wasn’t entirely your own fault? And you are making me doubt my judgment, now.”

Tony pressed his lips into a thin line and looked towards the window, as if he was dreaming of just flying away. “This is still all about the mindwipe, isn’t it.”

Okay, now, that really wasn’t good. Reed decided to intervene, even if the discussion was obviously personal and he felt like both Steve and Tony had forgotten he was in the room with them. He would probably never get the strange tension between those two men that used to call each other best friends. “Now, let’s not drag that up again. I think this… affair has been discussed intensely and isn’t relevant in this context.”

Steve turned towards him quickly and his eyes were flashing. “Richards, give us a moment.” He indicated the door.

Reed considered protesting, but Steve looked furious (Tony really shouldn’t have brought up the mindwipe), and he thought that he didn’t stand a chance anyways, and any undue resistance might rather damage Tony’s cause. So maybe complying would be the best thing to do. He crossed his arms and nodded tersely, walking out of the room.

When he had closed the door quietly behind him, he thought about what he should do. The conversation between Tony and Steve was so heated that he feared it might completely escalate. And if Tony provoked Steve even more… It might end up with Steve actually sending him back to prison.

Reed thought about how drained and, somehow, hopeless Tony seemed, and decided he could not let that happen. He had better stay by the door and listen in to the conversation, even if he felt bad about intruding on the two men’s personal affairs – but this way, he’d at least be able to do something about it should things get completely out of control.

He carefully put his ear to the door and heard Steve’s loud voice. “This is not about the mindwipe, Tony. You have done enough other things to make me not trust you even since then, believe me.”

There was a slight pause, then he heard Tony’s voice, a lot quieter. “I know.”

There was silence for a while. Then Steve started talking again.
“Tony, I don’t mean to… make this even harder on you than it has to be. But I can’t take the risk of you getting out in public again and being recognised the way you were today. People feel threatened by you.”

Tony’s voice sounded harried, but he was still keeping it down. Maybe he was even expecting him to listen in, Reed thought a bit guiltily. “Okay. And what do you intend to do about it?”

“I need to have a read on your position. We can’t have you wandering about freely, we can’t have you use Iron Man or Extremis tech, and we need to be able to intervene before something like today happens again, before you have… some other bones broken.”

Tony was talking more loudly now. “So you are telling me whatever you are doing is going to be for my protection? How selfless of you.”

Reed flinched back from the door, aghast. Did that mean that Steve wanted to fit Tony with some sort of tracker? Reducing Tony’s time out on probation effectively to some more time in a metaphorical prison?

Sure enough, he heard Steve take a few steps, and then Tony’s voice again. He sounded agitated. “And if I promise to behave?”

“I can’t count on that. Not after today.”

Tony’s voice was gradually getting louder. “And by that, you mean people questioning your authority, because you promised them to keep me locked up? That’s what this is about, isn’t it?”

“That’s neither here nor there, Tony. Hold still.”

Reed heard rustling and a faint exhale. Then silence.

A moment later there were steps moving in his direction. He quickly retreated to the opposite side of the corridor, where he draped himself on the wall in what he hoped was the most casual manner possible.

When Steve opened the door and saw him, he frowned. “Why are you doing that?”

Reed looked down at himself and realised that he had his own arm wrapped around his body numerous times. Probably not the most natural position. “I, ah, was cold, and this gets me warm again.” Reed felt his cheeks heat.

The skeptical expression didn’t leave Steve’s face, he obviously didn’t believe him, but he motioned for Reed to get into the hospital room again. Reed walked towards the bed and saw that Tony was fumbling his wrist. Upon closer examination he saw some sort of puncture. So there was a microchip there, or something of the sort…

He turned to Steve and swallowed. Maybe he could convince the man of reconsidering his course of action. “Is that…?”

“It’s a simple tracking chip, Reed. The moment Tony doesn’t hold up his end of our deal, an alarm will go off and we, the Avengers, will be there in a minute. Which means that you had better take care of him upholding the deal.” Steve looked stern.

Reed cursed inwardly. “Steve, do you really have to take such measures? I am sure Tony will… keep out of trouble’s way after today.”
Tony didn’t even seem to be paying much attention to the conversation, he simply kept on cradling his wrist. Reed felt bad for him.

Steve sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “I have to, yes. Of course I have to. You know that the Avengers have pretty much merged with S.H.I.E.L.D. And we owe them answers for what… some of our members did in the last few months.”

He looked up at Reed, and he seemed kind of sad. Maybe this really wasn’t all up to him. “It was hard enough to negotiate for the Avengers not being financially held responsible for the damage Tony caused, which could have led to us having to shut down our operations. Believe me, I don’t have a choice in this matter.”

For a moment, all three men were silent, each lost in their probably less than pleasant thoughts. Then Steve’s beeper went off. He took it out of his pocket, looked at it, then up at Reed. “I have to go. If you have any questions, let me know.”

Steve turned around and hurried out of the door, one last – guilty? – glance at Tony.

Tony had stopped fingering the tracking chip under his skin. He was just sitting in bed, staring blankly into space.
Domestic Life with Difficulties

Chapter Summary

Things are apparently fine for a while and Tony gets along well with the Fantastic Four. Until things aren't fine anymore.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to everyone who is reading this :)! Very much appreciated.

I have decided to update more or less regularly twice a week, so next update will either be Friday or Saturday. It will be a long chapter that kind of marks the middle of the story. And things will be going downwards from here.

Tony had to stay in hospital for another night – the doctors insisted on it despite much grumbling on the patient’s side. (“I am as fit as a fiddle, seriously, never felt better. I mean, come on, us superheroes basically thrive on injuries, have you ever seen me after a proper fight,” he muttered, while an exasperated nurse was trying to take his blood pressure. Reed had watched the scene and smiled.) The next morning, Sue went to pick him up as he was discharged.

Reed was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a newspaper, as Tony and Sue entered the building. They were laughing. Reed stood up to greet them and as they came nearer, he saw that Tony's eyes were lit up, the skin around them crinkling with cheerfulness. He seemed to be a lot better than the day before. That was good.

He went to his wife and kissed her, then he held his hand out to Tony, who took it with an amused glint in his eye. “Welcome back, Tony.”

“Thanks. That was more formal than I would have expected, but thanks. I am really glad to be back.”

Reed nodded, smiling. “I made some breakfast. Well, ‘made’ is maybe an exaggeration, but I put some breakfast on the table?” He indicated the table, fully set. Sue beamed at him.

“Reed, some days I feel that I am not talking at a wall after all when I tell you to make an effort in the household. But you’re probably just doing it because you want to make a good impression in front of Tony.”

Reed opened his mouth to protest, slightly hurt. But Sue just grinned and shook her head, giving him a peck on the cheek. Tony had already gone into the kitchen and started cutting up bread.

Over the next half an hour, the rest of the family slowly came together in the kitchen, Franklin still star-struck and staring at Tony. Reed was thinking about his projects and only half paying attention to his family, and Tony was entertaining everyone with a story about an old mission Iron Man botched because Tony Stark was supposed to be at some important charity function and couldn’t
sneak off. Which apparently hadn’t kept him from trying in rather imaginative and amusing manners. Tony seemed to be intent on not talking about his changed situation, so Reed was glad to let it rest. He did catch him fingering the place where he knew the tracker was and looking a bit forlorn several times, though.

All of a sudden, Reed’s communicator started going off. He took it out of the pocket and frowned down at the display. It showed him a warning – apparently something big was digging its way into Manhattan. This didn’t look good. But at least some of the Avengers were apparently already on scene.

Reed turned to his teammates. “There’s an alert and we are required to be on site. I am not sure what it is yet, but first analyses point to… the Mole Man?” Reed couldn’t keep himself from sighing. He had thought that Harvey had calmed down a bit of late, but maybe not.

“Can’t I finish my eggs first?” Johnny moaned. “It won’t be the end of the world, and even if it is, I’d prefer to die with my stomach full, let the Avengers handle the crazy for once…”

Tony snorted and murmured, “for once, right.”

Ben jabbed Johnny in the ribs with one of his enormous hands affectionately. “Come on, hothead, off we go. Suzie, you good?”

Sue had already activated the nanites of her costume to go into battle mode, and was checking updates on her own communicator. She looked up sharply. “Ok, whoever it is seems to have started attacking civilians. Let’s leave.”

Reed nodded and turned to go when he noticed Tony standing at the table, seemingly frozen in space. His hand was clutching his wrist. Oh, he had forgotten about that.

Sue, however, was faster than him, as usual. “Tony, could you look after Franklin until we’re back?” She shot him an apologetic look.

Tony nodded, even though he didn’t look happy. “Alright. But you’d better come back. Fast. I’ll be teaching Franklin the basic principles of engineering, Reed, slowly indoctrinating him. And you don’t want one of those dirty practical scientists as your son, do you. Hurry.”

Reed nodded (always jokes with Tony), kissed Franklin on the head and walked out.

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When they got back home, hours later, they were all exhausted. Harvey had seen reason, but only after a rather lively (and muddy) fight. Sue deactivated the Building’s defenses and Reed ambled in. He helped along Johnny, who had sprained his ankle. All in all, things had gone well.

As soon as they had crossed the threshold, Tony briskly walked towards them. They had let him know via communicator that they were all okay, but Tony still looked visibly relieved at seeing them back home.

Sue gave him a half-hug, then slunk past, in the direction of the elevator. “Got off easy, T,” Ben grumbled. Tony and Johnny did some strange greeting where they high-fived each other and bumped their fists. Reed shook his head slightly, bemused. When had that happened?

Then Tony turned to him and grinned. He extended his hand and carefully wiped Reed’s cheek. When Reed looked down at it, it was besmirched with some brown stuff, he didn’t exactly want to know what it was. Oh well. “Shitty day?”
Johnny chuckled. “Reed, maybe Tones could be your new housewife, waiting on you when you’re on missions and cleaning you up when you get back and the like?”

Reed made a defensive gesture and felt his cheeks redden. Tony just kept on grinning, turning to Johnny, and said “Hey, no reason to be jealous, I can clean you up too, if you like.”

“Eurgh, not cool,” Johnny exclaimed, expressively sticking his finger into his throat. At that precise moment, there was the sound of glass shattering. Tony looked up guiltily.

Franklin came running – no, half floating down the stairs. Upon closer examination, Reed saw that his son had two tiny repulsors strapped to his hands and some others apparently glued to his shoes. He turned to Tony sternly.

Tony raised his hands in defense. “Before you ask, it’s not real repulsors, they don’t discharge any heat, they are basically just… cosmetic? I mean, I wouldn’t give him real repulsors, not even I am that irresponsible. And I just quickly made them out of spare parts you kept in a cupboard on the corridor.”

Tony gave Reed his most charming lopsided grin while his son was racing through the hallway, screaming “MAAANDARIIN!!! I’LL GEEET YOUUU!!!” at the top of his lungs.

Reed pinched the bridge of his nose when a Chinese vase shattered in the wake of Franklin’s chase. But he couldn’t help smiling fondly, if a little exasperatedly. Tony seemed to get along really well with his family. And maybe that was worth some broken furniture.

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Reed had gone to bed early, exhausted from the fighting and negotiating – Harvey really wanted the Moloids to have seats on the city council, how on earth should he accomplish that – and consequently, the sun had barely risen when he woke up again. Slowly, he made his way downstairs.

When he heard laughter from the kitchen, he frowned a little. The door was half-open; through the gap he saw Tony preparing breakfast, Sue standing beside him, the two of them apparently sharing a joke. Sue was almost doubled over with laughter. There was a little twist in Reed’s stomach at the sight of her this light-hearted.

Suddenly, Tony turned around and noticed him. He gave him a little wave, still smiling.

“Oh, hi, Reed, I haven’t really slept, hence I thought I should make myself useful.”

Sue straightened back up, wiping her hands over her eyes, and came to him to give him a kiss. “Oh Reed, I love those chess-stories, did you really lose to Tony in chess once because he drew your attention to the fact that your win-loss ratio wasn’t perfectly even, and it started bugging you?”

Reed smiled reluctantly. He remembered that game, yes, at the very beginning of their friendship, when he wasn’t yet used to Tony’s tricks and banter. And he had actually lost on one board deliberately back then to even the score. Which still amused Tony, apparently, and now his wife as well.

He cupped Sue’s face to give her a good morning kiss when both their beepers went off at the same time. Sue sighed loudly. “Seriously, are you kidding me?”

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Reed was trying to get a good look at the results of the spectral analysis of what the hell was going on downtown when a massive blast almost hit him. For at least the second time during that fight, Sue only narrowly saved him by projecting an energy bubble around him. Reed wiped his forehead and felt his own hand shaking. This really wasn’t good.

There was a group of... superpowered individuals that were levelling whole city blocks at a time. Bodies were littered about the street. No one had yet taken responsibility for the attack. Everything pointed to the attackers’ biology having been altered with Extremis. That made this the second Extremis attack in New York in two days. And Reed was in over his head. He had never seen the code for Extremis, so he couldn’t judge what alterations had been made.

He had been trying to get some up-to-date readings to send to Tony, but whenever he got even close to obtaining the necessary data he almost got burned or shot or killed in some other painful way. He fiddled with the spectrometer when he suddenly heard Sue scream.

Reed looked up sharply from behind the car where he was cowering and saw his wife getting hit by a fire blast. He didn’t know why she had not been able to protect herself, but without thinking much, he jumped up from behind the car.

Johnny was already hurrying towards where Sue had fallen, and Reed tried to keep up, almost stumbling over a lifeless body on the ground, but suddenly, everything around them shook. A black cloud erupted before him and Reed lost sight of Johnny, not without hearing him scream in pain. He got showered in pieces of concrete and felt his uniform rip at the chest.

Reed coughed and desperately tried to get up again, but before he got very far, he felt something big hit him on the head. Then everything faded to black.

***

When Reed woke up again, he heard a faint beeping sound. Then he heard murmuring.

He tried to open his eyes, but his head still hurt too much. So he settled for just keeping them closed, trying to acoustically make sense of the world around him. After a while, though, he drifted off again.

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The second time he woke up, he felt someone holding his hand. Carefully, he opened his eyes and saw Sue sitting by his bedside. She looked a little worse for wear, still in her uniform that was torn at the shoulder, but she seemed to be fine. Reed sighed with relief.

Sue flinched and turned to him. When she saw he was awake, she immediately bent down and kissed him. So he hadn’t been the only person to worry, then. When she drew back again, Reed saw that her eyes were wet.

Reed smiled weakly. “Darling, I am fine, don’t worry.”

Sue took a shaking breath and shook her head slightly. “It’s not you.”

Reed froze. What...

Before he could ask, the door opened and Carol Danvers walked in. When she saw Reed half sitting up in bed, she smiled warmly. “Good to see you awake again, Doctor.”

Reed just nodded – he was too preoccupied with what his wife had suggested. He turned to look at
her imploringly.

Sue rubbed her eyes. “Carol, I was just about to tell Reed about… you know. Could you give us a moment?”

Carol sighed and looked down at the floor. “I’d love to, but I got another alarm of an attack coming in, and the virus is apparently spreading. This is a whole new level of bad. I just need to talk to Reed for a moment and ask his expertise.”

*The virus is spreading.* They had to be talking about Extremis. But the virus spreading to other people, therefore effectively being used as a bio-weapon, was new. So far, the people dying in the Extremis attacks had directly been killed by enhanced individuals…

Reed knew that Tony had feared an airborne version of Extremis for years. With the mortality rates that the full version of Extremis had, it being released into the environment could have devastating effects within a very short time span. But he wasn’t the person to talk to about this.

“Carol, I don’t know why you need my expertise, you should talk to Tony. This is his area, he has been working with Extremis for years. Also, it is a biological coding language. You need an engineer or a biologist or something similar, not a physicist.” Of course Reed was well aware of the fact that he was a very skilled coder himself, but he believed what he said – Tony was better, and he knew Extremis.

Carol ran her hands through her hair. “I wish I could talk to him. But S.H.I.E.L.D. doesn’t trust him.” A lot more quietly, she added “and some members of our team don’t trust him either, what with…”

She left the rest unsaid, but of course Reed knew that she was alluding to Tony’s… instability in the last few months. “He’s stable now. There’s no reason to leave him out of the process,” Reed objected, frowning.

“Exactly. Tony has been with us for a few days now and he has been behaving in a perfectly normal manner.” Sue had crossed her arms and looked at Carol defiantly. (Reed thought about Tony’s slightly manic behaviour, not sleeping enough, but he kept his mouth firmly shut.)

Carol looked from Sue to Reed and back again. “I believe you. But this isn’t a matter of personal opinion. I am quite simply not allowed to include him in this. He has to face trial for what has happened, and until he is cleared of the charges, Tony can’t officially be involved in any matters of national security.” She looked down at the floor, suddenly sounding tired. “I wish I could change it, I really do, but Steve…”

“He what?” They all startled as Steve, hair standing up in all directions and looking rather roughed up, stuck his head around the corner. They must look like a group of kids caught misbehaving, Reed thought uneasily. It shouldn’t be this way.

Carol opened her mouth, but Reed interjected. “Steve, where is Tony now?”

Steve frowned as he came fully into the room. “At the Baxter Building, I presume. At least the alarm hasn’t gone off. Good to see you with us again, Doctor Richards. Carol, Sue.” He nodded at each of them in turn, giving them a small smile.

Sue ignored the greeting, eyes flashing dangerously. Reed flinched a little, even though the anger wasn’t directed at him. But an angry Sue was a force of nature. Her nerves must be worn rather thin if she snapped at Steve, whom she usually liked well enough, he thought. “Why have you not
allowed Tony to come here?”

Steve shook his head, unperturbed. “Sue, you know what the deal was. After what happened last week, Tony has to keep his head down. It’s just for a while. Maybe they will be okay with the tracker being removed soon, if he stays in line.”

“Maybe? What do we do if not?” Carol sounded agitated as well. Of course, she and Tony were rather good friends.

“This is hardly the most pressing matter here.” Both Carol and Sue looked as if they were about to object, but Steve simply kept on talking. “Reed, I need you to analyse those samples as soon as possible. They come from infected individuals. We have to find a cure, some sort of counter-measure, before they reach the final stages.”

Reed stared. “The final stages?”

There was something like pity in Steve’s eyes. “I am sorry about Johnny and Ben, Reed. But their infection hasn’t progressed that far yet. They still stand a chance. We just have to…”

“Johnny and Ben?” Reed felt something ice cold in his stomach. He turned to Sue, who took his hand.

“Steve, I hadn’t even told him yet, he just woke up.”

Steve flinched. “I am sorry. I didn’t realise.”

“I’m sure you didn’t.” Sue looked annoyed, but when she turned to look at Reed again, her eyes softened. Her voice sounded choked. “Ben and Johnny got infected during the attack today. They are in intensive care, both in an artificial coma to slow down the disease. No one knows exactly what the virus does at this point, but… there have been casualties, quite a few casualties. It progresses fast.” She squeezed his hand.

Something in Reed’s head seemed to short-circuit. He heard the others continue to talk, but he couldn’t understand anymore. Ben and Johnny. Ben and Johnny. Both of them were at the hospital. Maybe dying right now.

He had to get to work now.
Chapter Summary

After the latest developments, no one is coping well. And then there's another attack.

A few hours later Sue and Reed were on the way back to the Baxter Building. Reed felt drained. After visiting Johnny and Ben – both unconscious, breathing shallowly, apparently suffering from internal bleeding – he had spent a while in the laboratories of the helicarrier, trying to analyse the genetic material. But it was… hard, because the infected DNA seemed to be constantly evolving, even in the seemingly dead cellular material. Reed had never seen anything like it.

At least he had found out that the virus was airborne, but only survived in normal air for up to a few seconds. Which meant that not as many people as he had originally feared were exposed to it during the attack. Still, the images of the site of attack, littered with the bodies of the people whose immune system couldn’t resist at all, whose internal organs simply combusted… He shook his head, trying to clear it (but there was still the image of Ben and Johnny in bed, unmoving. He really had to get that out of his head if he was to do his work).

Sue, who had spent the time helping Carol organize emergency evacuations, wrapped one arm around him and gave him a sad smile. “So, how many planes do you reckon Tony has built for Franklin while we were gone? Not paper planes, the real ones.”

Reed squeezed her arm and smiled back, recognising the attempt at lightening the mood. “Don’t worry, I think he at most made him an Iron Man suit, or two.”

They walked in silence for a moment, then Sue spoke up. “Have you actually called to tell him about the situation?”

Reed frowned. No, he had not, he had presumed that Sue had gotten in touch with him while he was still unconscious, and also, what with everyone at S.H.I.E.L.D. being so wary of him… Sue’s eyes were wide. “Oh God. He must be so worried.”

When they entered the Baxter Building they immediately saw Franklin, jumping up and down on what looked like… a malleable mountain of green foam. Reed and Sue stopped dead in their tracks and stared. They heard the sploshing sounds Franklin’s feet made whenever he hit the… foamy thingy, being propelled incredibly highly into the air, almost able to touch the vaulted ceiling of the entrance hall.

After two more jumps, Franklin noticed them, and slid down the huge… thing to greet them. Reed was at a complete loss as to what was going on. Franklin, however, was beaming. “Muum, Daad, Uncle Tony promised to build me a real Iron Man suit when I’m older. And when he has money again, he said. He said that shouldn’t take long.”

Sue gathered Franklin into a hug and kissed him on his head. “Well, darling, Uncle Tony says a lot of things.”

There were fast footsteps, and when they looked up, Tony was basically skidding round the corner (and almost slipping on some of the green… stuff). His face was set into an expression of anxiety.
When he saw them, relief washed over his features. “Sue, Reed… there you are. I heard about the attack going badly, and I was so… worried…” He frowned and looked around, taking in the whole scene (Franklin had skipped away again, all but rolling around in the green goo). “Where are Ben and Johnny?”

Sue hugged Tony, which seemed to worry him even more. His expression, eyes wide and confused, would have been rather amusing, had the situation not been anything but. “Sue? What −?”

She drew back but kept her hands on Tony’s shoulders. “They… Tony, they are at the hospital.”


“They got infected. With Extremis.”

Tony took a step back, as if hit, eyes even wider. “What…”

Reed sighed and started rummaging around in his pocket. “They turned Extremis into an airborne virus, using it as a bioweapon in the attacks. We don’t know who is behind it yet. But the death toll is… impressive.”

He had found the sheet on which he had summarised his scientific analysis of the cellular tissue, knowing full well that S.H.I.E.L.D wouldn’t let him take any digital data with him (especially not with Tony staying at the Baxter Building). Tony took it, looking a bit dazed. He glanced down, but didn’t really seem to see the calculations, immediately looking up at him and Sue again. “How… is their condition?”

Sue exhaled slowly. Her eyes were full of sadness. “They are bleeding internally, their organs seem to be collapsing upon themselves, but the illness seems to progress rather slowly… in their case. So far.”

Tony nodded, lips pressed into a thin line, and started studying the notes Reed had given him. Reed looked over his shoulder. “The parameter of the analysis was insufficient for a conclusive mapping of the atomic structure, but what I saw indicates…”

Sue smiled faintly, then interrupted. “Before you disappear into your science world, which I am very in favour of, particularly in this case: What on earth is that, Tony?” She indicated the green mountain.

Tony looked up distractedly. “That? Oh, that’s just an acid anhydride compound I cooked up. I took some of your supplies, Reed, sorry, but I just made it in the kitchen, so not in your lab. Don’t worry, it’ll dissolve at the latest in a few hours. I cleaned up the pans.”

Sue sighed theatrically. “Okay. A few hours with a green goo mountain in the entrance hall. And you cleaned up my kitchen. Whatever. I’ll leave you to it.”

Reed wasn’t really listening anymore, deep in thought about the strange viral attack and possible counter measures already.

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Tony and Reed spent the next hours cooped up in the lab, trying to copy the molecular structure Reed had tried to map with samples, and running tests. Tony, who still had the structure of classical Extremis and the core code in his head, was able to give them the basis for their research.

As Reed had known, classical Extremis had about a 99% death rate; the body reacted with the
evolution of a cocoon in which the modifications to the cellular structure and the repair center specifically took place. But the version used in the terrorist attacks had been greatly modified. However, it seemed that the modifications rather worked as add-ons to the code, which pointed to whoever had meddled with Extremis not fully having cracked the core sequence yet.

It was hard to figure out how exactly this version affected the human body without actual samples. There were no cocoons, they knew as much. And thankfully, the virus did not seem to be transmissible from person to person after contraction.

Reed progressively got a headache, and after about 6 hours of continuous work on top of what he had already done, he decided to call it a day. The fact that he had taken a hit on the head probably didn’t help. He told Tony as much; Tony just nodded and kept on working, so Reed assumed that he wouldn’t be joining him in going upstairs, and shuffled out of the lab.

He and Sue ate a simple little dinner. Franklin had already gone to bed. They had told him that Ben and Johnny were still at the hospital, but without revealing the gravity of the situation. On that front, there were no real news; Ben and Johnny seemed to be in a similar state to the one they had left them in.

Sue seemed to feel just as drained as Reed, having done some more catastrophe management on top of visiting Ben and Johnny in the hospital, so they didn’t talk much. Reed was just very glad to have someone sitting beside him, a warm, reassuring presence.

In bed, Reed wrapped his arms around Sue and buried his face in her nape. He slept fitfully.

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In the very early hours of the morning, Reed woke up after a particularly vivid nightmare replaying the attack, with the bodies littering the street. He exhaled slowly, trying to calm himself down, but now the image of Ben and Johnny on the hospital beds, still as death, was hovering before him. Maybe he should work some more on a cure. But no, he had to get some sleep, or his work wouldn’t be up to scratch. But he couldn’t sleep if he was upset…

He rubbed his eyes and decided to go and get a glass of water, hoping to get rid of his circular thoughts. Sue only stirred a little when he got up, but didn’t wake.

When he was in the kitchen, glass of water in hand, he suddenly heard the sound of something breaking downstairs. He frowned. He didn’t think it was someone who had broken into the Baxter Building – after all, he had designed the defenses, and just updated them recently, and he had utter faith in his own ability to write security programs. So it had to be…

When he reached the bottom of the stairs, his suspicion was confirmed. Tony was standing in the middle of the dimly lit lab, hands balled into fists, back heaving. There were shards of glass all around him. The door to the lab was closed.

Reed stared for a moment, feeling uncomfortable. Tony was obviously having a moment of weakness he didn’t necessarily want anyone else to see, and maybe he had better respect that. But then again, if he had already gotten to the point where he was smashing cups…

Reed made up his mind and knocked on the glass door to get Tony’s attention.

Tony flinched and turned around quickly. When he saw Reed, he grimaced. Reluctantly, he walked over to the door to open it (not that Reed wouldn’t have gotten in otherwise, but he thought it was more considerate to wait in this situation. Sue had taught him certain social rules after all).
Tony didn’t say anything. After opening the door, he immediately turned his back on Reed and walked over to a cupboard. When he turned around again, he had a broom in hand. Still avoiding Reed’s eyes, he went about cleaning up the shards on the floor. Reed saw that his hand was glistening red. He frowned.

“Tony, you cut yourself.”

Tony looked down at his hand for a moment, then he gave Reed a half-shrug, still not quite looking at him. “It’s nothing. It’ll heal.”

Reed shook his head in exasperation. He was tired, still half-stuck in those terrible dreams, and getting a bit impatient. “You should bandage that.”

Another half-shrug. “Okay, I will.”

So this was shaping up to be rather difficult. Reed was rubbing his eyes and for a moment considered just leaving, going back to bed. But that would not do. There was no use in denying it, he had to ask Tony what was going on. “Why did you smash that glass?”

Tony looked up at him, now, disbelievingly. His eyes looked a bit glassy. “Why? Well, of course because the search for a cure is going so very well!”

Reed recognised the sarcasm, but he wasn’t up for Tony’s games. “And you think the right way of going about this is locking yourself into my lab, not sleeping and smashing crockery?”

Tony grimaced again, but he didn’t reply. He simply kept on sweeping up the shards.

Reed sighed. “Tony, this is not helping. What do you want me to do?”

“What do I want you to do?” Tony laughed, but it sounded hollow. “I don’t want you to do anything, Reed. I want to be able to work freely in order to find a cure for… the fallout of the Extremis crisis created. I– I want Ben and Johnny to live.” He paused. “And I want a drink,” he added quietly, almost as an afterthought.

Reed flinched. So Tony wanted to drink again… of course. He knew that while his mind had been addled, Tony had gone back to being a full-blown high-functioning alcoholic. It had been hard to see his friend relapse like that, even if he kept on telling everyone he was perfectly fine. Reed didn’t quite know what to say now. Of course he could not let Tony drink again, and thankfully, he didn’t keep any alcohol in his lab. He settled for just making a non-committal sound.

Tony didn’t react, he simply kept on staring into space, eyes empty, broom momentarily forgotten.

Reed was casting around for something else to say, something to soothe Tony, to make him go to bed instead of indulging in this self-destructive behaviour. He thought back to their conversation a few days ago, when he hadn’t shown Tony the support he should maybe have shown him, and even though his nerves were wearing thin he tried to do better this time. “You didn’t create the crisis, Tony. We don’t yet know who is doing it, but this is a strongly altered version of Extremis, and not…”

Tony laughed again, and it didn’t sound any more cheerful than before. Reed insisted. “I am serious, blaming yourself isn’t helping, and it isn’t justified.”

Tony looked up at Reed and his eyes flashed dangerously. “Don’t give me that bullshit, please. Of course it is my fault. And I am pretty sure I know who is behind the attacks. I sold the stuff to Viper, Reed, because I fancied myself superior enough to protect the code with a clever encryption.
Which HYDRA of course at least partly cracked. And without proper samples and free access to a lab I don’t stand a chance of solving this.”

Reed’s thoughts stuttered. Tony sold Extremis to HYDRA. He had not mentioned that before. That was bad. That was very bad. How… And now Johnny and Ben were at the hospital, dying… Reed felt anger rise within him, and almost despite himself he blurted out: “You sold Extremis to HYDRA? Why would you do that!!”

He felt bad the moment the words had left his mouth because Tony… broke. There was no other word for it. He took a step backwards as if hit, practically crumbling against the wall, and started to pull on his hair, smearing blood from his cut onto his forehead. His apparent anger from moments before was replaced by a sense of desperation that was coming off him in waves.

Reed flinched at the violence of the reaction. Any overt displays of emotion made him feel deeply uncomfortable, but this was something else entirely, and he had caused it. He had better fix it as well.

Reed took two quick steps over to where Tony was standing and put his hand on his shoulder. “Hey, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that.”

Tony looked at him, eyes thankfully dry, but feverish. “Yes, you did, and you are completely right. Why would anyone do that. How could I be such an idiot…” He had started massaging his temples and Reed saw that his knuckles were white from tension; he was probably hurting himself if he applied that much force.

But before Reed could try to calm him down, he heard footsteps. Tony shuffled away from Reed, quickly swiped his hand over his eyes, and then there was Sue in the door, looking sleepy.

“What are you two up to?” She looked at the shards on the floor and her eyes became a bit more alert. “Tony? Reed?”

Reed cleared his throat. “Nothing, dear, Tony just wanted to show me some equations.” Tony nodded eagerly, taking the broom in hand again to finish cleaning up.

Sue frowned at Tony, whose forehead was still bloody. She obviously didn’t believe them, but instead of questioning the story, she went over to Tony, took the broom out of his hand and finished sweeping up in two quick strokes. She transported the shards into the bin by force field. Tony let her, standing there with his shoulders hunched and his arms hanging, apparently lost in gloomy thoughts again.

When she was done, Sue unceremoniously took Tony by his uninjured hand and led him over to the sink. She let the water run and held Tony’s hand under it, carefully cleaning the cut of any remnants of the glass that might have gotten stuck there. “When did you last really sleep, Tony?” she asked gently.

“What?” He looked up dazedly. “I don’t know, a few days ago...“

Sue had finished cleaning the hand and carefully wrapped a clean towel around it (Reed felt warm in his chest at seeing his wife like that, always able to handle difficult situations). Then she gave Tony a serious look. “You need to sleep more, you know.”

Tony gave her a little smile in return. “Ok, Mum.”

Sue ignored the teasing and turned to Reed. “And that goes for you as well, dearest husband of mine.” Reed withered under her stern glare, which made Sue smile. She came over to him and
wrapped him in a hug, whispering into his ear. “I don’t know what is going on here, but you should have involved me in this. And now, let’s get Tony to bed.”

Reed nodded gratefully. Sue took Tony by the hand – it was an indication of how out of it he was that he didn’t even protest – and led him to the door, Reed following behind.

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Reed woke later in the morning, alone in bed and feeling shattered. It had been a short night, even shorter for Sue, apparently.

Once they’d been back in their bed Reed had told Sue what had happened. She had looked concerned and said he needed to watch out for erratic behavior in Tony, which he knew, but it didn’t make it any easier. They were both on edge because of Johnny and Ben already, there simply wasn’t much space in their heads left for dealing with other problems.

When Reed went downstairs to get coffee to at least make his start into the day a little better, he suddenly felt the floor shake a little. He frowned. Maybe there was some heavy construction work going on somewhere close.

Then all hell broke loose.

The entrance hall before him was suddenly… gone. Instead, there was a huge tank, firing into the Building. The noise was deafening. Reed saw the wall behind him crumble and lunged across the stairway.

When he got up again, fervently typing into his portable bridge to the house’s computer systems in order to activate extra defenses and call the Avengers, he saw Sue hurrying out of the kitchen, a force field raised in front of her, and Tony following suit, eyes wide. They got thrown backwards by another cascade of fire from the tank.

Reed cursed. What the hell were they firing with? Sue’s fields were extremely strong – whoever was attacking them had to have special ammunition. And that wasn’t good.

When Sue had gotten up again – Tony was still out of sight – she looked extremely angry. With a flick of her hand, the tank started rolling backwards, pushed by an invisible field. But before it had gotten very far, a second tank came from behind and started firing. Sue threw up her other hand, trying to contain the fire, but then steel-clad people started jumping out of the first tank, firing at Sue from all angles with some sort of machine guns. They were wearing HYDRA-uniforms.

Reed caught himself looking around for Ben and Johnny, and then realized that it was futile. Something curled in the pit of his stomach. They were the Fantastic Four, a well-rehearsed team – they were nearly unbeatable with their normal line-up, but like that? Two people with powers, one of them hardly the greatest asset in a purely physical fight (Reed was well aware of his weaknesses)?

Finally, he had activated the plasma guns in the hall and aimed them on the attackers. He fired. A lot of them went down in the first round of shots, and Reed turned the guns around to try and stop the tanks.

But apparently, someone had realized that this was his doing, and the tanks turned around to fire on him. He cursed once more and tried to find shelter behind a statue of the Fantastic Four right after their inception, but all to no avail. The statue crumbled in a second and Reed caught some sort of blast in the chest. He got smashed into the wall and coughed up blood.
When he found he could move again, or in fact still move, he realized that this clearly hadn’t been lethal ammunition. So what… Then he looked down at his hand and saw the controller in his hand. It was charred and obviously not functional anymore. Some sort of EMP then.

Reed swallowed and looked up to see his wife still keeping the tanks at bay, face screwed up with effort. Tony, meanwhile, was in the background, right next to the door, typing away at the control panel there. Thank God, maybe he could crack the encryption and control the building’s defenses manually in his stead. “Tony!” he yelled. Tony turned to look at him, terror written all over his face (he probably missed his suit… If only Tony had his suit…). “The access code…” But before he could get it out, there was another enormous blast and the rest of the stairway crumbled. Reed landed in a heap on the floor, feeling dazed. His ears were ringing, drowning out every other sound of the fight. Everything seemed to happen very slowly.

Then he saw the opening of a canon right over his head. So that was it, then.

He turned his head away, very slowly, he felt, in order not to see the fire sure to come from the canon in a matter of seconds. From his tilted point of view, he saw Sue, turning her head to look at him in slow motion, opening her mouth in a silent scream. She broke one of her force fields, making a jerking motion with her arm, to conjure another one over him.

Then time suddenly seemed to speed up again, as if someone had let an elastic spring. Someone Reed couldn’t quite make out had gotten out of one of the tanks in the background (when had so many of them arrived?). There was a whirring sound, and Sue, who still had at least half of her attention on him, got picked out of the air as if she were some sort of puppet. Reed tried to sit up and saw that she was caught up in mid-air in some sort of metal harness that apparently prevented her from using her powers. She looked at him, saw that he was okay, then turned her furious glare on the person in front of her.

At that precise moment, Tony had apparently managed to crack the defense system (so fast, maybe Reed should look into an upgrade after all) and aimed the nano blasters on their attackers. But he didn’t fire, obviously aware of the fact that they had Sue in their power and firing now would seriously endanger her. Reed exhaled slowly.

He was standing on unsteady feet now and saw that the person standing next to the incapacitated Sue was Viper. Hardly a surprise. Viper had a sardonic smile on her face and was looking at Tony, whose teeth were clenched, poised to attack with the canons, but still hesitating.

“Well, well, Tony, good to see you again. Good to see that you are aware of the fact that the slightest movement on your part will lead to me… incapacitating the lovely Ms. Storm even more thoroughly.” She made a slicing motion over her throat with her finger.

Tony’s lips were pressed into a thin line, but he didn’t answer. Reed spoke up. His voice was shaking a little. “What do you want?”

Viper turned to him, still smiling in her unpleasant manner. “We simply require the… assistance of Mr. Stark. If he comes with us without resistance now, we will let you and your wife live. After all, you might become… useful for us at some later point.”

Reed swallowed, looking at Tony. Tony’s fingers were still hovering over the keyboard, but when he caught Reed’s eye, he let his arm drop. “Are you still mad about our last date, Viper?” His voice sounded tight.

Viper took two steps in his direction, and Reed saw Tony tense. “About that? Oh no, Tony, dearest, you’ll have a lot of time to make up for that. So, what do you say?”
Tony looked from Reed to Sue and back. Sue shook her head, but Reed couldn’t bring himself to do the same. He didn’t want Tony to turn himself in, of course he didn’t, but… what if they really ended up harming Sue?

“I have to confess, I am tempted. But tell me more about that lovely time with me you have in mind. Will it involve picnics?” Tony said nonchalantly. He was obviously playing for time, hoping for the Avengers to arrive, but Viper wasn’t fooled.

She made a clacking noise with her tongue. “You know I’m not an idiot, right? Make your choice in the next, ah, 10 seconds. Or Ms. Storm shall suffer the consequences.”

Tony cast his eyes down. Then he walked towards Viper, holding his hands out. Sue yelled “No, Tony,” but he didn’t pay her any attention.

When he had reached her, Viper pulled a pair of handcuffs out of a back pocket. She grabbed Tony by the arms and turned him around, cuffing his wrists behind his back. Then she grabbed the cuffs and pushed Tony into the nearest tank. The goons got into the other tanks and immediately started driving off at a breathtaking speed – they must have modified the heavy tanks somehow. Viper made a mocking little curtsey in Reed’s direction. “Thank you for your cooperation, Doctor.” Then she got into the last tank herself.

The metal bands that held Sue in mid-air snapped and she crumbled on the floor. Reed saw Viper’s hand out of the window of the tank, catching the harness in one fluid motion. He hurried to his wife as the last tank left the building, helping her up.

Sue got up shakily, looking at Reed with wide eyes. Reed bit his lip.

The entrance hall was in shambles, fuming debris everywhere. And Tony was gone.
Chapter Summary

Steve and Reed have to go on a rescue mission together. If only they were capable of communicating properly. And who might they need to save?

Moments later, the Avengers appeared on scene. Carol touched down in the middle of the hall first, eyes wide at the destruction that met her sight. Sue hurried towards her.

“Carol, we have a problem. HYDRA took Tony.”


Reed cleared his throat. “They didn’t exactly walk, as you can see. They managed to override the security systems through pure force.”

Carol shook her head disbelievingly as a larger group of Avengers dismounted the Quinjet that had landed in front of the building. Steve was walking towards them at a brisk pace. “What happened here? Reed, Sue? Are you okay?” He looked worried.

Sue crossed her arms, apparently still not very happy with Steve. “We are okay, Steve, but HYDRA took Tony.”


“Probably because he made good pals with them in the last few months,” Hawkeye murmured. He was standing in the background, polishing his bow. Reed flinched a little at the hostile tone of voice. He knew that Clint and Tony hadn’t really seen eye to eye while Tony had been in his superior phase, but still…

To his surprise, Steve turned around and snapped. “Clint, keep out of this. Sue, Reed, I need to know the details of what happened. And we need to pursue HYDRA asap. Let me run an analysis…”

He pulled a little device out of his pocket and started typing into it. Reed frowned, not sure what was going on. A moment later, however, Steve looked up. “We should have Tony’s location in a matter of minutes.”

Reed stared. And then something in his mind clicked. Of course. The tracker that Steve had implanted in Tony’s wrist. Why hadn’t he thought of that earlier? This was going to be a huge help; it might even save Tony’s life. If they were fast and HYDRA didn’t discover the chip’s existence.

Steve was already talking into a communicator, apparently coordinating his team, while Sue had started absent-mindedly cleaning the hall of debris with her force fields. Carol was talking to her quickly, and Sue looked a little relieved. When she saw Reed watching her, she called over, “No change in Johnny’s and Ben’s health state, for now. Which is good news in my book.”

Reed smiled. That was at least one good bit of information amongst all the terrible things that had
gone down lately. But they had to find a cure. And without Tony he might run out of time…

He tipped on Steve’s shoulder, and Steve interrupted a conversation with Black Widow. “Yes?”

“Steve, we need to be aware of why they took Tony. I am pretty sure they need him for modifications to Extremis,” Reed said, taking in Steve’s appearance and seeing the dark circles under his eyes. Apparently he was another man not getting enough sleep of late. Sure enough, the Captain started rubbing his eyes a moment later.

“That means that for the time being, he is going to be useful for HYDRA. They aren’t going to kill him right away. That gives us a window that we have to take advantage of. Do you want in on the mission?”

Reed swallowed. In a way, he felt compelled to stay back to always be up to date on Ben’s and Johnny’s state, but… He felt responsible for Tony being taken in the first place, from his home that was supposed to be a safe haven. And he could hopefully speed up the mission with his know-how. Also, Sue could keep him updated…

Steve seemed to notice his hesitation and interrupted his thoughts. “It’s no problem if you want to stay here, Reed. I can take some battle-tested Avengers with me, there shouldn’t be a problem.”

Battle-tested? Reed frowned. That sounded like Steve was planning on simply walking into HYDRA’s lair and tearing it down. And that might not be the best option, considering Tony was in there… He cleared his throat. “Steve, are you sure it’s the best idea to just storm there in battle mode?”

Steve stared at him for a moment, then he made an exasperated sound and rolled his eyes. “I am not an idiot. I wasn’t planning on driving over there with some tanks of my own without taking into consideration Tony’s wellbeing.”

Okay, that was good. Reed tried to smile apologetically, and probably failed at it, but he hastened to fill the awkward pause. “Yes, of course. I would like to join the mission, if you don’t mind. I’ve had some… tussles with HYDRA before, I know their tech quite well, I think I could be of help. Also…”

He swallowed again, considering telling Steve about his twinges of remorse. But he decided against it – maybe it wasn’t the best idea to show such weakness when they were about to depart on a mission together.

But Steve surprised him for the second time by putting his hand on Reed’s shoulder (Reed flinched a little, because he was so very surprised at the act – this was the most friendship-like Steve had behaved around him in a long time). “I understand. You’re not the only one feeling bad about what happened. We will get him back, Reed.”

And with that, Steve squeezed his shoulder a little, then turned around and started fiddling with his communicator again. Reed stood frozen on the spot for a moment longer – how had Steve managed to see through him so quickly? – then he shook his head and turned around to head over to Sue and discuss the plans with her.

At that moment, Reed’s alarm went off. He looked at his beeper, confused, and saw all of the assembled Avengers doing the same.

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Reed was sitting in the Quinjet next to Steve, who was checking the computer for the location they
were headed to. If the tracker was working correctly, HYDRA had opened a base somewhere outside Jersey City and taken Tony there, probably at least partly driving through the canalisation, and then some secret tunnels, as they had quickly found out when sending out some Avengers to scout. Why did organisations like HYDRA always have secret tunnels, Reed thought tiredly. If Tony didn’t have the tracker implanted in his wrist, they’d have a real problem now.

Steve shot him a quick look. “We should be there in about 10 minutes.”

Reed nodded, jaw set.

They were alone in the Jet, because another Extremis attack had taken place in New York just as they wanted to leave. It was bigger in scale than what they’d seen before, and Steve had quickly made the decision to dispatch all the members of his team that were available at the time to deal with that crisis, leaving Carol in charge of the mission.

Reed hadn’t really expected Steve wanting to take care of getting Tony back personally instead of dealing with the new attack, but then again he supposed he shouldn’t be surprised. Steve probably also felt responsible for what had happened to Tony, and if HYDRA managed to get him to modify Extremis for them and create a stable, airborne virus, things would only escalate further. Trying to get Tony back in fact meant dealing with the source of the problem.

Reed checked his communicator, but there were no news, which in all probability meant that the attack was still in progress. He sighed.

“What’s up, Doctor? Any news?” Steve asked. Reed just shook his head and murmured, “nothing much”.

Steve glanced at him before looking back to his instruments. He seemed hesitant. “Look, I…”

Then he stopped and stared straight ahead again. Reed shook his head slightly. He knew he wasn’t exactly good at guessing what was going on in people’s heads, but he tried his best, and this time, it didn’t help – he was utterly clueless as to what Steve was trying to tell him. So he opted for just waiting.

Sure enough, after a moment Steve tried again. “Reed, I know we haven’t exactly seen eye-to-eye of late. But we need to pull ourselves together for this mission, or we are endangering Tony even further.”

Reed frowned. Well, thank you very much, Captain, he thought. After all, he wasn’t the one displaying symptoms of not wanting to work with Steve. But before he could voice his thoughts in a slightly more diplomatic manner, Steve continued.

“I know you think I have been unfair to Tony, and that I only care about… I’m not even sure what you think, but probably that I only care about the Avengers’ image? But things aren’t that simple, and I would appreciate it if you could try to work with me without having that disdainful frown on your face most of the time.”

Reed startled a little, realising that he was indeed frowning a little – was he really that easy to read? – and carefully schooled his face into a neutral expression. He cleared his throat. “Things aren’t that simple? Forgive me, Captain, but I fail to see how they aren’t. You kept Tony locked up in a cell for weeks, and then you effectively ground him…”

Steve shot him an annoyed look. “The fact that I have, as you say, ‘grounded him’, is the only reason we have a chance of saving him now, Doctor. You’d better not forget that.”
Reed felt a little anger curl in his stomach. After all, the fact that Tony had been kidnapped by HYDRA was a complete coincidence, it wasn’t as if Steve had consciously done a good deed by implanting the tracker... But he decided not to press the point. “Be that as it may, you haven’t exactly given me the impression of dealing with Tony neutrally. You have every right to be angry at what... occurred between you and the Illuminati, but –”

“Oh, thank you for granting me the right to be angry at that utter violation of my person, because that is what occurred,” Steve interrupted through clenched teeth. Reed flinched. Maybe he shouldn’t have brought that up. “And by the Illuminati, you mean yourself and a few other men who think they are above the rest of humanity, that they have every right to rule it without anyone knowing, and that anyone who believes otherwise deserves to be taken out. Yes, I have every right to be angry.”

Reed swallowed. This conversation wasn’t exactly going the way he had hoped. Still... “Yes, as I said, you do. But with the rest of us, you managed to put the issue behind you, at least in terms of letting us live our own lives. But with Tony...”

Steve laughed bitterly. “Put the issue behind me? Like this is some tiny personal thing? Reed, if I had any real power over you, or Strange, or T’Challa, or anyone of your little group, believe me, you would face graver consequences than the ones you had to face so far for your lethal arrogance. Those would be the consequences of thinking you are fit to decide for us without our knowledge, common, inferior mortals that we are, and not the consequences of being emotionally hurt or anything ridiculous like that. But I don’t have that power.”

Reed pressed his lips together. It was the same old story, the one he had first heard in the snow in the Himalayas. “You do have that power over Tony, though, and you wield it rather indiscriminately.”

Steve’s eyes flashed dangerously when he turned to him. “Tony is different. Tony screwed up on so many levels that I had no choice but to react, no matter my personal feelings. And he is... he was an Avenger.”

Reed wrinkled his forehead, but immediately corrected that expression (he should be more careful not to let his feelings show). Tony is different. That was the problem, in the end, wasn’t it? Reed didn’t really know what was going on between Steve and Tony, but one thing was certain: it had always been complicated and emotionally overcharged. He debated raising the issue when there was a loud beep.

Steve glanced at the instruments. “Landing imminent. We need a plan of attack.”

Reed glanced at his own communicator – no news – then went to the back of the plane to pack the equipment he had taken with him. It was mostly some screening equipment, a plasma gun and a force field enforcer. When he came back to the front, he addressed Steve. “I will screen the base, so that we can determine where the members of HYDRA are. Also, I have a force field enforcer, I can triangulate the signal of the tracker to wrap Tony in one should it become necessary because of the force of our attack. It will only work once we are reasonably close to him, though.”

Steve looked up at him. “Already on the first part of that plan.” He indicated a big screen in front of him that was rapidly spewing heat signatures, showing a lot of people in different rooms of the underground base. “But I’d be grateful if you could take care of the second part. Also, as your scanner is portable, we can take it with us when we enter the base.”

Reed nodded. Of course, the Quinjet had tech just as advanced as his own, and Steve was an experienced soldier. Maybe he should stop assuming that he would be in charge of this mission the
same way he usually was in charge of things with the Fantastic Four.

He triangulated the signal, and saw that Tony was apparently in a sub-basement room, surrounded by members of HYDRA. But he seemed to be physically okay, at least. Reed saw on the feed of his vitals that his heart was beating normally.

At that precise moment Tony’s heart rate suddenly doubled. Reed startled, checking his other vitals. That was not good. “Steve, Tony is in distress. I think they are torturing him.”

Steve grimaced. “Okay, let’s be fast. I suggest we blow a hole into the base close to Tony’s location, then take out most of the HYDRA goons with sleeping gas – we have a generous supply of that on the Quinjet – then storm the place.”

Reed nodded, biting his lip. “Yes, but be careful not to drop the bomb too close to the room Tony is in. We might risk him getting hurt. As I said, I can only activate the force field once we are fairly close to him.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but his lips actually twitched a little, as if he were about to smile. “Thank you for that sound piece of advice, Doctor. What would I do without you. Now, let’s get onto it.”
Teamwork

Chapter Summary

Steve held out his hand for Reed, who took it gratefully. “You know, you shouldn’t get lost in your thoughts like that in battle, Reed.”
Reed frowned at Steve. “You are the one who told me to crack that gun. And I can handle myself, thank you very much.”

The team-up you never expected to see: in order to save Tony, Reed and Steve have to be amazingly awkward action heroes together.

Steve fired a missile right into the center part of the base. Reed felt the shock wave of the explosion ripple right through the Quinjet. Even as smoke was raising from the hole they had blown into what had looked like perfectly inconspicuous ground, mostly obscuring what was going on, Steve started dropping numerous gas bombs while monitoring the heat signatures of the HYDRA members apparently trying to climb out of the base. Then he swiftly and elegantly landed the Quinjet next to the entrance they had made for themselves.

Without talking, Reed and Steve jumped out of the Quinjet and carefully moved towards the hole, plasma gun and shield at the ready. They had both put on anti-smoke visors and were greeted with a sight bearing testimony to the force of their attack. As soon as they entered the complex, they saw unconscious bodies on the floor. There was a faint sound of snoring in the background.

Steve prodded one of the men with his foot, but he didn’t react in the slightest. He gave Reed a thumbs-up. So the gas had worked perfectly and they were clear to advance.

Reed followed Steve, who was moving like a cat, quietly and swiftly, utterly alert. He was sneaking around a corner when Reed saw a heat signature move and walk towards them. He wanted to shout out a warning, but before he even got that far, he heard a loud clanking sound and a man dropped to the ground in front of him. Steve already kept on walking, shield firmly in hand again. Impressive.

They were quietly walking through a corridor that was apparently deserted, towards the room where they still saw Tony’s signature in the midst of other people, when there was a huge explosion in front of them. Reed braced his arms over his head to protect himself from the falling debris and a split-second later Steve was at his side, holding his shield over both of them.

When the noise had died down, the corridor only half-standing, they looked at one another, breathing heavily. Then Reed looked at his scanner and cursed. A piece of rock must have hit it squarely in the quartz core; it was smashed to pieces. Why did this always happen. Meanwhile, Steve got up and took a few steps, and when Reed looked up, he saw that there was a huge pile of rubble right in the middle of the corridor, effectively blocking their passage.

Reed cursed quietly once again, catching up with Steve, who was inspecting the block with a slight frown on his face. Reed rubbed his neck and checked the force field enforcer, to his relief seeing that it was still intact. That was one thing, at least.

“Reed?” Reed suddenly noticed that Steve was looking at him expectantly. “What are you waiting
for?” Reed was momentarily confused, then he saw Steve indicating his plasma gun. His lip was curling. “I remember you telling me about a plasma shooter you were going to take with you?”

“Oh, right, of course,” Reed replied, untying the weapon from his belt and adjusting the settings. He really wasn’t used to being the one to do the jobs requiring brute force, what with Sue and Ben on his team… Ben. He clenched his teeth and fired.

The blowback of the gun nearly made him fall over, but he regained his balance quickly. The sight that greeted him was impressive: most of the rocks had literally melted, leaving them an open passageway again. Steve was already hastening through.

“From your despondent look just now I take it that some of your equipment has been damaged?” Steve asked when Reed was running next to him again – being able to stretch definitely made keeping up with a super soldier easier. Reed nodded reluctantly. “The signature screener was badly damaged. Damaged beyond repair, I am afraid, for the time being.”

Steve shook his head. “You know, you should really talk to Tony about some more durable materials. His stuff is a lot more battle-resilient than that.” Reed stared at him, not sure whether to be offended or take the remark as a joke, but Steve gave no sign of making fun of him, and so Reed decided to rather not say anything at all. (He did feel a little hurt, though. But also, this was Steve mentioning Tony in a positive context, maybe that was good…)

Reed’s musings were brutally interrupted when a group of HYDRA goons burst out of a side passage. Steve immediately threw his shield, taking out a few of them. But those men were heavily armed: they started mercilessly targeting Steve with what looked like containment guns, enveloping him in a flickering yellow field that apparently hindered his movement. Only seconds later, Steve was fully enveloped and Reed saw his face, eyes wide open, apparently fighting for breath.

Without much thought, Reed adjusted the settings to non-lethal, aimed the plasma gun at the squad and fired. There was an eruption of light as the goons were thrown backwards, then utter darkness.

Reed smiled a grim smile. Wielding this sort of raw power was actually more fun than he remembered. Of course he had used such weapons before, but mostly in his younger days… Of late he had started completely relying on his team when it came to physical force. Maybe he should talk to Tony about some more offensive equipment for his FF-suit, he had shown him some pretty neat things in the past…

“Reed?” came Steve’s voice out of the darkness, slightly breathless. A moment later, the light flickered back to life. Steve was standing in front of a control panel, apparently having switched the electricity back on after Reed’s plasma gun had shorted everything out. His chest was still heaving, but he looked uninjured. When he saw that he had Reed’s attention, he gave him a little salute. “Thanks for that. Good work.”

“… you too,” Reed retorted, not sure what to say. It had been a while since someone had last paid him that sort of compliment. Usually people just assumed that he did good work anyways, which he did, in all fairness. It actually felt rather… nice to have someone acknowledge him doing something as mundane as firing a plasma gun into a squad of men.

The goons were incapacitated on floor, and Steve quickly bent down and grabbed one of the containment guns they had used on him before. Then he looked up at Reed ponderingly and threw it to him. Reed caught it in one elastic hand. “Here, Doctor, see what you can do with that. I’d like to be protected next time we come up against it.” Steve shouldered his shield and started walking down the corridor when Reed’s communicator suddenly sprang to life.
First there was only atmospheric noise, and Reed frowned, but then they both startled as they heard Tony calling out, “Hello, are you there, Reed?”

After a second of utter surprise Reed scrabbled for the device, pulling it out of his pocket, and he replied rather breathlessly. “Yes, Tony, we are at the base! How are you talking to us?”

Tony’s answer came straight away, loud and clear. “There was an attack here, as this place seems to be crumbling, I suppose I can thank you for that. Most of HYDRA left and I took out the two men assigned to stand guard and hacked into their communicators.”

Reed stared. “But how on earth did you manage to tune into my equipment?”

“I know your equipment’s frequency, old friend” came out of the communicator. Tony sounded amused. But he also sounded rather weak. Reed didn’t know what HYDRA had done to him, but it was clear that it had taken a toll on his friend. Also, he should probably think about encrypting his frequencies better. And what Tony could do with a bunch of scraps somewhere in a God-forsaken bunker…

Steve looked as concerned as Tony felt. “Are you okay, Tony?” he asked, grabbing the device out of Reed’s hand.

There was a sharp intake of breath, then a hesitant “Steve…?”

“Yes, I am here with Reed, are you okay? Are you able to get to us?”

There was another second of silence, then Tony started talking again, and he sounded hesitant. “I’m fine, I guess. But I can’t get out of this reinforced cell they put me in. The guns of the men I took out are keyed to their fingerprints and I haven’t managed to crack them yet.”

Steve cursed. “Okay, we’ll get to you soon. Reed, can you…”

But before he could finish, they heard a loud thud and a scream through the communicator, then the connection cut. They stared at each other, then turned in the direction of Tony’s cell in unison.

Only about a minute later, they stood in front of it. Reed swallowed, set the gun to “melting” again and fired, activating the force field enforcer at the same time to keep Tony safe from the blast. The door immediately dissolved. Steve stepped through first, shield raised, Reed immediately behind him, switching the force field off again.

There was a whirlwind of movement and Reed saw Steve getting hit on the head. Then he heard Tony’s voice. “Oh damn, I’m sorry, Steve, but I had to make sure you’re not HYDRA.”

Steve straightened up again, glaring a little at Tony, who had raised his hands in defense. “Hey, you’re the one who taught me those moves.” He was smiling tiredly.

Reed looked his friend up and down. Tony’s hair was a total mess and there was sweat on his forehead. He was pale and seemed a bit unsteady. But judging by the move he just pulled on Steve, he was more or less okay. Reed smiled and took his hand. “Good to see you again, Tony.”

Tony put his other hand over Reed’s, squeezing it. “You too, Reed.” He looked honestly grateful and Reed felt something warm coil in his stomach.

“So you already took care of those men? Are they out for good?” Steve asked. When Reed looked up, he saw two men in HYDRA uniforms on the floor, apparently unconscious.
Tony ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah, one of them woke up again and attacked me while I was
talking to you guys, but I think he’s out cold now as well.”

Steve nodded and took a step towards Tony. He also looked him up and down, and Tony seemed
to squirm a bit under his inquisitive stare. He frowned. “You don’t look good.”

Tony took an unsteady step back and glanced over his shoulder, as if to look for a place to hide. “I
am fine.”

Steve just shook his head, frown deepening. “Let me get a proper look at you, you are walking
funny, you seem to be hurt somewhere.”

Tony ran his hand through his hair once more, looking at the floor. “Steve, I am fine, okay?”

Reed looked from Steve to Tony and back and decided that this wasn’t a very productive exchange.
He cleared his throat. “Gentlemen, I think we had better be off now?”

Steve seemed to want to object, but Tony already took a few steps towards the door, conveniently
slipping out of Steve’s grasp. “Good man, Reed, and good idea. I am not keen on staying here any
longer than necessary.”

They started hastening down the corridor, Steve following behind them reluctantly. Reed was
fiddling with the gun Steve had given him, trying to figure out the quickest way to crack the
fingerprint sequence, when he heard Tony utter a warning.

But before he could do anything, he was enveloped in what felt oddly like hot mortar. He couldn’t
move, but the state only lasted a second – then he fell to the ground. He saw a HYDRA member on
the floor right in front of him, unconscious. Tony stood behind the man, hand still raised in what
looked like some strange martial arts position (Reed had forgotten about his fighting prowess), and
Steve, flipping his shield back into place. He held out his hand for Reed, who took it gratefully.
“You know, you shouldn’t get lost in your thoughts like that in battle, Reed.”

Reed frowned at Steve. “You are the one who told me to crack that gun. And I can handle myself,
thank you very much.”

Steve snorted and murmured something under his breath that sounded suspiciously like “looks just
like it”.

Tony looked from Steve to Reed and back. “O-kay. I have no idea what is going on between the
two of you, but much as I’d like to find out, I’d also like to live to tell the tale, which means that
we should get going.”

On they went, and Reed caught himself looking at the gun again, then he remembered Steve’s
words and lowered it guiltily. Tony beside him was stumbling a little; apparently, the last fight had
taken the little that was left of his energy out of him.

Before Reed could react, Steve steadied Tony from behind. Tony flinched, but then he accepted
Steve’s arm with a little sigh. That passivity probably wasn’t a good sign. Steve looked worried,
and Tony seemed to be dragging his feet a little. They really had to get him medical help.

When Reed turned a corner, a few steps ahead of Tony and Steve, he stopped in his tracks. A
whole squad of HYDRA members was standing there, and in front of them was Madame Hydra
herself. Viper spoke up, lips curled into a smile. “Gentlemen, if I were you and if you want your
associate to live, I would stop right now.”
Reed narrowed his eyes and fired the plasma gun right into the HYDRA squad. Some men were thrown backwards, but Viper was still standing, having conjured some sort of protective field. But before Reed could do anything else, there was a loud bang and the field seemed to flicker. Viper looked confused, afraid even. A second later, Steve’s shield hit her in the head and she went down.

Reed turned around to see Tony standing there, pale but determined, Reed’s force field enforcer in one hand. Reed stared. How had he gotten it and what on earth had he done with it? Tony shrugged and gave him an apologetic half-smile.

“Sorry, Reed, I saw this thing on your belt and allowed myself to take it, neutralising her field with the inverse frequency.” That… that was actually quite brilliant, a practical implementation of a principle Reed had only pondered in theory…

Tony apparently saw his look of wonder, and shrugged once more. “You know, I have been a weapon’s manufacturer for more of my life than I care to think about, this is a principle I have used often. If you like, I…”

Steve, who had picked up his shield again, shot him a look, and Tony fell silent immediately. “Now, we have to get out of here. Science later. And we can send a clean-up crew for this mess here, I’d rather get you to a hospital asap now.” He came over to Tony again and offered him his arm, but Tony shook his head.

Steve frowned a little, but he turned around and resolutely started marching towards the exit and their Quinjet, Reed and Tony following right behind him. But after only a few steps, Tony was visibly struggling again. When he only very narrowly kept himself from falling by bracing a hand on the wall, Steve was ready to steady him again immediately. This time, Tony took his arm, if only reluctantly. They completed the rest of the way in silence.
"You see someone in me I’m not, Steve. And in order for you to keep on seeing that person I would betray the very things I believe in. I would let our world die. I almost did. And I can’t take it. I can’t take it."

Reed and Steve have managed to rescue Tony, but somehow, that doesn't make things a lot better. And time is running out.

They arrived at the Quinjet without further problems. Tony had been walking with increasing difficulty, though, and Reed was very glad to get him on board. He started powering up the very basic medical scans they had with them immediately.

Steve went to the pilot’s seat, while Tony sagged in a chair further back. His breathing was ragged. Reed shot him a worried glance as Steve was starting up the engine.

“Tony, what did HYDRA want from you?” Reed said, in an attempt to distract him.

Tony turned to him, and his eyes looked huge and feverish. This was bad. “Well, they tried to get me to give them the basic coding sequence of Extremis, which they don’t yet have, as my encryption was too good. We already thought as much. They are so far only… adding to the code, trying to change the formula at the margin. But if they were to crack it open, they’d turn it into a stable airborne virus that would immediately exterminate most of America’s population, enhancing the rest of them against their will. Because new super-race, bla bla, you know the story… Of course I refused.”

“And then they tortured you,” Reed said absent-mindedly.

Tony gave him a dark look. “No, they gave me cookies. Of course they tortured me. Nothing I haven’t seen before. Also, they probably applied too much force because they knocked me out quite fast.”

Reed looked back down at his medical equipment, thinking that he really wasn’t good at small talk. But suddenly, Tony folded in half, almost hissing out in pain.

Steve was by his side in a second, apparently letting the Quinjet run on autopilot. He put his hand on Tony’s shoulder just as Reed was coming up to them both. “Tony, what’s up? Talk to me!”

Tony’s teeth were clenched. “I… I don’t know…”

Reed tried to hook Tony up to his scanner, but Tony had started shaking like a leaf. In this state, it was impossible to even just conduct a reasonable medical examination. Reed bit his lip. “Tony, you said you had lost consciousness quite fast while they tortured you. Do you think they could have done something to you while you were out?”

Tony looked up at him, his eyes now wide with fear and pain. “I don’t know, I really don’t. I was unconscious, I don’t remember…” Tony sounded panicked.
Suddenly, there was the sound of static. The main screen at the front of the plane switched on of its own volition. All three of them turned to it immediately, Tony groaning a little with pain from the effort of holding himself up. On it was the face of Viper, smiling a grim smile. She looked furious. Behind her was the interior of another jet. So she had obviously gotten away, then.

“Well, Mr. Stark, I think by now you are feeling the effects of our… encounter. I’d have preferred for you to listen to me at the base, but you and your associates chose a childish course of action. A course of action that might very well cost you your life.” There was a pause as Viper licked her lips. When she went on, she didn’t sound angry anymore, but smug. “You survived Extremis the last time, but how about our altered version of it? I don’t think so, as it is made specifically to erode you. Crack the code and fix it in yourself, which will give us immediate access to the full coding sequence, as your version is directly linked up to us. Or play the noble hero and sacrifice yourself. You choose.” The transmission flickered, then turned to black.

Tony stared at the screen, shaking even worse than before.

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After the transmission, all three of them didn’t really know what to say. When they had been standing (or sitting, in Tony’s case) around for while without anything happening, only the faint sound of Tony’s teeth chattering from time to time disrupting the silence, Steve sighed. “I’ll see to it that you get full clearance to work in Reed’s lab. More comfortable with doing this the official way.” He turned and disappeared into the back of the plane.

Tony was biting his lip, and staring at the floor. Reed swallowed. “We’ll find a solution, Tony. Don’t worry.”

Tony looked up at him. “You really think so?”

Reed quickly squeezed Tony’s shoulder, then retracted his hand. “Yes, I do.”

His friend’s eyes went rather unfocused again, and the sense of desperation about him hadn’t dissipated in the slightest. “I don’t.” And he added, a lot more quietly, “but maybe it’s for the best.”

Reed frowned, and then suddenly realised what that statement meant. No, Tony couldn’t… “I won’t let you say that,” he said sternly.

Tony looked up again. When he spoke, his voice sounded hollow. “Not saying it doesn’t change the fact that maybe it is.”

Reed shook his head in a mixture of exasperation and sadness, but before he could think of anything appropriate to say, Steve approached them again. He had a blanket with him. When he saw them standing there in what was obviously tense silence, he frowned, but he had the good grace not to ask what was going on. Instead he carefully put the blanket on Tony’s shoulders. Tony seemed surprised, but after a moment’s hesitation he wrapped it more tightly around himself.

Steve sighed. “I’ll go take the pilot’s seat again and make some phone calls. Reed, try to run some tests on Tony, maybe we can figure something out even before New York. No sense in losing time.” Reed nodded, that was a reasonable course of action, and Tony seemed to curl up even more tightly in the blanket.

Except for Steve talking to various people on the phone from time to time in a low voice, the rest of the flight passed in silence.
When they were back in New York, Steve landed the Quinjet on the roof of the Baxter Building. Sue was up there to greet them. Reed had messaged her during the flight, hence he knew that Ben and Johnny were still both in their artificial comas, their state very slowly getting worse. The newest Extremis attack had been contained, but it had cost a lot of lives and put even more people into hospital, in a state similar to that of Johnny and Ben. Tony had buried his head in his hands at the news.

Reed went to his wife and hugged her tightly. Sue looked tired, having helped with the clean-up and evacuations, but she smiled at him happily. When she saw Tony getting out of the plane with Steve’s help, her eyes widened. “You don’t look good.”

Tony smiled weakly. “Well, as you are radiant as always, dear Sue, I think we can afford me lowering the average attractiveness on this rooftop.”

Sue smiled back and went to give him a hug. She simply nodded at Steve. He nodded back, then immediately started helping Tony into the building. As they now knew that Tony’s state was caused by Extremis, they had decided to forego ambulances or any other kind of conventional medical help, instead letting Tony get to work immediately. Steve had managed to obtain official permission for Tony to make full use of Reed’s labs, if only for 12 hours. But looking at Tony’s state they couldn’t take longer anyways.

After Reed had explained the whole situation in detail to Sue, he followed Steve and Tony down into the lab. Tony had collapsed on a chair and started reactivating his profile on the Baxter Building’s computer system. Reed immediately powered up the database for Extremis they had made before Tony’s abduction and started looking at the equations.

“Tony, I think in order to have the best chances of saving you, we should split the work,” he said thoughtfully.

Tony sighed, and when he looked up at Reed, the circles under his eyes were so dark as to almost be black. “Okay, let’s not kid ourselves here. You don’t honestly think they are going to let me live once I have given them the code by fixing myself? I am pretty sure that they have some sort of backup plan in place.”

Reed shook his head. “Yes, but what if we managed to somehow cut the link to your biology they apparently have? So that we could cure you, all the while not – or only apparently – giving them what they want?”

Tony rubbed his eyes. “Okay. You try and figure that out, I’ll give you samples in a moment. I’ll work on the virus itself.” Reed nodded and turned back to the simulation he was running. Within moments, he was deeply lost in thought.

His reflections were disrupted when something fell to the ground with a loud clatter. When he looked up, he saw Tony stare at a syringe he had apparently dropped from his shaking hands. He was cradling his arm. “Shit.”

A moment later, Steve was by his side (Reed had almost forgotten his presence). He picked up the syringe and took Tony’s arm. “Here, let me do that.”

Tony looked up at Steve as if he couldn’t quite believe he was there. And sure enough, he asked, “What are you even doing here?”
Steve didn’t pay attention to him; instead he carefully took some of Tony’s blood and skin cells and started preparing samples. Reed hadn’t realised he knew how to conduct biological examinations. Then again, he supposed that as leader of the Avengers, Steve had had to deal with a lot of things over the years.

Only a few minutes later, Steve came over and gave him some samples. Reed thanked him and immersed himself in his work once more.

The hours passed. At some point, Steve left to deal with some Avengers’ business, but he came back (Reed didn’t really know why). He was pacing up and down in a corner of the lab, apparently getting increasingly nervous, when Tony started rubbing his temples almost violently. A groan escaped his lips. Reed looked up, alarmed. “What’s up?”

“It’s just… I start feeling the Extremis enhancements. I… hear the inner life of all those machines around us. I hate it.” Tony tried to smile, but it ended up as more of a grimace. There was a faint blue glow in the background of his eyes that hadn’t been there before; Reed remembered that it indicated activity on the Extremis feeds. He couldn’t really imagine what it felt like, but judging from Tony’s pained expression, at least in this version it was anything but comfortable.

“Tony, can’t you shut it down?” There was distress in Steve’s voice.

Tony shrugged. “Not really. This version of Extremis apparently doesn’t include any of the safety measures my version had.”

Steve had crossed his arms, a deep frown on his forehead. “I don’t like it.”

Tony cast his eyes down, partly facing away from Steve. “I know you don’t. With a bit of luck you won’t have to put up with it for long anymore. Or with me, for that matter.”

“Don’t do this,” Steve said in a low voice.

When Tony turned to him, his eyes were blazing. “Please, spare me. Don’t pretend you care.”

This didn’t look good. Reed really didn’t want another escalation between Steve and Tony, not now, when they were running out of time and when Tony was obviously getting weaker and needed to focus on finding a solution…

“I do care,” Steve said quietly.

Tony looked down again, away from Steve, lips pressed into a thin line, muscles in his jaw working. “Well, you shouldn’t.”

Steve took some steps towards Tony. He sounded harried when he answered. “Are you really just trying to make me hate you? You know, I thought I did, over the last few months.”

Tony’s expression hardened. “Yeah, I kind of picked up on that. Throwing me into a cell without trial for weeks gave me a clue.”

Steve gritted his teeth. “I am not even going to bother with correcting your version of the story. I think you are well aware of the fact that it doesn’t even begin to cover the truth. But let me ask you one thing: is that the way you want things to be between us?”

Reed tried to sidle towards the door without drawing attention to himself. This was clearly getting too personal for him to be eavesdropping, because that was what this felt like, as both men had apparently forgotten his presence. And he really didn’t find it in him to intervene. If anything, he...
could maybe call Sue and get her to handle the situation…

Tony crossed his arms, in what Reed recognised as a gesture of fake defiance, coming from a man who looked utterly drained and hopeless. “There is no ‘between us’, Steve. I used you, as you so aptly put it. And I told you I would do it again. We all would. Isn’t that so, Reed?”

Reed stopped in his tracks, like a rabbit caught in the headlights. So much for getting out. He made a non-committal sound at the back of his throat that could mean anything. But Steve wasn’t really paying him any attention anyways, being intently focused on Tony, and Reed was quite glad for that, he had to admit.

Steve shook his head, and his eyes were shining a little. “You don’t mean that. You say that because you want to alienate me. You’ve done that before.”

Tony ran his hand through his hair. “And why would I do that?”

Steve narrowed his eyes and sighed exasperatedly. “I don’t know, why don’t you tell me, Tony? Probably it is some misguided attempt to protect me because you think you’re bad for me?”

Tony laughed, but it sounded hollow. “I am bad for you. But no, I want this… thing between us to end because you stop me from doing what I know I must. I can’t… be close to you and be the man I need to be, Steve.”

His face suddenly contorted in raw pain. For a moment, it looked as if it would overwhelm him, but then Tony took a shaking breath and seemed to calm down a little. When he continued, he almost whispered. “You always see the ideal instead of the person. You see someone in me I’m not, Steve. And in order for you to keep on seeing that person I would betray the very things I believe in. I would let our world die. I almost did. And I can’t take it. I can’t take it. Please, go.” He buried his face in his hands.

Reed stared at his friend helplessly. Steve took a step closer and looked at Tony, something like… longing on his face. But before either of them did anything, Tony made a visible effort to get himself under control. He swiped his hand over his eyes, shot Reed and Steve a quick (embarrassed?) look, then continued working, as if nothing had happened.

The tense moment broken, Steve turned around abruptly and stalked out of the lab. The door slammed shut behind him.

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Reed didn’t know how long they had been working in silence when he suddenly saw something in the cellular material Steve had given him. The realisation made him gasp. “Tony.”

Tony looked up from his computer terminal, and Reed flinched. He hadn’t looked at his friend for a while, lost in his own research, and it was plainly obvious that his condition was worsening. Tony’s skin was shining with sweat and Reed could see he was shaking all over even from this distance. He swallowed. They had better be fast.

Reed hurried to get his point out. “Your body… It emits traces of a very weak energy signature that is strikingly similar to something we know very well. It took me a while to figure it out, but I think… I think they have used technology on you that is similar to the non-molecular energy emanators we used as the Illuminati in order to track each other, monitor incursions and stay in touch. That’s how the link works!”

Tony looked momentarily confused, and that, if nothing else, was a sign of him not being well at
all. Then understanding dawned on his face. “So you mean… We can cut the connection or track the signal back to HYDRA?”

Reed licked his lips, quickly scrolling through his data. “I’m afraid not directly, no, it is too well encrypted. But once it emits a bout of data… We should be able to trace it back to them.”

Tony’s eyes lit up and he looked decidedly more alive than moments before. “That means we can coordinate a huge attack on HYDRA immediately after they get the code, effectively shutting them down and preventing any knowledge of it from ever getting out.” He started scrabbling amongst his papers.

Reed was beaming. “Yes, exactly.”

“Okay, well, as curing me as such is no problem…” Reed stared at Tony. No problem? What did that mean? Tony seemed to see his questioning look. “Oh, I have figured out how to neutralise the virus long ago. After all, I know Extremis. What I have been working on now is an antidote for all the other victims that isn’t as… invasive as the method that came to my mind immediately. I think I am very close, with the tissue from myself to work with, I am pretty clear on the modifications they have made.”

Reed wasn’t sure he had heard Tony correctly. “You’ve know how to save yourself this entire time and not told us?”

Tony looked at him as if he were insane. “This wasn’t really about saving me. This was about stopping HYDRA from getting its hands on the core code of Extremis and saving everyone else, and also, I am sure they have a backup plan…”

Reed interrupted him. “Tony, you are an idiot.” Tony looked slightly stunned at the statement, but opened his mouth as if to protest. Reed didn’t let him. “Get in touch with Steve and tell him that you want there to be a ‘between you’ after all, even if it just consists of taking down HYDRA.”

The order – yes, Reed was well aware of having voiced it like one, but this situation required someone taking charge and Tony didn’t seem to be in the right state to be that person this very moment – seemed to baffle Tony even more. But slowly, he took a communicator from the table and dialled. Steve didn’t ask any questions, he just brusquely told Tony that he would be at the Baxter Building in a matter of minutes (maybe he had just sneaked upstairs into the kitchen to sulk, Reed thought).

When Steve entered the lab, Reed immediately informed him of what they had found out. Steve looked at Tony disbelievingly, almost angrily, when Reed said that he had found a possible cure for himself long ago – Tony murmured something about it being “invasive” and “dangerous” and “not fit as a general antidote” – but he didn’t ask for any clarifications. Instead, he took out his holocommunicator and called Maria Hill.

A moment later, all three of them were staring at the image of the Director of SHIELD, looking supremely pissed. “Rogers. I would appreciate it if you didn’t use your emergency frequency every single fucking time you called. I have a normal line, you know. Don’t give me a heart attack because, oh, I don’t know, Paste-Pot Pete has glued a cat to a tree.”

Steve’s eyes glowered. “Maria, stop mouthing off. This is serious.” And in a few brief sentences he explained what was going on. While he talked, Maria was straightening up in her chair.

When he had finished, however, she sighed. “I can’t do that, Steve. I can’t lead a hardcore assault on a possible HYDRA base on American soil involving a lot of troops on the basis of the testimony
of Tony Stark. Even S.H.I.E.L.D. has higher-ups, you know. And they simply won’t let me after… what he did. You are aware of the fact that he is suspected of treason and cooperation with HYDRA, right. And HYDRA is out of the question as the target of S.H.I.E.L.D. missions anyway until the whole business with the Skull infiltrating our ranks is 100% cleared up.”

Steve pressed his lips into a thin line. “So you are telling me you don’t believe me.”

Maria raised her hands. “This is not what I am saying at all, Steve, don’t twist my words. I am saying that I can’t give the order. Unless you are willing to lie profusely to the president of the United States, that is.”

Steve raised one hand. “Wait a moment. That’s all it would take?”

Maria frowned. “Seeing as you are Captain America, the personification of our lovely country dressed in a rather dubious outfit based on our flag, I wouldn’t have thought that this is negligible to you. This could cost you your rank, Steve. Even if it goes well, which frankly, I doubt. This could be the end for you.”

Steve almost snorted. “I thought you knew me better than that, Maria. This is HYDRA we are talking about. I don’t give a flying fart about my ‘rank.’” And with that, Steve simply disconnected.

Tony stared at him, but when Steve met his gaze, he quickly lowered it to his calculations, apparently keen on finishing the antidote. Reed turned to his own work, perfecting the tracking algorithm he was planning to use on Tony. Meanwhile, Steve was establishing a connection to the president.

Who was sitting in a pool, a Martini in hand, when he popped up on the holoprojector. Reed almost smiled a little at the foreign sight. And he was impressed despite himself that Steve simply had the personal number of the President of the United States at the ready. “Oh, if it isn’t our country’s favourite son. What can I do for you, Mr. Rogers?” he rumbled.

Steve cleared his throat. “Mr. President, I need your permission to deploy an urgent mission of S.H.I.E.L.D. troops, now. I can’t tell you where to exactly, yet, but let me tell you that the threat we are facing is serious. A supervillain called Paste-Pot Pete is threatening to attack New York.” Reed was impressed. Steve kept a completely straight face while telling the ludicrous lie.

“Paste-Pot Pete, eh?” the President drawled. “I have no idea who he is, but if you consider him a worthy enough threat… Sure, go for it!”

Steve smiled a little. “Thank you for your trust in me, Mr. President. Might I ask you to contact S.H.I.E.L.D.-Director Maria Hill and give her the go-ahead?”

“Sure, even if I don’t like talking to that Hill, she is a tough cookie…” the President smiled.

Steve nodded, face still completely serious. “That she is, Mr. President. Thank you.” He disconnected the call.

Reed almost felt like jubilating. This was working. It was really working. They were going to take down HYDRA. And Tony had the antidote almost ready. Ben and Johnny were going to be alright. They were all going to be alright.

Then Tony keeled over.
One of those days

Chapter Summary

Tony’s unfocused gaze shifted to Steve’s face, and he seemed to make an effort to speak more clearly. “Need… Reed… to run the… compiler… finished…” Reed nodded.

Will Steve and Reed manage to save Tony?

In what felt like a split second, Steve was at Tony’s side. He wrapped him in his arms. Tony didn’t move, his head drooping low. Steve was murmuring “no, no, Tony, stay with me” as he held Tony close.

Reed had already reached for a scanner. When he got the feeds of Tony’s vitals, he exhaled in relief. Tony wasn’t dead. But his heartbeat was weak, his breathing shallow. He wasn’t going to last very long. “Steve, he’s alive.”

Steve looked up at him, fear in his eyes. “I know, Richards, I checked his pulse, I’m not new at this. But he’s fading fast. We have to implement that plan of yours now.”

Steve looked back down at Tony, and Reed did the same, and they saw that he had opened his eyes very slightly, the blue shining through his dark lashes. He was mumbling something. Reed didn’t understand, and apparently neither did Steve, because he bent closer to Tony’s mouth and shot Reed a questioning glance at the same time. “I didn’t catch what you said, Tony, can you repeat that?”

Tony’s unfocused gaze shifted to Steve’s face, and he seemed to make an effort to speak more clearly. “Need… Reed… to run the… compiler… finished…” Reed nodded.

When he got up, he took another look at Steve, who seemed more than unwilling to let go of Tony. He sighed. Gently, he put a hand on Steve’s shoulder. “Steve, we need you to coordinate the attack. The moment I have injected Tony, I can triangulate the signal back to HYDRA and the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. need to strike. If the compiler works, that is.” At the look on Steve’s face he hastened to add, “which I am sure it will. After all, Tony knows what he’s doing.”

Steve still didn’t seem to want to let go of Tony. But after a moment, he nodded reluctantly. Carefully, he gathered Tony in his arms – Tony groaned a little – and carried him over to the couch Reed kept in his lab for night shifts. He lowered Tony on it, pulled a blanked over him, then went to one of Reed’s work stations to start up the communication systems.

Reed had started checking the compiler Tony had prepared. It seemed to be okay, but he wanted to make absolutely sure that Tony had not made mistakes, seeing the bad state he’d been in when working on it.

In the background, he heard Steve talk to Carol. He wasn’t really paying attention until he heard Steve say: “You are in charge of this, Carol. I want to stay here. With… Tony.”

Reed looked up and saw the projection of Carol in her battle suit, face serious. She nodded. “Of
course. And Steve… make sure he’s ok.” She disconnected.

Steve came over to Reed and shot him a dark look. “Do you think this is going to work?” He indicated the compiler.

Reed swallowed. “I think so. I’ll synthesize the antidote now. Could you start up the tracker I prepared from the other work station?” For a second, Reed thought he should not have asked Steve to do that, as he was no scientist; but Steve just nodded, and once again, Reed was surprised at the agility with which he seemed able to adapt to new situations. Before he had the chance to explain any technical details, Steve had walked over to the terminal and started up the mainframe.

Reed shook his head slightly and went to the bio compiler. He let Tony’s algorithms run through it. In under a minute it had synthesised the antidote. Reed took the little flask and grabbed a syringe from the work table, drawing up the liquid. Then he went over to the couch.

Steve arrived at pretty much the same time, looking grave. He held out a mobile computer bridge for Reed and he could see that Steve had activated the tracking program. As soon as there was an emission of data, they should have HYDRA’s location in a matter of seconds.

Reed swallowed and put the syringe to Tony’s arm. He hesitated. Suddenly, he felt Steve’s hand on the one he had braced on the couch, squeezing it a little. When he turned to look at Steve, he gave him a reassuring look. “Go for it, Doctor. Best we can do. A look at your medical scanners tells me he doesn’t have long.”

Reed nodded, took a deep breath and emptied the syringe into Tony’s arm.

Tony’s whole body seemed to buck. Then he started shaking violently.

“His heartbeat is racing now, Reed. What do we do?” Steve was almost shouting. He looked terrified.

But before Reed had to make a decision, the fit seemed to pass. All of a sudden, Tony settled down again. When Reed checked the scanners, he saw that Tony’s vitals seemed to stabilise. Oh god. He had been so afraid…

Steve exhaled, and it sounded almost like a sob. He had taken Tony’s hand and was stroking it relentlessly.

Then a beep startled them both. The tracking program had a perfect match. The uplink lead back to… the Meat District. Without a moment of hesitation, Steve grabbed his holocommunicator. Carol appeared. “We have the location. Meat District. Sending you the coordinates now.”

Carol nodded. “We are ready, the S.H.I.E.L.D. troops are fully armed, we’ll be off as soon as we have the details. And Steve… how is Tony?”

Steve swiped a hand over his eyes, then he smiled. “He’s okay, Carol. He’s alive.”

Carol beamed. “I am so glad. And now, let’s go kick some ass. You’ll be missed, old man.” With a wink, she disconnected.

Reed leant back against the couch, exhaling slowly. Steve was still holding Tony’s hand. Finally, it looked like this nightmare was over, or at least out of his hands for the time being. He closed his eyes, an almost overwhelming feeling of relief filling him up.

Then there was a warning signal frighteningly close to his ear. Reed startled out of his reverie and
saw Steve looking at his wrist, alarmed. Reed saw that he had pulled up a little screen from what Reed had assumed was his watch. “There are missiles heading our way. Impact imminent. Five Minutes, at most.”

Reed jumped up immediately. “Oh, so that’s the HYDRA backup plan Tony thought existed. He was right.”

Steve sighed loudly. “It’s just one of those days, isn’t it…”

As soon as Reed had stretched over to his console, he started typing furiously to get the Building’s defenses up. But the problem was that some of them were still damaged from the last attack by HYDRA…

He cursed. This wasn’t working.

Steve shot him a look. “Richards, your building, your rules. What do we do? We could do with a plan.”

Reed nodded. “Don’t worry. Let’s get everyone into the bunker chamber, one floor down. That should afford us enough protection.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Steve nod and pick up Tony, who was still unconscious. But a quick look at his vitals showed Reed that he was more or less fine again. Good. Steve left the lab without any further questions, holding Tony close.

A scan indicated that only Sue and Franklin were in the building apart from the three of them. No time for evacuation. He called his wife up immediately. Sue agreed to get Franklin into the chamber, then she hastened to join him in the lab. In the meantime, Reed sent out an emergency call to warn people in the immediate surroundings of the impending attack. He just hoped this would only hit the Baxter Building…

Reed stretched to hug Sue as soon as she had entered, but Sue interrupted the moment of intimacy almost immediately, all business-like in the face of danger. God, he loved this woman. “You think my force fields won’t be enough to stop the rockets?” she asked.

Reed pressed his lips together and shook his head. “From what I can tell, those rockets have been designed to penetrate your force fields. After all, HYDRA knew who they were attacking, and they aren’t stupid.”

Sue shook her head exasperatedly. “Okay. Do you think the bunker will be able to withstand the explosion?”

Reed swallowed. Truth was, he wasn’t sure. This was a hell of a lot of explosive power racing towards them. For a moment, he contemplated lying to Sue to not worry her. Then he remembered that this was the sort of self-righteous behaviour he should really try to change in himself, as Sue had told him often enough. Quietly, he told her the truth. “I’m not sure.”

Sue sighed. “Okay. I assume you have called for backup from the Avengers and SHIELD, but they won’t be here on time. So let’s go to the bunker.”

Reed shook his head. Something else had occurred to him, something he felt he had to try. “One moment, darling. I will try to open a portal to the negative zone over the building, in the impact zone. Maybe we can redirect the rockets into that portal and get rid of the problem that way.”

Sue didn’t look particularly happy. “Can’t you try to do that from the bunker?”
Reed pinched his nose. “No, I can’t, because for safety reasons, it is a Faraday cage. I won’t be able to communicate with our interdimensional tech from there.”

Sue sighed. Then she leant in and gave him a kiss. “Okay, I believe that you know what you are doing. I’ll go to the bunker, come after us immediately.”

Reed nodded, already intensely focused on the approaching missiles. So if he could open a portal right where the computer calculated the impending impact… He activated their transdimensional shifter, calculating a dimensional bridge into the negative zone directly over the Building. With one eye, he kept on following the course of the missiles.

Reed took a deep breath and activated the portal just as the first missile was getting dangerously close. He braced for the impact that he still feared might come. But on the screen he saw the missile almost hit the building, but then apparently disappear into nothingness just before it could do any damage. Reed balled his fist in triumph. This was really working.

Now, for the others… The next 2 missiles were caught without a problem. But when he was about to shift the portal in order for it to swallow up the last one, he suddenly saw something strange on the screen. Right before disappearing into the portal, the missile seemed to split, casting off a part of itself.

Oh no. Reed cursed. It looked like they were dealing with intelligent weaponry, adapting to the situation. He flashed into action, trying to shift the portal in order to catch that new, smaller explosive device. But no… not that one, that one he didn’t reach in time.

The explosion was deafening. He felt his body being thrown into the air. Then nothing.
Chapter Summary

And yet again, we are at the hospital. And there might be a chance to work things out...
Or: there might be some fluff here.

He woke to the low sound of beeping. Everything was warm and comfortable. He didn’t feel any pain. Was this heaven?

Someone was caressing his hand. Oh no, hopefully this wasn’t heaven, then, as he recognised his wife’s hand. Who he hoped was safe and sound in the bunker. Or not anymore. He didn’t really know how much time had passed, but he didn’t find it in him to care. Everything felt fluid and soft and he was tired, even though he had just woken up. His eyelids were heavy, opening his eyes felt like an impossibility.

Someone started speaking softly, and he recognised Sue’s voice. He felt the last bit of worry in him disappear. “Sometimes I am damn glad for the special abilities that accident gave us, you know.” There was a smile in her voice.

“Yes, I wonder how those ordinary human beings even survive.” Steve.

“Hey!” Tony. His friend Tony, who they had managed to save. Or, more accurately, who had saved himself, kind of. Steve and Sue chuckled.

“But you know, without the enhanced endurance his stretching abilities gave him, he might very well be dead now... So yes, I love what this accident has done to his body.” Sue again, speaking fondly.

“I never want to hear you talk of how much you love Reed’s enhanced endurance and stretching anymore, thank you very much,” Tony commented drily. Some more chuckling.

“Tony, you are a disgrace,” Sue said warmly. A little pause. Then she spoke up again. “God, I hope this is going to be the start of a phase without attacks on the Baxter Building every other day. Why do people hate us so much.”

Someone cleared his throat guiltily. Probably Tony. And sure enough, he spoke up. “Well, you know, he just chucked those things into the negative zone. And then you guys wonder why Annihilus hates you.”

There was snorting in the background, snorting by people who obviously tried to be as quiet as possible.

Then there was a little pause. Sue interrupted it. “I’ll go get myself some coffee, does anyone want anything?”

“No, thanks. We’ll stay put; should Reed wake up, I am sure he’d be very glad to see our gorgeous faces.” Tony again. Sue laughed a little, then Reed heard the door closing behind her.
Reed considered trying to open his eyes a bit more seriously when he heard Tony say something in a low voice. “Steve… I meant what I said about us. About me. In the lab. I’m not… I’m not sure I can deal with… us.”


Someone, probably Tony, took a deep breath. “I know. I noticed. You weren’t exactly subtle. Shouldn’t have been cradling me when I woke up. So… what do we do about that?”

Reed opened his eyes a little, curiosity getting the better of him, and through tiny slits he saw Steve and Tony sitting on opposite sides of his hospital bed. Steve was smiling a little. “I don’t know, Tony. But I would like… I would like it if we tried to work things out. I would like it if we really tried to change the way things work, or don’t work, between us.”

Tony shook his head slightly, as if he didn’t believe Steve’s words. But the corners of his mouth turned up a little. “I don’t know why you would. Us trying to work things out will probably lead to another Civil War. You’re insane.”

Steve grinned. “Hark who’s talking.” He extended his hand.

Tony shot him an insecure look, full of unsteady confusion, but then, very slowly, he reached out. Their hands touched in the air over Reed’s stomach.

Steve stood up, pulling Tony with him. Tony’s eyes were wide when Steve leant in. But after a second, he followed. Their lips touched very fleetingly, then they parted again, both apparently scared of the sudden intimacy. They sat back down and Tony cleared his throat.

Reed couldn’t stop himself from smiling. So that was what was going on.

Oh, so much for pretending to be asleep. No use now anymore, was there.

Reed opened his eyes, feigning what he feared was a rather unconvincing yawn.

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As always, Reed and Tony picked up seamlessly from where their last game of chess had left off. Reed moved a pawn, then looked up at his friend. Tony seemed more relaxed and happy than Reed had seen him in months. He was talking almost without pause, telling Reed about the final results of the HYDRA mission.

“… and so we got most of HYDRA locked up. And still, Steve is in trouble for it now. Isn’t that ridiculous?”

“Mhm.” Maybe he should move his King next…

“I mean, yes, okay, he lied to the President, but who cares when you look at the results?” Tony was smiling fondly, eyes on the board. Reed couldn’t stop himself from grinning.

But there were other things to worry about… “Do you know when your trial is up, Tony?”

“Thank you, that sobered me up alright. From handsome super-patriots right to the threat of a life sentence. Good.” But Tony winked at Reed before he continued. “They aren’t sure yet, probably next month. But after what went down with HYDRA, it looks like they are actually entertaining the possibility of going with diminished responsibility on the charges of me fraternising with HYDRA. And now that the Extremis attacks have stopped and people have been cured…”
Reed smiled. “I am glad.” Oh, he hadn’t seen that move coming, maybe he had to adapt his strategy then…

“I think I am very close to finding a non-invasive method to fully purge Extremis from the bodies of the people who were affected, as well, you know. Even just being allowed to independently work on that… Man, it feels good.” Tony seemed to ponder his next move only for a second, eyebrows drawn together.

“I can imagine.” Ah, so that was where he was going with his strategy, then. Well, Reed could work with that. He smiled and made his move.

“I only wish… I only wish the help hadn’t come too late for so many people.” A shadow of sadness flickered across Tony’s face.

Reed looked at his friend and decided not to go with cheap words of comfort that would only insult his intelligence. “Yes. So do I. But we did what we could, and that’s maybe what we have to hold onto,” he sighed.

Tony didn’t reply. He probably didn’t believe him. There was a little pause. Then he cleared his throat. “I don’t know if I’ve said it before, but I’m sorry for the property damage. Normally it’s Avengers Tower that tends to get blown up because of me, and not other people’s stuff. This was… unfortunate.”

Reed grinned. “You said that more than once already, Tony. And what is more important than mere rubble: I am glad you seem to have fixed… some other damage.”

Tony looked up at him sharply, questioningly, then his eyes started twinkling. “How perceptive of you. The great Reed Richards notices what is going on between people. Miracles really do happen.”

Reed was about to protest when the door flew open and Johnny flew through, all in flames. Ben was thundering after him. “I’ll get you, you little…” When he saw Tony, he stopped. “Oh, hi Tones, didn’t know you were ‘ere.”

Johnny touched down behind Tony, reverting back to his human form. He was laughing. “No offense, Ben, but this will never get old. Hi, T, whazzup?”

Tony and his brother-in-law did the strange ritualistic greeting again, fist bumps and everything. Reed had to remember asking Johnny what it meant at some point. But he didn’t want to confess to his ignorance in front of Tony.

“Nothing much, Flameboy. I am just handing his ass to your brother-in-law in a chess match, as usual.”

“That is utterly untrue,” Reed said indignantly. But Tony, Ben and Johnny were just laughing lightheartedly.

And after everything that had gone down, this sight felt like the best thing he could ever wish for. Reed hid a smile and looked back at the board.

Always some more moves to make.

The end
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