Tomorrow Belongs To Me

by valtyr

Summary

Steve wakes up in the 21st Century. He doesn't think much of it, and it's dubious about him. He meets a Norse God, joins a superhero team, and feels terribly awkward about the whole monument at Arlington he's rendered obsolete by not being dead. Meanwhile, Tony is trying to make his mark on history by being the man who finally drove Nick Fury over the edge.

Notes

Written for the Cap-Ironman Big Bang: artwork by made_of_tin can be found here and here

Spoilery content!

There's a supporting character death in this story; if this is something you need to know, please check the end notes.

See the end of the work for more notes
Chapter 1

The surface of Tony's coffee trembled. He stopped typing, and gave it a suspicious look; it settled, and he returned to work. Maybe they were blowing things up in the labs. They did strange and terrible things at SHIELD HQ.

"Is that you?" Rhodey tapped his helmet with one stubby metal finger. He was bristling with so many connectors and wires, he looked like a porcupine.

"Is what me?" Tony scowled at his laptop, and hit a few more keys. The War Machine's sensors were picking up some very weird stuff. He flicked back between windows, trying to see if any of his diagnostics could be producing the effect. "I don't think it's me."

Rhodey didn't exactly look convinced. He'd been giving Tony that look a lot, recently, which was completely unfair considering he was the one who'd stolen a highly advanced battlesuit and then let Justin Hammer fiddle with it.

Tony was only helping smooth out the bugs in his system out of the kindness of his heart, because he was a good, considerate friend. Guilt at no point entered into it.

The coffee trembled again.

"Okay, unplug me," Rhodey groped towards the wires, and Tony hissed and slapped at his titanium-clad hands. "Seriously, Tony, get these things out of me, in case - "

"We're in the middle of SHIELD headquarters, Rhodey. I'm sure if anything happens - " The War Machine let out several discreet beeps, and a number of warning messages blossomed on the screen. "On second thoughts, let me get these for you."

"What is it?" Rhodey turned and twisted so Tony could get everything free.

"I don't know." Tony glanced back at the screen. "Some kind of energy buildup. Similar to the arc reactor, but it's not the arc reactor. A lot more - " he reached for the keyboard, but Rhodey coughed pointedly, and he sighed and got the last few cables. "There you go, Grumpy Bear."

Rhodey stalked to the internal window and pulled the blinds up. His sharp intake of breath made Tony look up, and then dash to Rhodey's side. The vast hollow cylinder that was the central atrium of SHIELD headquarters was humming with crackling light, like phosphorescence on cave walls.

"What the - " Tony's voice was lost in a vast terrible sound, like ground zero of a vast lightning bolt. A rushing pillar of light formed, not striking down or leaping up, but coalescing together out of the air. Tony jammed his sunglasses on, and looked up, then down; the shaft of light seemed to pass through both arched ceiling and scoured steel floor without interfering with them in any way. He could still see the tables and chairs scattered around the snack bar undisturbed, coffee cups and half-eaten sandwiches abandoned; SHIELD agents knew when to clear an area. Even the central water feature played on calmly, rainbows sparking from each scattered drop.

And then it stopped, and silence rushed in like a solid force on the ears. Tony swallowed, then cleared his throat to establish he hadn't gone deaf.

"What - " and he was drowned out again by a furious bellow, a sound smaller and realer but still very loud. His eyes rose to the wide gallery two floors above, and he slapped Rhodey's arm. "What the fuck is that?"
"It's a giant," Rhodey said in numb tones. And that was a fair enough assessment, although it didn't really tell Tony anything new. It was about ten foot tall, just clearing the ceiling, and it had blue skin and moved with swift purpose around the gallery, calling out something in a strange language. Other voices called back; how many were there? "Tony, stay here, lock the door," and Rhodey turned away from the window and strode out the door, faceplate whirring down.

Tony squinted up and down; the water feature had frozen solid, and a thin rime of ice was creeping outwards from it. He could hear gunfire, not too close; he could hear repulsor fire, which meant Rhodey had found a fight already. He glanced towards the door, and moved with the full intention of locking it.

At least, he'd thought about locking it. He'd very sincerely considered Rhodey's advice.

Well, he'd listened to it, which was essentially the same thing. He let himself out into the corridor, and cocked his head. Rhodey had turned right, and found a fight. So... left. Happy had the armour, but Happy was off with Pepper today. He really needed to get his own chauffeur again; or get Pepper to get her own, that would be fairer.

The stairwell was empty of giants, and Tony skittered down the six flights to ground level, where he peered out into the atrium. It was a winter wonderland, so cold the air burned when he breathed in.

"Stark," and Tony flinched before pasting a smile on and turning to Agent Hill, who was carrying a lethal looking pistol. "Anything out there?"

"Just ice. They were on the upper levels; Rhodey went after them. What's going on?"

"Hostiles loose is all I've got right now. Some of the security systems are fritzing, either the cold or the energy surge." She touched her earpiece, eyes going distant. "Apparently there's one down here. Stark, get into cover, the stairwell - "

"Oh come on, you've got to have a spare gun."

"Stark -"

"I'll cover you." He gave her the puppy eyes, not that they worked on Hill.

Hill narrowed her eyes, but drew a second gun from the small of her back and pressed it into his hand. Then she advanced out onto the ice, her boots gripping a lot more solidly than Tony's expensive shoes did. He skated sideways, into the cover of a large display about stress at work and how you could combat it. Someone had added 'Fire Clint Barton' to the bottom of the list, which Tony judged as fair, though if Clint discovered who'd written it no doubt their stress levels would skyrocket. He peered through the hinge in the display board to see Hill edging round the water feature. The aluminium chairs and tables were solidly iced in place, and he could see his own breath clouding in the air.

If he were some kind of ice monster, where would he hide?

In the ice.

Oh, shit.

"Hill!" he yelled, and her head jerked towards him, giving a perfect opening to the misshapen lump of ice which unfurled into a vaguely humanoid shape and punched her across the room. "Sorry." He brought the gun up, and fired. Three shots into the centre of mass, which sent cracks spiderwebbing across it; unfortunately, they sealed shut again as the creature clambered forward, rearing up onto
his... legs? Hind legs? Those could be arms. Bipedal, Tony decided as it took a step forward, and then Hill put a large-calibre bullet into its right knee, which exploded and pitched the creature down. She scrambled to her feet, and cursed as it groped around for the lower part of its leg.

"Stark! Ideas?"

This was the joy of being a consultant to the Avengers Initiative. People asked you questions and expected you to come up with answers.

"Turn up the heating?" was the best he could offer. "Flaming arrows?"

"Flares," she ordered someone, presumably through her earpiece. "We need heat and small explosives."

She shot out the thing's other knee, and it let out a deep booming sound that echoed off the walls. Then it rolled forward onto its hands, or possibly front legs, and launched itself at her. She backpedalled, feet skidding on the ice. Tony took a shot at its head and missed; he really needed to spend more time at the range. It grabbed Hill's ankle and hurled her into the iced chairs, and she slumped to the ice unmoving.

Tony grabbed the strut of the display stand and ripped it free. Then he charged the ice monster with his best war cry, which wasn't much to impress. He scored a nice solid hit, which put a large bend in the strut - cheap steel - and then its paw-thing came round and caught him a blow which sent him flying. It turned on him, which was mission accomplished as far as distracting it from Hill went but raised a number of new difficulties.

He put his free hand down onto the ice, which was a mistake. It stuck. Stupid SHIELD and its fancy metal floors. Tony yanked, but he didn't have the leverage to rip free; he raised his strut in defence as the creature advanced.

A cracking sound, and the creature jerked forward; its front paw - claw - dug into the ice between Tony's feet. Hill darted to its side, and put a second shot into the side of its head at point-blank range. Another low roar from the creature, and it lolled sideways; a third shot, and it collapsed Tony swallowed.

"Thanks," he said, and Hill nodded and began to reload her gun. "Were you actually in danger there?"

"Playing possum, luring it close for a head shot. Thanks for playing bait for me, though."

"Great, happy to help." Tony turned his attention to his hand, which was starting to ache. Ice was creeping up over his fingers. He got his feet under him, the tug of the ice on his pants suggesting that decision was just in time. "Uh, Hill."

"What?" She looked over. "Oh, damn, Stark, what have you done now?"

"Really need help here," his voice was tight with nervousness; tissue damage on his fingers would be - "Oh shit!" He grabbed for the gun again, and put an ineffectual shot into the stack of ice which was, unbelievably, lurching upright again. It went straight for Hill, bowling her over, taking another shot that barely slowed it. Tony yanked desperately at his trapped hand, but he was going nowhere.

The air crackled around them, and for a second Tony thought the pillar of light was back; then something hit the ice-monster in the side, something with all the force of a freight train by the way it sent the creature flying thirty feet across the room.
Something - Tony would swear it was a giant mallet - flew out of the icy wreckage and back the way it had come. Tony swivelled his head around in time to see it smack into the raised hand of -

Well, of -

Of a ren faire escapee?

Over six feet tall, broad and blond and wearing some kind of scale mail topped with a flowing red cloak. Possibly the weirdest part was he was flanked by two of the science division, two short, pretty women armed with tazer and fire extinguisher respectively.

"Can someone unfreeze me before I get tissue damage," he said loudly, because what the hell could wait. The taller woman took a step forward to peer at his hand, and then scuttled off towards the snack bar. The huge blond crouched beside him and pressed his bare thumb firmly into the ice before Tony could tell him how stupid that was; but ice cracked under the force, and the man didn't stick.

"Here," said a breathless voice, and a paper cup of steaming water appeared over his shoulder. Tony grabbed it, and began to apply it. The big guy helpfully kept cracking ice, and soon he was able to puddle the water around his fingers and pull free. The two women stood guard, looking around suspiciously. Tazer-girl kept taking aim at the empty air, and saying Ha!. The other one he knew; Dr Jane Foster, who did something highly classified involving particle physics.

Agent Hill seemed to have washed her hands of the whole performance, and was talking into her earpiece in a low voice. She didn't show any concern at seeing hammer-wielding oddities in capes wandering through the base, which Tony was taking as a good sign.

"So what the hell," Tony said as soon as his hand was loose. "What's going on?"

"Ice giants." The big man grabbed his arm and lifted him upright. That was about as helpful as Rhodey had been. "I fear I brought them with me, somehow."

"From where?"

"From Jotunheim."

"Where's that?" Tony said. "Wait, the big lightshow - that was you? Arriving? From Jotunheim?"

"I came from Asgard. My name is Thor."

Tony looked at Dr Foster, who shrugged. He looked back at Thor, who smiled at him, the confident smile of a man who expects to find friends everywhere he goes.

Nick Fury had once told Tony he was the realest guy Tony was ever going to meet. Tony had believed him at the time, but Thor, even in his theatrical red cloak and Lord of the Rings armour, was so solidly, inarguably real he made the SHIELD atrium look like a movie set.

"Okay then." Tony extended his hand, and Thor's smile widened even further, and he caught Tony's wrist in some kind of ye olde warrior bond thing. "I'm Tony. Nice to meet you. Hill? You want to tell me what the hell is going on?"

"Got a mission," Fury said, and Steve shrugged.
"Trying to get me back into the world?" Steve turned back to the fallen punching bag. It hadn't damaged the wall on impact, at least. Maybe he could hang it somewhere else. He hated it when they sent the repair men in; he had to restrict himself to lifting normal weights for as long as they were there, and it wasn't anything like a distraction.

"Trying to save it." Steve glanced round, attention caught despite himself. Fury gave him the usual I-am-concerned-son look, but it was subtly different today. It reminded him of Colonel Phillips; a look that said I may be concerned but right now I have more important things to worry about.

It was the first time Fury had acted as if there was anything more important to him than Steve's wellbeing. It was... it was reassuring, oddly enough. The reminder he was just one small part of a busy, active world that had more important things to worry about than one tired veteran. He felt the old, familiar urge when seeing a problem; to say can I help. He struggled with it briefly, and then compromised.

"What's up, sir?"

Fury sat down on a bench, and gestured to Steve to join him; Steve detoured to grab his water bottle, and then put on his attentive face.

"Last week we got the Bifrost Bridge reactivated."

"Uh," Steve had been told an awful lot of things since his arrival two months ago, and most of the information had sleeted straight through his brain without being caught. Bifrost, Bifrost... "That's the gate to Asgard, right?"

Because apparently in the future they were on friendly terms with alien gods. Steve had been unable to work up any surprise. You're in the future. We've been to the Moon. There's a black President. You can carry a computer in your pocket. The Norse Gods are real, kind of. At some point, you just have to give up and go with the flow, and hope no one's screwing with you.

"Close enough. Dr Foster and Heimdall managed to get it together long enough for Thor to ship on down to us. They've managed two brief connections since. It's offline right now, but Thor brought down some data, and Dr Foster thinks they'll be able to get the link up and stable soon. Further, she hopes we'll be able to do it using Asgardian power sources, instead of blacking out Manhattan."

"Still no budget for generators, huh?" Fury gave him the careful look that meant he wasn't sure if Steve were making a joke, and Steve waved it away. "So what's this got to do with me?"

"Well, first problem is that the Bifrost isn't working properly. A week ago, ago, five giant ice men went gallivanting through my base. Two days ago, some kind of small fire-breathing thing I refuse to call a dragon. This morning, we played host to seven extremely angry dwarves, who were by no means as cute or as helpful as Mr Disney would have us believe." Fury paused, brow furrowing. "You've seen Disney, right?"

"Yeah, Snow White was out before the war."

"Right." Fury drummed his fingers on his knee, apparently losing himself in thought. His single eye had deep shadows below it, and the white was traced with red; he was exhausted, Steve realised, with a touch of surprise. Even after only two months, Fury seemed... immutable. Unchanging. As if he'd meet any crisis with the same calmness he'd worn walking up to Steve in Times Square, like being punched through walls was something that only happened to other people.

Steve waited a polite minute before prompting him, curiosity tickling despite himself.
"But you don't need me to deal with dwarves." Technology had moved on far enough that Steve's skills hardly seemed relevant; whatever fighting giant ice men might entail, Steve couldn't see himself being notably useful.

"Not exactly, although I'm sure you'd do it well. There's a lot of people getting all excited about meeting the gods and rainbows bridges and maybe there'll be unicorns, you know? The way I see it, we're making first contact with an alien race who have technology vastly superior to ours. And enemies. Lots of enemies. Asgardians seem like nice enough fellows, but the first time we met them was brothers trying to kill each other for the throne. We're stepping into stuff we don't understand." Fury's hand shot up to tap at the strap to his eyepatch, nudging it a little lower on his skull. "We've got a dozen... aliens down in holding cells. Or, if you want to look at it another way, twelve foreign nationals we kidnapped and are holding against their wills."

"Tricky," Steve said, which judging from the face Fury made, was a massive under-reaction. But it wasn't like Steve had ever met an alien, or been involved in diplomacy or politics. It was way above his paygrade.

"That's tricky? I've read some Norse mythology. We have historians on the payroll now. The Bifrost hiccupps, we can expect anything from buxom women on flying horses to fire giants. Now, I don't know what a fire giant is, but I don't like the sound of it." He looked at Steve expectantly. Steve looked down at the polished pine floor.

"Maybe you should stop using the Bifrost." It seemed reasonable to him, but Fury just sighed.

"That's certainly an option. Then we'd be holding the heir to the throne of an alien nation against his will, while they try repeatedly to establish contact with us, which will keep on sending us little presents. The dwarves arrived on Earth in Minnesota, by the way. The Bifrost isn't just dropping them here at SHIELD HQ."

"So what do you want me for?"

Fury grinned in that particular way Steve had already learned to be wary of, and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I want you to be Captain America, hero of the people."

"What?" Steve's stomach seemed to vanish, leaving him only a hollow, panicky feeling. "No. You don't need - "

"That's exactly what we need right now." The hand squeezed, firmly, as if Fury could sense his urge to bolt. "Thor's a nice fellow. But his society prizes heroes. Big heroes. Larger than life. Thor's six foot six and carries a hammer that can bring the thunder, and who have I got to face that?"

"You told me I wasn't the only superhero around."

"Yeah. But I'll be honest with you, Cap; you're our only hero. We got a few guys with what are more-or-less superpowers, and they're working on a combination of self-interest, guilt, daddy issues, accidents of science and a monthly paycheck. We've only got one guy who laid down his life saving the world from, well, evil. The Asgardians can respect that."

"I didn't exactly die," Steve said in the absence of anything better. There was a large difference between signing autographs for kids and pretty girls, and having to be, well, America. To aliens, too. At least he'd never been risking interstellar war before.

He hadn't thought the stakes could get any higher; sometimes it seemed like someone, somewhere
was laughing at him.

"They can respect that, too. Going through death, and returning from it; it's a mystical thing for them."

"They have religion?" Steve tried not to boggle too obviously. How could Gods have religion? How would that even work?

"Haven't had anyone give me a straight answer on that. They've got mysteries." Fury leaned even further forward, getting right into his space. "Cap, we need you. Not just America; the Bifrost alone has the power to destroy worlds, and that's their elevator. I want you to show up with the Avengers Initiative, make nice with Thor, meet their diplomatic missions, if they have them. Smile like it's a photo op. You've done that for your country before."

"Is this - going to be public?" He was folding, he could feel it, the glare of Fury's single eye was demolishing his resolve.

"No need for that now. SHIELD personnel, of course. But we'll keep it locked down until you're ready. If you ever are." He smiled, expectantly, and Steve sighed. He couldn't, after all, spend the rest of his life in the basement gym, destroying punchbags. Or maybe he could; another fifty, sixty, seventy years watching things split under his fists while the world buzzed on overhead, growing and changing while Steve... fossilised. Froze. He couldn't even remember what time of day it was. Afternoon? Midnight? There were no windows down in SHIELD's basement gym.

"Fine," he looked down at his feet. "Yeah. I'll try it."

"Good man." Fury let him go, and stood up. "I'll arrange a meeting with the rest of the team to break the news to them - we'll get them a little bit prepared to meet you."

"Great." Steve managed a smile, and tried to push his qualms aside. "Will I get my shield back?"

"Soon. I promise, it's fine, and I'll pry it out of the lab's hands soon."

Tony leaned a little more into Thor's space, and scraped his sampling tool determinedly over the underside of Mjolnir, where there weren't any elaborate patterns for him to ruin. Sure, he hadn't made a dent in the past two weeks, but who knew? Perhaps he could wear it down. And it wasn't like he had anything better to do. Consultant today seemed to mean sitting around listening to people talk and talk, in a conference room that had been way over-designed. The dramatic uplighting just made everyone look ghastly, and they'd had to swap out the brushed steel table for a glossy black number after Thor had managed to give everyone an electric shock.

He'd tried skipping the meetings; Agent Hill had tricked him into this one by telling him she had news of another legal attempt to confiscate the armour. She'd also told him it was an hour earlier than it actually was, so Tony had been slightly early, which was enraging, especially for a breakfast meeting. Still, at least she hadn't had Natasha and Coulson kidnap him this time. Nothing like arriving to a meeting in a sack to impair your gravitas.
There wasn't even any Rhodey to keep him amused; how come he got to skip meetings? He was a bona fide member of the Avenger Initiative, after all. He should be at all the meetings.

"And one final matter," Fury paused to be sure he had everyone's full attention, and Tony looked directly at him, as a reward for finally wrapping up the meeting. "We found Captain America."

Tony felt that at least that was slightly interesting. Clint just looked bored. Natasha looked attentive, but then she was attentive even when Fury was talking about the fire drill, because she was a natural-born kiss-up. Thor looked affably confused. His face was going to stick like that one day, or maybe already had.

"And we care because?" Tony said, to keep up appearances, but Fury smirked at him. Something was up. "I mean, hurrah, America's hero will come home to be buried in our soil, but why do – " His brain helpfully produced a reason that it could be very interesting, and he changed gears smoothly. "Oo, did you find his shield? You found his shield, didn't you. Can I see?"

"Yes, we found his shield too, and you may in due course get to examine it," Tony suppressed the urge to bounce in his chair. Vibranium. The first known piece of vibranium, which they'd promptly strapped to a grunt and dropped into the ocean. Maybe getting a look at that was worth not yanking Fury's chain for a little bit. "However – yes Thor?" Thor lowered his hand. His face was set in a familiar expression of wide-eyed interest.

"Who is Captain America?" he asked. "When was he lost?"

It wasn't as if Thor ever needed telling the same thing twice; he sucked up information like a bottomless stick of flash memory. There was just so much he didn't know.

"An American soldier from the Second World War, a global conflict that ended seventy years ago," Natasha rattled off, not taking her eyes off Fury. "He was reported missing in action in the final days of the War, after preventing an attack that would have destroyed most of the major cities in Europe and the US."

"Until now." Fury folded his hands, and looked smug. Tony stared fixedly, trying to pierce that poker face. What else had they found down there? Fury wouldn't be looking like this for one dead soldier, not even Captain America.

He cast a look at Agent Hill, who looked alert and ready, eyes fixed on Fury like a retriever waiting for a gunshot; no clues there.

"So he's dead?" Thor looked at Natasha.

"Yes," she said.

"No," Fury said.

There was a pause.

"I beg your pardon, Colonel?" Natasha raised her eyebrows in polite inquiry, as if Fury had said something slightly off-beat, rather than gone straight to la-la land without passing Go. Tony wasn't particularly surprised; he'd known from the start Fury was a man on the edge.

His eyes went to Hill again. She showed no signs of calling in a medical team, so either the madness was contagious, or...

"He's not dead," Fury repeated, and then stopped, clearly about to milk this.
"Where's he been for seventy years, then?" Clint leaned forward, showing interest for the first time that day. Tony had thought he'd gone to sleep behind his beetle-green wraparound shades. "Was he a prisoner?"

"He appears to have been locked in some kind of suspended animation, probably brought on by extreme cold; we found him in the Arctic, under the ice."

"Suspended animation?" Thor looked at Natasha again.

"Think magical sleep. Wait, he – " she hesitated, ice-cool facade clearly warring with rampant curiosity, and then plunged on. "Suspended animation? Has he aged?"

"No." A slow grin stretched over Fury's face. "Captain America appears to be a perfectly healthy young man. The only living recipient of the Super Soldier Serum is alive and well and in the prime of life."

"Shit," was all Tony could think to say. That was - he glanced down at his hand, still resting against Mjolnir. All right, the boundaries of possible had been expanding, but Captain America? He wasn't some weird Norse God alien thing. He was real. "Are you kidding us? This is a joke." Or a PR stunt? Not if they were going to show Tony his shield. Captain Americas might come and go, but a chunk of solid vibranium couldn't be faked.

"No. There was something of a... dispute over his custody, but it has been decided that as he is a superhuman, he comes under SHIELD's aegis. He has expressed an initial willingness to being a part of the Avengers Initiative."

Tony would have loved to have been a party to those discussions. What kind of strings had Fury pulled? Captain America... everyone was going to want a piece of that. The man was, quite literally, legendary. Tony bit down on a number of breathless fanboy questions, and went for cynicism.

"That's great. Just what we need, right? Bet he's got all kinds of useful skills. Can he drive a tank?"

Tony rolled his eyes exaggeratedly. Still. Captain America. Tony couldn't quite suppress a little quiver of excitement, which was silly; the man was just a veteran, albeit a distinguished one, and it wasn't like Tony didn't know dozens of soldiers. Sure, he'd be a treat for the biologists if the whole Super-Soldier thing was actually true...

"Obviously he'll take a little time to get up to date," Fury glared at him. "But I think he'll cope. Thor's been adapting well, after all."

Well, that was wildly optimistic. Sure, Thor hadn't actually caused any major disasters, but he'd been vigorously demonstrating the principle of 'culture clash'. Tony, in his ever-shifting role as consultant, had already had to fetch Thor back from the home of a kid who'd trolled Thor's Facebook page. Would that work out better or worse with someone who was from the past, and not another world?

"Is he going to be happy working with lady soldiers? For that matter, how about you, Colonel? Isn't he used to segregation? A lot to adapt to, right?"

Fury narrowed his eye; Tony kept his shit-eating grin wide.

"I've already spoken to the Captain myself. He seems to be adjusting to his new circumstances very well. Fortunately, he's already accustomed to working with female personnel, as it seems there were actually some ladies peripherally involved with the war." He widened his eye with faux-innocence. "I was surprised too."

"Right. So when do we meet him?" Tony said with absolutely no excitement quivering in his voice.
"Well, I think the team will be meeting him quite soon. As you're just a consultant, I'm not really sure there's any need for you to meet him. You're obviously not very interested, anyway."

Which meant Fury had dragged him to this meeting for the sole purpose of taunting him. Well, he wasn't going to get any satisfaction out of Tony. Tony didn't give a hoot for Captain America. He folded his arms, and slouched back in his chair to indicate his complete lack of interest in the whole affair.

"But when are we going to do anything?" Clint didn't quite whine. "We've been sitting around on high alert for ten days, and all that's happened is Thor's become a media celebrity."

And Clint had picked off fourteen fire-crackling salamanders swarming over a church while he dangled from a helicopter; but perhaps to Clint that didn't count as anything happening.

"I have two hundred and fifty thousand followers on the Twitter," Thor put in, like he thought it might help. Maybe that would be the new way of boasting in Asgard; instead of enemies slain, they could compare Facebook friends.

"What do you Tweet about?" Fury frowned at him. "Someone's checking that for you, right? Hill?"

"On it, sir. Thor, perhaps we could talk afterwards - "

"Well, it's been fun," Tony stood up. Time to get out before they discovered the extent of Thor's social network, and who had helped him set it up. Maybe they'd blame Darcy. He'd go and pay a little call on Rhodey, see if he could pump some information out.

"Rhodey. Rhodey? Rhodey, come on, pay attention to me."

"Working, Tony, I'm doing work, very important work. Urgent work." Rhodey slanted him a glance, and Tony sat down firmly in the chair across from him.

"So much work you missed the meeting," Tony folded his arms and pouted reproachfully. Rhodey pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes; his lips moved as if he were counting.

The problem with being as competent and dedicated as Rhodey was that people noticed you being competent and dedicated. Fury had noticed instantly that Rhodey was the kind of man you could rely on, and promptly stolen him. Borrowed him, seconded him, something, anyway, Rhodey and the War Machine were not only attached to the Avengers Initiative, Fury had him liaising with the Asgardians.

Fury had said something near-libellous like he's got so much experience with dealing with people who look human but are really freakish alien beings.

Add this to the military's constant borrowing back of Rhodey to play war games with his armour, and Rhodey didn't have nearly enough time to focus on the essentials. Like Tony.

Rhodey opened his eyes, and spoke in weary tones.

"Do you know how much paperwork a night out in Vegas with a Norse God generates?"

"No?"
"If you did, you might think twice before doing it."

"There were no problems." Tony waved a hand dismissively. Rhodey bit down on the end of his pen and closed his eyes briefly.

"Was it really necessary to get him married?"

"It was very touching; I was a flower girl. I had a wreath and everything." Plastic, sparkly and made from a pew decoration, but still. Tony smiled reminiscently. Thor had insisted on holding Jane cradled in his arms for the whole ceremony; Tony may have shed a few tears when they kissed. Volstagg had broken down entirely, sobbing in the combined embraces of Hogun and Sif. All in all, it had been a fantastic night out and well worth sneaking Thor out from under Fury's eye. Rhodey didn't look convinced. "It could have been much worse, you know."

"How?"

"Well, apparently they're culturally bisexual. Isn't that fascinating? I thought that was fascinating."

"What?"

"So really, I've done us all a favour by getting Thor firmly hitched to a person of the feminine persuasion. I could've married him myself, and then we'd have to tell him his marriage wasn't valid in...

"This isn't in any of my files," Rhodey clawed vaguely at his paperwork.

"Well, why would they bring it up? It's not like we greeted them with 'Hi, we're the human race, let me tell you where I like to put my dick'. Wait, Thor met Jane first, so it would be 'let me tell you -' except actually, I think they were both pretty upfront about where they wanted the dick to go. Anyway. I only found out when we were trying to pick a strip club."

He waited, but Rhodey just stared, despairingly, at his cluttered desk. Tony sighed, and decided to give him an easier question. "So is she Mrs God of Thunder? Mrs Odinson? How are you working that out?"

"She's staying Doctor Foster."


"A bigger worry is the fact she's married to an extradimensional non-human being." Rhodey showed a distressing lack of interest in Norse deity naming conventions; that kind of attitude would take him nowhere.

"Wow. Is that even legal?" Tony widened his eyes innocently. Rhodey slammed down his pen and glared. Tony could tell he didn't really mean it. Secretly, he found it all hilarious and was grateful to Tony for making his days more interesting. Rhodey would have a boring, boring life without Tony.

"It's going to have to be, or Thor's going to cause a diplomatic incident." Rhodey tapped a finger on what seemed to be a scroll. Probably parchment or vellum or something; there were large wax seals visible. "The last Bifrost connection sent down a lovely letter about dishonouring womanhood and shaming wives sent down from Frigga. Apparently she's very keen on the whole grandchildren aspect; there's a whole section about bastardy and claimants to the throne of Asgard and the possible
"See, now they're married, Thor's heirs will be half-human! That's surely a diplomatic coup, right? Like sending princesses to marry your enemies. I'm a natural at this interdimensional relations thing." He frowned. "Wait, isn't Loki adopted or something? How does adoption compare to bastardy in the legitimate claim to the throne stakes?"

"Well, that's an excellent question, Tony. One which is addressed in the fourteenth paragraph of this letter. It doesn't appear to have come up before, and I'm told that Asgardians tend to resolve legal disputes with battles. Large, violent battles, ranging from world to world, leaving - " Rhodey ran a finger down the letter " - now my Old Norse isn't very good – although it is, by necessity, improving very fast - but I think this says only the raven's feast and laments of the bereaved, for the earth itself is wounded unto death." He stared at Tony. Tony stared back.

"You know," Tony said finally. "Did you ever think how interesting it is that all those people who studied the useless dead language are now getting paid top dollar as translators? I mean it's funny how things work out."

"Get out, Tony."

"I'm just saying, maybe next we'll meet Ra and Set and Nefertiti and suddenly people who read hieroglyphs will be making bank."

"Out!" Rhodey pointed to the door; Tony settled back in his chair, but then caught sight of a familiar deep red through the half-open door. Questioning about back-from-the-dead super-soldiers could wait.

"I gotta run, Rhodey – I'll give you a call later, okay?" He made kissy faces, and Rhodey flapped a hand as if trying to fend off the airborne smooches. Tony bounced out of the door in pursuit of Thor's cloak, which was, as expected, attached to Thor.

"Good morning, my friend!" Thor clapped a hand down on his shoulder. "How do you fare on this fine day?"

"How do you know it's fine? I thought you were grounded?"

"Grounded?" Thor's other hand snuck apparently unconsciously to check the hammer at his belt. "No, I am still capable of flight; and I can feel the tides of Midgardian weather in my blood. The sun shines, unclouded, though the wind is rising." He hooked his arm around Tony's shoulders and dragged him firmly along. "Join me for breakfast?"

"Sure," Tony let himself be towed towards the stairs. While Rhodey had an office that was reasonably well-situated - there was even a teeny window - Thor had been stashed in a tiny apartment in the depths of SHIELD headquarters. He was remarkably cheerful about it. Probably because he could nag Heimdall into zapping him back if he really wanted, although that had a decent chance of dumping a dragon in Central Park. "So what do you think about the Captain America thing?"

"A warrior bravely fallen in battle, returned to his people?" Thor beamed. "Truly, it is a cause for celebration. I'm told he was the mightiest of your race?"

"Race? Oh, humans."

"Midgardians." Thor knocked loudly on his door, and they waited.
"Yeah. I mean, not really." He put on a bright and shiny smile for Jane, who peered suspiciously round the door at them before shuffling away without a word, hunching into her fluffy robe like a turtle into its shell. Dr Foster was not a morning person.

Tony unfolded himself a chair, and sat down at the little table, which was piled with photocopies of magazine articles about hadroproduced muon pairs and neutrino interactions. Being a particle physicist was one of those career paths Tony had always dismissed as boring as hell, except apparently that wasn't always true. Sometimes you ended up marrying aliens, it seemed.

Thor opened the mini-fridge, and extracted what appeared to be a glazed ham. He edged round Jane, who was fumbling together a coffee, and grabbed bread and a knife, which he set down in front of Tony.

"Ale?" he inquired, and Tony shook his head.

"Coffee, please."

There was a brief, silent negotiation between Thor and Jane; guests! Hospitality! The traditions of my people! said Thor's puppy dog eyes. my coffee mine said Jane's narrowed glare. Puppy eyes won, and Jane surrendered her coffee in exchange for a kiss. Thor carried his trophy back to Tony triumphantly while she turned back to brood over the carafe. Tony should buy them a fancy coffeemaker; it was surely the quickest way to Jane's heart.

"What did you mean?" Thor said, and Tony gave him a blank look. "You said 'not really'."

"Oh yeah. Well of course he was a hero. But greatest ever? He had the right place, right time." Like Tony's father; by any reasonable estimate, if their positions had been swapped, Tony would have been an esteemed scientific veteran of the Second World War, and Howard would have been Iron Man. If Tony had never been kidnapped, he would never have been Iron Man, and if there hadn't been a Second World War, Captain America would have been an ordinary soldier, or maybe a lab rat.

"That is true of many warriors." Thor began efficiently dismantling the ham. "The greatest heroes of my people fought in the war with the Jotuns; I was but a babe then. Without such a battle, I will never be as great a hero as my father." His expression was strange; Tony couldn't make it out. Something like sadness. "But a great man knows when to take the moment, and make it his own. Or her own. Woman." He glanced around uneasily, as if Sif might be lurking with a short sharp lesson, and then offered Tony a slice of bread with ham piled on it. Tony eyed it consideringly, and then shook his head.

"Not for me, big guy." Tony swirled his coffee, breathing in the scent. "My father used to search for his body."

Jane turned around, and shuffled to the table, clutching her coffee. Her eyes were open all the way now.

"Hi, Tony." She managed a smile, and Tony waggled his fingers at her.

"A worthy endeavour." Thor hooked a finger round Jane's wrist, and managed to disentangle one of her hands from her mug and clasp it in his own; she smiled at him with goofy infatuation. Newlyweds, honestly.

"He knew him, you see," Tony rarely talked about his father, and now he was in the mood to, he wasn't going to be discouraged through mere lack of interest. "Every few years, he'd get an
expedition together, go out, spend a few months searching... he sank so much money into it."

The search for Captain America had been a fixture of his childhood; when he was five, when he was seven, when he was ten, when he was fourteen, and then Tony was at MIT and didn't really pay attention, but he knew Howard had made more trips. Finding Captain America was a big thing in the Stark household; even his mother, rarely short of a barbed remark about Howard's extravagances and follies, had never found a criticism for those expeditions, had always kissed Howard goodbye and wished him luck.

*Bring him home, Howard,* she'd said once, the first time he remembered, and Tony had asked, interested, *Will he come to live with us?*

He couldn't remember quite how they'd responded, but he knew it was a good memory, remembered Maria smiling down at him and the prickle of Howard's moustache when he'd kissed Tony's cheek.

Tony hadn't taken any such trips himself, though there were still Stark operations in the Arctic. He felt a little bad for that now; but anyway, they'd found him without Stark Industries.

"I mean we made fantastic advances in deep-water and cold-weather tech, so we ultimately made good profits, even today Stark tech is the best for - " he trailed off. Without Stark Industries? Jane looked up at him.

"Indeed, expeditions to Jotunheim will be far more comfortable with my new parka." Thor spared Tony a smile before turning back to stare at Jane.


"Parka is the right word? My armour tends to collect ice, and it - "

"That son of a bitch." Tony was awed. Nick Fury was possibly the biggest, ballsiest asshole ever to exist. It couldn't be true. Tony had to be wrong.

"Is something amiss, Tony?"

He ignored Thor's look of innocent inquiry, and looked at Jane. There was no surprise in her sleepy eyes, only a guarded wariness. Guilty.

"You're damn right it's amiss." He pointed an accusing teaspoon at Jane, who gave him a bland look that shrieked of her culpability. "You know, don't you? It was Selvig."

"Yes," she said, as if she didn't have a thing to feel guilty about. "Erik was called out. You didn't have the security clearance your father had." Tony's breath caught at the sheer unjustness, and he would have shrieked at her if she didn't have a God of Thunder hovering anxiously at her shoulder, looking between them. He'd known there was something up with Selvig's sudden disappearance, after he'd been so tight with Fury. But he'd hadn't thought it worth his time, and he hadn't connected it with Pepper's complaints about the Arctic operations being mysteriously bogged down by government red tape.

"One of my operations - an operation that actually originated with the search for Captain America – one of my operations finds him, and I don't get told?"

"They didn't know it was Captain America when they called in Erik. They thought it was connected to – something else. Something you don't have clearance to - "

"The ship he went down in," Tony said instantly, and Jane winced. "It wasn't nukes. There's just not
the evidence that Schmidt was working on nukes, and Zola had little knowledge of that field." His frowned deepened. "Some other superweapon. He had an occult obsession – made a major incursion into Norway shortly before his advanced weapons started appearing."

"Tony, stop," Jane was looking worried now, as well she might. Tony was intimately familiar with his company, the history of his company, and the history of weapon making. Nazi weapons. Norway. Weapons that played fast and loose with the laws of physics - or with the physics they knew, at least. He could work this out, he could -

"Something to do with your merry band," Tony crowed to Thor, who looked blank. "Schmidt had an occult toy, something Asgardian, he used it to power superweapons, they were in the ship Cap brought down, so when they found it they got their dual expert in Asgardian tech and Norse mythology in."

"Is this true, Jane?" Thor said, and Jane pursed her lips, and then nodded.

"The ship had something very similar to Asgardian tech aboard. It was a considerable help in reconstructing the Bifrost - with certain elements here, it's much easier for Heimdall to make a connection. Anyway, they found Captain America's – body, we thought. I flew out to examine the tech, and they'd gotten him up by that point, were doing medical exams."

"On a sixty year old corpse? What were they planning to do?"

"DNA. They'd dragged Dr van Dyne in to start doing work on extracting the Serum, and she detected signs of biological activity in the cells. From what she said to me, she thought it was just... something to do with the serum keeping cells alive, so she thought she might get some active – anyway, she started hypothermia treatment in the hope of getting some preserved Serum, and then, boom. Brain activity, followed shortly by a pulse, and then people screamed like the base was coming down."

Tony made a sharp cutting movement with his hand; who cared?

"And I'm sure it was very touching and people cried red, white, and blue, but what about the Asgardian tech?"

"Classified," and she shut her lips tightly.

"Something came out of Norway in 1943. Something that Schmidt and Zola used to create – no, to power weapons unlike anything seen before or since. Something that went down with Captain America. And you found it."

"Jane," Thor laid a hand on her shoulder, his brow creased with worry. It looked odd on a man usually so ebullient. "Jane, I haven't – we haven't heard anything of this. Why have the Asgardians not been informed?"

"I told you that new discoveries had enabled me to create a Bifrost effect," she said, and Thor shook his head.

"Not – Jane, I am by no means expert in the mysteries. That was always my brother's path. But this is not a small thing, is it? What did you find down there in the water?"

"Don't worry, Thor," Tony slapped his hands down on the table, and bared his teeth at Jane. "We'll know soon enough. I am going to sue the goddamn pants off of Nick Fury for sneaking into my operation and hiding my salvage from me. That ship belongs to me; my guys found it. International waters, salvage law applies."
"Well, about time I went to work," Jane patted Thor's hand and retreated into the bedroom, and Tony glared after her.

That was - that was unbelievable. If Nick Fury thought he could swipe things out from under Tony's nose with no consequences - Tony should have known about whatever this was -

- should have known about Captain America, should have been the first person to talk to him, to tell him Howard Stark had come through for him in the end.

"I can't believe she's singing from the SHIELD hymn sheet now." Tony ran a hand through his hair and turned to Thor, who was frowning down at his bread. "Remember when she first – no, you weren't there, but she called Coulson a fascist enforcer twice a week."

"My sweet Jane is a woman of passionate emotions," Thor directed an infatuated smile at the bedroom door, in the absence of her actual presence. Then he frowned again. "Tony, if an Asgardian artifact is in SHIELD's possession -"

"I know, big guy." Tony waved a hand, and then thought of culture clashes. "Wait, do I know? Is this some kind of invade our world and lay waste thing?"

"My father prefers peace." Thor's face was unusually grave. "But it would be a mistake to think that means he will not fight. The Midgardians knew him as a God of war and death."

"So would he..." Tony gestured for Thor to continue. What had Rhodey said, about ravens and lamenting? It had sounded pretty bad. Thor looked again towards the bedroom door before fixing his pale blue eyes back on Tony.

"He might," was all he said, but it sent a cold chill down Tony's spine.

The new world was, in many ways, just the same. Military discipline hadn't changed much. Fury was recognisable as a superior officer in every way but his skin colour, and the way rooms snapped to attention for him was no different. There were still icy brunettes with a taste for weaponry, although the leather jumpsuit the woman wore was more revealing than anything he'd seen Peggy wear and the gun at her hip wasn't anything he recognised.

"This is Natasha," Fury said. "She's one of my best agents. I was also hoping to introduce you to some of our other team members, but I guess something came up." He smiled. There were a lot of teeth; Steve didn't think Fury was angry at him, though.

"Good morning, ma'am," and he held out his hand. Natasha had neat little hands with polished nails, and she just nodded in response to his tentative smile. Her eyes tracked slowly up and down his body, as if looking for weak points.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain."

"Why don't you two get to know each other," Fury showed his teeth again. "I'll be back shortly."

Natasha took a seat, and crossed one slim leg over the other. Steve had to forcibly prevent himself from staring, and sat down beside her on the pale, squishy sofa. The room looked more like the
The whole SHIELD base was expensive and glossy and new-seeming; the basement gym was the most worn part of it, and he was getting the creeping feeling they’d furnished it especially for him, with gently used fittings and deliberately aged paintwork.

He looked at Natasha's profile; Natasha Romanoff, according to the files, which had been somewhat sparse. A huge amount of her background was apparently covered by various top secret restrictions, which he didn't have access to. Undercover, infiltration, and he strongly suspected from certain hints, assassination.

"So... have you worked here for long?" he tried, and she turned from studying the clouds to stare straight through him.

"I'm afraid that's classified, Captain."

"Right." Steve nodded. Classified, of course. What wasn't likely to be classified? "Do you..." He cast about for a new topic. She raised one eyebrow as the silence lengthened. "Wow, I wish I could do that," he blurted, and wished he could take it back as the brow rose higher.

"Excuse me?"

"The eyebrow thing." Steve pointed, helpfully, to his own eyebrow. "I've never gotten the hang of it. Just raising one, I mean." Yup, show him a pretty girl and his higher reason still flew out the window. Great. The eyebrow lowered, and her lips pursed up a little; could be holding back a smile or a sneer.

"Maybe you'll have more time to practise, now." She wasn't outright mocking him, at least. Perhaps he could think of something smarter to say.

"Do you think?" he said instead. She frowned, and for a moment he expected her to say *that's classified*, but she was looking over his shoulder towards the door. Steve followed her gaze to see a man standing in the doorway, looking about as un-military as it was possible to get, with slicked back hair and mirror shades.

"Hey, Nat," he greeted her, and Steve glanced back at Natasha, who nodded, unsmiling. "Where's Fury?"

"He'll be back shortly." Natasha uncurled a single finger to indicate a chair. "Why don't you take a seat."

"I don't really have time to wait about." He did an aimless circuit of the room. "Tell him - "

"You don't want to meet Captain America?" Natasha interrupted, and he stopped in his tracks. "You should get to know your new team leader."

*Leader?* Fury hadn't said anything about him *leading* the Avengers. And he hadn't said anything about - whoever this person was, because if he was a military assassin or a Lieutenant Colonel Steve would eat his shield. If he ever got it back.

Worry about that later. Smile for the camera.

"Hi," Steve stood, smiled, and offered his hand. The new person put his hands in his pockets, and
looked him up and down.

"So, Captain America? You look like a cliche."

"So I've been told. And you are?" Steve dropped his hand, keeping his smile in place. Maybe people didn't shake hands any more outside the military.

"Tony Stark."

"Stark?" Steve's mouth stretch in a disbelieving grin. "Are you -"

"You knew my dad, I think." Stark looked away, out of the window. "I get that a lot." Well, that killed that avenue of conversation; Steve felt suddenly deflated. He could see a slight resemblance, but Howard had been friendly, had been there to coax the conversation along when Steve floundered. This man seemed content to sink it outright. Silly, to look for something familiar in a stranger.

"Yeah," Steve glanced at Natasha, who was doing a fantastic impression of a fashion mannequin. She didn't even appear to be breathing. "So... what do you do?"

"I'm Iron Man."

"Iron Man?" Steve was really starting to wish he'd gotten a little more information out of Fury. There was no Iron Man on the team roster.

"He privatised world peace," Natasha said, apparently without moving her lips. Steve looked between them. Stark continued to stare into the middle distance.

"Captain!" and the room seemed suddenly smaller as a huge blond man in some kind of armour piled in. He spread his arms as if about to gather Steve into a hug, but to Steve's relief, grabbed his hand instead. "A pleasure to meet you! The son of Coul has told me much of your exploits."

"Right," Steve said. His hand felt as if it were wrapped in a baseball mitt; he squeezed back, cautiously, and got the most brilliant open smile he'd ever seen. He couldn't help but smile back.

"I am Thor," he said, and Steve nodded. "Known to Midgardians as the God of Thunder."

"Of course." Of course he was. "It's a pleasure."

"And I see the fair Natasha is with us today," he turned and advanced on Natasha, who was wearing a tiny smile, and didn't hit him when he took her hand and lifted it to his lips. "Does this mean we may expect the lovely Pepper with us today?"

"She has meetings," Natasha dipped her eyelashes very slightly. "Many, many meetings on complex legal issues." Her gaze flicked to Stark and back. "And where is the beautiful Jane? Or Sif? Or even the delightful Fandral."

"Jane has travelled this day to Asgard, where she is on a - a study date, she called it - with Heimdall. Sif and Fandral have gone shopping, with Hogun and Volstagg in their train. Fandral will be sorry to have missed you; I know he longs to face you in combat again and take his revenge."

"I would have thought Sif would have warned him about underestimating opponents." She retrieved her hand, and Thor turned on Stark.

"Good morning, Tony."
"Hi, Thor," Stark cracked a smile, and suddenly Steve could see Howard in him, the spark in his dark eyes and the charm in his smile. He let Thor clasp his forearm; seemed he just didn't want to shake Steve's hand. "Fury got you in?"

"I have not seen him yet! I was afraid I was late, but - " He looked around vaguely, as if he could possibly have missed Fury's presence.

"He was here earlier," Steve offered. "I think he went looking for people."

"Oh," Thor looked faintly guilty. "Was he angry?"

"Um," Steve looked back hopefully at Natasha, but she was studying her nails. "I don't know?"

"Well, that's all my wayward chicks," Fury's voice came from the doorway. He ushered a man in black leather and sunglasses into the room. "Hawkeye, take a seat. You too, Thor. Stark, sit your damn ass down, you're going nowhere."

Thor sat next to Steve, and beamed up at Fury. The apparent Hawkeye sat, and Fury glared at Stark until he perched on the edge of a chair, where he began fiddling with some kind of gadget. A telephone, Steve thought. Steve had managed to coax Maria Hill into showing him her little pocket telephone; he definitely wanted one.

Fury levelled a finger at Steve, who sat up as straight as he could on the squishy cushion.

"This, team, is Steven Rogers. Otherwise known as Captain America." Steve put on his best poster-smile, and beamed about him. Stark didn't look up. Natasha was doing the cool eyebrow thing again. Hawkeye looked bored. Thor, at least, grinned back with fierce enthusiasm. Steve looked at Fury, who looked a little irritated.

"Show some enthusiasm; this man once punched Hitler, and he's increasing our funding just by existing. And I'm looking forward to seeing our approval rating skyrocket when we go public with him."

"I didn't actually punch Hitler. That was just a propaganda thing." Steve was going to get a lid on that right now.

"Did you really stop a nuke from hitting America?" Hawkeye said.

"Uh - yeah, that was a real thing, sort of, it's wasn't quite – yeah." He blushed. The atom bomb was the cover story, although judging from the penetrating look Stark was giving him, he wasn't lying well.

"Did you really throw a shield at Nazis?" Stark inquired, and went back to staring at the wall.

"Well, yes, it - " he was pretty sure vibranium wasn't classified, but Natasha interrupted before he could elaborate on his shield.

"Is it true you had a fist-fight with the Red Skull?" She had little creases of amusement at the corners of her eyes.

"Yes, but - "

"All right, leave him alone." Fury scowled. "We're getting Steve up to speed, but it's going to take time. So you play nice, you hear?"
"The Captain can accompany me on my journeys," Thor proposed, and gave Steve a sunny smile. "I am learning a great deal about Midgard through what is known as the road trip. It is most enjoyable to travel with my team mates."

Fury stared fixedly at Hawkeye until he caved.

"I can show you around the armoury, get you up to date on some of the weapons," he muttered.

"Well, that's nice. And Natasha, perhaps you can take Steve through some sparring?"

"Sir," she said coolly. Steve cast a doubtful glance at her slim form, and then remembered what she'd said to Thor. If she was taking down Asgardian warriors like Thor, then she had to be packing a punch.

"And Stark - " Fury eyed him with apparent disfavour. "Try not to get him into trouble."

"Sure, why would I?" He didn't even look up.

"Is Mr Stark on the team? He wasn't on my list," Steve said. "I need to know these things, sir."

"Due to pressure of work on our good friend Colonel Rhodes - the War Machine - he'll be stepping out from active duty with the Avengers Initiative. In the meantime, Stark has graciously agreed," Fury drawled the words out, and Stark gave him a look of wide-eyed insolence, "To take his place."

Natasha was altogether too self-possessed to roll her eyes, but her slow blink and set lips were surprisingly eloquent.

"Something of a last minute decision, Captain, I do apologise for not updating you. Stark wears a highly advanced battlesuit of his own design, not unlike the War Machine." That told Steve very little, really, but before he could question further, Fury stood up. "I'm going to leave you all to chat up - 

"I have need of speech with you." Thor bounced up, and Fury sighed, and beckoned him to follow.

The room seemed much bigger and quieter without Thor. Steve looked from Hawkeye to Natasha to Stark, and decided that Hawkeye looked the friendliest.

"So, what do you do?" he asked, and Hawkeye looked at him as if he were stupid.

"I'm a SHIELD agent."

"Well, I realise that, but what do you actually do?"

"I'm on assignment to the Avengers Initiative."

"Right." This wasn't quite the most hostile audience he'd ever faced. It was strangely enlivening; after weeks of being handled with the most delicate of kid gloves by people who were barely restraining their panic, it was almost reassuring to meet people who were bored of him. "You want to show me the armoury?"

Hawkeye looked at Natasha, who was staring fixedly at her nails, and then at Stark, who was playing with what seemed to be some kind of pocket computer. Steve had had the vague thought it would be nice to be part of a team again. That had obviously been a very optimistic idea.

Hawkeye knew his weapons, anyway; he could reel off information about any gun Steve touched, and he checked Steve's stance and grip with crisp professionalism.

The basic form of guns hadn't changed much. They had all sorts of fancy scopes and fitting, but they were still about pointing and pulling the trigger, and pretty soon Hawkeye – Clint Barton, he grudgingly divulged, although Steve had known that already – signed him into the range and let him try a few of the weapons.

Hawkeye seemed almost peeved at how fast he adapted to modern guns; he was poking through the locker with a scowl on his face when Steve noticed the bow, and asked to try it out.

Turned out bows were tricky things; Steve managed to give himself a huge weal from elbow to wrist, and Hawkeye cheered up a bit and told him some funny stories about Fury while they iced it.

Stark came in while Hawkeye was examining his arm.

"It's not that bad," he was saying, and Stark glanced over his shoulder.

"That's not even a bruise, what are you doing? Super soldier got an owie?" He arched his eyebrows above his sunglasses and then turned away to rifle through the gun locker.

"It looked worse before," Hawkeye said dubiously. Steve prodded it. It didn't hurt, and the colour had already progressed to yellowy greens.

"I heal fast." Hawkeye rolled his eyes as if Steve had done it to spite him; Steve suppressed the urge to apologise.

"Are you allowed in there?" Hawkeye looked at Stark, who was picking up each gun, examining it with care, and then tossing it back into place. Stark shrugged.

"My access pass worked."

"Your access pass acquires mysterious new powers whenever you get close to a SHIELD computer."

"It's truly amazing. What can I say, I have a knack for ingratiating myself with security systems." He kicked the locker door shut and swiped his card on another, smaller locker, which contained small and wicked looking things, none of which interested Stark for more than a second. Steve stretched out his hand for a palm-sized triangular thing, and Stark slapped his hand away.

"Not for you, stars and stripes." He finished his search, and then slammed it shut again.

"I'm going to have to report I saw you here." Hawkeye folded his arms and gave Stark a cold look, which didn't seem to faze him; he prowled round the edge of the room, trailing his fingers over the walls, as if searching for secret compartments.

"Oh no, whatever will I do? You seen any funny weapons around here?"

"A regular barrel of laughs."

"Glowing blue." His gaze swept over Steve, barely interested. "You can describe them, right, Rogers?" Huh. Stark knew about the weapons... but didn't know? Internal politics of some kind?
"I think it's classified," he murmured, and Stark growled under his breath, a petty pleasure to Steve. At least he wasn't the only one kept in the dark.

"Sure." Tap tap tap went his fingers, and then he turned to the door. "Well, I'll see you boys later. Perhaps you'll have upgraded Captain A to spears by then." He cocked an eyebrow at the bow and was gone before Steve could explain he was perfectly comfortable with guns, thank you. Hawkeye made a face after him, and then turned back to Steve and clapped a hand down on his shoulder.

"Want to try a crossbow?" he offered in almost friendly tones, and Steve nodded.

Tony had planned to spend the next day working on the War Machine, but in an act of stunning ingratitude, Rhodey had gone off to do training runs with his Air Force buddies, which probably meant they were trying to work out how to shoot him down, in case Tony decided to take up crime, terrorism or intergalactic warfare.

He stayed home, instead, and began digging through Howard's notes for any sign of mystical artifacts. That proved exactly as fruitful as expected, so after a few hours he abandoned the effort and sent Fury a coaxing email about Captain America's shield. Not that it was likely to have much effect on him; he was mysteriously unhappy about being blackmailed into letting Tony on the Avengers team. Sore loser.

Internet searches on Nazi occultism got him far more results, most of which were obviously garbage. However, two weeks ago Tony would have said that Nazis with god-powered weapons were obviously garbage, so he wasn't sure he could entirely rule out the theory that Hitler had been the puppet of shape-shifting aliens.

He was seriously considering taking the armour and going out to search for muggers, when JARVIS cleared his electronic throat and announced Pepper Potts had arrived. Apparently she had an appointment, or some such thing.

She'd come in person to get him to sign some things, including papers for the lawsuit; there was looking to be a hideous legal tangle around whether Howard's discovery had been personal, on behalf of his company, or on behalf of the Strategic Science Reserve. Tony was two out of three of those, though, so he liked his chances. He managed to coax her into staying for a drink by holding the last piece of paper hostage.

"They've brought in a new guy for the team," he told her, handing her a martini, and she made an uninterested noise. She wore something in deep blue-green, crisp and professional looking; she didn't look like the end of a long day, but she hardly ever did. Anything up to explosions or open heart surgery were taken in stride. "I can't tell you. It's classified."

"Right. Is this Captain America?" She sipped her drink.

"I knew she told you things." Tony pointed an accusing finger; she just rolled her eyes.

"She's my SHIELD liaison. She's supposed to tell me things."

"But it's secret." He flopped down on the couch beside her, and kicked his feet up onto the coffee table; he was briefly tempted to sulk, but she'd just leave. The disadvantages of making your PA your CEO, he supposed. He should really get a new PA, but... well, even if they didn't turn out to be a secret ninja, he didn't want a new PA, he wanted a new Pepper, and they hardly grew on trees.
"And I have clearance to know secret things, because I am the CEO of Stark Enterprises and therefore Natasha tells me things." That was unarguable logic; it still didn't seem fair that the SHIELD interloper got to tell Pepper all the interesting things. There was a whole lot of not fair going around recently, and Tony was feeling picked on.

"Did she tell you Fury wants him to run the team? I don't see why he gets to lead the team."

"Because he's America's greatest hero? Because he's a famed military tactician? Because he's taller than you?" She gave him an amused look, and he smiled back. She was really very pretty when she was mocking him. Why had they broken up again? Stupid reasons.

"A low blow, Ms Potts. He's very boring. All chiselled and charmless with outdated hair." And of course the first thing out of his mouth had been about Tony's father. No one who started conversations I knew your father ever had anything interesting to say.

Well, maybe Fury. Sometimes.

"Really." A not-quite smile.

"Did Natasha say different?"

"She used words like 'devastating' and 'sexually magnetic'. She also said something about climbing him like a tree." Well, that was a surprise. Natasha hadn't seemed to like him at all. Tony had been starting to think she was a lesbian, as she'd shown no interest in him, in Thor, and had barely changed expression at Rogers. Perhaps blankness was how she displayed her near-uncontrollable lust, in which case Tony had missed his chance.

"I don't think that's very accurate. I think her head has been turned by all that flag. 'I knew your father" He tapped his foot, and considered Captain America's serious face, and the hopeful-puppy smile he gave the people around him when he wasn't doing the fake toothpaste thing. He did have an impressive body, as far as Tony could assess through slacks and t-shirt, but hell, Thor's muscles were half again the size. "I suppose he might be moderately attractive if you like them very dull and conventional. But that doesn't explain why Fury is fawning over him."

"Perhaps Fury likes conventionally handsome men."

"That is a terrifying thought. He does act kind of like a man with a new boyfriend, all bitter because his friends don't like his boring pretty-boy." He brooded vengefully on Fury for a few moments.

"How's the lawsuit going?"

"Complicated." She narrowed her eyes at him; the lawsuit was going to be a great deal of trouble, probably. Well, that was what she got paid for. "It would help if we knew exactly what we were after."

"We need to subpoena Captain America, the man blushes when he tells a lie. He'll never be able to lie under oath." He'd gone pink when he'd said classified, and okay, that was almost cute in a whitebread way.

"That would mean revealing his existence to our legal team, and in case you hadn't noticed - "

"I get to be on the team as long as I keep their silly secrets." Tony had bargained Fury down from 'drop the lawsuit' – well, he'd laughed in Fury's face at that. But Fury was going to some lengths to coddle Captain America, and keep him deathly secret, and was willing to let Tony on to the team in that interest. It meant that as soon as all this came out, Tony would get the boot; unless he could prove his usefulness. But proving his usefulness while the team was still secret was going to be
tricky.

Pepper set her empty glass down, and held out her hand. Tony cocked his head.

"Paper," she reminded him, and he sighed.

"You could stay a bit longer. We never talk any more."

"That's because I'm not your PA any more." She gave him the condescending little smile that was so oddly attractive on her.

"True," Tony tried to take her hand, and she pulled it away. "Pep. Pepper. Why -"

"Don't you dare." She narrowed her eyes, and he threw up his hands defensively.

"Just asking!" He glanced at the paper, hoping for something that he could use to get her to stay a little longer. Then he looked again, more closely, jerking away when Pepper reached for it. "What the hell, when did this happen?"

"About a month ago, Tony. You were copied in on the emails, which were especially flagged for your notice and JARVIS told you they were urgent."

"But you didn't tell me," Tony gave her a reproachful look, and she rolled her eyes. "Seriously, a month ago? So what, they only managed to keep him in custody a month? Since when does Justin Hammer have what it takes to break out of federal custody?"

"He got Vanko out," Pepper said, fingers creeping towards the paper. "And it seems they weren't keeping him in a secure facility."

"Where the hell were they keeping him, then?"

"Well, he was a Government contractor. As far as our lawyers can extract, they had him doing some work for him."

"I don't believe this," Tony let her pluck the paper away. "Seriously, they let Hammer escape." He looked up as Pepper got up. "So, uh, how's it going?" A last-ditch attempt to get her to stay a little longer; she was already on her feet, putting on her swingy white jacket.

"Well, we're suing SHIELD for an unidentified artifact that may belong to a God, and our chief engineer – that's you – is off playing superhero instead of designing new products."

"So all as normal, then." He trailed her to the door, and managed to peck a kiss on her cheek before she retreated down to where Happy was holding the car door for her. "Take care, Pepper."

SHIELD's cosmology lab was vaguely reminiscent of the lab which Steve had been experimented on, all those years ago; the machines were shinier, there was bare metal and plastic where there once would have been paint and wood, but overall, it was quite familiar. It smelled of disinfectant and coffee and was even underground, though they didn't have to pass through any secret doors. Thor just swiped his access card with careful concentration, and then held the door for Steve, which was probably in violation of security procedures; Steve couldn't bring himself to care.
The assorted scientists and technicians barely looked up at Thor striding across the floor, which meant they had to be accustomed to him. Even in this new century, he refused to believe armour had come back into fashion as casual wear.

"Darcy!" Thor bellowed, and a girl with dark hair turned her swivel stool towards them. She gave Steve a slow appraising look, and then an wide smile. Steve could feel a blush starting. "This is Captain America!"

"It's – " Steve began, and Darcy's smile dropped away and she rolled her eyes.

"Ha ha," she said, and Thor's face dropped. "What? Seriously?"

"Yes," Thor looked doubtfully at Steve, who shrugged, equally at a loss.

"Huh," she looked Steve up and down again, more critically. "Well, I guess you look the part, but honestly I think it's kind of tacky."

"Excuse me?" Steve was starting to get a little tired of this. He hadn't been expecting a ticker-tape parade, or anything – sure, the world had moved on – but people here were just plain mean. It wasn't like he'd even picked the name. Star-Spangled Man, now that was tacky.

"Well, I realise it was just a codename, but recycling it is, no offense, kind of gross. I mean, you're setting yourself up as one of the heroes of American history? Pretty big boots to fill. Presumptuous." She jutted her chin forward aggressively. Steve opened his mouth, and shut it again, then looked helplessly at Thor, who frowned.

"I thought you were the original Captain America?"

"Don't be ridiculous, big guy," Darcy shook her head, giving him a pitying look. "Captain America's from World War II, he'd be what, ninety now? If he weren't dead."

"But I am the original Captain America," he protested, and then wondered if he should have kept his mouth shut. She didn't look much like a SHIELD agent; maybe she wasn't supposed to know. Thor clearly had little concept of classified information.

"What? How?" she wrinkled her nose, clearly disbelieving.

"It's a long story," he muttered. Frozen in ice probably wouldn't help his claims. Darcy eyed Thor, doubt clear in her face. It seemed unfair she was doubting the word of the Norse God. He'd expect a little more mental flexibility from Thor's friend.

"You sure?"

"Fury said so," Thor said as if that were unchallengeable, and Darcy's eyes widened a bit. "The World War. He's that Captain America. Jane!" he raised his voice, and waved a hand. "Jane, over here - " Thor bounded forward enthusiastically, and swept a small woman up in his arms. "The moments have been like years since I last saw your sweet face."

Steve studied the machine at their side as they kissed; it looked ridiculously complex, bristling with gauges. After a moment, Darcy noisily cleared her throat.

"Jane, Thor says this is Captain America."

"Oh wow," Jane squirmed out of Thor's embrace and hurried past Darcy, holding out her hand. "You're him?"
"This is Jane, Captain, a doctor of particle physics." Thor beamed down at her. "My wife. Jane, this is Captain America."

"From World War II," Darcy clarified, and he nodded, shaking Jane's hand with a smile. She was very pretty, with huge sweet eyes and an engaging smile. "Oh my God!" Darcy put her hands to her mouth. "Holy crap, really? That is just - oh my God. Oh wow, I'm sorry I was so rude to you, it's just, you know, you're kind of a big deal nowadays... like, an institution."

"Really?" Steve perked up a little. She was smiling again now, and Jane was nodding, and being told how amazing he was by nice girls was one of the better parts of the job.

"I have heard many legends of your valour," Thor chipped in. "I saw one at the movies." He said the word carefully; Darcy nodded.

"So that's why you wanted to go!" She kicked his ankle. "You should've told me, I could've got us DVDs of the others."

"They still show the newsreels?" Steve hesitated. "Or do you mean - "

"There's been about ten movies. With..." Jane pursed her lips for a second. "Varying levels of accuracy. And there was a TV show when I was a kid, and hundreds of books."

"Hundreds?"


"You're kidding." That was – actually, it was embarrassing. Bucky had always teased him about the posters; there was no Bucky here, though, to make him laugh and blush when they saw his face smiling down at them. Bucky would have demanded they see the movie, and then heckled him forever after. He'd been bad enough about the fake newsreels that had him leaping around a set pretending to shoot down actors -

"There's a memorial for you at Arlington, right up near the Unknown Soldier, we saw it on a school trip," Jane said.

"I - "

"Wow, that's awkward now," Darcy said brightly. "Will they take it down, do you think?"

Steve's brain sort of failed on him when he tried to comprehend the enormous social faux pas that was returning from the dead and rendering a decades-old war memorial obsolete. He should probably apologise to someone. Darcy was opening her mouth, no doubt to say more terrifying things; he groped desperately for another subject.

"So what are you ladies working on?" he managed, and Darcy rolled her eyes, but Jane perked up.

"We're working on the Bifrost. Every time we make a connection, we get more information on how it works, and how it's broken. We're making excellent progress - we did another connection early this morning."

"How does it work?" She hesitated.

"Do you know anything about relativity?"
"No?"

"Okay, well, it's a shortcut through space that lets a person travel between worlds in seconds. And I'm afraid explaining in any detail would take a good long while."

"Jane, can we borrow the truck?" Thor said hopefully. "I want to take the Captain out to meet my comrades."

"Be careful," she scowled at him, and then handed him the keys. "Not kidding. You've got your license with you?"

"Yes, Jane." He dipped his head, and she kissed him quickly on the lips, and then patted his cheek.

"It was nice to meet you, Captain," she held out her hand, and he took it; she grinned, and then took a step forward and stood on her toes to kiss his cheek. "I mean it was an honour. Really."

"Me too," Darcy nipped in and kissed his other cheek, and then patted his arm. "Wow, you're really - "

"Darcy," and Jane took her shoulders and turned her firmly back to the machine. "About those readings."

Thor wasn't a bad driver, really. It was just that modern cars were faster. And less... sturdy. They weren't actually plastic, mostly, but they felt like it. And hurtling at this kind of speed down roads that were far busier than they had been in Steve's day was, well.

At least no one was shooting at them. That put the trip head and shoulders above a lot of previous journeys. He'd feel better if Thor kept his eyes on the road, though, instead of turning to smile reassuringly.

"I'm fine, Thor, really," he said for the third time.

"You are clinging very tightly to the doorhandle," Thor said, giving him another look while cornering at far too high a speed. "I can assure you, my friend, I have developed some skill in the handling of this machine. And I have driven chariots and carriages for many centuries."

"Well, that's nice," Steve forced himself to loosen his grip. "I would love to go for a carriage ride one day. Horse drawn, right?" Not too fast.

"Goats," Thor said vaguely. "My racing chariot is drawn by goats."

"Okay." He wasn't going to question that. If he questioned all the things he was confused by, he'd still be in his bedroom. "So... is it far?"

"Not long now! My friends find the city noxious, and prefer the clean clear air of your countryside."

"Los Angeles isn't noxious." It seemed remarkably clean to Steve; so had New York, in the day or two he'd spent there.

"No offense intended," Thor reached over to clap a hand on his shoulder. Steve held his breath until
both hands were back on the wheel. "It is simply that the grand city of Valhalla is... well, it is..." he seemed lost for words.

"Clean?" Steve offered, and he nodded.

"It's very hard to describe," he cast Steve an apologetic glance. "To one who has not seen the works of the Gods."

"Of course."

"It has..." a wave of his hand, before he yanked the car round and sent them bouncing down a side road. "Golden towers. A sky of stars and purple clouds. Streets paved with fine gleaming crystal, and deep within you can see sparks, as if fire was within. The houses, even the meanest, are graceful."

"It sounds very nice." Of course, Thor was royalty; it was natural he'd have a somewhat biased view of his home city. It probably wasn't all golden towers and crystal. "I'd like to see it."

"Yes!" Thor beamed at him, and Steve winced as they missed a gatepost by a hair's breadth. "One day, I will bring you all to Asgard as my honoured guests. It will be my great honour to present you, Captain, the foremost hero of this realm, to my father, Odin."

"Yes. I mean. I'll be honoured, too." Steve was aware of a faint feeling of horror at the thought of being presented to - well, King of the Gods or King of the Alien Species, neither sounded great - as some kind of representative of humanity. "Um, to meet your family."

"My father will admire you," Thor sounded a little wistful. "He has often had cause to decry my brashness and arrogance."

"No, I'm sure -"

"And he was right to do so," Thor said firmly. "I have, in the past, been very unwise." He slammed the brakes on, and Steve was flung against his seatbelt as the truck skidded a few feet more in the mud. "But I am learning to do better, under his guidance. Would that I had been wise enough in the past, to listen and hear him."

"Uh, yeah," Steve nodded. "It's always good to listen to your dad, right? Especially Odin. He's supposed to be wise."

"That's right." Thor smiled, face clearing. "We are here; we have to walk the rest of the way."

Thor locked the truck as Steve got his new backpack settled in place. They'd finally returned his shield to him; Steve had almost cried at the familiar sight and feel. At least that hadn't changed. They'd issued him a big round backpack to carry it in, and he was hoping to get to take it out today; Natasha had mentioned sparring with Fandral, which sounded fun. He hadn't had a chance to persuade Thor down to the gymnasium yet. The grassy meadow Thor led him across was damp, but not waterlogged, which would allow for soft landings even if it did mean a high chance of returning as a mud ball.

Sif and the Warriors Three had come down about a week ago, as a kind of peace offering from Asgard; they were here to hunt down any particularly horrifying creatures the Bifrost vomited up. Agent Hill had, according to Clint, taken one long, cool look at them and suggested they might like to camp out, rather than deal with Midgardian accomodation. They had agreed, although Sif and Fandral were by all accounts developing a taste for department stores.

"So where are they camped?" Steve looked about him.
"About forty miles north," Thor said cheerfully.

"We're... walking forty miles?"

"No, no. We're joining them on a hunt!"

"Hunting? Hunting what?"

"Nithings," Thor said. "You heard Jane, didn't you? They used the Bifrost this morning. Nithings came through. Nice and close, fortunately, Sif and the Warriors ran down earlier. I hope they didn't beat us here by too long- they may have found and defeated our quarry."

"Does Fury know about this?"

"About the nithings?"

"That we're..." Steve unslung his backpack, and extracted his shield. If Fury didn't know, it wasn't Steve's fault, after all. "Never mind. What are nithings?"

"Foul creatures that exist only to corrupt and destroy." Thor screwed up his face in disgust. "They poison the earth and water and air, and feed upon the dead and dying that result."

"Heads up." Steve jerked his head toward the treeline, and Thor stopped and squinted, unsubtly. Then he waved.

"Fandral!" he bellowed. "Come down, and greet my guest!"

A green figure dropped from the tree, and three more figures advanced from the trees. Steve could easily identify them from the pictures he'd seen. Distinctive, in any company.

"Captain, may I present the Lady Sif, Fandral, Hogun, and Volstagg; the finest warriors of Asgard. My friends, this is Captain America, a great champion of Midgard who has returned from death itself to join the Avengers."

Steve opened his mouth, but failed to think of any way to say that's completely untrue and really it was all a coincidence. He found himself the recipient of four broad smiles, all as frank and untroubled as Thor's.

"An honour," Fandral bowed deeply and elegantly, like someone out of a historical movie. He looked rather like Errol Flynn, in fact. "I am sure we would be delighted to hear of your adventures, Captain."

"Well, I'm sure there'll be plenty of time for that," Steve glanced from one friendly face to another. "So... nithings?"

"There's a stream in the woods," Sif jerked her thumb over her shoulder. "Hogun predicts the nithings will be moving towards the source, in the hope of corrupting the water there."

"So we go." Fandral bounced on his toes. "Are you ready for a run, Captain?"

Steve was. The Asgardians set the pace, which wasn't too demanding to his enhanced body. Hogun led the way, with the others scattered out behind him; Thor, Sif and Fandral chased each other back and forth over his wake, apparently playing some kind of tag. Steve kept pace with Volstagg, who was red in the face but ploughed steadily along.

He couldn't remember the last time he'd run like this; he'd never had anyone to run with, and when
they travelled overland it was either by jeep or the slow dull creep of secrecy. Soft turf underfoot and the bright sun and the mocking calls of the Asgardians teasing each other - it was like nothing he'd ever experienced.

"Up the hill!" Sif called from the slope of a hill Hogun had skirted. "Come, Captain, come and see!"

He broke away from Volstagg, and chased her up the hill; it wasn't so steep from this side, but on the other the ground fell away sharply, into a wide valley. The trees were wearing autumn colours, a great sweeping, surging sea of fire and amber colours, rippling and swaying in the wind.

"Midgard is beautiful," Sif shaded her eyes, and gazed down the valley. "I didn't think so, at first, but it improves with knowing."

"It really is," Steve said. "I don't really... I don't know America very well." She raised her eyebrows, and he laughed. "Isn't it silly? And I've been to almost every state, on tour, but - I've never had a chance to just... stop and look."

"Sif!" Thor's voice boomed from the valley. "Steven! Come down, now, this is no time to enjoy the view!"

"If you don't dawdle your way through life, there's plenty of time for views!" she bellowed back, and then she cast a mischievous grin at Steve and jumped down the sheer side of the hill.

Steve lunged after her, far too late to catch at her hand, and she was already fifty feet down, skidding and leaping, barely keeping her balance on the loose rock and sand. He could hear Fandral and Thor hooting and heckling, and then Volstagg's voice rose up, louder than even Thor.

"Come on, Captain, you're not going to let her show you up like that, are you?"

He was unslinging the shield from his back before he'd had time to register it was a terrible idea, and by the time he'd run through what Fury would say and how embarrassing it would be to be brought home in a helicopter with a broken leg, he was already leaping off the edge.

Dare you was not something he'd ever been good at resisting.

He hit the slope shield-first and bouncing; there was very briefly a rock outcropping under his toes, which launched him out past some lethally insecure looking rocks that hung in the slope like loose teeth. The inviting surface he landed on, however, proved treacherous, and tipped him off in a shower of dry earth to drop fifteen feet onto a pine, which diverted him into a almost sheer rock face. Desperate clawing kept it a descent rather than an outright fall, and then he caught a nice solid root from something and swung onto what was very nearly a path, only to meet Sif coming the other way and cover the last ten feet or so in a cartoonish ball of dust and limbs.

There was dirt in his eyes and mouth and blood or sweat trickling down his spine, but the second he got a full breath it came out of him in a whoop of laughter. Sif sat up beside him, hair a bird's nest, little cackles escaping from behind the hand she held over her mouth, and Steve laughed harder, because he'd just almost broken his neck on a hillside for no reason at all but that it had seemed - fun.

Nithings turned out to be little things like black whippets, with viciously sharp teeth. Fighting them was two parts hoping for a lucky strike to one part falling in the river, and it took them two mostly hilarious hours and slightly bloody hours to be done.

The run back to the truck in the bright afternoon sunlight had them mostly dried out, though, and
Fandral enlivened the truck ride by making up a song about their adventure, with much dwelling on how they’d all ended up soaked and foolish.

"You'll join us for our dinner, won't you Captain?" Volstagg asked when they pulled into the campsite parking lot. "To sit by our fire, and tell tales."

"Indeed," the Lady Sif extended her hand to him, and smiled bewitchingly. Steve stepped towards her obediently, and she tucked her hand into his elbow and led him through the trees. It occurred to him he should probably have checked with Thor, but when he looked back, Thor was following along, playing some kind of shoving game with Hogun.

It wasn't far until the trees opened up again into a broad green clearing, pitched with several canvas tents in bright colours, banners trailing from their points. There was a fire banked, as promised, and what looked to be a haunch of some kind of large animal slowly roasting over it. There was an electronic spit-turner set by the fireside, which Steve assumed they'd bought on one of their shopping trips.

Steve gave the meat a long look.

"Are you... hunting here?"

"Of course," Volstagg sat down on a low wooden chair, which creaked ominously. "How else would we feed ourselves?"

"The pack mule has not been born that can carry Volstagg's lunch," Fandral put in.

"Even were he to feast upon the mule itself to whet his appetite," Hogun added.

"Silence!" Volstagg glared sternly at them, and they looked back with limpid eyes. "Ignore them, good Captain, and draw up a chair. Soon there will be food, and now there will be the finest, darkest mead from Asgard."

Steve sat in the chair next to him; it had what appeared to be sheepskin to cushion the seat. He sincerely hoped that they'd brought the sheepskin with them, and weren't preying upon local flocks. The others settled down, except for Fandral, who went to tend the meat.

Volstagg poured something dark into a leather flagon and pressed it into his hands.

"Drink!" he boomed. "Be merry. You are among friends, Captain America."

"You can call me Steve," he said. "It's my real name. Captain America is, um, kind of a codename."

"A codename?" Fandral raised his eyebrows.

"Like... Tony Stark is Iron Man."

"Ah, Tony," Volstagg nodded. "A fine chap. Yes, he has the flying armour! Wondrous stuff."

"So you don't have to call me Captain." He took a cautious sip of the mead; it tasted pretty good, sweet but sharp. This was good; Los Angeles wasn't noxious or anything, but he had to admit the air smelled good here, a little damp but fresh. "Steve is fine."

"As you wish, Steve," Volstagg clapped his shoulder. "So! Tell us of your adventure!"

"Which adventure?" Steve stalled. How impressive would any of his battles seem to these people? If he'd read the files right, these people were centuries old and fought giants.
"Tell us how you walked through death," Hogun said quietly. He'd wrapped his furred cloak firmly round himself, and buried his chin in it, so only his dark eyes peered out. "Those are the best kinds of stories."

"I," Steve swallowed. "It's really less exciting than it sounds. I wasn't really dead."

"Well, how did it happen?" Fandral flopped into a chair, resting his elbows on his knees, attentive. Sif produced a cloth from somewhere, stripped off her bracers, and began polishing them, eyes fixed on him, clearly expectant.

"Well, I - " Steve looked at Thor, who gave him an encouraging smile. "I'm not really used to telling stories."

"It's a simple enough thing, Steve - you'll soon catch on. To start: where were you?" Fandral said.

"On a plane."

"An air vehicle, correct?" Fandral beamed when he nodded. "Very well. How did you come to be there?"

This was what Fury had wanted, after all - for the Asgardians to see him as someone like them, who did... heroic things. Adventures. Steve would just have to do the best he could.

"I was chasing Johann Schmidt. He'd... killed my friend, and he had a plan to wipe out the cities of Europe and the US. He planned to... rule the world, I suppose. Kill millions of people."

"Millions!" Volstagg whistled. "A truly evil man. How did you get on the plane? It was his plane?"

"Yes. He had - it was a big plane, with little planes inside. He was making his escape - I was almost too late. I tried to chase it, on foot - but it was too fast, and I thought I'd lost him. I was starting to think of other ways to catch him, but then Peggy - Peggy was my girl-"

"Beautiful, no doubt?" Fandral said, and Steve nodded, feeling his cheeks colour.

"Very. She had dark hair, and wore red lipstick, and the first time I met her she punched out a man a foot taller than her. And she was a great shot, too. And - really beautiful. And she was very kind to me." He swallowed; she'd clearly not taken him very seriously, at first - women never did - but she'd been kind, and she'd smiled at him, and listened when he talked even when he was making an idiot of himself. "Anyway, she and Colonel Phillips drove up in a car, and we drove after the plane."

"I thought planes flew, " Thor put in.

"It had to taxi out through a tunnel. We chased it... it was a fast car. It was modified. Uh, we - " his blush deepened.

"What happened?" Fandral's mouth curved, clearly reading it in Steve's expression. "The lady?"

"Uh, she kissed me, and told them to go get them. And I - then Phillips told me he wasn't going to kiss me," Volstagg and Hogun both snickered, "And I should just - and so I jumped to the landing gear, and was carried off with the plane."

"Bold," Volstagg lifted his tankard in a toast. "So you were borne into the air with your target! A fine gambit."

"Had you had the mass of Volstagg, the battle would have been over then," Hogun said.
"Indeed, no flying machine could bear Volstagg aloft with such careless ease." Fandral grinned, and Volstagg snorted.

"You show no respect for the Captain's valour. Go on, Steve, and pay no mind to their crude heckling. Was he alone?"

"No. The bombs - he was going to bomb the cities, there were smaller planes inside, just... missiles with pilots, really." Steve took another drink of the mead. "So I fought them - some fell out, and I threw a knife at one. One got out, and I fell on the plane, and I had to break into the cockpit and fly it back to the main plane."

"You rode it through the sky, and fought for control? Daring," Sif nodded in approval. "And then?"

"And then I went after Schmidt." The smell of roasting meat, the cool breeze, all seemed less pleasant when he thought of Schmidt.

"And what manner of man was he?" Hogun was very still.

"He... was an unsuccessful experiment. He'd taken a serum that was supposed to make better men. But he was the wrong kind of man; it made him a monster. He had a red skull in place of a head."

"Monstrous indeed," Sif breathed. "Was he mighty?"

"Very strong. As strong as me. And he had weapons that just - vanished people away. But I had my shield with me, and I defended myself. We fought, and we hurt each other, and then we landed on the machine at the centre of the cockpit," he hesitated, and looked at Thor, who nodded. "There was a - power source at the centre, and it fell out. He picked it up, and it destroyed him."

"A fitting end," Fandral said thoughtfully. "Undone by his own tools."

"Something like that."

"But you won, then?" Thor pressed. "Your enemy was destroyed?"

"The plane still had a lot of bombs, and it was badly damaged. I had to force it down into the sea." He ducked his head. "It was too broken to - I couldn't steer it, it wasn't under control."

"I see," Sif said. "You were alone, then?"

"No. I called back to base, to let them," and suddenly, his throat clogged. He took a draught of the mead, and blamed its burn for his watering eyes. "I had to let them know, and I - talked to Peggy."

"What did you say?" Sif leaned forward.

"She told me I'd better not be late for our date; she was going to teach me how to dance. And I promised I'd meet her, and - " he stopped. "I hit the sea," he said finally. "The plane was so badly damaged, it had a hole in the cockpit, the water just came rushing in, and it was very cold. I drowned, I think? Or froze solid. I don't really know. I remember breathing water, and it ached, it was so cold. And then, I don't really know. I woke up."

"You don't remember," Hogun paused delicately. "Any of the inbetween time?"

"No," he said too quickly, and then shut his eyes. "I didn't dream, I just. I shut my eyes, and then I opened them again, and I was here. In the future."

"And Peggy?" Fandral said.
"She died," Steve said quietly. "I was frozen, asleep, for seventy years. It was two years too long."

There was a pause, and then Volstagg lifted his tankard.

"To Captain America, and to the Lady Peggy," he declared. "May they meet one day in Valhalla, where warriors rest."

Steve blushed at the toast, and blinked away tears.

"So - " he looked at Sif. "Will you tell a story now?"

"Of course!" She sat straight, and smiled about her. "Which story shall I tell?"

"Tell the story of how you hunted the white boar," Fandral said.

"The story of how you bested Volstagg in the tournament ring." Thor grinned at Volstagg, who huffed.

"Why not the story of how you became one of the pre-eminent warriors of the land?"

"That's a good story," Hogun said. "Tell that one."

"If it is to the Captain's liking?" she looked at Steve, who nodded. "Well, then, lean close and listen to my story. In Asgard, home of wonders, many things are sure. Odin's ravens fly free and unfettered; the golden towers shine in the sunset; the men of Asgard wield the sword and shield, and venture forth to win glory, while the women of Asgard bear the shield, and hold the hearth against invaders. Such is how it has been, and Asgardians are creatures of habit.

"I am the Lady Sif, and as a child I was adventurous. I wanted to roam, I wanted to wander, and I carried a spear and I scorned the shield. I appealed often to the Lady Frigga, who was a patron to me; when my mother and father - dear to me though they are - threw up their hands helpless, the Queen of Asgard laid her hands on my shoulders and told them peace; that not all things we think are sure are so, and what is merely custom should not be treated as law.

"And the Queen of Asgard is the wisest of women; she sees the future, and does not speak of it. If her heart ever gives her qualm for what she sees, she does not speak it; and never by word or gesture does she betray the fate of a doomed warrior. She sits, and spins clouds into yarn and weaves destiny, and - "

Sif's voice was clear and beautiful, and her hands moved as she spoke, sketching out accompaniment to her words. Steve fumbled cautiously for his backpack, and got his sketchpad out.

"Bravo," he said sincerely when she finished, and she smiled at him.

"I am glad it pleased you, Captain. Are you drawing me? Can I see?"

"Uh, yes." He passed the sketchbook to her, and she made a cooing noise and showed it to the others. Her body was only loosely sketched in, but her face was set in lofty fierceness and her hands clenched as if round the haft of a spear. "You can keep it if you like?"

"I would love that," She beamed at him, and passed the sketchbook back to him so he could carefully tear out the page for her. "Who will tell a story now?"

"Fandral," said Thor. "Tell the story of rescuing the prisoner of Maradobr!"

"We have all heard too much of Fandral's conquests," Volstagg put in.
"It's a story of great valour," Fandral protested. "The generous rewards of the prisoner unbound are surely an essential part of the tale; his gratitude was truly bountiful." He leered. Sif hooted. Steve blinked. Had he... misunderstood that?

"Did you - " Steve looked at Sif, who smiled back. He couldn't say anything in front of her. "Um, who was the prisoner?"

"A bold prince from a distant realm - "

"He wasn't a prince," Volstagg said in a stage whisper. "Minor lordling at best."

"Who's telling this story?" Fandral glared around, and then looked back at Steve. "Are you all right, Steve?"

"Maybe this isn't a proper story to be telling in front of a lady?" he tried, and Sif's smile died into a flat line. "I mean - " Oh dear.

"What do you mean, Captain?" She sat bolt upright, and glared. He could feel his colour deepening.

"Well, I - we don't - talk about - here, I mean, I suppose it must be different - " he gave Thor an imploring look. Thor stared back with a kind of urgent blankness, as if he very much wanted to help but had no idea how. "I don't - where I come from, men don't talk about - that - with ladies."

There was a long, thoughtful pause.

"Like the strip clubs?" Hogun offered, and Steve's jaw dropped. "The entertainers were either men or women. Not both."

"Oh, I see," Sif relaxed a little in her chair. "I thought that was strange. Tony said that was how it was in Midgard."

"Tony Stark took you to a strip club?"

"He said it was traditional before a wedding," Thor said. "Jane agreed. So we saw some ladies dance, and then we went across the road to see some men dance." His face took on a thoughtful cast. "Everyone was very shiny."

"Are you a heterosexual, Steve?" Volstagg said, and they all leaned in with interest. "Jane and Tony assured us they both had more conventional tastes, but many Midgardians choose to limit themselves."

Steve stared round at their fascinated faces. Apparently, Asgardians placed a very high value on truth. And it had been in the employment contract they'd made him sign, that no one could be discriminated against on the basis of their sexual orientation, and Fury had taken him aside and explained that they let - homosexuals - in the military now.

Not that he was a homosexual, but - he didn't think heterosexual was entirely right, either. He had some very clear memories of sharing a shower with a lot of tall, muscular men, and -

"I don't think so," he said in a small voice. Volstagg sighed gustily.

"I think Tony was pulling our legs," he announced. "No one I've asked has admitted to being a heterosexual. They just glare at me and scurry off."

"Fandral should tell his story." Steve looked urgently to Fandral, who nodded agreeably. Anything
other than continuing this conversation, really.

Even what turned out to be quite a filthy story.

"Are you touching my settings?" Tony threw up his hands defensively as Jane almost ran at him, like a small dog at a postal worker.

"No, no, honey, I was just looking at - "

"Don't call me honey." Jane hovered over the machine, hands dabbing towards it but not quite touching. "Seriously, did you touch anything? This is incredibly delicate."

The machine hulked above them like, well, the Hulk. It had weird projections extending towards the roof, and there were all kinds of adjustable pieces.

"I did not touch, I only looked." Tony solemnly drew a cross over his arc reactor. "I just want to see how you're powering this thing." Jane went tense, and then let out an exasperated sigh.

"Clearly, you already know how we're powering this, so do you really have to come and bother my equipment?"

"This is our Bifrost, then?"

"It's not a Bifrost. I wish. Heimdall has... a certain amount of his Observatory rebuilt. Enough to start the connection. But it needs an anchor on the other end. And right now, this is the only anchor in existence." Jane's brow was scrunched up, probably with the effort of translating from particle physicist to human. Quantum anything was a long way from Tony's areas of expertise.

"Show me the power source?" He made his best puppy eyes at Jane, who scowled, and then sighed.

"Fine. But don't touch anything. Do you understand me, Tony?"

"Sure, sure." Tony scrambled down onto his knees, and gazed into the bowels of the machine through the door Jane unlocked - with an actual, physical key, no access pass. Sneaky.

It glowed a clear and beautiful blue in there. Tony leaned forward, and Jane gave a warning hiss.

"Looking," he defended himself. "You want to hold my hands? You can hold my hands. I just want to see how it works."

At the heart of the machine was a gleaming blue component roughly the size and shape of a cigarette packet, apparently hovering in its nest of wires. Squinting made it clear that it was balanced with great precision between its numerous connections; it must be very light indeed.

"Fascinating," he murmured. He'd have to check his father's notebooks again; Howard had clearly known all about this. "Who did this?"

"What?"

"You didn't build this. Oh sure, you did the math and the calibrations, but you did not design this, not the underlying power structure. This - it's elegant." Tony almost felt jealous. Was this more of his father's work, resurrected from old project notes? Tony was starting to feel inferior. He'd have been
pleased to produce this now; if Howard had designed this decades ago, Tony was going to pack it in and retrain as a plumber.

"Justin Hammer -"

"Oh bullshit," he turned to glare, and she shrugged.

"He had a team. I don't know who. It was a networked collaboration, and almost everything was done online. He was my contact, and he did the installation. I didn't even think this was possible; I thought the power needs were beyond our capability. I thought it would take decades, but..." She threw up her hands. "But here it is. Now we're able to trade data, we're working on stabilising the connection, so we stop kidnapping things from other worlds and throwing them down; once we've got that locked in, we can start working on getting the Observatory in full working order."

"Yeah, that's great, honey." Tony said absently, and turned back to the blue and silver interior. What he was looking at wasn't a whole lot like the arc reactor, which was a relief. They still hadn't reverse engineered that from Rhodey's armour; either that, or they'd had a sudden attack of respect for intellectual property laws. Yeah, right. No, that thing wasn't set up to generate power with the blue thing as fuel; it was just using the blue as a battery.

But Hammer? Sure, Pepper had said he'd been doing classified work, but this... perhaps this was where he had actual skills.

"Can I take some readings?" he tried, but Jane swung the door shut with the clang of finality. "Oh, come on. Just a few. I just need to know how much power it puts out."

She turned away and scrabbled through her paperwork, and then handed him a photocopied page of equations.

"There's my calculations regarding power output," she said. "I'm giving you this to keep your sticky fingers off my work, you understand?"

"You're a princess." He kissed her quickly on the cheek, and she gave him narrowed eyes before returning to her desk. He ran his eyes down over the paper, and sighed. This was going to take a while.

"Hey," and he turned to see Darcy sidling up. "So what's up?"

"You meet Justin Hammer?"

"Yeah. Kind of a dork."

"You're a smart girl. You know who he was working with?"

"Some kind of top secret division of criminals."

"Criminals?" Vanko surely couldn't have faked his death a second time? Neither he nor Rhodey had seen him die, of course... perhaps he'd made his escape, and been captured by SHIELD. Vanko was good, but... Tony shook his head. "This is so unfair. No one tells me anything."

"That sucks." Darcy nodded sympathetically, and plopped down on a chair. "I was down here a lot when Hammer was working. Intern's job to keep an eye on the work-placement criminal, and all." She put her chin in her hand and beamed at him. "He talks to himself."

"Hmm." Tony glance up at the ceiling, and then put on a smile. "Have you had lunch yet?"
"Nope!" she bounced to her feet, and grabbed her bag. "Let's go. Somewhere nice."

Tony's choice of restaurant fazed her for all of two steps; then she snapped her jaw closed, and handed her ratty fleece jacket over with a disdainful air.

"Have a cocktail," Tony suggested. "Jane won't notice."

"Jane drinks beer at lunch," Darcy said cheerfully. "That's why she does all her technical work in the morning. Afternoons are for coming up with crazy ideas. She can't accept she weighs ninety pounds and can't hold her drink."

"How long are you interning with her for?"

"Indefinitely. She pays me now. I may never go back; life working with superheroes is awesome. I met Captain America! He's so pretty. I want to lick him."

"Sure. Bet you'd look good in one of those jumpsuits."

"No, I want to be like Coulson. Smart suit, sunglasses, radiating an aura of palpable officialdom." She sat bolt upright, and gave Tony an unimpressed glare. It lacked the weary cynicism Coulson managed to infuse his expressions with, but it wasn't bad.

"Odd ambition."

"The Black Widow works out like ten hours a day. Who has that kind of time? Suits are much more forgiving."

Tony ordered for them both; Darcy waited until the food was in front of her before dishing on Hammer.

"He does weird little dances, and talks to the machines."

"That's not so weird."

"I don't know. I mean, Jane flirts with her laptop when the results aren't right. Erik just gives stuff his very disappointed look. Hammer, he just..." she flapped her hand, then waved down a waiter to take her empty glass. "A Bellini next, please. Yeah, he used to mutter to it. Not the interesting bits, just, like, surfaces."

"Surfaces?"

"He'd take the cover off the side of the Bifrost, and then he'd root around, and then he'd start muttering out of the corner of his mouth. To the cover. Sometimes he'd just stop what he was doing and peer at it. And he used to listen, too."

"But what did he say?"

"Stuff about not being able to do it. Needing help. Sounded like he was bargaining."

"With the console cover." Tony sighed. Presumably he'd had an earpiece in, and he'd been talking to whoever had actually designed that system. Or maybe he'd just lost his mind. "He didn't say anything about who it was? A name?"

"Olaf something," Darcy said promptly. "Sorry, he'd clam up if I got too close. Oh, and he really
hates pot, which is weird. Blames it for putting him away, but he was in for like... evil robots, like? Was he high at the time?"

"Pot?" Tony shook his head. "Why would he... never mind."

That was it for useful conversation; they turned the conversation back to Captain America instead. Not that Tony found the subject gripping or anything, but Darcy had a lot to say about him and Tony had nothing better to do than listen.

Steve wasn't limping, but he definitely felt some stiffness in his stride as he trailed Hawkeye down the corridor. A day in the woods with the Asgardians was enough to stretch him; he really needed to get out more.

"Where are we going?" he asked Hawkeye, and Hawkeye made a non-committal noise. They were in the lobby, for the second time, a huge glassed area with squishy seats and fake plants. "Don't you have - " Hawkeye bounded away, and Steve gave chase as he pounced on a familiar figure.

"Stark! Buddy," Hawkeye clapped a hand down on his shoulder. "Watch Steve for me."

"I don't need watching." Steve glared at them both impartially; neither paid him the slightest attention.

"I have a life, Hawkeye. A job. A career, even. Tasks to fulfil - " Stark flung out his arms, apparently ready to make a full production of it. Hawkeye didn't even pretend to listen.

"Yeah, just keep him from getting into stuff or wandering off, he's pretty docile." Hawkeye shouldered past him and left Steve alone with Stark, who looked about as pleased as Steve felt; not at all.

"Docile," Stark said, as if tasting something unpleasant. "You mind accompanying me down to the storage areas, Rogers?"

Well, he was supposed to be spending time with the team, even if they interpreted this as babysitting him. At least he could report back to Fury with a clear conscience.

"Sure." Steve trailed after him, through a network of passages that all looked the same. Desks, cabinets, conference rooms, all had a depressingly bleak uniformity. Even the coffee cups had SHIELD logos on them.

"Tell me about the weapons." Tony stopped, and slapped at the wall. It took Steve a second to realise it was the elevator controls, and this particular grey expanse of wall was an elevator door.

"Classified." He hadn't been told it was classified, but it was clear some things were being kept secret from Stark, and he didn't feel like doing the man any favours.

"Right," Stark took out his pocket telephone, and frowned at it. It was sleek and gleaming red, and Steve gave in to temptation.
"Where can I get one of those?" he said and Stark looked up at him.

"What?"

"One of the little telephones. Are they SHIELD issue?" Stark lifted his eyes to the ceiling, and spoke with exaggerated patience.

"Everyone has them in the future, Captain. We also have pre-sliced bread and freeze-dried ice-cream." The elevator gave a discreet chime, and Stark pocketed his phone and stepped inside. Steve followed; the elevator was mirrored inside, with was at least a variation. He could see himself reflected into infinity, him and Stark. Far down in the mirror, one of Stark's reflections turned its head to give him a raptor's smile; he blinked, and blinked again, and there was just Stark's profile vanishing into forever. He shook his head, and turned back to the real Stark.

"So I can just go and buy one?"

"Yes - actually, probably not, you need identification and things. I guess you won't have much of a credit rating."

"What's a - "

"Never mind." Stark waved a hand. "Talk to Fury, I'm sure he'll give you as many phones as you want."

Another soft chime, and they stepped out into a dim grey corridor. The lights helpfully brightened for them as they walked, and dimmed behind them; it was a little creepy, for all Steve had had movement sensors explained to him.

"Pick a door, Captain."

Three more doors, and Steve tapped lightly on the door marked B3-18. Stark swiped his card, and they entered a room crowded with steel shelving, stacked high with boxes.

"Hm," Stark ran a finger down the edge of the nearest shelving unit, apparently deriving some information from the codes written on stickers. "Looks like this is weapons; good choice, Captain."

"You can call me Steve, you now."

"I know." He wandered away down an aisle, and Steve suppressed the urge to make a face at his back. Maybe he should see if he could get someone to take him back out to the park; the Warriors Three were much friendlier than anyone here. And Sif. He'd definitely like to spend more time with Sif.

Stark balanced on his toes to look at the top shelf; Steve helpfully brought him the step stool, and got glared at.

"Make yourself useful and help me get this box down," he ordered, which turned out to mean Steve should take down the box, unpack all the guns inside and lay them out on the narrow table by the door while Stark watched, apparently displeased.

"Not the right weapons?" Steve stepped back, and Stark just sighed.

"You know exactly what I'm looking for, Rogers, so don't play the innocent. Did you pick this room
on purpose? These are all Stark weapons. This was the last one," Stark said wistfully, picking up a long, narrow pistol and stroking it. "Went into production just before – anyway, it was the last model of gun Stark Industries made."

Steve watched the way his fingers moved over the gun, wrapped round the barrel, thumb passing briefly over the rim. Stark looked up at him, and raised an eyebrow.

"Yes?"

"I was just thinking that you remind me - "

"Of my father, I know," Stark sounded bored; Steve almost decided to leave it there, but an afternoon of silence sounded very unappealing. He glanced round the room, with its grey walls and muted fluorescent light. Stark picked up another gun, tossing it casually from hand to hand, barrel always pointed safely down; the movement was so familiar he continued.

"Well, yes, but I was going to say Maria."

Tony put down the gun, and gave him a considering look over his sunglasses.

"You knew my mother?"

"Very briefly. She was an agent, like – uh, there were some women agents, in what – I think it became SHIELD, it was a science division, and they had some women agents. Your mother was one of them. I only met her a few times. I used to spend time with Howard, and she'd come in to see what he was working on. She was always so excited about new toys, and he always had something new just for her." He grinned, and Stark grinned back, and took off his sunglasses. Steve's breath caught a little; Tony Stark's full attention was like being out in the noon sun. Howard hadn't had this intensity about him. He remembered Maria Lorraine's snapping dark eyes, and the way her face had always softened for Howard.

"She liked guns?" Stark took a step forward, and his body language had gone from you don't exist to you are completely fascinating. Stark had the most eloquent body Steve had ever seen.

"Loved them. She was in Peggy's - Peggy was my girl - they were in the same line of work, that's how she met him, and how I met her." If being grabbed by the tie and dragged into a kiss constituting meeting. He'd not learned her name until Howard had introduced them, later.

"An agent? What did that mean?"

"You know," Steve said vaguely. "Sort of a military aide... running about doing whatever the Colonel wanted."

"In the field? Running about shooting things?" Stark looked delighted, and Steve wanted to keep him smiling.

"Yeah. Like Agent Hill, or Agent Romanoff. You didn't know?"

"No, I - she never really talked about it. Said she'd been a military liaison in the war- I got the impression it was mostly admin work." Tony hopped up onto the table, feet dangling by Steve's knee. "She was fifty when she had me, so it was – difficult to think of her being young."

"Fifty?" Steve mentally added it up. Howard had to have been in his fifties, too. "I guess, yeah. That's – "
"It was an accident," Stark said flippantly. "She thought it was the menopause at first. Didn't find out til almost six months, and then decided as she'd come this far, she might as well have me."

"Oh," Steve scrabbled for something to say. "It's hard to picture her as a mother."

"She felt the same way, I think," Stark's mouth jerked up at the corner. "But it worked out okay. Tell me more about her."

"Your eyes are like hers. You look most like her when you smile." No wonder Steve hadn't noticed it before, he didn't say, but the warm glow in his eyes was all Maria's ebullient personality. "And the way – with the guns. The way you hold them."

"Yeah, she taught me to shoot – I always thought she'd learned from Dad." His hand drifted absently out over the guns on the table. "How did you meet her?"

"Uh - " Steve hesitated, and felt that stupid blush colour his cheeks. Stark's eyes widened.

"You - my mother?"

"She, um, kissed me," Steve rushed out. "Only once! She said it was on behalf of the women of America. As they weren't there."

"Wow, go Mom." Stark started to laugh. "She never told me that! She should have told me. Why only once?"

"Peggy saw," Steve ducked his head. "She wasn't very happy. I hid from Maria for a week, but eventually she followed me into the storeroom and told me it was okay, she wouldn't poach on Peggy's turf. Uh, and then Peggy opened the door, so - "

Stark was laughing so hard he looked set to fall off the table.

"I can tell you're smooth with the ladies, Rogers."

"Don't start." Steve shook his head and turned back to the guns. "So none of these, then?"

"No. I'm pretty much searching at random, now, looking for any kind of signs of weird and unusual weaponry. You want to tell me about the stuff on that plane you brought down?" He gave Steve an intent look, and it was a surprising temptation to spill it, just to keep that interested look on Stark's face.

"Classified."

"I figured." His lower lip jutted out, and that expression was like Maria, too, the pout that meant she didn't have everything she wanted, but by God she was working on a plan to get it. It had looked good on her, and it looked just as good on Stark, and Steve could feel a blush starting at that thought.

"I would have thought you'd know all about the wartime weapons. Your dad - "

"I know all the ones that weren't mystical weirdness. I know everything from the standard issue semi-automatic pistol to Johann Schmidt's personal sidearm, but whatever he loaded onto that plane is so deeply classified I've never heard a whisper." He kept staring at Steve; Steve could feel a blush starting to gather around his ears. "So did you really bring the plane down on purpose?"

"I didn't have a choice." Steve started packing the guns away as an excuse not to meet Stark's eyes.

"Hey. My dad never stopped looking for you," Stark stretched out his foot and poked him in the
“Just - so you know. It was one of our operations that found you, in the end.”

Steve stopped, hands full of guns. Howard’s guns, or Tony’s? It hurt, to think of Howard searching patiently for him all those years, and now he’d been dead twenty years and Peggy -

“Yeah,” he said, voice rasping a little. “Howard was - a good friend.”

“Okay, well, bonding time over.” Stark hopped down from the table, and nudged him aside so he could pack the guns back in. "Let's go upstairs, prowl the labs, look for glowing blue substances."

“Sure.”

They didn't get that far; when they stepped out of the elevator at ground level, Fury just happened to be walking past.

“Well, it's nice to see you boys getting along,” Fury managed to sound sinister and fatherly at the same time, which was quite a trick.

“Hey, glad to help with the babysitting.” Stark took a couple of steps back, holding up his hands. “But I guess now daddy's home, you can keep an eye on him.”

“Sure I can.” Fury looked thoughtfully at the elevator they’d come from. “You know, maybe you could swing out to Utah for me? I hear there's been another Bifrost incident. Packs of wolves terrorising the locals. I'm sure you can take care of it.”

“On my own?”

“You think you can't handle it?” Fury gave him a mildly sadistic grin. "Take a buddy, if you want. Take Maria and Rhodes."

"Oo, that's a treat. You don't usually let Maria out to play."

"Times are hard, Stark, and I know how close you two are." Fury glanced at Steve, and his smile turned warmer. "Captain, why don't you walk along with me."

Steve glanced at Tony, but he was already heading away without so much as a goodbye.

“Sure,” he said, and turned to walk beside Fury.

"Can you hear me?" Hill said patiently. "Sif? Hello? You don't need to shout, just speak normally. That's right. Okay, we're getting to the area now."

Tony flipped over onto his back and looked up at her; she was clasped firmly in the War Machine’s right arm, while Rhodey tried to fly straight under the weight. Not that Hill was anything but svelte, but a whole person was a lot to carry without unbalancing the armour. She was bundled up in a parka, hat, goggles and gloves for the altitude, and had been uncomplaining during what had to be a very uncomfortable journey. Tony was starting to suspect SHIELD agents were all made of steel. It would explain a lot about Natasha.

"You all right there?” he inquired, and she gave him a brusque nod.
"I have Sif on the line, ready to advise us. If necessary, you'll need to send images to Thor's cellphone."

"We should get him a tablet or something." The Asgardians were responding quite well to Midgardian technology. Better than Captain America, anyway. *Little telephones.* Ha. All right, it was cute. Rogers was cute. Tony wanted to ruffle his hair and give him fifty cents to buy candy.

"Where would he carry it?" Rhodey asked, and Tony shrugged. He wasn't quite sure where Thor stored the phone. "Anyway, Tony, can we focus on the ground?"

"Sure," Tony paused. "Wait, you want me to look at the ground?"

"Yes, Tony, please look at the ground. You're not going to find any giant wolves looking at me."

"You say that now, but what if they can fly?" Tony flipped over again, and dived closer to the ground. His sensors were busy picking and analysing, searching for an appropriate-sized heat signature. The area was fairly thin forest, no large animals expected except their targets.

"How likely is that?" he heard Rhodey ask over the comm system, and Hill sighed.

"We don't have any reason to believe there are flying wolves loose in the area."

"That's a relief," Tony said, watching the heat pinpoints of small animals and birds. "Shouldn't we be prepared anyway? That's your job, right Hill? Being prepared for any and all threats?"

"Well, Stark, in theory I'm the safest person in the world right now from 'flying threats'. I mean, if your stories about how your armour is the mightiest superweapon in existence are all true..."

"Hey, it is the best." Tony did a mid air somersault, just to show off. "But I think I've been clear it's a prosthesis, not a weapon. So what kind of distinguishing features are we looking for on these wolves?"

"Black ear tips. Enormous, as opposed to just very large."

"Right. So no black ear tips, we're authorised lethal force, but black eartips, hold back." The fine gradations of alien wolf ears were apparently the difference between pest control and a diplomatic incident; of course, it was possible that was an Asgardian practical joke. Hell, it could all be a practical joke, and Heimdall could be firing monsters onto Earth for shits and giggles. He'd have to suggest that to Fury when he was looking particularly paranoid.

"That's right. They're not afraid of humans, so they're too much of a danger to let run loose. No casualties yet, but we've had reports of them pursuing humans."

Trees, trees, more trees. Tony yawned. He preferred to keep his eyes on the sky when doing this; if he wanted to look down on stuff, he had penthouses. Trees, road, heat signatures. Big ones.

"Oh, hey," Tony slowed, rolling back to balance on his bootjets, and pointed towards the road. "I see them."

"I got them on HUD." Rhodey swooped upwards to get a better vantage point; Tony crept forward to avoid spooking them.

There were half a dozen wolves on the road, sitting around, looking for all the world like big, friendly dogs of the husky variety. Tony glanced from road to trees to wolves, and couldn't get a clear picture of size; was it a narrow road, or were those atrociously large? The armour obligingly
rolled up an analysis, which pegged them at approximately three metres from nose to rump. Was that large or enormous? He considered putting that question to Hill, then dismissed it as too relevant and helpful.

"They're cute. Can't I keep one?" he tried instead, and heard Rhodey huff with irritation. Hey, they'd be a step up from Rottweilers.

"We have visual," Hill was saying. "No black ear tips. Sitting by the road, there's no sign - wait - "

A car was approaching; the wolves were rising, ears pricked, tails wagging with interest. The car that came round the corner braked so hard its occupants must have given themselves whiplash. Then it fired into motion again, turning tight and putting on the speed. The wolves pursued, breaking out into baying, spreading out across the road."

"Chasing cars," Hill said with an irritated sigh. "Sif?" A pause. "We're a go."

"Okay, then," Tony stooped towards them. "Time for our daily dose of puppy killing. You got me on your targeting, Rhodey?"

"I got you. Don't pull any stunts."

"As I." Tony barrel rolled for a dismissive wave, and then plummeted. He tackled the lead wolf down, smearing it across the asphalt in a mess of blood and fur. It howled and snapped, jaws scraping on the armour. Trashing the paint job, no doubt. Tony punched it a couple of times, and then launched himself into the air again before any more of them could pounce.

Another one of the wolves was on fire, which didn't seem to be slowing it down; several of the others were leaving blood trails.

"Tough babies." Rhodey fired a good-sized missile, which reduced one wolf to chopped meat.

"Good work, Rhodey, got a few more of those?" Tony hit the floor and blasted one with a repulsor, which sent it tumbling and yelping; they moved too fast for easy targeting from his shoulder-mounted missiles.

"Can't use them on the road," Hill said. Tony glanced up to see her lining up her pistol; she squeezed off a shot and a wolf eye blossomed with blood, but the wolf just snarled and shook its head.

"Collateral damage is a thing some of us worry about, Stark."

"We're saving the world. Don't we get a little bit of a pass?"

"Unlike you, Stark, we have to get our budget signed off each year." Another shot, and the wolf was blind. "Can someone please finish that poor bastard off? Knock it off the road, Stark, and Rhodes can use another missile."

"Yes ma'am," and it was slow and bloody work. Tony had felt that being a superhero would be more glamorous; he suggested this, and Hill actually pulled her goggles down so her could see her roll her eyes.

"We're Government workers, Stark. It's rarely glamorous and usually boring."

"Ain't that the truth," Rhodey said. "Is that all of them?"

"Yes. No. There's another one." Sneaking up in the forest cover; Tony levelled his palms. "I'll flush it out."
"Ready," Rhodey turned to face it, and Tony fired the repulsors.

The wolf leapt out of the forest, Rhodey's missile launcher whirred, and Hill jumped out of Rhodey's embrace and hung on the barrel, like some kind of fucking moron.

"What the hell are you doing, Hill?" Tony fired the boots, and grabbed her round the waist. "Are you all right? You could have lost your hands." He grabbed her wrist to check; she had all her fingers, at least.

"Black tips," she snapped, and Tony looked down. The wolf bolting up the road away from the crater Rhodey had left (in the middle of the road, good job all) did indeed have black tips to its ears. "Let's get going. My hands are fine."

Rhodey was already diving after it, leaving Tony with an unfriendly armful of SHIELD agent. He scowled, and flew in pursuit.

They caught up to find Rhodey down in the road, facing off with it; they were doing something that looked like the you-first dance, darting from side to side. The wolf took a glance up, and spotted them; it bared its teeth, and crouched to spring at Rhodey.

"WAIT," boomed Sif's voice, from the headset Hill was holding at arm's length. "DO NOT ATTACK. THIS HAS BEEN A MISUNDERSTANDING."

The wolf's posture relaxed, very slightly, and it cast another glance at them.

"The wolf speaks English?" Tony said, and Hill shrugged.

"The Asgardians speak the Allspeak. Which can apparently be understood by anyone."

"Huh." That explained why the Asgardians spoke English, when they wrote Old Norse.

Sif's voice seemed to be having an effect; the wolf let out a flurry of barks and yips, and Sif returned soothing apologies. Tony descended, cautiously, and though the wolf backed to keep them both in sight, it didn't run or attack.

"Okay, so what now?" Rhodey eyed it. "Doesn't seem like we can carry him back."

"One of us will have to stay," Hill said. "We'll send a pickup out, take the wolf back to base."

"Are we going to have room?" Tony said. "We're already swarming with giants and dwarves and those alarming skinny shadow-creatures."

"We'll have to make room," Hill hopped down out of his arms. "It's only til the Bifrost is working properly."

"Sure. So. Hill, you staying? Rhodey and I - "

"No, Rhodes will stay." She turned to Rhodey and took a more conciliatory tone. "If that's all right, Colonel - I'd prefer it be someone reliable in armour, which means you're my first and only choice."

"Subtle, Hill, real subtle." Tony put his hands on his hips, and ignored Rhodey, who was actually thumbing his nose - or where his nose would be if he didn't have a steel faceplate - anyway it was very childish and Tony was ignoring it. "And I suppose you still want a ride home?"

"No, right now I want you to take me up and find where the Bifrost offshoot landed. Dr Foster wants a full report."
"A report of what?"

"Anything." Hill shrugged, and stepped in close.

"I'm not hugging you." Tony spread his arms. "Climb on, baby, I'll give you a ride."

Hill didn't comment, just grabbed his arm and swung up onto his back, where she wrapped her arms firmly round his neck.

Flying with a passenger was only mildly inconvenient this way; the weight spread well over his back, and was balanced. He tried a few fancy turns, but she didn't flinch, just kept peering over his shoulder, occasionally sparing a hand to touch her goggles, which clearly had more going on with them than wind protection.

JARVIS was monitoring for unusual features, but Hill spotted it first, a perfect circle cut into the forest. They dropped neatly into the centre of it, Tony bending his knees to let Hill gain her feet.


"What is this, Star Trek?" Tony set everything he had to go, anyway. The intricate knotwork pattern was intact for only about a quarter of the circle. The rest was - it hadn't smeared, but the pattern was far less complicated, it looked almost... unravelled. Like someone had gotten bored of drawing the pattern, and just... half-assed it. Halfway round the circle, it was just plain curved lines. They never broke, it wasn't exactly flawed, just... clearly not right. He took detailed photos, walked slowly round the circle, and took all the information he could. The Bifrost was certainly an interesting device; were the patterns an integral part of the transportation process, or the Asgardian tech equivalent of a mint on the pillow? Would Jane know?

Would Jane tell him? Or was it classified? Tony turned to glare at Hill, in the absence of any other SHIELD representative. She didn't seem impressed.

"Got everything you need?"

"It's not what I need," he said pointedly. "Just doing this as a favour, remember?"

"No, you're doing it as part of a team," she came right back, not missing a beat. "This is how it works. Sometimes there is dull scutwork."

"Is this some kind of lesson about working together and worthwhile things taking hard work? I'm not an Aesop kind of guy."

"No, this is about stopping giant wolves from eating people. I don't have the budget to teach important life lessons." She glanced at her watch. "Are you finished, or not? I have paperwork to get back to."

"Your life is one long party."

"Can't murder puppies every day."

"Yeah, sometimes you're letting murderous terroists escape." Hill hesitated for only a second.

"If you're referring to Justin Hammer, he wasn't a SHIELD prisoner and he wasn't in our custody when he escaped."

"Was he working on the Asgardian artifact?" Tony pressed, and Hill's lips tightened.
"Hammer was temporarily loaned to us to assist with the Bifrost project. He was not working on any other SHIELD projects."

Huh. That meant either SHIELD didn't have the shiny toy, or Hammer hadn't been working on it. Or that Hill was lying, which was probably an art she was as skilled in as Natasha was. Tough call.

"Well, let's get back," he stepped into range, and she swung onto his back. "I'm sure SHIELD business is at a halt without you to process the forms."

Tony deposited Hill on the balcony of the floor her office was on, because he was a well-behaved team player kind of guy, and then made his way to the lab. Fortunately it had an outside door and concrete floors, so the scientists could get their heavy equipment in, so he didn't have to risk the armour on the interior floors. Most of them would take the weight, but most wasn't really good enough.

If he trusted Fury as far as he could throw him, he'd be able to leave the Iron Man unattended in SHIELD headquarters; but he didn't, so he wouldn't. The War Machine didn't hold all his secrets.

He clunked his way down the broad concrete steps, popped his access card out of a storage compartment, and let himself in. No one had revoked his access, so perhaps Jane didn't realise he shouldn't have it. He headed towards towards the Bifrost machine; he was pretty sure that wherever Jane was, fiddling with the machine should bring her running.

Darcy waved at him, and he waggled his fingers; unusually, she didn't bounce over to talk, but turned back to her laptop, which - huh. That was Rogers there, hunched over the keyboard, typing by hunt-and-peck. Darcy draped one arm over his broad shoulders and leaned in close, and Tony watched the back of his neck turn pink. Well, go Darcy. She was definitely goal-oriented.

He took a half-step towards them - Rogers would no doubt be impressed by the armour, which might make him more appropriately impressed with Tony - but then decided against it. He was smeared with blood and mud and there were fang marks in the armour; better Rogers saw the Iron Man at its best. He turned his steps back towards the Bifrost machine, and sure enough, Jane was crouched in its shadow, staring at her laptop screen.

"Hey, Jane, I brought you some data. Can you download it from the suit without stealing any proprietary information for the Government?"

"Oh, shut the hell up," Jane threw a cable at him, and he plugged himself in to download the high resolution photographs. "Are you still going to help me calibrate the sensors?"

"Did I say I'd do that?"

"You told Thor you'd help me."

"I did?" Tony vaguely recalled nodding and smiling at Thor. "Oh, this is for finding the monsters, right?"

"That's right. The Bifrost leaves a noticeable negative particle signature. Now, it's much more distinct with a full connection and a two way bridge, but with some work we should be able to detect the traces of the little bridges, the ones that keep dumping random creatures around the place."
"Then we won't have to wait for reports. Clever. Coverage'll be the hard part. You got access to the SHIELD satellite network?"

"I suppose so."

"Suppose?"

"I don't know how they get the data."

It wasn't complicated work, but it took a while to get everything put together. Processing that much data was a needle in a haystack job; but they'd only need to do it after Bifrost connections, of course, when the negative particles would be present _en masse_. Tony judged her as having access to Government satellite data, but not the really high-grade military stuff or commercial imaging. Enough for their current needs, anyway, and Tony had a strong feeling there was a lot of budget accessible for their first contact with an alien race.

There was already a filtering program installed on the system. Tony opened it up for a closer look; mostly deleted.

"You've already made a start?" Tony said, clicking through the remaining files. Jane shook her head.

"Not really my area."

"Who did, then?" He tapped the screen. "Someone's been trying to filter for negative particles."

"Huh," she leaned over to look at his screen, then shook her head. "I don't know. When was it created?"

"Look like it was installed about six weeks ago. Uninstalled a couple days later." Jane's face went blank. "What happened six weeks ago?"

"I got the new power system installed."

"And that was Hammer?"

"Can you tell what he was looking at?"

Tony made a doubtful noise, and began to type. Hammer hadn't covered his tracks very well, which didn't surprise Tony at all. Sloppy and inefficient, all the time.

"You notice a slowdown in data processing while he was here?"

"We weren't. He said the risk of a power surge was too great; we were idling three days."

"Enough for him to search through a continent of data. Ah." He retrieved a file that hadn't been as thoroughly deleted as it should have been. "Something in Oklahoma. Got a grid reference, let's see what's there now..."

They waited, and then leaned forward to stare at the display.

"What's this?" Jane put her finger against the projected image, and Tony zoomed in. The indicated spot had the very faintest of disturbances, a light scattered of pink among the indigo.

"Could just be noise... or..." He frowned. "Can you bring up the site in New Mexico where Thor first landed, put it beside this one."
"Sure." They didn't resemble each other much. "That was a full Bifrost connection, though, when it was working properly. Let me see, if I take the readings of the random connections, sort them by date, I might be able to project the decay - " She typed for a few moments, and then pink shapes formed and exploded and settled like dustclouds.

"Looks right. So how long ago was this?"

"I'd estimate that was about two months."

"And two months ago -"

"The Bifrost was destroyed."

"And looks like we had the first random connection. Something was sent through?"

"Can't tell." Jane looked up. "We should go check it out."

"Sure, I'll get a posse or something." Maybe Rogers would like a nice day out. They'd have to fly down; he could show off his private plane. What colour would Rogers go faced with pole-dancing stewardesses? "So Hammer was looking... for something, and he found something. Was it what he was looking for?"

"He escaped soon after, I heard." Jane shrugged. "Maybe he went to Oklahoma."

Steve had a very small freakout the first time he saw War Machine; the shield left his hand before he thought, and the armoured figure staggered. Steve was was starting into a run when he saw Stark, eyes and mouth round, and Steve caught the shield and dropped back to a walk, feeling his cheeks burn.

"Uh -"

"Well hello, Rogers. Have you met my good friend Colonel Rhodes?" Stark's face shifted back to amusement. They were standing on the wide balcony that extended halfway round the building; Clint claimed it was because Fury liked to take potshots at starlings on his lunch hour, which Steve assumed was a lie. Fury never took lunch breaks. Still, it was one of the quickest ways to get to Fury's office without pushing through swarms of SHIELD agents all very busy and very determined.

"Uh, yes," Steve's face burned as the steel faceplate rose to reveal an indignant face. "I'm sorry, Colonel, I thought – you looked like -" Like a Nazi didn't seem a very tactful thing to say to a black man, and really, the armour didn't look much like a anything Hydra had fielded, now he was closer.

"It's okay," Rhodes said, in a long-suffering tone.

"It's an honour to be hit by the shield of the great Captain America," Stark said cheerily. "Something something must yield, I forget how it goes. Will you sign the bit you dented?"

"Is this the Iron Man?" Steve said, deciding to ignore that, and Stark looked scandalised.
"Are you kidding me? You're a technological Neanderthal, Rogers. This is a very rough, sketched copy of the Iron Man with some cheap pop-guns bolted on. Rhodey here scavenged it out of my dustbin and has been doing cut-rate impersonations of me ever since."

"I... see," said Steve, and cast an imploring look at Rhodes, who sighed.

"Tony kindly donated a model of his suit to the US Military. A few changes have been made."

"I think I saw some duct tape holding the cannon on," Stark added.

"So what does the Iron Man look like?"

"Flashier," Rhodey got in before Stark talked over him.

"Infinitely more stylish and sexy. I'm not sure you should see it - it might blow your mind and you'd start worshipping it as a God."

"I - " there was no way to answer that. "Have you seen Fury?"

"I talk about the Iron Man and you call for Fury? No taste. He's in his office."

Steve nodded to Rhodes, and sidled past them towards Fury's office. Stark slapped his shoulder in a friendly fashion as he passed, which was good. Progress. Teambuilding.

Fury directed a benevolent smile at him when Steve hesitated at the open door to his office.

"Good morning, Cap, what can I do - " Hill passed him a note, and he frowned. "Rewind. Thanks for coming on short notice, Cap, I won't take up much of your time. Just that we got you a SHIELD uniform for around the base; help you blend in a little." Fury gestured to Hill, who picked up a brown paper package and tossed it across the office. He caught it obediently.

"That's great, thanks." He strongly suspected the point of this was more to check him over for obvious dings and scratches; rumour had it Fury had not been best pleased when he finally heard about the nilthings incident.

"I'll do until we find you something a little more appropriate. Your old costume is a little bit outdated."

"I'll be fine with just this," Steve hefted the package. "I can dress like any other agent."

"We'll see," and Fury grinned in a way that clearly meant not a chance. Steve sincerely hoped they wouldn't try to stuff him into some cartoonish monstrosity; he'd had quite enough of being a PR stunt.

"Can I have a telephone?" he said instead of arguing further, and Fury raised his eyebrow. "One of the little ones."

"Who will you call, soldier?" Fury inquired.

"I don't know... the team?" He considered this, and seemed to find it reasonable.

"Stop by requisitions. Maria'll give them a call, they'll find you something."

"Thanks," and he backed out of the door under their gaze, clutching his package defensively to his
chest.

Requisitions gave him a blocky little box with a black-and-white screen and a large number pad; they showed him how to make and receive a call, and had helpfully put Agent Hill's number on it for him. It made a noise just like a real phone when he got a call.

He took phone and uniform up to the bright comfy lounge that seemed to be solely devoted to Avengers use; he had a locker and everything. He changed in the bathroom, and was packing his street clothes away when Stark came in, and stopped in his tracks.

"Whoa," Stark looked him up and down with slow attention, a smile tugging at his mouth. "Who gave you that, Rogers?"

"What?" Steve looked doubtfully down at himself. That was how Fury wore it, zipped up to the neck with the gunbelt around his hips.

"Nothing." He grinned, and Steve looked down again. Stark wouldn't let him go out looking like an idiot, would he?

Sure he would. Steve checked himself in the mirror by the door. Everything looked normal; it was a close fit, sure, but so was Natasha's. Maybe he should get an overcoat like Fury's.

"Seriously, you look fine." Stark slapped him on the shoulder. "It's just weird to see you in SHIELD gear, you look different." He let his hand run down the line of Steve's spine, and Steve turned away, feeling his cheeks flush at the casual intimacy of the touch. Stark took hold of his wrist, and traced the seam of the sleeve with his other hand, up and over the curve of his bicep. "I have no idea how they get the leather to fit so tight," he mused.

Steve stood stock still while Stark examined the stitching over his elbow, and focused on trying to keep the sudden feeling of arousal from translating into a physical reaction; the uniform wouldn't hide that. He wished he had the shield to hand. That hid everything.

Still, Stark's flirting was only directed at people he liked; this was a good sign, really, it meant they were getting on. Tony didn't necessarily mean - but Volstagg had said, hadn't he, that Tony liked - both. So maybe he was - Tony flicked a look up from under his lashes that made Steve's throat dry.

"What's that in your pocket? Are you pleased to see me?"

Steve grinned, confusion vanishing in the face of pride of possession, and dug out his telephone to show off. Stark's mouth turned down.

"That is a shitty phone, Rogers."

"I like it," Steve clutched it closer. Stark was positively sneering at it.

"I think I had one like that when I was five. My First Walkie-Talkie."

"They said it was a simple one, so I could get used to it."

"They think you left some brain cells in the Arctic? That thing looks like it's marketed to ninety-year-olds." His hands were wandering again, flat on Steve's belly.

"I have to go," he blurted when Stark's fingers drifted to the seam that curved over his pectoral muscle. "Briefing. There's a briefing."
"For SHIELD agents. You're not a SHIELD agent."

"I kind of am. It sounded interesting." Steve backed away. "And if I'm going around in a uniform, it'll look weird if I'm not at briefings, right?"

"Okay, then," Stark's eyes swept him up and down again. "Well, if you're busy, I guess. I'm taking Thor and Hawkeye on a road trip, so we'll catch you later."

"Right," and Steve was out the door. Not his most graceful exit, but Stark didn't seem to have noticed his discomfiture. Steve didn't usually get nervous around good-looking guys the way he did women, but Stark was – well, he wasn't like the men Steve was used to. Maybe it had been easier when Stark didn't like him.

He went to the briefing, as he'd said he was going to and he didn't like to lie. Agent Coulson, who was apparently a crony of Clint and Natasha, had sent back a report from North Africa about a Hulk sighting. It wasn't really very interesting.

Steve tuned it out – it would all come round in a memo later – and looked around him at the other agents, who looked the usual assortment of attentive, bored, and zoned out.

There was a blonde woman staring at him; he glanced at her, and she looked away, and then back. She was beautiful, with wide-set blue eyes and a serious mouth, hair in a neat ponytail. Steve stared back, and then tried a smile; she jumped in her seat, and turned her eyes to the front.

He peeked at her a few more times, but her eyes remained fixed on the projected screen until the end of the briefing, when she darted for the door. She stopped in the doorway, and looked back at him; then she jerked her head to the right, and walked that way herself.

Most SHIELD agents probably knew who he was; it couldn't be that hard to figure out. But most of them pretended not to know, and treated him with a sort of distant deference. This was the first time he'd been, well, accosted.

She was waiting for him in the elevator area, looking out over the parking lot. There was something very familiar about her, the way she stood, her profile. Steve stopped, just to look at her, until she turned her head and broke the illusion; she was a stranger.

"Captain America?" she said, and the accent was all wrong.

"How did you know?"

"I've seen pictures." She held out her hand, and he took it. "My name is Agent Carter."

"Oh," he dropped her hand. "Oh, you – I - "

"Her niece," she said hurriedly.

"She's dead." Steve hadn't thought to ask about family, he'd heard never married and that had been it. He remembered now, a baby brother, mentioned once or twice.

"Last year."

"I – " Steve glanced around, down the busy corridor. "Look, can we get some lunch or something? Or meet up later? I'd really like to talk with you some more, somewhere more private. If that's okay with you."
"It's ten am." A soft flicker of a smile, and that was Peggy, right there. "But sure, I can do lunch. Let me give you my number."

"Thank you." He carefully entered her number on his new telephone, followed by her name. Sharon Carter. "Sharon," he said, and smiled at her.

Steve settled himself at a corner table in the canteen, shortly after the lunchtime rush; it was still busy enough that they wouldn't be conspicuous, but not so packed anyone would feel the need to join them.

He'd thought that Sharon was different enough from Peggy it wouldn't unsettle him; but the quick assured steps she took, the way her brows drew together as she looked about, were a cold shock of familiarity. He contained himself long enough to wave to her, and she nodded; he was able to compose himself while she fetched herself a sandwich and coffee.

Sitting down opposite, she wasn't so alike. Peggy had always been guarded, a woman surrounded by men, ready to defend herself; Sharon clearly saw no need to be the very best and most professional at all times, more like Natasha in the way she leaned her elbows on the table and gulped down her BLT.

The silence stretched to the point of awkwardness. Steve tried to think of a gentle start to the conversation, instead of rushing straight in with -

"Tell me about Aunt Peggy," Sharon said, pushing her sandwich carton aside, and Steve grinned, relieved.

"I was going to ask you that."

"Well, I can go first. She was my favourite aunt. My dad was her baby brother, and I was her only niece. My mother and father both worked, so she used to babysit me; we'd watch newsreels together; she cried, sometimes. She told me why when I was older."

"Was she... she still cried for me?" The thought of bright, vital Peggy crying –

"It wasn't a regular thing," Sharon said hastily. "She never – I mean, she never married, but she had a full life, you know? She worked until she was sixty, and then she did a lot of volunteer stuff. Just, sometimes. When it was raining, or I was sick. She'd dig out the tapes, and we'd curl up and watch and she'd tell me stories. And sometimes you were in the newsreels, and she'd tell stories about you, and she – had a few pictures. She told me not to tell anyone, because it was all classified still, but..." She shrugged. "She had a good life, I think. I remember her smiling far more than crying."

"She never married, though."

"She said she'd never meant to."

That was a gutpunch, and it must have shown; she put her hand over his.

"Sorry, no – she said she'd never meant to marry, she was going to focus on her career, but then she met you. But after you – after the war, she just went back to the job. Never found another guy who she wanted to marry."
"Oh," and it didn't make him feel better, the cold ache in belly spread to his chest, and he shut his eyes, trying to catch his breath. Peggy was dead.

"I'm sorry," she squeezed his hand, and he shook his head.

"It's all right," he managed, and forced a smile, opening his eyes. "Sorry, I'm sorry. Um, what would you like to know?"

"How did you meet her?"

"She didn't tell you that?"

"Yes," she gave him a smile of pure amusement, "But I'd love to hear it from the other side."

"It was at an army camp; we were all lined up for inspection. One of the other soldiers gave her sass, and she punched him out."

"Really?" Sharon laughed. "See, she didn't tell me that! She told me there was a row of tall soldiers, and then there was you, five foot nothing."

"Peggy was always nice to me," Steve said wistfully. "Even when I was just a little guy."

"She said you tried harder than anyone. She liked that about you."

"The morning of the - the -" he waved a hand vaguely at his chest, "She said she understood what it was like to have every door closed to her."

Sharon's face went a little absent, eyes narrowing.

"Yeah," she said finally. "Yeah. Life wasn't very fair to Aunt Peggy, was it?"

"She didn't let it stop her. You know, without her I might never have been Captain America for real - she got me on my first mission."

"Really?" Sharon leaned forward, her smile warm. "She never told me that. Tell me about it."

"Rogers isn't so bad," Tony informed Thor, who nodded. His blond hair was streaming in the wind that came from riding in a convertible, and he reminded Tony of a friendly golden retriever. All he needed was his tongue hanging out of the corner of his mouth.

"The Captain is a fine man, and I find his company pleasant."

"He's not as boring as all that."

"Indeed, I find his tales of battle most fascinating. Can your vehicle go any faster?"

"Sure," Tony put his foot down further, and Thor grinned. The car was hired, of course, but it wasn't terrible. "He's sort of cute, too. A certain extremely conventional and mainstream charm. Not my type, but you know."

"Very handsome," Thor said agreeably. "Did my sweet Jane not hold my heart, I would gladly invite
him to my bed." He turned to give Jane, who was crammed into the back seat with Clint, a goofy smile.

"Not sure he swings that way, Thor."

"Swings?" Thor's brow crumpled briefly. "Do you mean he - "

"Never mind."

"But Steve said - " Thor looked even more confused. What had Rogers said to him? Maybe Volstagg had quizzed him on his sexuality. He'd have to ask Fandral for an account.

"They did things differently in his day," Clint patted Thor's shoulder. "Don't worry about it. But I don't think he's going to end up in your bed."

"I wouldn't mind, Thor," Jane patted his other shoulder. "As long as I can watch. Or join in. It's not cheating if it's Captain America." She'd also displayed a healthy interest in Tony's flight attendants; Thor was a lucky guy.

"Really?" Thor caught her hand and kissed it. "I love the customs of Midgard."

"Don't get your hopes up," Tony said, and contemplated the image of Steve sandwiched between Jane and Thor. How much booze would it take to bring that about?

It was the leather jumpsuit, that was the problem. No, not that - it was the way he'd blushed when Tony had impulsively traced the curve of his back. Like he'd known exactly what thoughts had drifted across Tony's mind, and was scandalised by them.

Scandalised, but not repulsed. Tony knew the signs, and Steve had been an open book; he'd liked Tony's hands on him. Maybe he did swing that way.

Tony was definitely going to have to find a chance to quiz Fandral.

"Seriously, he's so easily embarrassed," Clint said, clearly intent on diverting the conversation away from Thor and Jane's sex life. "I tried to watch Bad Lieutenant with him last week, and he ran away."

"Jesus, Clint, were you trying to scar his brain?" Jane slapped his shoulder. "Poor Steve. Darcy lent him some Disney movies, he likes those." Tony turned enough to give her an incredulous look.

"Darcy owns Disney movies?"

"She has a little niece, watch the road."

They pulled up in a stretch of desert that looked mostly like any other stretch of desert; but Hawkeye's GPS said this was the relevant part of the desert, so they all piled out and trekked into the scrubland.

"Here," Jane said. "Look - "

The earth was flattened, and there were odd shapes marked on it; twisting shapes, untidy, not like the elaborate knotwork patterns that marked a Bifrost gate.

"Hawkeye, go scout a perimeter or something, science is happening." Tony crouched, and stared at the ground. They looked entirely different from the patterns he'd seen at the gate with the wolves. He took out his phone, and projected an image of that onto the flat piece of earth in the centre. Jane
made a little *hm* noise.

"Not quite a Bifrost gate."

"Yeah," Tony trailed sand through his fingers. "Yeah, but - "

"But not unlike," Jane agreed. "The markings alone. There's been some impact, big, but - "

"But gentle." Tony looked around. "Well, comparatively."

"As if the Bifrost were broken?" Thor dropped to one knee beside Jane, and she shrugged.

"That's a jump; the signs aren't quite the same, and we don't really have any evidence that - "

"But if the Bifrost were broken, and someone cast into the spaces between worlds - "

Jane sat back on her heels and studied him; he put his hand up to cup her cheek, and she leaned into it, eyes going soft.

"An uncontrolled impact from the Bifrost centre might well look like this; is there any reason we should be looking for that?"

"My brother," Thor looked away, down. "When the Bifrost was broken, my brother fell."

"Your brother?" Tony raised his eyebrows. Well, that was a twist.

"You said Loki was dead," Jane looked alarmed, and no wonder. By Darcy's account, Loki had been a murderous villain determined to usurp the throne and destroy all his enemies.

"We believed it to be so," Thor said. "If – if he were cast down onto Midgard – if this were the Bifrost – would he live?"

Jane looked at Tony. Tony made a face.

"Depends." He looked down at the patterns again. "I mean, if we're saying a complete wormhole could have opened?" He cocked an eyebrow at Jane, and she nodded.

"If this were a natural phenomena, I'd say it was impossible. But it's not. The Bifrost is an incredibly complex piece of engineering, and its major function is to ensure the people transported in it come out alive and intact. It's got all kind of safeguards built in. So if he were carried away in the Bifrost, it's entirely possible he would just have been spat out onto a different world; in some ways, it's even likely, as the place between the entrance and the exit of the wormhole is more a conceptual space - "

"Then if he were spat out on to Midgard, and hit here with enough speed and force to make a crater like this, a normal human could not have survived the impact or the heat." Tony looked down, and then around at the rocky amber landscape.

"But my brother is not a human."

"And there's no sign of a body." Tony stood up. "As something as an expert on the many ways flesh can be mangled, shredded and burnt, I'm not seeing – or smelling – anything of the kind."

"What if he had turned to ice and melted?" Thor inquired anxiously.

"Is that an actual concern that we have?" Tony sighed when Thor nodded. "Well, if he had melted away, there wouldn't really be any sign remaining at this point, it gets pretty hot here. Wait, would
"his clothes turn to ice?"

"No," Thor's brow cleared. "No body and no clothes, so - "

"How big were your brother's feet?" Hawkeye reappeared. Thor frowned.

"Smaller than mine."

"That doesn't really narrow it down. I found tracks. Someone, tallish, not too heavy, wearing hand-

made boots with no heel.

"We should have brought Hogun," Thor shook his head. "Hogun is the greatest of Asgardian

trackers - "

"Well, I'm only a boring old Midgardian, and all I can tell you is they're going north."

Natasha, despite being tiny, slender and beautiful was almost as deadly as her codename. She moved

like a gymnast, spinning and tumbling, and Steve was hard put to it to keep up with her. Every block

was at the last possible second, and she fielded all his own efforts with little trouble. She'd booked

them a private room for their session, which was a relief; people had a tendency to stare at Steve.

They probably stared at Natasha too; her body in motion was - it was intriguing. Steve had never

seen a woman move like that. Sure, Peggy could throw a punch, and Sif had kicked her way through

the nithings as smoothly as any of the Warriors, but Natasha moved like she was made of coiled steel

springs, face a distant mask even as she delivered a kick like a mule that he barely blocked.

"Not bad," she said after an hour, and Steve felt a surge of pleasure when she gave him a tiny smile.

"Hit the showers, we'll grab some lunch and discuss your training after."

He saw Sharon while they waited in the lunch queue; he waved to her, and she darted over to say

hello. She and Natasha knew each other, which wasn't surprising. Natasha even smiled at her,

exposing neat white teeth, so Sharon had to be high in her favour.

"How did you meet Agent Carter?" she said when Sharon had departed clutch her sandwich and

soda.

"At a SHIELD briefing," Steve said cautiously. Perhaps he shouldn't mention that she'd drawn him

aside? Natasha's next words confirmed it.

"Fury thought it might upset you, so we weren't going to introduce you; but of course, you go to the

briefings." She rolled her eyes. "You're not going to freak out about her?"

"She's very nice. I'm not upset about - about her being my Agent Carter's niece, if that's what you

mean."

"Well, that's good. She was on the Avengers Initiative for a while, but they transferred her when you

were defrosted. Very conscious of your tender feelings. I'll ask Fury if we can have her back - she's

too good an agent to be spared."

"That sounds nice," Steve said mildly. They took seats near the window, and Natasha cracked open

her sparkling fruit juice and fixed him with a stern glare. "Is that why they moved me to LA?"
"To stop you wandering the streets weeping? Yes. And Fury wanted you close at hand, and he mainly works out of the LA base these days. I blame Stark. Anyway. You're fast, and of course you're strong, but you're very sloppy; you must be out of practise. What was your training regime like back in the day?"

"I didn't really have one. It was combat all the time, you know? I didn't really need downtime to recover, so they didn't give me any." The SHIELD cafeteria served an assortment of food that was really very pleasant after months of army rations. Today he had a panini, which seemed to be an odd-shaped toasted sandwich. Nice, anyway.

"Well, before. What discipline did you train in?"

"Discipline?" He took a bite of his sandwich. The lettuce was limp, but the cheese was nice. Modern food was a crapshoot, in Steve's view; some things were amazingly better, but some things just tasted weird.

"Judo? Kung fu? Savate?" She frowned. "I can't place your style at all."

"I didn't really get any hand to hand training. They taught me to use a gun in basic training."

Natasha put her fork down. She looked as if she were chewing on something unpleasant, and as her lasagna looked and smelled perfectly pleasant, Steve had to have said something mysteriously dreadful again.

"Are you telling me you never received any formal instruction in unarmed combat?"

"I had to learn on the job, really," Steve felt obscurely guilty; he wasn't sure why she was annoyed. It wasn't his fault they'd never had the time. There had been a war on. "It wasn't really – see, they weren't going to send me into combat, but then - I mean, it worked out okay?"

She spoke forcefully in Russian, and Steve blushed.

"I, um, understood that," he muttered.

"Of course you did," she said with a sigh. "No training at all, and I can't even land a punch. I'll talk to Fury; with some actual skills, you might be dangerous."

"We didn't really do a lot of that during the war," he felt obliged to point out. Machine guns, tanks, throwing knives, flamethrowers, but hardly anyone ever threw a punch at him. "I mean - "

"Did you only get basic training in guns?" she said suddenly, brightening, and Steve nodded. "Ha. I can't wait to tell Clint."

"Why?"

"Nothing." She smirked, and Steve shook his head. "Oh, here is Clint." She wrinkled her nose. "And Stark."

Clint sat down and stole a handful of Steve's fries; he made a grab for Natasha's juice, but she whisked it out of reach.

"What'd you find?" Steve looked from Clint to Stark hopefully; Natasha flicked a glance up through her lashes.

"Classified," Stark said happily. "Seriously! Super secret, you'll have to wait for a briefing."
Steve judged by the glance Clint exchanged with Natasha that she would shortly be fully informed, and suppressed a sigh.

"All right then," and Stark grinned.

"Later, guys, don't do anything I wouldn't do. Steve," his hand landed firmly on Steve's shoulder, and squeezed. "You should come hang with me at the weekend, we should talk."


"I see he's warming to you."

"Yeah," Steve wrestled back the grin. "He seems pretty nice."

"Oh, he can definitely seem nice," she picked up her juice again, took a long sip, lashes cast down demurely. Steve waited for her, and she finally looked up at him. "Be careful."

"I thought you said he was warming to me?" Steve turned his plate so Clint could get at his fries without putting his hands all over the panini.

"He is. He's not much kinder to his friends than his enemies - and they have to spend more time with him." A very slight narrowing of the eyes.

"He's fine," Clint said around a mouthful of potato. "Just don't take the guy seriously. That's when trouble starts."

"He's on our team," Steve protested automatically, and Clint and Natasha did the significant look thing again. "Oh come on, don't do that to me. Don't conspire right in front of me, what does the eyebrow thing mean?"

"Stark's kind of on probation," Clint said. "Fury doesn't think he's stable enough."

"I thought the Iron Man - "

"It's fantastic," Clint looked dreamy. "I want one. I almost envy Rhodes, except he has to put up with Stark all the time."

"No one is arguing that Stark is not a genius," Natasha said deliberately. "It has been argued, however, that he is a self-absorbed loose cannon who is unable to grasp either the concept he has equals, or the concept of teamwork."

"That's – not kind," Steve said, startled, and she shrugged.

"I'm not paid to be kind, Captain. I'm paid to realistically assess situations and people, and Stark is a danger to others and himself."

"Hm," Hogun said, and frowned down at the footprints. Steve waited, patiently. Thor sighed. Agent Hill looked annoyed, which wasn't unusual. Steve had a suspicion she was only here to keep an eye on him, after Thor had invited him along.

"Well?" Thor said after a few minutes. "Is it him?"
"They're Loki's prints, all right." Hogun took a few steps. "He's injured; staggering. He – " Hogun dropped to a crouch. "He fell," he said finally. "There's blood."

"What?" Thor took a step forward, and halted when Hogun held up a hand. "And there's another person. Two sets of tracks."

"Two? You're sure?" Hill said sharply.

"I can't tell where the second set are coming from; too many people have walked around the site." Thor looked sheepish. "But here, there are two sets of tracks; perhaps a scuffle took place here." Hogun trailed his fingers through the dirt. "Loki... Loki still has his powers, I think – it is as if a man is fighting a ghost, here, he charges empty air. But that only works once; here he finds his target, and then there is blood – "

Hogun paced around, eyes intent on the earth. "Loki falls. His heels scrabble on the earth; someone or something is holding him down."

"It's been two months," Hill mumbled in tones of quiet outrage, and Hogun looked up and gave her a surprisingly sweet smile.

"I am the greatest of Asgardian trackers, my lady."

"What happens to Loki?" Thor said anxiously. Hogun nods, and turns back to the ground, circling wider.

"Whatever happens then... perhaps Loki talks his way free... they travel together," he said finally. "They are stepping far apart, cautiously, but they are moving within sight of each other."

They trailed Hogun through the scrubland; he moved slowly, eyes never leaving the ground, each step deliberate and careful.

It took them almost twenty minutes to reach the road, by a wavering path. Then they paralleled it for almost half a mile. Hogun didn't speak a word.

Finally he stopped.

"A car stopped here. Someone emerged – Loki's footprints, here, he was close to Loki. The other stood away," he gestured out. Then he trotted back into the scrub, and looked about. "Ah," he said after a few minutes, and picked something up, something small and shiny. He threw it to Hill.

"A bullet casing. How did you know?" She dropped it into a little plastic bag, and tucked it into a pocket.

"There's blood on the ground over there; just a few drops. A body fell, and Loki started back."

Now Steve was looking, he could see disturbed earth; could see the hump of earth some six feet long. A shallow grave. Hill cursed softly.

"Loki dragged the body. His companion met him at the grave. They returned to the car together. And they joined the road," Hogun looked up and down. "And I am sorry, but even Hogun the Grim cannot track one deer in a stampede. At least, not weeks after the stampede."

"So Loki has been loose on this world for weeks, and has found an ally here." Thor shook his head.
"This fills me with the gravest foreboding."

"I'll call in the murder," Hill said. "Don't disturb the grave. Rogers, can you go – you don't have a license, do you?"

"I can drive it three hundred yards," he said indignantly, and she sighed.

"Just don't crash it," and she tossed him the keys.

A car arrived for Steve at ten on Saturday morning, just as Steve was starting to wonder what to do with his day. Hanging out with Stark definitely seemed like more fun than guns with Hawkeye or sparring with Natasha, so he got in the car. Technically he wasn't supposed to leave the base alone, but he was also supposed to be getting to know his teammates; bending the rules a little wouldn't hurt.

It was quite a drive, but the back of the car was a huge air-conditioned area with plushy leather seats, a selection of magazines, and a television; Steve watched cartoons until the car slowed, at which point he pressed his nose up against the tinted windows for a look.

Tony's house was enormous; Steve had understood he was rich, of course, but the house was - it looked weirdly futuristic, of course, everything did – but this looked consciously futuristic, it looked like it had just flown down out of the sky and perched on the cliff. The gates opened automatically, and they drew to a stop; the car door clicked, and Steve fumbled for the handle.

"Uh, thanks," he said, and stumbled out into the blinding sun.

"Steve!" Stark looked completely different, jeans and a tank top and the bright glow in his chest on full display; it was hard not to stare. The arc reactor had been in Stark's file, of course, but it was a different thing to see it. "Come in. Say hi to Jarvis."

"Jarvis?"

"Good morning, Captain," said a British-accented voice, and Steve looked around.

"Good morning – Jarvis?" he said tentatively. "And hi, Tony." Stark didn't seem fazed by the use of his name, so Steve guessed that was okay. Maybe they were friends now, then.

"A pleasure to meet you," the voice came out of nowhere again. An intercom, maybe?

"Likewise," he gave a slightly panicked look to Tony, who grinned.

"Jarvis is an AI."

"What's an AI?" Steve looked up and around again, searching for clues.

"Artificial intelligence. A smart computer."

"Oh." He followed Tony into the house, trying not to look too impressed. It was difficult; even aside from the whole talking computer, the house was one of the fanciest he'd ever been in. There was a waterfall, and an incredible ocean view, and he could see the kitchen at the far end of the room, sitting right there in the same like it was a tiny studio flat. Everything looked like it was ready to be in a science fiction novel.
"Oh yeah - " Tony pointed at the coffee table. "I got you a present."

"Oh?" Steve leaned forward and picked up the box. "What is it?"

"Well, open it." Tony grinned.

Steve flicked it open, and took out a small, sleek black shape. A moment's turning and fiddling, and it split open to reveal a screen and a tiny keyboard.

"It's the new Starkphone. Better than the thing Fury gave you."

"Oh." Steve turned it, carefully. It had a distinctly space-age look to it, like a laser would fire if Steve found the right button.

"Here, give it here," Tony plucked it out of his hands. "And your phone, c'mon." He snapped his fingers, and Steve took the other phone out of his jacket. Tony pried it apart, and took a little chip out of the back. "This is your SIM card." He put everything back together, and passed the black phone back to Steve. "There. It's already charged."

"Thank you, Tony. I really appreciate this." He turned it over. "Um, is there a manual?"

"Of course, you read manuals." Tony fished in the box. "And the charger, a handsfree kit - the usual stuff. Don't show this to anyone, they're not out for a week."

"Right," he tucked the phone into his pocket, and suppressed the urge to start on the manual. "Thank you very much. So, what do guys do to hang out in the twenty-first century?"

"Well, I don't know what normal guys do, but I thought I'd show you the Iron Man." He backed towards the spiral staircase. "If you're interested. You're interested, right? You want to see my super-powered battlesuit."

"Well, sure." Steve followed him down the stairs.

Tony's workshop was incredible. It was like Howard's workshop, a bit, but brighter and more colourful, and the walls were lined with War Machines in shades of steel. Except, as Tony sternly pointed out, they were Iron Mans. Iron Men?

Tony showed him the current model, which was an intense glorious red over gleaming gold, and looked like a sports car crossed with a tank. There was a machine that helped put it on, and then he stood and let Steve prod at it.

"It really flies?" Steve ran his hands down the sleek metal arm, and lifted the hand to inspect the fingers. "How?" It was as intricate as jewellery, but it had to be far tougher if Tony went out to fight in it.

"Repulsor technology, which is something I invented, because I am a genius." The voice was creepily electronic, like a computer; except, of course, he'd heard a computer and Jarvis sounded just like a person. Steve traced his fingers down the torso; Tony did a little shimmy so Steve could see the way the plates articulated, sliding over each other, and then he balanced on one leg.

"It's amazing," Steve breathed. "Just the way it all fits together. You're an artist."

"Engineer," Tony said, affront creeping into his voice.
"Yes, but this is - this is beautiful, Tony." Like the way flower petals furled, or the complexity of a feather; form following function to create something beautiful in its purpose.

He shaped his hands over the smooth golden curves of the biceps, feeling the plates flex and adjust under his grip, and then the faceplate lifted to reveal Tony's grin, and he smiled up into Tony's face, higher than he was used to.

"Hot, huh? Like what you see?"

"Uh - " it was suddenly very evident to Steve that when he was fondling the Iron Man, he actually had his hands all over Tony. He took a careful step back. "It's very nice."

"Well, thank you." Tony gave some invisible signal, and the machine arms came out to lock on to the armour and peel him like an orange. "Okay, you want to get a pizza, and play some video games?"

"Yeah." Steve smiled. "Yeah, that sounds like fun."

"Too slow, too slow," and Steve groaned as a rocket took him down. "For a super-soldier - "

"Whatever you use to play video games, it didn't get enhanced," Steve interrupted, and grinned at Tony, who was grinning back.

Tony offered him another beer, and he shook his head.

"Sure? Something stronger? Want a snack?"

"I'm good," he leaned back into the plush couch, and Tony leaned up against him. Steve dropped an arm around his shoulders without thinking; Tony was more touchy-feely than Steve had thought at first, moving confidently into Steve's personal space as if it were unthinkable he'd be turned away. "Your TV is really cool."

"It is." Tony took a long swallow of his beer, and Steve watched the way his lips flexed around the mouth of the bottle for a second before looking back to the screen. His corpse was being chewed on by zombies, which was kind of grim.

Tony's hand rested on his belly, warm seeping through the thin cotton. The thumb stroked absently, and Steve could feel a blush building. He put his hand over Tony's, meaning to move it, perhaps grab the controller and demand to be shown the moves again, but Tony turned his hand and their fingers tangled together.

"Steve," a warm breath on his cheek, and he slid his eyes sideways to see Tony giving him that small, quirked grin, the private intimate we have a secret look. "Shut your eyes, Steve, okay?"

He shut them, and Tony's breath trailed over his cheek, stirred his eyelashes, and there was a very soft brush of lips on his brow. The couch cushion shifted under him, and Tony put a hand on his shoulder for balance, leaning over him, and another touch of lips to skin at the corner of his eye. Steve's skin was prickling with the closeness, with the expectation; he jumped when Tony used teeth at the corner of his jaw, and Tony chuckled, a warm engaging sound, and planted a distinct, damp kiss firmly on his cheek.
"Come on, baby," he murmured, and it was so easy to give in, to accept what he was given. Steve tilted his head back, and parted his lips. Vicious little bites down the curve of his neck, and then open-mouthed kisses back up, finishing with a sucking kiss under his jaw that was surely going to leave a mark. Steve pushed a hand up into his hair, slick with some kind of hair product, and pressed their lips together with care; but Tony bit his lower lip and then pushed his tongue into Steve's mouth, sending a shiver through Steve's body, making his skin tingle. Tony tasted of beer, and he smelled of expensive cologne, and he was warm and surprisingly heavy, letting his weight fall against Steve, the arc reactor digging in through his thin shirt.

Tony rolled his hips, and Steve gasped; he had a sudden vivid image of them naked, together, right there on the floor, Tony groaning ecstatically -

A tug at his belt, and Steve realised he was going to get that, it was going to happen, right now. That was -

- great, it was great, but -

"Is this," Steve muttered against his lips, opening his eyes. "Wait. Wait, I -"

"What?" Tony lifted his head, and licked his lips. His eyes were sleepy, and his hair rumpled, falling into his face. He looked – Steve swallowed. He could just shut his eyes right now, let it carry on -

"I don't, this. What - what does this mean?"

"Mean? It means sex." He grinned, and the heat flushing Steve's body slowly drained away, leaving him feeling cold and foolish.

"Okay. Okay, I'm sorry, I can't." Steve struggled away, and Tony huffed out an irritated breath. "I'm sorry, I don't do sex without - casual sex. I don't do that, I should have thought, I'm sorry." He shut his mouth tight before the babble got out of hand. His body ached for more of that touch, it knew exactly where those hands had been going and oh, he wanted that.

"What, you thought I was proposing?" Tony shook his head. "That how they do things back in the day?"

"No. I'm sorry." Steve pulled his shirt back into place. "It was stupid of me. I'm not used to - how casual things are."

"They teach you no sex without commitment in the Army?"

"Yeah, actually," Steve tried to take a light tone. "Peggy was pretty strict about it."

"Sure she was," Tony unfolded from the couch, drifting away, his expression getting that far-away look. As if he'd forgotten who Steve was.

"I," Steve stood up, and smoothed his t-shirt down. "Should I go?"

"You don't have to go," Tony shrugged. "Stick around, practise the X-Box. You can leave whenever, the car's waiting for you."

"Right," and Steve felt a clogged feeling in his throat, like he wanted to cry. He'd thought Tony liked him, at least. "I should - " he fumbled the new phone out of his pocket. But it had the SIM card in it. "I should give this back - "

"What?" Tony actually looked at him, brows drawing together in a frown. "Don't be ridiculous. You
"Don't like it?"

"No, I just." Steve couldn't even begin to form the words, but Tony apparently read it in his face.

"It's just a phone, Rogers, not the price of your virtue," waspish. "Unless you're not allowed to accept gifts from strange men." He pushed Steve's extended hand away. "Keep the stupid phone. It was a present."

"Right." Steve ducked his head, and picked up the box. "I'll go."

"Sure," Tony was already heading towards the stairs. "Jarvis'll let you out."

Steve distracted himself by reading the manual, and not thinking about what had just happened. They were on the outskirts of the city when he realised that he didn't want to go back to base after only a few hours, that Natasha would look at him curiously and ask angling questions. And Steve would blush, of course, and then say -

Steve carefully pried open the phone, and pressed the little keys until Agent Carter's number was highlighted. He hesitated a long moment, and then pressed the green key.

Sharon moved with Peggy's quick assurance, marching down the street toward him, but she wore practical boots and jeans and a fitted white t-shirt, and her leather jacket was more like a pilot's jacket than the neat coat Peggy had worn.

"Hi," he offered his hand. "Thanks for coming to meet me on such short notice."

"Not a problem," she said easily, giving his hand a firm squeeze. "In this job, you get used to last-minute changes of schedule."

"Right," he nodded, and then he had nothing to say. They stood for a moment, and Steve cast a glance around. "Do you like ice cream?" he said hopefully, and she gave him a brilliant smile.

"Does anyone not like ice cream?"

"Diets," he said, and steered them towards the kiosk.

"Don't tell me Aunt Peggy was a dieter. She loved food."

"Not that I ever saw. She loved ice cream, when we were back in the States she'd eat it three times a day." Sharon ordered a double scoop, chocolate and pistachio; Peggy had ordered something different every time, and traded bites with him. Good days, when they were just soldiers on leave.

"So, uh," he began, and then stopped. Sharon looked at him inquiringly; he could feel his face heat up. "Shall we – walk?"

"Sure." They sauntered down the street, and eventually found a little park, with a bench and a pond and some ducks flapping around.

They sat; Steve's blush was making a comeback.
"Sorry," he said. "Uh – how long have you been an agent of SHIELD?"

"Straight from college. I always wanted to; Aunt Peggy was always full of stories."

"She worked for SHIELD?"

"She helped General Phillips found it," she said proudly. "She was his successor as director."

"Peggy was Director of SHIELD?" Steve blinked at her. "Really?"

"General Carter," she said. "That was the seventies, of course, and it wasn't called SHIELD then; it was international then."

"Tell me all about it," he begged. Somehow, it hurt less, to know that Peggy had gone on to batter down all those doors she hated so much. If she'd married Steve, she'd have had to give that up.

"Well, she was Strategic Science Reserve, of course, and she was Colonel Philips' right hand woman. When he retired, he recommended her as his successor, and of course Britain was all for having one of their people in charge. Aunt Peggy says there was a lot of squawking - I can't imagine, really - but no one knew the business like her, and she got it eventually. She said Howard Stark backed her, and of course he had a lot of pull - he was in at the start as well."

"Did you know him?"

"No. I met Mrs Stark a few times when I was tiny, she and Aunt Peggy were quite close, but not him. I think he used to email sometimes, and they always sent a card at Christmas." Her face brightened. "Oh, did they tell you? I'm moving back to the Avengers Initiative."

"That's great," Steve smiled at her. "I'm sorry that - I mean, because I - "

"It's hardly your fault. But I am glad to come back."

"Did you come and speak to me because of that?"

"Well, I did want to hear about Aunt Peggy. But I might have let it wait a little longer if I wasn't hoping to get my place back." She dimpled, and he grinned back.

"Tell me about how you got started," he suggested, and settled into enjoy a long listen.

Tony sulked for a good three hours. He'd been prepared for *I'm not into guys*. He'd even been prepared to be punched in the face. But to get Steve all hot-eyed and pliant only to get cockblocked by *not into casual sex* - ugh. Stupid Forties morals.

After three hours, though, he was feeling antsy enough to go bother Fury.

"I'm too busy for you right now," Fury said curtly, and Tony followed him anyway. Hill glared at him from her desk. "God dammit, Stark, how the hell do you keep getting in? I personally revoked your access to this area. We have had a break in – apart from you, I mean. We have had classified material stolen. Captain America is missing. I don't have time - "
"Missing?" Happy hadn't said anything about Cap going missing, and Tony was pretty sure he would have mentioned losing the super-soldier.

"He's not answering his phone." Fury spun on his heel and glared. "I note he left the base this morning in a car registered to your name. And it is a mark of how serious the situation is that he is not my primary concern right now." He glowered in a way Tony had long ceased to find intimidating.

"But -"

"Stark. Your mission, and you'd better choose to accept it: go find Captain America. I'm busy right now." He took a long step backwards, and slammed his office door in Tony's face. Tony seriously considered following, but Agent Hill interposed herself, looking distinctly unfriendly; Tony decided to leave before she tried to repossess his access card.

Easy enough to track down Steve; the phone was registered to Stark Industries, and Tony would be able to track it through the GPS. Assuming he hadn't thrown it away as tainted by Tony's impure intentions.

Steve's miserable, determined face hovered before his eyes for a second; he felt brief and unaccustomed guilt. He probably shouldn't have shown Steve the door quite so promptly. He was a nice, decent guy, and it was hardly his fault he had old-fashioned sensibilities. Hell, Tony had half expected a homophobic freakout at the first kiss; if he'd coaxed Steve along a bit, he might have gotten somewhere.

Coaxing Steve would have been a pleasant experience; the eager way his hands had fumbled at Tony's skin, the little surprised catches of breath, the way he'd leaned into it like he was drowning and Tony was air. Tony should've taken it slower, instead of going straight for his pants, but the noises had been so thoroughly enticing he'd briefly forgotten Steve probably hadn't had a lot of casual hook-ups.

Instead, Steve had wandered off in a strange city on his own, and if anything happened to him, it would be Tony's fault.

Tony stopped feeling guilty when the car pulled up next to a restaurant terrace. Steve was there, drinking coffee, talking to a very, very attractive woman, who was smiling at him as if he'd personally hung the moon for her.

"Well I'll be damned." Fast work, Rogers. Reasserting his heterosexuality, maybe? He threw open the door, and jumped up onto the terrace. Steve turned sharply at the sound, and then his face flamed with colour.

"Uh, hi," he said weakly. "Were you... looking for me?"

"You're not answering your phone." Steve just looked confused. "Your phone? It makes little musical noises, and then you talk on it?" Steve continued to look blank. Tony pulled out his own phone, and hit redial.

Faintly, the national anthem began to play. Steve kept staring at him.

"Steve? Can you hear that?"

"The anthem?"

"That's your phone."
"My phone plays music?" The woman beside him stifled a giggle, and he shot her a guilty look. "Um, I'm sorry, I should probably go, if they've been trying to call me -"

"Of course," she waved a hand. "It was lovely to talk to you again, Steve."

They shook hands in a way Tony could only describe as lingering. Tony arched his eyebrows at her, and she gave him a bland smile.

"Fast work, champ," he said as soon as the door shut, and Steve gave him a look of wide-eyed innocence. "Did you pick her up in the cafe?"

"What? No! Nothing like that," he was red as a cherry again. "I just, she's a SHIELD agent."

"Oh, so all the time you spend lurking in the basement at SHIELD looking anguished is actually scoping out the ladies. Well done, she's a looker." It explained the smile, too; they apparently taught bland smiles in SHIELD basic training.

"It's not like that."

"Sure it's not."

"Have you been trying to call me?"

"No," and Steve looked a little crestfallen. "Fury has been trying to call you, and as you were last seen in my car, he made it my job to bring you back."

"I wondered where the music was coming from," he murmured. "I figured there was just a radio nearby." He frowned. "Why did Fury send you?"

"Excellent question. Because there's been a break-in, apparently."

"At SHIELD?" Steve paled. "Was anyone hurt?"

"I have no idea. Actually, I couldn't see any signs of fighting, damage or even disarray, so whoever -" Tony stopped, mouth open.

"What?"

"Classified material missing - son of a bitch." He banged on the smoked glass screen. "Happy, hurry the fuck up, I have people to yell at."

"What?"

"Stark, you can't go in there," Agent Hill darted across the room too slow, and had to chase him in. Steve followed her, and shut the door.

"Has Loki taken it?" Tony demanded, and Fury turned a shark-like gaze on him. Thor and a number of SHIELD agents were there, seated around a table.

"What are you talking about, Stark?"

"I don't know. Because you haven't been telling me." He sat down in the chair between Thor and
Fury, who glared. Steve shut the door, and leaned up against it; Agent Hill hovered, eyes on Fury, clearly eager for a chance to toss Tony out on his ear. "But you've been clucking over Steve like a hen with one chick for months, and now suddenly he goes missing and you're too busy? What does it take, Fury? Loki's taken an Asgardian artifact. My Asgardian artifact."

"My father's artifact," Thor corrected.

"You know what it is?" Tony looked over at Thor, who was looking distinctly grim.

"I know what it is."

"Well, please enlighten us," Fury said. "Because our best scientific minds are still a little unclear."

"It's called the Tesseract," Thor said. "It was lost on earth, many centuries ago. From what I have heard, Johann Schmidt found it, and used it as a source of power for weapons."

"So it's a giant battery?" Tony asked. That didn't entirely make sense; sure, unlimited power was nice, but -

"It killed him," Steve said from the door, and Tony slewed round in his chair. "It was in the plane with us – when I – when I went down over – I broke the casing in the fight, and Schmidt picked it up – it was a glowing blue cube, right?"

"Yes," Thor said.

"And he – melted. I don't know. There were stars – not – I mean, it was like – " Steve blinked uncertainly.

"As if reality tore open to reveal a strange sky?" Thor asked, and Steve nodded.

"And Schmidt melted into light, and the cube fell out of the plane, through the hole it blew."

"And my father found it," Tony folded his arms. "And it was a Stark Industries research vessel on a Stark Industries job in international waters, and he never gave up rights to it."

"It's Asgardian," Thor rumbled. "It's ours."

"Why wasn't I told?" Tony glared at Fury.

"You didn't – and don't – have the security clearance Howard Stark rated," Fury glared right back.

"And when you found the ship? I didn't have the security clearance for that, either."

"Well, Stark, what were you going to do with the ship?" Fury leaned back in his chair. "You don't build weapons any more."

Tony stopped, mouth hanging open.

"That's not the point," he said indignantly.

"Indeed, it seems to me an irrelevance," Thor said. "I would like to know - "

"Was it Loki?" Tony bounced in his chair. "It was Loki, wasn't it?"

"The current evidence - and this is all highly confidential and I would remind you that highly confidential does not mean put it on your Facebook - is that Justin Hammer stole the Tesseract."
"Are you trying to tell me your security is so bad *Hammer* can get through it?" Tony snorted. "You have all the problems, in that case."

"*I would like to know,*" Thor said at something short of a bellow, "Why my inquiries have not been answered. I would like to know why SHIELD's possession of one of Asgard's treasures has been kept secret from me until it was stolen."

"Can you prove it's yours?" Fury said, and Thor's mouth opened, then shut. "Well, you see our problem."

"Then see mine, Fury," Thor said sharply, and rose to his full height. "I will return to my people and tell them that due to SHIELD's deceit and incompetence, the Tesseract may be in the hands of the wicked, or in my brother's possession. I do not think they will react kindly to the news."

"Now hold on - " but Thor was holding up his hammer.

"Heimdall!" he called. "Heimdall, bring me home!"

The next few seconds were busy. Hill hurdled the table right into Thor's personal space, and almost landed on Tony, who had already jumped up to grab Thor's belt. A big hand clamped on to Tony's shoulder, which had to be Steve.

Then the world split open around them, and Tony barely managed to suppress a scream. Speed, the sensation of terrible rushing speed, and space unspooling around them and being shredded away like clouds around a jetplane, like flying in the armour *with no armour*, bare and unprotected. Steve's hand tightened almost unbearably on his shoulder, and his own knuckles ached with clinging to Thor's belt – what if his hands slipped, would he go spinning off into some other world, lost in the immensity of space -

They ended up stumbling on a fragile-looking bridge, under a vast smokey sky glittering with far too many stars. A huge dark figure in golden armour was gazing down at them; Tony was on the point of breaking out into hysterical giggles when he saw the neat figure of Jane, pen tucked into her hair, mouth hanging open.

The sight of her grounded him, and he let go of Thor's belt and stood up.

"Are you all right?" Thor patted his shoulder. "The Bifrost can be most disconcerting to those unaccustomed."

"Yeah," Tony's voice barely wobbled. "I'm fine."

"I have never been so scared," Steve said, and unpeeled his hand from Tony's shoulder. *Ow.* "That was – that was *space*. Are you okay, Agent Hill?"

"Fine," Tony was pleased to note her voice was a little breathless. "This is Asgard, I take it."

"You must be Heimdall," Tony nodded to the tall figure. "Nice armour."

"Thank you, Tony," Heimdall said. "That means a great deal from you."

"Sure it does. How do you know that?" Tony looked around him, at the colours running in the bridge, at the sky that extended below them, infinitely. "Do you really see everything? That's creepy."

"It's amazing," Jane gave him a stern look. "What are you all doing here? You know the Bifrost isn't
stable yet. We've probably scattered elves all over Texas."

"You should not have come." Reproach filled Thor's voice. "I was making a dramatic exit. You ruined it."

"Yeah, well, I wasn't done talking," Tony said.

"I didn't think it was wise to let you go off like that," Agent Hill added.

"I didn't really think about it." Steve shrugged when Tony turned to give him an incredulous look. "I don't know, everyone else was doing it."

"I'm in awe of your strategic talents," Tony told him, and turned back to Thor. "So! Who's the expert?"

"Expert?"

"I remember you telling me you weren't the expert in mysteries. Who is? I want to talk to them." He glanced at Hill. "Alone would be best."

"Not alone." Hill folded her arms.

"SHIELD have already screwed this up enough, I think." Tony put a hand on Thor's arm, and gave him earnest look. "Come on. I need to talk to someone about the Tesseract."

"My mother," Thor said, after exchanging a look with Heimdall. "My mother is the expert. I will take you to her."

"Welcome, children," was the first thing Frigga said to them, and Steve's throat closed at the sight of her; she looked nothing like Sarah Rogers, who had been small and tired and thin and not at all regal, but somehow all Steve could see when he looked at her was his own mother. Thor rushed forward to embrace her, and Steve was, simply, envious.

This was Frigga's workshop, and Steve had been vaguely expecting something like Tony's workshop; from the disgusted look Tony was giving the room, he had been too. The curving marble walls and sparkling windows were only to be expected, but there were no computers, and the only book lay in the lap of a young woman in loose blue silks and unbound hair, who had been reading poetry when they entered and was now staring with open curiosity.

Thor stepped back and away, and Frigga held out her hand to Steve; he took a step forward, took her hand in his, and then remembered Thor's mother was a queen. A split-second's panicked indecision, and then he dropped to one knee.

"Your Majesty?" he said doubtfully, and she smiled at him.

"Dear Steven." Her smile made his heart clench. "My son has told me much of you." She placed one hand on his cheek, and pressed her lips gently to his brow; Steve felt his eyes prickle with tears. Her soft perfume was nothing like his mother’s scrubbed-clean nurse's smell, but her fingertips were calloused against his skin and the gentleness of her kiss was all maternal.
"What did you do to him?" Tony was suddenly at his shoulder. "Steve?"

"Let him be," Frigga sat back. "He has lost much."

"He was fine till we got here," Tony said belligerently.

"Tony," Steve said, as sharply as he could. "I'm fine. Don't be so rude." He stumbled to his feet, Tony's hand gripping his arm tightly.

"And you, Anthony?" Frigga raised her eyebrows, and Steve could almost feel Tony glaring. He tried to elbow him, but Tony stepped away.

"I'm good, thanks."

"Maria?" Frigga said, and Tony stiffened, but apparently that wasn't directed at him; Agent Hill let Frigga take her hand, and pull her down into a embrace. Hill hugged her very quickly, and when she pulled back, she turned her head away from the others, staring out the huge windows into the starry purple twilight.

"So is that your divine power? Bring out everyone's latent mommy issues?"

"Would you describe your – ah, issues as latent, Anthony?" she smiled at him, and he jerked his chin up aggressively.

"I'm not really here for family therapy."

"Indeed," Frigga said tranquilly, and picked up a little bundle from the bench beside her. She shook it out, and Steve realised it was some kind of weaving; Tony let out a little exasperated breath as she looped the end around her foot, revealing strip of fabric with an intricate pattern woven into it. She began clicking the cards in her hand back and forth, feeding in yarn from her other hand, and Steve watched, fascinated, as more pattern was laid down. Thor sat down at her feet, and rested his head against her knee. After a moment, Hill folded gracefully to to the ground on her other side, and Frigga gave her a benevolent smile.

Tony folded his arms over his chest and walked around in a circle, staring about him. He stopped at a basket of yarns, and glared at them. They looked like perfectly normal yarns to Steve, piled haphazardly in no particular order, a clear jubilant red next to a soft mottled grey-green. Sif had said the Lady Frigga could spin from the clouds. They did look very soft and puffy. That was probably just poetic license, though.

He looked back to Tony, to see him eyeing the girl with the book; he had the expression that meant he was going to say something dreadful, and then there would be diplomatic incidents again. Sweet maternal attitude or not, Steve didn't think you got to be queen of the Norse gods by being a pushover.

"Your Majesty," he ventured, and got an encouraging nod. "We were hoping you could tell us about the Tesseract." Tony gave a little grunt of irritation. "Weren't we?" he shot a glance at Tony, who rolled his eyes theatrically towards Hill.

"I was hoping not to talk about it in front of SHIELD agents." Hill leaned back against Frigga's chair, and fixed Tony with a blank look, like she was staring straight through him. It was a little bit creepy, and Tony apparently found it so too, because he sidestepped to the other side of Steve.

"What do you want to know, Anthony?" Frigga smiled up at him, her hands not pausing in their work. Tony sighed noisily, glared at the arched ceiling, and apparently concluded he wasn't going to
get his way.

"I want to know what it does." Hill's eyes went back to alert. "It's more than a battery, isn't it? You wouldn't care so much if it were just that."

"You're quite right, of course," Frigga's hands didn't stop their click-click, no sign of distress in her serene face. "The Tesseract gives dreams form."

There was a pause. Frigga stopped weaving, and leaned over to adjust the loop around her foot. She resettled herself, and continued, and Tony let out a sharp, annoyed breath. Steve managed to nudge him hard in the ribs without anyone but Hill noticing.

"Can we have that again in less magical fairy talk?" Tony said, and Steve kicked him in the ankle. "Jesus, Rogers, stop hitting me, this is such bullshit. I mean, assuming the Tesseract doesn't actually grant wishes - "

"That would be an incorrect assumption, Anthony." Frigga at least didn't seem shocked by his behaviour. There was amusement lurking in her soft eyes as she watched Tony gape.

"What," Tony shook his head. "I, what - "

"The mistress of the Tesseract may shape reality to her – or his – will," she said in slow, careful tones. "I'm not sure how much more simple I can make this for you."

"I," Tony lifted a hand, then let it drop as if he weren't sure what to do with it. "Are you kidding me?"

"No."

"Why was there ever a war with your Jotun-things if you can reshape reality at a whim?"

"There was a war with the Jotuns because we did not have the Tesseract," Frigga shook her head. "If it had not been lost, we would not have needed to go to war."

Tony did a fast circuit of the room, shaking his head, tapping his fingers on the walls, the window, the book in the girl's lap, Steve's back. He refrained from knocking on Frigga's head, at least.

"So, excuse me, Loki has this Tesseract now, and he's going to start... reshaping reality?"

A shadow passed over Frigga's face; she looked down at her weaving, bronze curls slipping down over her shoulder. The steady movement of her hands slowed, and then stopped.

"That may come to pass, yes," her voice was soft and sad and Tony hissed like an irritated kettle.

"May?"

"It killed Schmidt," Steve volunteered. "When he picked it up."

"So it did. It's not wish-and-go, then." Tony looked back at Frigga. "That's a relief."

"No more than any highly complex tool. Or weapon." Frigga's mouth curved, and she lifted her weaving to show them. Steve couldn't really tell how the bundle of cards and yarn made fabric, and Tony gave it only a quick look. "Think of it as a giant loom. You can weave the fabric of reality into any pattern you desire – if you know how. The pattern will reflect a deeper meaning, and the deeper meaning will affect the pattern. Of course, if you don't know how, you may be pulled into the machinery and torn apart."
"Right. Or, let me just extend the metaphor, you might tear reality apart and not know how to put it back together again," Tony said, and Frigga nodded.

"Reality is a resilient thing," she said. "An intricate but strong weave. And looms are designed to weave together, not unravel. But yes, that is also possible if the Tesseract is misused. I hope that my son would not be so careless."

"Oh, well. I'm sure we can all put our faith in Loki's sense of responsibility. I need a drink," Tony turned to Thor. "A very large drink. Thor, what do you have to drink here?"

That was their audience, then. Agent Hill elected to stay a little longer in Frigga's company; Tony seemed inclined to go drag her along, but then recalled he'd wanted to be rid of her.

"Steven," and Steve paused in the doorway, to look into Frigga's deep eyes. "Give my son my love when you see him."

Steve glanced at Thor's retreating back, and then back at Frigga. She smiled, sadly, and he nodded.

Thor led them to a vast balcony overlooking a valley, with a waterfall tumbling down into the depths; the roar of water didn't quite drown out their voices, and the rainbow spray was pleasantly cool. Everything, down to the stones underfoot, was engraved or embossed or embroidered or painted with intricate and beautiful patterning.

Asgardian ale turned out to be good, if strong. Tony brooded over his for several minutes while Thor and Steve talked about hunting. Or rather, Thor told stories about hunting pigs with spears, and Steve nodded politely and agreed he'd love to try it sometime. Maybe he even would.

Halfway down his second ale, Tony perked up enough to join the conversation.

"You have Valkyries here? Tall blonde women? Just Steve's type, right?" Tony flashed his teeth. Steve hunched down, and searched for another topic of conversation, one that would grab Tony's attention.


"Not really," Thor waved a hand. "It's – well, it has some things in common, of course they are both Asgardian technology. Why?"

"Because – because when Schmidt picked up the Tesseract, what I saw was the same as what I saw on the Bifrost." There was a pause; Thor tapped his hammer idly, frowning.

"You fear he may not have been killed, but translated to another world?"

"He'd be what, a hundred years old by now?" Tony said.

"Maybe ten, twenty years older than me," Steve said dryly. "They don't know if it was the ice or the Serum that kept me young." He'd been sure, at least, that Schmidt was dead. The idea he could be back, could be loose even now plotting disaster - could have access to the Tesseract - it didn't bear thinking about.
"So you think there might be some kind of immortal super-Nazi lurking out there in space?" Tony hesitated. "I didn't mean for that to sound mocking, by the way, but I am kind of boggled that we have to address this as a legitimate concern."

"There are nine worlds," Thor said. "Nine worlds that the world tree touches. Who knows where the Tesseract might have sent your enemy?"

"Two sets of footprints leading away from the Bifrost impact," Agent Hill said from the direction of the building, and Tony jumped so hard he splashed ale all over his legs. "Frigga let me check out a pair of Loki's boots. Loki's prints, and a tall, heavy person with large feet in something like army boots."

"Is that even possible?" Tony looked at Thor. "What are we arguing here, that the Bifrost sucked Schmidt off another world and put him down with Loki? Or that Schmidt was trapped between worlds for the last sixty years and got caught in the Bifrost explosion?"

"The place between worlds is not a place or a time," Thor said. "I have never heard of a person being trapped there. But it is not an impossibility."

"So," Tony scrubbed a hand through his hair, leaving it sticking up oddly. Steve bit his lip and suppressed the urge to pat it down. "How do we track down this thing?"

"If the Asgardians could detect it, they would have done it centuries ago," Hill said. "Think you can do better, Stark?"

"Of course I can," Tony jerked his chin up. "I'll need - some things. Let's get back. No time to waste."

Jane and Heimdall were able to deposit them in the rear parking lot of SHIELD; Thor elected to stay in Asgard until Jane was done. Tony bolted for the gate as soon as he was steady on his feet. Hill gave chase, and Steve followed. He found them fighting over a taxi, Tony trying to push her out while she determinedly scrambled over him; Steve got in the other side, and gave the cab driver an apologetic look. Tony was forced to yield to Hill's superior strength, though he muttered irritably all the way to the Stark Enterprises office.

Tony marched them into a large, airy meeting room, huge glass table and floor to ceiling windows and a dozen men in expensive looking suits, all staring at them in surprise. Ms Potts and Natasha were there, too, and didn't look at all pleased to see them.

"Pepper!" Tony took a step forward, and she bared her teeth at him. "We need to talk."

"Tony," she said. "Tony, this is a board meeting. One that you were supposed to attend."

"Okay, not my fault – Hill, back me up here -"

"Not really," she allowed grudgingly. "We'll just wait in your office, Ms Potts." She grabbed Tony's arm, and Steve grabbed the other, and they hustled him out. Natasha accompanied them, and she and Hill began to mutter urgently together. Tony sat down in Ms Potts' chair, and began tapping away at her computer.

Ms Potts stormed in twenty minutes later.
"Tony, what do you think you're doing? Do you know how hard it is to run a company - "

"This is Captain America," Tony interrupted, and Steve could almost hear Ms Potts' mental gears grind as she switched tracks.

"How nice to meet you." She gave him a smile and her hand. "Tony, I would like to have a word - "

"You see the fabric of reality is in danger," Tony interrupted again. Steve had never actually seen anyone gnash their teeth before. He took a prudent step back, in case Ms Potts went off like a grenade.

"Pepper," Natasha laid a cautious hand on her arm, and Ms Potts' eyes rolled towards her. "I'm afraid we do have a very serious emergency."

"Fabric of reality?"

"...very possibly, I'm afraid."

"We need to do some investigation," Tony turned back to the computer. "It's very exciting. You'll be like a super-spy. Well, like Natasha, really. You can wear a catsuit, like Steve and Natasha do. You can be like Tony's Angels."

"We need to look for power emissions," Steve said hastily.

Ms Potts looked at him, seemed to register he had no idea what he was talking about, and looked back at Tony.

"I need to use our satellites," he said. "Some other people's satellites, if we can get them. We need some really in-depth sensor data, I need to monitor the whole US. I think we can limit it to the US, they can't have gone far." He pushed away from the desk, and wandered towards the door. "I'll need to talk to the lab, you can start getting us access to satellite data."

"And we need to start tracking the sales of certain types of equipment," Natasha put in, following him into the outer office, which had squashy sofas and fake greenery. "I can do that through SHIELD, but Stark Enterprises is going to have the most up-to-date information about what we need to be tracking and who sells it."

"Right, yeah," Tony waved a hand. "That'll help. I could do better with some data on what Schmidt did with the Tesseract back then, so I can work out how he's going to try and duplicate it."

"I'll talk to Fury." Hill made for the elevators, apparently convinced Tony was in safe hands now.

"All right," Ms Potts looked soothed, as if the merely very difficult was comfortable when faced with problems like 'fabric of reality'. "Tony, you'll need to get me the list of - "

"I'll email it," he backed towards the door. "I need to go to the satellite guys in person, I need to talk to them about it."

"Email it right away," Natasha glared at him, and he grinned.

"Can I leave you alone with Pepper, Steve? You're not going to charm the pants off her in under an hour, right? Or am I underestimating you?"

"Stark," he growled, feeling his face flame. "You - " but Tony was gone. "I'm so - "

"Terribly sorry," Ms Potts spoke with him, and then gave a startled laugh. "Um, yes. Don't worry.
Only Tony is to blame for Tony."

"Right," he gave her an awkward smile. "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Not unless you feel like manning the reception desk," she said with a sigh, and he nodded.  

"I can do that."

"You can?"

"Sure. I mean – is it complicated?"

"No, just sit there and take messages and tell people I'm busy, but – are you sure?"

"I'm not doing anything else," Steve sat down at the desk that was presumably Natasha's. "If it helps, I can do it."

"Thanks," Natasha flashed him a smile before drawing Pepper into the inner office.

He spent a peaceful two hours writing down messages and playing Patience on the computer. He also painted the fingernails of one hand baby pink, and then realised he didn't know how to remove it. He was wondering whether it would be best to do the other hand to match when Tony reappeared.  

"I'm afraid Ms Potts is busy right now," Steve said in a bright professional tone, and Tony let out a bark of laughter.

"This gets more and more ridiculous. One day I'm going to find Fury fetching her coffee." He sat on the corner of the desk and eyed Steve thoughtfully. "You make a hot secretary. I'd hire you. Actually, I could use a new PA; you want to quit working for SHIELD?"

"If I did, I wouldn't come work for you," and Tony gave him a look that seemed to have genuine hurt in it. "Anyway, did you get it done?"

"Of course. If the Tesseract discharges energy on a large scale in North America, we'll detect it." Tony took Steve's hand and inspected his nails. "You need two coats of this stuff."

"No word from Hill yet."

"Not surprising. She's not going to be very helpful. She's SHIELD loyal to the core." Tony linked their fingers together almost absent-mindedly. "This would be so much easier if SHIELD would co-operate with me. You have really big hands, you know."

"I'm pretty sure Fury thinks you should be co-operating with him," Steve tried to ignore the delicate scrape of Tony's nails over his palm.

"Well, Fury needs to learn he can't have everything he wants," and that was so ridiculous Steve laughed out loud. "What?"

"That's rich, coming from you."

"You're very spiky today," Tony put his hand down. "I think I liked you better all bashful. Who's been a bad influence on you?"

"Almost everyone."

"Corrupting the national idol. Hold all my calls, baby." And Tony vanished into Ms Potts office,
leaving Steve to apply another layer of nail polish.

Tony got himself back to SHIELD bright and early next morning, and was rewarded by intercepting Agent Hill on her way to Fury's office, loaded with coffee and paperwork.

"You found something," Tony bounced in front of her. "I know you found something. I can see it in your beady black eyes. Tell me what you found."

"I report to Fury," she said coolly, stepping smoothly round him, and Tony trailed in her wake, trying to catch a glimpse of her papers.

"Are those crime reports? You found a crime? Loki knocked over a liquor store? No, a sudden rise in shoplifting of Nazi memorabilia."

Fury was in his office; he sighed when Hill tried to shut the door in Tony's face and Tony determinedly tried to wriggle through the narrow gap. Hill was unreasonably strong for such a slim women. All the SHIELD women were cyborgs, it was the only possibility. Fury had a machine in the basement cranking them out.

"Let him in, Maria," Fury said. "He'll only spend the next ten minutes breaking the lock, and I don't have time to have him arrested today."

"Sir," and Hill stepped away, letting Tony stumble ungracefully into the room.

"Ten minutes? I'm offended. Hurt, even. That lock - "

"And have you detected anything, Stark?" Fury gestured him to a chair.

"Not a thing. It's been sixteen hours. If I had access to all your Bifrost data I could probably refine our tracking to detect smaller emissions."

"There's a lot of things you could do with our Bifrost data, Stark, but I feel like I want you to limit your scope to this world. Think of it as my gift to the multiverse."

"Hurtful, that is a hurtful comment, you are all very cruel today." Tony pointed a finger at Hill, who was sedately shuffling her papers. "Can I ask, why do you have papers?"

"Because you can't hack into them," she said.

"You're using dead tree communications just for me?"

"That's right." She handed Fury a piece of paper; his face barely twitched, in the way that meant a not-good surprise.

"What? What is it?"

"You got the Iron Man on standby, Stark?"

"I can be moving in half an hour."

"Well, now's your chance to be useful. I want you to take a couple of agents – take Hawkeye, and he can pick another – and go out here," he handed the paper to Tony, and Tony blinked down at it.
"A theatrical supplies store? What? Why would Loki burn down - "

"Prosthetics."

"Ah. The skull."

"Not exactly inconspicuous. The owner designed and made custom facial prosthetics. The elephant man. Star Trek aliens. That kind of thing. They found what appear to be his remains in the building. Arson is inconclusive."

"So..."

"So take Clint and go and find out if that was a Nazi, a Norse God, or an accident with some flammable materials."

"Are you sure Fury said to bring Cap?" Clint said for the third time, and Tony nodded.

"Sure. Good for him to get out more, as Thor's too busy to take him on outings. All right there, Steve?" he yelled back over the sound of the rotors.

"Yeah," Steve looked almost childishly excited, bouncing slightly in his seat. Tony took a moment to eye him up and down. Tight black leather really did look amazing on him. Whoever had fitted that jumpsuit deserved a medal. The black baseball cap he was wearing to shade his eyes was less flattering, but you couldn't have everything. "How long?"

"Almost there, right Hawkeye?"

"Coming in to land." Clint had insisted on piloting, on the grounds neither Tony nor Steve were checked out on these helicopters. Which was ridiculous, because Tony could build one of these things. So he'd chosen to strap himself into the co-pilots seat, armour and all, and heckle.

Not that Clint wasn't an adequate pilot, but they couldn't have him getting cocky or anything.

Someone had called ahead to arrange a clear space in a parking lot. A small Oklahoma town wasn't limited in its empty places, but Tony supposed it was standard procedure. They set down behind a tyre store, which had a grand total of two cars parked outside it.

"Welcome to the big city, Cap." Tony threw out a hand expansively, and turned to glare when Clint put a ringing slap across his ribs. "What the hell, Barton, I'm not a kettle drum."

"Don't call him that. Do you understand the concept of classified information?"

"Somehow I don't think people are going to jump to the conclusion he's the once and future Captain." Tony stepped carefully out of the copter. If he managed to damage it, Steve and Clint would have a long, boring wait.

"Agent Rogers is safer."

"Fine. Agent Rogers, welcome to Oklahoma, there's less singing and dancing than you might expect." Steve blushed up to his hairline, for no reason that Tony could tell. There was no way dancing was scandalous in Forties New York.
"So what do we do?"

"Good question. Clint, you're the secret agent crime scene kind of guy. What do we do?"

"Look at the scene, talk to the cops, talk to the locals. We're looking for signs of unusual behaviour, anyone seeing Loki or Schmidt. General weirdness. Oh, and Justin Hammer I guess."

"If Hammer's involved, they probably burned the place down by accident. In fact, maybe the corpse is actually Hammer. He was casing the joint, and then everything descended into fire and anarchy."

"Stark, please shut up. Can you find something useful to do while I talk to the cops? I'm not taking you with me. Why don't you walk Steve around for a bit? Buy him ice cream or something. Ask people if they've seen any Nazis. That is a joke and if you ask anyone that I will end you."

Tony watched him leave for a few seconds, but couldn't think of a suitable parting shot. He turned to Steve instead.

"So, Agent Rogers. Alone at last." Steve shifted his weight, and glanced after Clint, clearly unhappy to be put in the 'dead weight' category. Well, Tony wasn't thrilled about it either. "Ice cream?"

"Maybe we should find some locals to talk to. Like Clint said."

"Maybe we should split up," Tony suggested, and as expected, Steve looked relieved. As expected, Tony felt shitty about Steve looking relieved. Tony was going to start eating worms if people didn't start liking him soon. "I'll go... talk to people, and you go... be shocked by miniskirts, or something." He stomped away, ignoring Steve's comment on miniskirts and his total endorsement of them.

He got himself an ice cream cone, and found a decent-sized rock to sit on, as all the benches looked ancient and fragile. By the time he was finished, a number of small children were orbiting him at a distance of about twenty feet, all trying to look like they were doing something else entirely. They were about as subtle as Thor eyeing up a cheeseburger.

"So who wants to try on the helmet?" he asked the air, and orbits rapidly decayed into children clinging to his knees and demanding to be first. At least he still had some fans.

He let them pass it around, peer inside and bang it on the ground, put it on and chase each other. Odds were pretty low they'd break it, and it wasn't like he needed the armour. Was sending him on this mission a punishment for him, or for Clint? Who knew how Fury's mind worked.

"Guys," he said, and got a few glances. "Have you seen anyone weird around?"

"You," said a kid in a Power Rangers shirt, and there were a couple of giggles.

"Very funny. I mean a couple months back. Before the big fire. Anyone strange or unusual?"

"No," this one was probably a girl, as she had braids. "Lots of people come through here. They stop at the store for snacks and then get back on the road."

"Some guys came to stay at the motel a while back," one kid contributed, and there was a round of nods. "They hang out and drink beer and say they're gonna look for work tomorrow."

"My mom says they don't even want jobs, they're just lazy."

"Okay, great." Tony shook his head, and dismissed the idea of a Nazi commander undercover as a redneck. Redskull, ha. "No one who could - " he hesitated, but so what. Worst case, the kids would
tell their parents he'd been drunk. "Do magic?" Oh, there was something. Glances back and forth, little feet shuffling.

"No--ooo," one drew out, and Tony leaned forward.

"Are you sure?"

"We promised not to tell," said another.

"It wasn't really magic."

"You can tell me," Tony said. More glances. How did you persuade kids into stuff? It wasn't really a skillset Tony had cultivated. He'd have to improvise.

Seventy bucks later, he was getting breathless accounts of the conjurer who'd been in town the week the old theatre store burned down.

"He could make stuff disappear and bring it back."

"He could talk to animals."

"Grown-ups couldn't see him unless he wanted them to."

"He could make ice out of nothing."

"So you just hung out with him?" Sidelong glances. "C'mon, spill. I don't care what you did."

"We brought him stuff." Braids again. "Food. Newspapers. Joey borrowed his mom's cellphone for him."

"I put it back," Joey assured them. "The next day. My mom never uses all her free minutes anyway."

"Where'd he hang out?"

"In the red barn on the edge of town. He wouldn't let us come in; he'd come out and talk to us."

"He eat a lot?"

"Yeah, we brought him lots of food. He really did do magic, though."

"Hey, I believe you." Enough food for three? No way of telling. If Loki ate like Thor, it might just have been for him. "What'd he look like?"

"Taller than my dad."

"Long black hair like a hippy."

"He dressed like a wizard."

"We weren't supposed to tell anyone."

"Oh, it's fine. I don't count. You always got to tell the truth to superheroes, right?" He gave his widest bullshit smile.

"I guess?"

"Anyway! Thank you very much, you've been a great help." He plucked his helmet out of a small
pair of hands, and settled it back on his head. "Stay in school, don't... commit any more petty crimes, even for magicians."

He sauntered up the street with a warm feeling of achievement. He was a useful and contributing member of the team even without stuff to blow up. And the phone was good - they could check calls. He should probably have gotten Joey's surname; too late now. They could get it from the school rolls, or something.

Steve was standing outside the bar, talking to a young woman in a short denim skirt and an apron. She laid a hand on his arm, and leaned in a little, and Steve gave her a big idiotic grin and turned pink. Tony should probably just leave them to it, but hey, Steve didn't do casual sex. It'd be doing him a favour to extract him before the conversation got awkward, right?

"Steve, you picking up women again?" Tony placed one metal gauntlet on his shoulder. "Hey sweetie. Don't mind him."

"Uh," she looked doubtfully at his expressionless golden mask, then back to Steve. She had freckles on her nose, and blond curls, and was just the kind of girl-next-door cute you'd expect an American icon to be interested in.

"Thank you, miss, you've been very helpful," Steve said, and she nodded and retreated. Steve narrowed his eyes at Tony, which wasn't at all intimidating. He looked like an angry cat. "Can you not, Tony?"

"Not what?" Tony hoped the smirk came through in his voice. "We don't really have time for you to chat up the ladies, Steve, I know you can't resist a nice blonde, but - "

"I think she saw Loki," Steve interrupted, and Tony hesitated, then put up the faceplate.

"Really?"

"Tall. Long-ish black hair. Good-looking, narrow face." He shrugged. "That's how Sif described him to me. I know it could be a lot of people, but - "

"Sif thinks Loki's hot? I thought she hated him."

"She just said he was good-looking, Tony, and that's not really the point."

"What was he wearing?"

"Some kind of long coat, maybe leather." Could be, could be - or it could just be a lost Goth doing conjuring tricks.

"Found something?" Clint sidled up, looking hopeful. Steve opened his mouth, but Tony was quicker.

"Romeo here's been seducing information out of the locals."

"Tony, please stop - "

"Do SHIELD give training in that, Clint? If Natasha had been busy, would you have been wiggling round my desk in tight pants?"

"Fuck off, Stark, some of us are here to work." Clint jerked his thumb. "Why don't you find something useful to do with all that high-tech hardware instead of fouling up our investigation?"
"Sure," Tony smacked the faceplate down. "Call me if you need rescuing from the locals."

"What the hell crawled up his ass and died?" he heard Clint mutter, and then cough in the dust kicked up. Tony extended his sensors, heard Steve lie I don't know before filtering their voices out as meaningless noise.

He'd tell them about his findings later. Let Steve have his moment first. Tony had a place as blowing things up guy, after all, Steve just had Nazi-punching.

The sky was drifting with dull grey tufts of cloud, casting black shadows over the earth. Tony balanced on his jets, and looked down at the small town, scattered messy and inefficient over the landscape, the burned out hulk of the theatrical supply store a scar in Pleasantville. An odd place to choose, but the town was set between two major roads; maybe it got a lot of drive-through business. It wasn't far from the city, and had to be a lot cheaper to live.

What had drawn Loki and Schmidt here, then? Had they just been passing through, conveniently, on one of those roads? In their stolen car? Tony called up a list of local businesses, and scrolled through, humming softly to himself. Nothing leaped out. Maybe Loki had come alone? Maybe Loki wasn't even working with Schmidt - although what else he'd need in a theatrical supply store was beyond Tony.

If Schmidt had shot his victim, he might have left another bullet casing - but they would have gone through the building, checking for that, and Clint would have looked himself. Say what you like about Clint, he wouldn't have missed that. And anyway, they'd examined the bones and found no sign of trauma. If Schmidt or Loki had murdered him, they'd done it to soft tissue.

Of course, Schmidt was probably saving his bullets; if Tony remembered the ballistics report, that pistol had been a Gewehr. Nazi officers tended to supply their own handguns, and Schmidt was nothing if not melodramatic. No boring old Luger for him. Not too easy to get bullets for, these days.

Tony brought the list of local businesses back up. Then he called the gun store.


He did a victory loop, and glanced down, looking for Clint. This was definitely something he could hold over Mister Weapons Expert. Clint, Clint - there was some kind of scuffle going on in the lot near the copter, was that - surely they'd call for - except he'd tuned them out to do his readings, and never tuned back in.

When he turned them back up, he could hear Clint's breathless curse. Tony dipped into a dive, putting up his hands, and he was going to have to blast that little fracas because holy shit, that guy was going to stab Clint but the repulsors would be too dispersed at this distance -

A bright shape bounced off the helicopter, leaving a dent, and dropped the knife-wielder to the ground like his strings had been cut. Captain America's shield hit a signpost with a sharp crack and landed neatly back in Steve's hand.

Tony almost laughed at the dropped jaws; even Clint was gawking, having apparently not seen Steve throw the thing before. But now he was in range, and two blasts cleared the space either side of Clint with only a light wash of concussive force sending Clint back a few steps. Tony landed neatly on his feet in front of Clint, and got a ringing slap to the front of the armour.

"Where the hell were you, asshole?"
"Had a phone call," and Clint went almost purple with rage. "How'd they get the drop on you, anyway?"

"Some kind of fucking tazer-thing," Clint said disgustedly. "Said they were going to ticket the copter, did I have the papers, and then they threw it at me. Body armour absorbed most of it, but by the time I got it free - "

"And where were you, collecting phone numbers?" He quirked an eyebrow at Steve.

"Clint sent me to check out the gun store. They sell - "

"Antique ammo. I know." Well, he'd probably thought of it first.

"Oh, you got something?" Clint perked up a bit. "Well, I'm glad you came, you were useful."

"Yeah, I got the security tape." Tony put his tongue out at Steve, secure in the knowledge he couldn't see it. "So who are these guys?"

"Local punks?" Tony hazarded, and crouched to go through pockets. "Maybe they were just too shy to ask you out, Clint."

"That thing. There." Clint pointed, and Tony poked delicately at the little metal shape. It was sticky on one side, and had little prongs emerging from it.

"This is Hammer tech."

"How do you know?" Clint leaned over.

"It's got a logo, genius. This is some of his experimental crowd control stuff, I saw him demo it last year."

"So what - "

"These must be the guys from the motel."

"What guys?"

"Most stupid plan ever? I think so. Hire some goons to randomly assault any SHIELD agents that come here? That's ridiculous. Why not put up a sign saying Suspicious Activity Here!"

"Stark, explain to me - oh, here come the cops. Do not say a fucking word to them."

The police were persuaded to take temporary custody of the attackers; Clint called it in to Hill, and Tony could hear her irritated sigh from several feet away.

One of the policemen tapped the underside of Steve's shield. He was holding it with the domed side pressed against his belly, in a futile attempt to hide the distinctive logo.

"What's that, son?"

"It's a," Steve's mouth hung open for a long second. "Well, it's a - throwing - disc."

"Ste - Agent, get in the copter," Clint said sharply. "You're classified."

Well, that made Steve the centre of all eyes, as he ducked into the helicopter and pretended not to notice the people staring through the glass at him.
Today just got better and better.

"Was it really necessary to throw the shield at him?" Fury said in weary tones. He put down the picture he was holding, which showed Steve's hand outstretched for the incoming shield. The shield itself was blurred, but there were other photos. Steve hadn't seen any cameras; Hill was of the opinion they'd been in windows overlooking the parking lot, snapping away at the crime in progress.

Fortunately, the higher elevation had meant that in most of the pictures, his face was obscured and shadowed by the brim of his cap. It hadn't stopped the pictures going up on the Internet and fuelling frantic speculation; the favourite idea was that SHIELD was launching a new Captain America, and they found the idea about as tasteful as Darcy had.

Thor had told him that he was trending on Twitter. That had made Hill close her eyes as if in great pain.

"Yes," Steve said. "Yes, actually, it was."

"Got to concur with him, Director," Clint said in clipped tones. "It was my fault. I was careless, let us split up." Steve wanted to defend him, but he wasn't really sure how; they'd all been sloppy and careless. Steve just hadn't thought of it as enemy territory. He'd never been in danger in America apart from the very first time, when Dr Erskine had died. America had always been safety.

"Sure it was," Fury sighed, and dropped his face into his hand, fingers digging into the skin and massaging. "Never mind, Hawkeye. Okay. This was going to have to come soon anyway; we're going to have to go public with you."

Steve took a breath, and considered. The expected plunge of horror didn't manifest. He nodded, firm.

"Sure."

"Sure?" Fury looked out from between his fingers. "Just like that? Are you ready for a media barrage, Captain?"

"I've been a target for the media before. I think I'll live."

"I think you should appreciate, Captain, that the intensity of media attention has increased." Agent Hill handed him a bulging folder. "This is a selection of the media coverage from Thor's first week as a public figure. Obviously, Thor is an alien being who has been worshipped as a God; you are a national hero returned from the dead. The media will take a different slant, but I wouldn't expect it to be any less fascinated by you."

"Seriously," Clint said. "We're going to be buried in historians baying for a piece of you. The History Channel won't show anything but World War shows for weeks, which I guess isn't much of a change."

Steve riffled through the papers. There was really too much to take in at once; Thor had been in a number of photoshoots, and had apparently been interviewed in a magazine that gave sex advice. Steve really hoped he could persuade them he didn't want to be in that kind of publication. Or photographed with women in skimpy bathing suits, for that matter. He paged past those fast, feeling his face begin to flush.

"We'll need to get you a new uniform," Fury added, and Steve's head jerked up. "Your old one isn't really - "
"I can just wear a SHIELD uniform," Steve said hastily. "It's very comfortable." He patted his chest. "No reason for anything fancy, it's not the Forties any more."

"I'm afraid we're going to go for something a little more colourful, Captain."

"Not too colourful. Just, something subtle?" Hill snickered. "It's not funny."

"Stark's going to - "

"Not Stark!" Steve said too fast, and Fury's eyebrow went up. "He's - got a terrible sense of humour." What would Tony find it funny to dress him in? He'd be enough of a figure of fun beside the sleek black SHIELD agents, dressed up like some Uncle Sam parody - it had been different, during the war, people had wanted flags to rally round, but now -

"Captain, it'll be fine," Fury gave him the trust me smile. "Stark's going to make you a new suit, I talked to him about it a while back. You've seen the Iron Man - "

"Gaudy," Clint put in, and Fury narrowed his eye.

"And it looks fine. I'm sure he'll do a good job for you. If he doesn't, well." A shrug. "We can always get a re-design done. All right?"

They couldn't force him to wear anything he didn't want to, after all. Steve nodded, dismally. At least there wouldn't be dancing. He could handle smiling for the cameras.

"I want you to stay on base until further notice, all right?" Fury pointed an accusing finger. "No sneaking off."

"Yes, sir."

"We're going to get this under control."

"Sir."

Tony had to complete Steve's new costume as a rush job; he complained bitterly to Hill, but on the whole it was probably best he stayed out of Fury's eye for a day or two. Steve and Clint had almost certainly put the boot into him in their reports of their little outing.

Not unjustly, perhaps, but Clint was a big boy and should be able to take care of himself. Tony wasn't the babysitter.

Out of what wasn't at all guilt, but the urge to be as helpful as possible, Tony had offered his house for the interviews. Either from Fury's passionate hatred of reporters in SHIELD bases, or Agent Hill's passionate defence of the SHIELD budget, his offer had been accepted. Natasha dropped by the night before to make sure he hadn't taken all the security measures offline and installed a neo-Nazi group in the basement; she also demanded to see Steve's new outfit. It had been a pleasure to deny her, and she'd retreated, baulked.

Tony managed to restrain his urge for endless tinkering, and he was upstairs and respectably dressed when Steve was dropped off by the lovely Agent Carter. Tony watched on the laptop screen as she blew Steve a kiss; Steve looked sadly after the car before turning to trudge morosely towards the house. Charming. Tony shut the laptop as the door opened to JARVIS' polite greeting.

"So, ready for your new costume?" Tony said, and Steve's face dropped even further, like someone had just told him the modern world didn't have puppies or rainbows. He looked down at his
"Can't I just wear this?" his eyes went impossibly wider and sadder. The man was a living cartoon character. Freaky. "I don't want - I don't know what Fury told you, but I don't want to dress up like some clown -"

"Star-spangled man," Tony said, and the pleading eyes narrowed abruptly. Tony had found the old footage of Steve striding about the stage with dancing girls intensely hilarious, but it wasn't like Tony was in any position to judge. "It's fine. Trust me. I helped design it – and I used your original designs. My father kept them."

"He did?" Steve perked up slightly, which was irritating. Sure, Howard could cheer Steve up. Tony was so much chopped liver, obviously.

"He was pretty fond of you. Yeah, he kept them." Tony turned to the table, and pushed the case towards him. Steve gave him a doubtful look, and actually flinched when the case clicked open to reveal deep blue. Then he took a careful step forward.

The sleeveless outer layer lay on top, folded so the star was on top; Steve tapped it lightly, and then scratched a fingernail over the fabric. Tony suppressed the urge to hurry him on, watched his doubtful face as he unfolded it. That top layer was the most colourful, with the red and white armoured panels and the blue kevlar-woven fabric. Steve considered it, rubbed a panel between his fingers, lifted and turned it, and then his mouth crooked a little.

"I guess this is okay," he conceded, and looked down into the case.

"Try it on," Tony pointed to the bathroom. "Yell if you need help."

Steve returned a few minutes later, and he was smiling. The costume looked fantastic on him, just as Tony had predicted, and only the slightest bit goofy. No more so than his World War II gear, anyway. People would expect Captain America to look a little bit of a dork. There were limits on how sexy a national icon could look before it became undignified, which was just another reason the US Government wasn't getting its hands on Iron Man.

"I like it," Steve did a turn so Tony could see the back fitted as snugly as the front. "How does the neck thing work, though?" He tugged at the loose fabric; the collar didn't stand on its own.

"It attaches to this," Tony displayed the helmet and Steve grinned. "Hold still." He placed it on Steve's head, and secured the strap. "See, these bits here – they clip in over the ears – they've got your comms in, so even when you take the helmet off you should be able to hear them, okay? Just press and twist to get them loose."

"Right," Steve put up a hand to feel at them, his gloved fingers moving over Tony's. His breath smelled like cinnamon, Tony noted. "Okay. Thank you, this is good. You've done a really good job."

"Hey, you gotta look good, right? Can't have people making fun of the Avengers." He smoothed his hands down Steve's throat, checking the fit. "How's it feel? Good range of motion?"

"Yeah, feels great." Steve flexed his arms, swinging them back and forth, then bent his knees. "How strong's the armour? It's so light."

"Strong," Tony patted at his shoulders. "Trust me, it's tougher than your old costume." He gave into temptation, and when Steve turned around, took a handful of blue-clad ass, and squeezed. Steve squeaked and jumped away, and gave him a reproachful look. "Just checking the fit." He reached
out again, and Steve shied away, blushing.

"Stop that."

"The costume's inspiring a lot of patriotism right here. I really want to give my country some loving right now." Tony took another step forward, backing Steve against a wall, and Steve's eyes flicked down and then he looked up through his lashes, which wasn't a no. Not at all. "We could just take some tension off for you. Get you nice and relaxed for your interviews."

He brushed his fingertips over the red and white panels at Steve's waist, and inched them downwards, towards the silver square that held the belt on. Steve's breath caught, and then he grabbed Tony's fingers and shook his head. Tony turned his hand and lifted Steve's.

"Not wearing the gloves?" he remarked, and ducked his head to kiss his wrist. Steve was silent. Tony kissed the pulse, and gently dug his teeth in to the pad of flesh at the base of his thumb. He let his beard drag against skin, and Steve's breath hiccuped.

"No, I," Steve's voice stuttered as Tony looked up at him, then started again with more confidence. "I don't want to. Stop that, okay?"

"Sure?"

"Sure." Steve stepped around him and headed for the couch. "When's the first interview get here?"

"Another twenty minutes or so. You need anything?"

"I'm good." He dug in the case where he'd stowed the black leather, and came up with a handful of flashcards, which he began flicking through.

"PR department write you those?"

"Uh huh."

"You always say what they got for you?"

"Not always." Steve glanced up at him, frowning slightly, and Tony really preferred it when Steve smiled. He sat on the coffee table, and Steve looked up at him. The blue of the helmet brought out his eyes, bright and clear.

"Don't worry. Just stay relaxed, be yourself, smile." Steve obediently smiled at him, and Tony tapped a finger on his cheek. "There you are. I'm sure they won't be able to resist those baby blues." The smile vanished, and Steve's brows came down.

"Will you please stop that, Tony?" Tony dropped his hand, stung. Steve looked down at his cards again. "Sorry. I'm nervous."

"You'll be fine."

The costume was light and comfortable enough he could do the interviews in it, which was – well, it was embarrassing. But the reporters were all very nice about it. He signed a ridiculous quantity of autographs for an assortment of young and elderly relatives, and was kissed by three lady reporters and one young man from Out magazine who wanted to know how he felt about being a gay icon.
Steve had got as far as explaining he wasn't gay when the man explained what gay icon meant, and Steve decided not to finish the sentence about maybe just experimenting or possibly bisexual.

Tony kept appearing to make chirpy, needling comments at the beginning and end of interviews, usually while resting a hand at the base of Steve's spine in a very distracting way.

"Oh, I see you're getting an interview with Christine," he said to the lady from Vanity Fair, who was very pretty and didn't seem at all impressed by Steve, Tony or Tony's house. "Nice work, Christine, happy to see you getting so much superhero action."

"I'm sorry," Steve said to her when Tony had retreated down the spiral staircase to his workshop. "He's – um, I'm sorry."

"Don't worry." She smiled at him, tightly, and sat down on the couch. "I'm used to Stark's behaviour."

"Oh. Um." Steve floundered. "I, would you like coffee?"

"Thank you," and getting coffee from the machine gave him time to regain his balance.

"I read your profile on Thor." He proffered the little cup. "I liked it."

"What did you think of my assessment of the impact on the UN?" she said sweetly, taking her coffee.

"I didn't really understand all of it," he admitted. "I don't – I've still got a lot to catch up on. I mean, you made good points about the monarchial system not being ideal, but I don't know that excluding Asgard for being a dictatorship is a good idea."

"Well, it's an extreme position," she crossed one leg over the other. "But I think it's wise to take a suspicious stance to self-proclaimed superheroes. Which leads us nicely into the subject of our interview, which is you."

"Right. Well, I guess you read the press kit?"

"Yes. I've not had a chance to study your role in the war in depth, and I'm afraid the science of your origin is rather over my head; but I understand I'm in good company there. I'm familiar with the basics of your story, of course. That a notorious Nazi commander known as the Red Skull went rogue, developed weapons of mass destruction, and sought to conquer the world; and you prevented it, leading a campaign to bring down all his arms factories, stopping the bombing and sacrificing your life to bring the plane down in the ocean."

"That about covers it."

"I'm an investigative journalist, Captain. Do you know, even sixty years after your alleged death, no one has been able to dig up any dirt on you?"

"There isn't any," Steve shrugged. "I was a skinny kid who got beat up a lot. I was Captain America for under two years, and I was in combat for most of that. I didn't have time to make dirt."

"You put together the first desegregated unit in the US army since the War of 1812."

"Well, yeah, I mean, that wasn't deliberate. Not that – I was in favour of desegregation of course, but it was just coincidence that – they were all people I rescued. From different units. So it was just a coincidence."
"Is it also true you turned a blind eye to homosexual activity by members of – what's the nickname -"

"The Howling Commandos," Steve mumbled. "I didn't really – I wasn't – I was a field commander, I didn't get involved in the disciplinary side of things."

"But you were aware of such activity and chose not to report it?"

"Well, yes." He'd been focused on far more important things than who slept where; that could hardly be criticised.

"And you apparently had a brief romantic liaison with the then-Agent Peggy Carter, who went on to become Director of the organisation that became SHIELD."

"There was nothing – nothing happened," Steve felt himself flush pink. "It was never inappropriate."

"See, Captain, this is what concerns me. You're simultaneously the perfect Forties gentleman, while holding views that are considered on the liberal side now. It's hard to believe you're real. Very hard."

"You're the first person to accuse me of being an imposter to my face," Steve jutted out his chin, and she just gave him a pleasant smile.

"I imagine so. Everyone wants to believe in you, Captain. We all want to believe that a hero's come back and will fix everything."

"I'm not here to fix everything. I can't fix everything. I didn't win the war; I was barely involved with most of the major battles and campaigns. I stopped Johann Schmidt – the Red Skull – from bombing most of the world's major cities, and by that time he even considered the Nazis his enemies. Inferiors."

"Yes. Is it true he was a recipient of the same treatment you were?"

"A similar treatment. One which caused the – physical effects."

"There's a very famous painting of him."

"I've seen a copy, and yes, that is what he looked like. It was an excellent likeness, and no, I would not say it was an exaggeration." Steve had answered that question before, several times.

"According to some of the writings he left in the last few months of his life, he considered himself to be the culmination of the Nazi ideal; the new Master Race, embodied in himself. He mentions you, more than once; he seems to have alternated between regarding you as the only person like him, who could understand him, and his opposite who he had to destroy." She waited. Steve looked down at his hands. "How do you feel about that?"

"I told him I was no one special," Steve said. "He wasn't happy. I told him I was just a kid from Brooklyn. You have to remember – they didn't go through everyone in America and pick me out as the best candidate. I met Dr Erskine by chance, in the recruiting station, and he realised that I'd, um," he looked up at her. "Everyone knows I lied on my enlistment forms, right?" Her mouth twitched.

"I think we're beyond the statute of limitations."

"I mean, there's not going to be all these headlines - " he waved a hand. "Anyway, I'm not the only person who did that. Lots of people lied to sign up, signed up underage, bribed doctors to lie about their health. Sure, I was persistent. But I wasn't the only one. I wasn't that special, I just got lucky
because one of those times Dr Erskine overheard."

"And you threw yourself on a dummy grenade during basic training?"

"Lots of people have thrown themselves on grenades," Steve said. "I wasn't even the only person there who went for the grenade, I just got there first."

"Really?" She arched her eyebrows. "All the accounts I've read said that all the cadets fled except you."

"Yeah, see – Agent Carter was there, and she ran towards the grenade too. But you don't hear about that!" Steve leaned forward hoping to get her to understand. "It doesn't fit the story; the story is that I was always special, and I wasn't. I mean, okay, I did things not everyone did. But there's not anything I did that you couldn't find half a dozen people who did the same, right? Most of my missions I went in with a whole bunch of people doing the exact same thing as me. I was in the right place at the right time, and so I got to be the big hero, because people like that story. And it's not a lie, or anything, but it forgets all the other stories. I didn't win the war. Yeah, I helped. But there are other men – other people who could have been Captain America, but I was the one who got the chance."

"Okay, time's up." Tony bounced into view and clapped his hands. "Do you need to use the shower, Christine? Any dry-cleaning need doing?"

"Thank you, Tony, I think the Captain has given me everything I need." She held out her hand, and Steve shook it, trying to convey apology with his eyes. She gave an expressive little arch of her eyebrows, and he grinned.

The door shut behind her, and Steve turned back to Tony.

"Who's next?" Tony shook his head.

"Christine was last."

"Okay," Steve let out a sigh of relief. "Thank goodness that's over."

"Sure, it's hard work batting the lashes at all those panting admirers. Want some dinner? If you have time?" Tony cast a concerned glance at his watch. "I mean, I wouldn't want to cut into your busy socialising time."

"What?" Steve could feel his teeth grinding together. It had been a long day, and he really didn't need -

"I mean, you can't have managed to pick up any new girlfriends in at least twenty-four hours, so - " he frowned theatrically. "Unless that lady from Time - "

"Is this what it's going to be like forever? Because I didn't sleep with you?" Steve's voice rose; Tony cocked his head. "Fine. You know what, fine." He unclipped the belt, and let it fall, then pulled open the armour layer and threw it aside. Tony actually backed away, eyes cartoonishly wide, and Steve peeled the undershirt off.

"What - "

"See, I thought casual sex might ruin our working relationship, but apparently not sleeping with the great Tony Stark means he acts like a god damn five year old." Steve ripped at the laces on his boots,
getting them loose enough he could pry his feet out, and then started on his fly. "If that is what it takes to get you acting like a grown up, you can fuck me, all right? We'll pretend I put out the first time, and then your PA politely threw me out, and I felt like shit for a week while you cracked stupid jokes, and then we got over it and got on with our jobs. Okay?" He put his fists on his hips. Tony was not letting shock prevent him from rubbernecking.

"My PA - did Christine tell you that?"

"No, Rebecca. The lady from Time. You didn't even recognise her. Never mind that. You want to fuck me, here I am."

"I don't - " Tony pulled his chin up, and managed to look Steve in the eye. "That's not what I want."

"Well, would you care to explain what it is you do want? Because at this stage, I'll do it just to stop you being an asshole."

"Tony," the door clicked and familiar high heels tapped in. "Uh."

"Are we interrupting?" Natasha's cool voice, and Steve could feel his neck turning pink, but he didn't look away from Tony.

"Could you give us a minute, ladies? We're just trying to - resolve some interpersonal conflicts."

"I told you he reads the leaflets they give him," Natasha remarked, and the door clicked shut again.

"You just - "

"I don't care! Like you wouldn't have made it clear to everyone you'd slept with me. I can list off half the women you've slept with and I was frozen in the Arctic for most of them! And I don't even care, because you going about telling everyone you screwed me is still better than you wrecking the team."

"I'm not - "

"So here it is. Choose. Fuck me, don't fuck me, but from now on, you are going to act like an adult when you're working with the Avengers team."

"Fine," Tony looked around, not meeting his eyes. "Fine. You don't have to be such a drama queen about it. I'll - just put your clothes back on, okay."

"Right," Steve grabbed for his pants, embarrassment flooding in as anger waned. "I, uh, Natasha's here to drive me back, I guess - "

"Yeah, we'll do dinner another time." Tony sidestepped until he reached the stairs, and then fled as if wild dogs were after him.

"Okay, I have to know," Natasha plopped down on the squishy leather couch beside him, a bottle in
her hand, and gave him an expectant look. Steve shrugged, feeling colour surge up his neck. "What
were you doing? Stark looked terrified. And I couldn't see anything to be terrified of." She gave him
a slow, appraising once-over. "Nice, by the way. I thought that peak of human perfection thing was
just PR."

"Is this sexual harassment? There's a SHIELD helpline I can call." Steve turned back to his stack of
press cuttings. Everyone had been very nice, really. Ms Everhart had heavily implied he was a total
imposter, but had at least given the impression he was a nice and well-meaning imposter, which
Agent Hill said was about the best possible result there.

"Sexual harassment is more like stripping off and demanding a co-worker fuck you."

"You – " of course they'd eavesdropped afterwards. "I did not demand that."

"Whatever." She hefted the bottle. "You want a drink?"

"I don't really drink."

"But it's Monday." She produced two glasses from somewhere, and set them down. Was Monday
when people drank nowadays?

"But I can't – " Steve sighed. "Fine."

The 'something' was in an unlabelled bottle, and was clear. Natasha poured herself a shot, and then
half a tumbler for Steve.

"Drink," she ordered. "We're a team. Let's bond."

"You just want to gossip," Steve said, but the lure of actually getting on with his teammates was
strong. The Howling Commandos had made regular attempts to get Steve drunk, with very little
success; he wasn't entirely immune to alcohol, but it was close.

Natasha lifted her glass, and grinned. Steve sighed, and clinked his glass against hers.

"See, he's a – " Natasha slurred an indeterminate amount of time later. "He's an asshole."

"You already said that," Steve muttered. His lips felt weirdly numb. Drinking several times as much
as Natasha seemed to be having an effect; after the first few glasses she'd divulged she'd bought the
bottle from one of the SHIELD chemists. That was slightly terrifying, but he hoped Natasha knew
what she was doing.

"But he's really an asshole." She jabbed a finger into his shoulder to emphasise her point. "Give me
the bottle."

Steve passed her the bottle; she took a drink, and then held it out to him. He obediently took a
mouthful, and she nodded, satisfied, and leaned in close. She draped her arm over his shoulders, and
leaned in close for a confidential murmur that buzzed in his ear.

"See, he's a spoiled brat. He wants whatever he wants, and damn everyone else. He promoted me to
be his PA just because he wanted to sleep with me."

"You're very pretty," Steve contributed, and she nodded.

"I am very pretty indeed. I did underwear modelling. But that is no basis for employment as the PA
to the guy running a major company. Sort of running. He made her CEO, and then totally didn't support her, and then she quit, and then he wanted to join the Avengers so he made her be CEO again, and he's just no help."

Steve ran this through his mind a couple of times.

"Ms Potts?" he ventured finally, and she nodded her head up and down.

"Just because he was dying was no excuse for being such an asshole to her. He's such an asshole."

"Dying?" Steve frowned.

"He had a thing, he fixed it. Stupid." She sniffed. "Element. His daddy."

"Howard?"

"Was he an asshole?" Natasha gave him a wide-eyed look, and he considered it.

"Sometimes," he admitted, feeling guilty. Howard had been a wonderful person quite a lot of the time, but on bad days he was horrible. "But I liked him."

"Cause Stark's an asshole."

"You said."

"Don't sleep with him. He doesn't deserve nice things."

"You think I'm a nice thing?"

"Of course I do." She patted his head, and he leaned in to rest his head against her shoulder. He was feeling fuzzy round the edges, now; he eyed the bottle dubiously when she held it to his mouth, but drank anyway. "You're a sweetie. Like Pepper. Too nice. You deserve better."

"I bet it would be good, though," Steve said wistfully, and Natasha nodded.

"I guess," she conceded. "I'll give him that. But that is not enough, Steve."

"It'd be enough for sex."

"Steven Rogers. I thought you were a good boy." She snickered, and Steve laughed.

"Mostly through lack of opportunity."

"You had a girlfriend, right?"

"I was going to marry her. She was perfect." He'd had such a clear image of their life together; he was going to use his pay to go to art school, and they'd get a little apartment, and maybe have some kids.

"Not an asshole?"

"Well," Steve hesitated, considered the steely glint that had appeared in her eye on occasion. "She was in the military."

"Oh, all right," Natasha nodded. "If it's for the job."

"She shot at me," Steve said thoughtfully. "It was really hot. I decided right there I wanted to marry
her, but I wasn't sure I'd be able to catch her, you know? She was way out of my league."

"This was before you were Captain America?"

"Not really. I don't know." He took the bottle out of Natasha's hand, and took a swig. "I really miss her," he added in a small voice, and Natasha made a little crooning noise and put her other arm around him. "I mean, I guess I knew it was a war, and people died, but I didn't expect – I thought if someone did, it would be me. It kind of was. It doesn't seem fair that I died and she went on without me, and then she died and I had to go on without her. That's not fair. Seems like at least one of us should have been spared that."

"It does," she agreed, and squeezed him. He snuggled up closer, almost in her lap. "I hate it when people die," she murmured, almost to herself, and he made an inquiring noise. "Never mind." She pressed a kiss to his temple, and he sighed.

"Why don't you like me?"

"I do like you. I said."

"You were mean, though."

"Well," Natasha kissed his eyebrow. "You just came on in, expecting to be in charge, like you thought we should be grateful to have you, Mr Living Legend – "

"I did not!"

"Well, no. But we thought you were going to. And Fury acted like we should be grateful." She wrinkled her perfect nose. "I've been working for him for years. Clint too. And suddenly it's all Norse Gods this – but at least everyone agreed he was kind of weird and he's also sort of foreign and Fury think he's nuts, but anyway, then it's you and what, you're from the Forties? Big deal. My grandfather was from the Forties. It's not special."

"I didn't mean to come here," Steve said, and she nodded. That brought her cheek right up next to his mouth, so he kissed it. "I don't want to get in the way."

"Oh, it's okay." She kissed the corner of his mouth, and he turned his head hopefully; the next kiss, sure enough, landed squarely on his lips.

Her hands were small, but very strong; she gripped his head hard and kissed him with a focused intensity that was really very appealing. When it became clear the kissing was going to continue, Steve lifted her into his lap so it was all more convenient and just, it was very nice.
Chapter 2

"Holy shit," someone said, and Steve muttered under his breath and turned his head. Soft, squishy flesh, and he opened his eyes to find he was nuzzling into Natasha's cleavage; her zipper was pulled quite a long way down.

"Get lost, Clint," a somewhat raspy voice came from above his head, and Natasha's hand burrowed under his chest and tugged the zipper up to somewhere closer to its usual position. Steve gave a little sigh of regret, and lifted his head.

"Um," he said, and gave Clint a sheepish smile. "Good morning."

"Someone get me some fucking coffee, I have a gun," Natasha growled, and Clint turned towards the coffee machine. "Jesus. I haven't had a hangover like this in years. Is your liver made of steel?"

"Something like that."

Clint handed a plastic cup to Natasha.

"Are you guys – "

"No, Steve is more or less a gentleman."

"I think I was mostly worried that if you regretted it in the morning, you'd shoot me in the head." She snickered, rustily, and slapped his shoulder.

"So cheer up, Clint, you could have seen much worse." Natasha wriggled, and Steve pushed himself upright so she could kick her legs to the floor and sit up. "Also, if you tell anyone, I'll shoot you."

"Tell anyone what?" Clint raised his hands defensively. "I don't have time to gossip. We've got a mission."

"Shit," Natasha mumbled, struggling to vertical."Have they found him?"

"Got some intel from Hammer's goons, used it to focus their science and stuff, and then got some kind of power weirdness reading thing. Stark says - I have no idea what he said, actually, because I don't speak geek, but Dr Foster was nodding. And Fury says we leave in ten minutes, so - "

"Oh fuck you, Clint," Natasha lurched to her feet and made her way to the bathroom. Steve went to dig out his costume.

Natasha looked green this morning, which was... odd. Tony gave her his brightest morning smile, and she glared. Was that a step up from the usual blank pout? Maybe she was ill. She gave Steve a grateful smile when he brought her a coffee, though. Hm. There was something just a little bit odd about Steve this morning, too.

Maybe he was just embarrassed about that whole stripping off and yelling thing. Natasha had to have gossiped to Clint, and Clint and Darcy went barhopping on Tuesdays (as they were the days no one else wanted to barhop) and once both Clint and Darcy knew something you might as well post a notice.

That wouldn't explain why Steve looked so goofily pleased today, though, unless Natasha had been
telling everyone flattering things about his junk. Which she hadn't had the angle to see, and Tony had personally wiped the tapes of that little encounter; some things were still best trusted to squishy organic memory.

Of course, Steve being the old-fashioned type he was, a base buzzing with information about his cock might not make him happy, however flattering the estimates were. Maybe he was just pleased to be going out on a mission; he was all dressed up in his new threads, and looking very shiny. Yes, that was probably it. The bounce in his step was not unlike the bounce of a big dog that sees its owner putting on the mud-spattered walking boots.

"Good morning," Steve said when his bouncing brought him close to Tony.

"Good morning, Captain," Tony said with exquisite politeness, and Steve gave off a distinct air of drooping ears and tail. "What, what now?"

"Nothing. I, uh, really like the costume. It's great. Thanks again."

"You're welcome." They stared at each other. "So... Fury's late." Steve perked back up at even that paltry offering of small talk. Tony had taken for granted that Steve wanted to remain strictly professional, but apparently small talk was still on the table. Perhaps he considered that a professional adult thing.

"Yeah, he's had to go do a thing? The Asgardians are still pretty upset about the whole Tesseract thing. Thor's been called home again, and Fury keeps getting calls from diplomatic people."

"I guess that explains the lack of Ho, brothers!. What kind of monsters did we get?"

"Nothing this time. There's a new tree growing out in the VIP parking lot. I think they're just going to fence it in. Sif and her team are still up in Alaska running down carnivorous hares, so it's just as well."

"I'd say something about extradimensional biohazards, but who even knows. Ah, the man himself."

Fury looked as tired and worn as Natasha, though if he was green it didn't show on his face so well.

"I'll keep this short, we're moving fast. Schmidt and Loki have holed up in an abandoned township. We've got agents moving in to form a perimeter, but everything we have on these guys says if they try to break out, they're going to do it. Satellite monitoring is giving us nothing, and we don't want to tip them off. You're going to go in and hit them hard. Clint, you got your guys fitted out?"

"Bristling with heavy weaponry."

"Stark, your battlesuits up to scratch?"

"Rhodey's pop-guns are in full working order, and the armours are, of course, my armours and therefore flawless." He'd half expected Fury to have booted him from the team by now, as Captain America was a public figure and Tony didn't have much blackmail material yet - but with the absence of the Tesseract, maybe Fury felt he needed all possible resources.

"Okay. Cap, you've got field command - Natasha will have your back, you feel things slipping, pass command to her, okay?" Fury gave him an intent look, and Steve just nodded.

"Understood, sir."

"All right. Make me proud, boys and girls. At least, try not to embarrass me. Lot of people got their
eyes on this."

The rest of the team travelled in a small plane, which was fast and sleek but still flew too slowly for Tony's liking. He and Rhodey ran escort, and Tony, very dutifully, did not tease or taunt Rhodey, or attempt tag, just kept to his place beside the plane.

The War Machine kept screwing its head round to look over at him; Tony could almost see Rhodey's suspicious glare.

Tony retuned to the communications network inside the plane. Steve's communicator had a backdoor, just for... safety.

"Are you going to be okay with this?" Natasha's voice was warm with concern, which was creepy.

"It'll be fine. Don't worry, Nat, if I get overwhelmed, I'll pass to you. No false pride, I promise. I know a lot of this is new."

"Okay. Sharon and I usually run perimeter, Clint goes high, but I'm worried about the stability of the buildings. One of the armours can drop him off, but that's not much use if he falls through the floor."

"We could position an armour in the air with Clint aboard? If we put Tony high, he could keep an eye on everything, and Clint could snipe from him, right?"

Great. That was all he needed, to be a mobile weapons platform. He resisted the urge to chip in and whine.

"That could work. Satellite pictures are showing this building here to be in the best repair, and it's also one of the largest - looks like an old warehouse. Probably used for storage after the town was mostly abandoned, as the town's got some roads still in use."

"Seems the obvious choice - if they're doing things with the Tesseract, enough to make it discharge energy, they need space."

"They need all kinds of things, few of which they have... but yes."

"You, uh, look like hell," Steve voice dropped a little lower, and Tony snickered. "Maybe you should take a nap? We've got a couple of hours. There isn't much planning we can do."

"Ugh. You're probably right." Natasha admitting weakness? Wonders would never cease. "Here, shift over a little." Scunching sounds, and soon there were soft, regular *shhh* sounds coming through the comm system.

Breathing, of course, but the comms barely picked up Steve's breathing; for Natasha's breath to be caught, she must be snuggled right up to Steve. Head on his shoulder, probably.

Tony felt a sudden petty urge to turn on Steve's speakers and say something about professional behaviour and ruining teams. He didn't, because he didn't really care who either Natasha or Steve slept with and he hoped they were very happy together.

The town was a common or garden ghost town; maximum population under a thousand people, the
town had coalesced together in the late nineteenth century, built some houses round a high street, a general store, a small church. Old farm buildings were scattered more widely, and some of those were even still occupied by folk scratching a living from the dry, poor-quality earth.

The church tower was just a bare frame, now, the boards fallen away over the years. No place for a sniper. Clint made hopeful noises about water towers, but Steve's plan was the best, and so Tony took to the sky with Clint clinging to his back, grouching about the lack of places to hook a carabiner to.

"Sorry, Barton, I didn't design this thing for mass transit."

"Maybe we should get you a saddle."

"Or one of those babyslings?" It wasn't an awful idea, a harness to carry people with, except that would make it convenient and easy, and Tony was not in this business to hover patiently in mid air dangling gunmen.

"Anything other than this." The clunk of a magazine being dropped on Tony's back, and he sighed, pointedly.

"Pockets, Clint, I know you have pockets. If I have to corner, that stuff is going to slide right off."

"You're not going to corner. Orders are, stay up." He picked up his stuff, and Tony could hear him clicking things together. Tony could check in the rear cameras, of course, but it wasn't like he hadn't seen weapons put together before. He kept looking down, looking at the dusty, empty roads and the battered houses. He could see right into some of them, see weathered furniture and floorboards with spaces like missing teeth, the darkness of cellars and foundations below. No footprints in the dust that he could see, no tyre tracks, but Loki had run with Hogun and presumably knew a few things about covering his tracks. They wouldn't have driven in by the road, and five minutes work with a broom would have swept away their traces in the town.

The abandoned warehouse had a complete roof, and its smashed windows were boarded up from the inside. Tony couldn't pick up any heat signatures, but he couldn't pick them up anywhere else in the town. Perhaps they'd done their Tesseract thing and bolted.

Or perhaps they were in a basement, perhaps Loki was using magic to hide them, perhaps Schmidt and Loki didn't even have heat signatures. No, that was foolish; Steve had one, and the other Asgardians had them, all reading as normal humans except for a slightly elevated core temperature on Steve.

He could pick up Natasha and Sharon Carter, racing in opposite directions round the outskirts of the town, like collies out to herd sheep. Tony kept watching the centre, kept watching for any signs of disturbance, any sign people saw them and were responding. Nothing but stillness and quiet. Next up, Rhodey and Steve, and he could already detect the War Machine accelerating towards the town.

Tony privately felt it wasn't fair; he had the best suit, he had the most practise, he should've been the one swooping in there with Steve on his back. But he was being a good team player, so he hadn't kicked up a fuss, and there he went, dropping down in a perfect smooth arc, Steve's shield braced against his shoulder guns as a windbreak, and boom, the door of the warehouse exploded under the impact.

Clint was tense and silent on his back; Natasha and Carter kept moving, narrowing their circles, spiralling inwards. He could 'see' Rhodey and Steve inside the warehouse, on their feet, back to back, circling, and if they hadn't found a fight - the perspective altered, weirdly, and Steve's glowing
figure made a leap; it took Tony a second to realise that Rhodey had fallen through the floor.

"Rhodey, you okay?" he said without thinking.

"Get off the line, Stark," Natasha barked in his ear on a different channel, and Tony gritted his teeth and didn't respond.

"Stuck," Rhodey said shortly. "This... tar? Something. Don't want to repulsor in this crud."

"These boards have been partially sawn through," Steve's voice joined in. "So - "

"There's someone in the next building over," Tony said sharply, as the heat signature grew - someone climbing out from a cellar, probably. "No, other side - " The dull crack of a bullet leaving a barrel, and the muted sound of it impacting Steve's shield; Tony was briefly taken aback, but the other building didn't have boarded up windows and there were enough gaps in the wall that bright colours would make a target.

Maybe Steve had been right about the SHIELD jumpsuit.

"That's Schmidt's gun," Steve said calmly, and charged the wall. He burst straight through like the Hulk or something, briefly visible as a flash of blue, and then leapt with a sound of shattering glass. Tony saw the heat signatures meet and separate, spin around each other and merge and then one went flying through the outer wall of the building and Clint took a breath and his weight shifted on Tony's back as he lifted his rifle.

Tony diverted all his sensors to capture Johann Schmidt in as much detail as possible; he was physically nearly identical to Steve, right down to the elevated core temperature. His face was nondescript, dark hair and pale skin. He hit the ground and rolled and leapt and tackled Steve back under cover. Clint cursed, but didn't lower the gun; he was preternaturally still, not a quiver or twitch, and his breathing and pulse were slow and regular.

A wall bulged under impact, but didn't give; he thought that was Steve, taking a foot to the head, and then dropping - Tony's heart was in his throat for a second, but no, Steve spun and took out Schmidt's feet and they rolled and grappled, and Tony couldn't tell them apart again.

"Guys," Rhodey said. "I think I'm sinking in this stuff." Tony twitched, and Clint said something foul and graphic in an oddly dreamy voice.

"Fuck you Stark, don't you fucking move," he finished on a sigh. Tony hoped he didn't have his comm channel open; Natasha didn't rebuke him that Tony could hear.

"On my way, Rhodes," and what did Natasha think she was going to do? Rhodey needed airlifting out.

"Loki," Carter reported tersely, and Tony scanned the ground around her - she was running through old backyards, hurdling broken down fences.

A slow expelled breath, and a gunshot from Clint. Tony had the briefest glimpse of a tall, dark figure before it exploded into nothingness. He hadn't picked it up before because it had no heat.


Still one heat signature for Schmidt and Steve. They hurtled through an outer wall, but Clint didn't take a shot; Steve and he were grappled too tightly, presumably, Schmidt's arm locked round Steve's neck with a grip on his chin, Steve holding his other arm twisted very nearly to breaking point
behind his back. Another spin, stagger, lunge and they went through another wall in a shower of splinters.

A sudden spin apart, an extended arm, a gunshot, no sound of bullet on shield - either a miss or a minor wound, because Steve was charging.

Sharon, all of a sudden, hurtling through the wall - probably one of the holes they'd already made - and she delivered what looked like a hell of a kick to Schmidt's kidneys before he punched her a good ten feet. Distraction enough for Steve to - to miss a punch? No, Schmidt recoiled, that must have been a blow from the shield. It didn't show up well to heat vision. Sharon was back on her feet, and he could hear gunfire.

Another shot from Clint; another not-really Loki. More gunfire over the comm, and Natasha had joined the fray - where was Rhody, then? A quick scan showed him that Rhodey was pulling himself up with a rope, God knows what Natasha had attached it to but it had better be damn solid to take the War Machine's weight.

Where the hell was Loki?

"Grenade!" Natasha said on a gush of breath, and she and Sharon fled through door and window respectively. Schmidt bolted back along the path of their fight, with Steve in pursuit; they both staggered but kept running from the explosion at their backs.

"Going back towards the warehouse, Rhody," Tony said, and that didn't get him snapped at by Natasha, at least. He felt all useful. Something pinged on his sensors. "Rhodey, you're heating up."

"What?"

"The warehouse. It's showing a temperature rise. What are you doing down there?" Rising sharply now, and the War Machine clawed its way up and out of the cellar and punched through the wall onto solid earth. It did look like tar on his boots, but why would there be a pit of tar under a warehouse?

And what would happen to a pit of tar when the temperature kept rising like it was doing?

Some questions had easier answers than other.

"Don't go back to the warehouse! It's going to catch fire!" Catch fire, explode, fall down - yeah, there were some real hotspots now, and the walls were looking distinctly less than vertical, no wonder with the punishment it had taken - odds Natasha had lashed her rope to a support beam to dangle War Machine from? High.

Steve had chased Schmidt into the warehouse.

"Hold on." Tony cut his hand repulsors. Clint let out a girlish shriek as his seat turned into a slide, only the grip of his thighs at Tony's waist holding him on. Tony flung a hand back, and caught his wrist, yanked him down flat before wind resistance could tear him free, and Clint's other arm wrapped securely round Tony's neck.

Tony didn't put on as much speed as he could, because he didn't want to rip the face from Clint's skull. The warehouse was already starting to show fire around its edges when he burst through the hole Rhodey had made in the door, just in time to see Schmidt break free of Steve's grip and leap into the cellar.

Which was... full of burning tar? Steve followed Schmidt because self-preservation was for other
people, and Tony gave chase because something sensible and reasonable.

Another hole in the floor flashed past, like a glimpse into Hell, and okay, that was where Rhodey had gone down, so Schmidt had dropped into a different area.

An area that was nearly as bad, filled with choking fumes and sparks; Tony stared blindly around, and something very strange appeared on his heat vision layer, like a pit of coldness, like a heat signature in reverse, an icy core with warmth bleeding in from the fire around it.

Loki loomed out of the clouds of fire, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder. Then he vanished entirely.

"Don't you fucking dare, Stark," Clint wheezed, and Tony ignored him, because it was take hints from the God of Mischief or get the hell out of here. Without Steve. He lunged forward over slick burning ground, and there was a fucking tunnel, of all things, a tunnel on fire, and he went ten steps down into the pit before his hands found another human body, and he grabbed firmly onto it ignoring the sharp curse in Steve's voice. There was someone else there, an indeterminate human shape coughing frantically, and Tony grabbed that too and turned round.

"Shield over our heads," was all Tony said as they staggered back into the cellar, and Steve at least obeyed that, so when Tony just threw the repulsors to full blast and went out through floor then roof, they went shield-first.

The other shape turned out to be Justin Hammer, streaming tears and charred around the edges.

They landed just outside the town, on the road, and Clint slithered to the floor and threw up, noisily. There were burns mottling his bare arms, and he was making pretty horrific noises. Steve crouched beside him, using his gloved hands to clear away vomit from Clint's mouth.

"Water, medical," Steve snapped at him, and Tony dropped Hammer on the floor and took to the sky again.

An oxygen mask, several coolpacks, and a stretcher later, Clint was going to be fine. Natasha did something very close to clucking over him, which he bore up under. Rhodey airlifted them both the half-mile to the cars; Clint was going to be driven to the nearest hospital, instead of coming straight home. Agent Carter marched Hammer back to the plane as soon as she got to them, which left Tony and Steve.

Tony opened his mouth to offer to fly Steve back to the plane, but was forestalled by a glare.

"That was incredibly stupid," Steve said, and Tony blinked. That was - not the expected response.

"What? I just saved your life, hello."

"I was following Schmidt and Loki. That tunnel was a way out."

"Yeah, likely, assuming they didn't bring it down behind them – " Or maybe Loki had meant for Tony to get Steve off their tails. Oops.

"That was stupidly risky; you and Clint could have been killed, and then where would we be?" Steve set his hands on his hips, like he hadn't been the first one to jump down into a fire pit. His boots were burned; anything other than the very finest Stark manufacture, and Steve would be walking on charred stumps right now.

"Apparently not sorry or anything." Tony snapped, and Steve let out a sharp breath of annoyance.
"I thought you were going to act like an adult?"

"I saved your life! How is that not acting like an adult?" He had saved it, Steve had been unsteady on his feet when Tony caught him, he would have succumbed to smoke inhalation and died down there. Unless he was right, and there was a clear escape route down there. They'd never know, now.

"You need to be working as a team. You almost killed Clint. I can take care of myself."

"But you were – you were in danger," was all Tony could say. He remembered the dizzy feeling of panic when the walls started to wobble and he'd realised Steve would be trapped in the fire; he liked Steve.

"Look, you need to realise you cannot just abandon a battle plan when people are in danger," Steve said a little more gently. "It's not up to you to rescue everyone, and you could have killed Clint."

"Clint's fine!" Tony protested, and Steve pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Yes, but – it was close. Another half minute down there, he'd probably be dead now. You can't expect your risks to pay off every time, and you're not just risking yourself, okay?"

"What do you want from me? You throw shitfits when I'm mean to you, and now you're mad when I'm nice to you."

"This is not about being nice! Tony, you wanted to be on the team. That means being a team. It's different from doing things on your own, okay? It means trusting other people to – " Steve hesitated, and his mouth turned down a little. "It means letting other people take responsibility for their own decisions," he said finally. "When I do something dangerous, I need to be worrying about that. If I have to worry about whether you'll suddenly break off what you're doing and rush to me rescue – it's too much to worry about. You're a loose cannon, Tony."

"Oh, fuck you, Rogers, you sanctimonious prick," Tony snapped, and fired his jetboots. Let him walk back to the jet. Tony was going home.

He didn't go back home; he went to the SHIELD base, and found Fury in the lab with Jane.

"You're right. I'm a narcissist who isn't suited for team work." Fury and Jane both turned to glare. "What?"

"We're busy, Tony," Jane said. "Can you - hey, Darcy, can you take Tony and just - something."

"Sure," and Darcy slung her bag over her shoulder and hooked her hand round his metal-clad elbow. "C'mon. Good superhero, c'mon, walkies."

"Oh shut up," but he went along with her, because the other option was stay and get glared at. He kept a dignified silence until they were out in the parking lot, where Darcy hopped up to sit on a picnic table and give him an expectant look. "I'm going to quit."

"Why? You're doing great!" She gave him a bright, peppy and completely fake smile.

"You have no idea how I'm doing."

"Fury got a mission report already, said no one died and only two people were injured." She
shrugged. "That's good, right?"

"I maybe got Clint almost burned to death," he admitted. She nodded.

"Dick move. But it can happen, you know, I accidentally tazered a guy once. Thor, actually. You'd think that wouldn't work on him. Anyway, I'm sure Clint's used to almost dying. As long as you didn't deliberately shove him in an oven or something, I'm sure he'll get over it."

"I was rescuing Steve from a fiery pit. But apparently Steve didn't need saving and by dragging him out I stopped him defeating evil and now I'm the bad guy again." He was really too old to whine. How old was Darcy, anyway? Twenty? Twenty-one? Something appallingly young. God, he was getting old.

"Where does Clint come into this?"

"I was carrying him on my back."

"So next time, put him down first?"

"That's not the point."

"Sure it is. Clint doesn't nearly die, no yelling." She nodded. "Hey, you know what you need?"

"A drink?"

"Exactly. It's Tuesday, and Clint's in hospital." She slipped down from the table, and stepped up close. "We'll fly to... wherever you change out of that, and then Happy can pick us up and take us somewhere nice. Think of it as your way of saying sorry to Clint."

"How does this do Clint any good?" He put his arm around her anyway. An evening out not being judged sounded like a nice change.

"I won't call him and whine about being stood up?"

"Close enough, I guess."

"Sorry," Tony said, and Steve looked up at him, squinting against the bright sun. Tony was very pale, and wearing mirror shades. "Can - can I sit?"

"Free country." Steve gathered in his books a little. Tony sat, and poked at them. Steve was a little surprised Tony had tracked him down; not many people used the little space on the roof, which had a few wooden picnic tables and a weedy-looking flowerpot. Still, it caught the sun and had a nice view.

"Don't like your e-reader?" Tony said after a while.

"Love it, actually." Steve tapped the brown leather cover, and Tony nodded. "Not all books are available, though."

"We can fix that," Tony gave him an awkward smile. "Say the word, we can get them converted in a day or two."
"No, it's okay. I like real books too." Steve raised his eyebrows. "So, you were saying?"

"I - " Tony looked away, looked back. "So my behaviour may have been less than admirable." His hands were tapping idly on the edge of the table, as if it were a computer keyboard; Steve wondered if he was absently typing out words, and what they might say if Steve could read them.

"I'd say."

"I did not actually realise it was so bad people would fuck me just to shut me up." Tony paused, as if hoping for reassurance; Steve wasn't about to give it to him.

"If that didn't work, I was going to tell Fury he had to choose which of us he wanted on the team."

"You'd get me thrown off the team?" Tony pulled off his glasses to give him a betrayed look. His eyes were very bloodshot. Then he frowned. "You were willing to sleep with me before getting me thrown off the team?"

"I don't want you off the team, Tony. You're a real asset, when you're not playing the reckless fool. And sleeping with you wouldn't be a hardship" was probably better left unsaid. Steve had always liked to think he was attracted to a person's worth, their personality, their virtues, not just a sucker for a pretty face and superficial charm. He'd been completely deluding himself – watching Tony gnaw on his full lower lip was making him feel distinctly warm.

"You'd actually have slept with me?"

"Yeah." He shrugged. "I would have lost what little respect I have left for you, though." Ouch, he could see on Tony's face, and it was such a hang-dog expression it was hard not to say something reassuring. It was easy enough to see how Tony got away with his garbage.

"You don't like me," Tony said, and Steve gave him a wry smile.

"I like you fine. Everyone likes you. Even Fury likes you."

"But they don't respect me, is that what you're saying?"

"You'd have to ask them." Steve shrugged. "You haven't given me a lot to respect."

"Ow." Tony picked at the table. "You know, I wasn't showing off when I went in after you. I was really worried; I thought you were going to get hurt. I wasn't trying to – " he waved a hand. Steve's face softened, a bit. "I am getting the idea that it takes more than rescuing people from danger to make up for – things."

"Yeah," Steve agreed. "I guess if people are in danger all the time, that'd work, but most people do other stuff in between times."

"Did you - " he frowned. "What was her name? Peggy?"

"Yeah."

"Did you rescue her from things?"

"Once. She yelled at me." Steve could smile now, at the memory. He'd kind of expected her to be
pleased with him.

"She did?"

"Yeah. She was shooting at a guy who was trying to run her down in a car. I got her out of the way, but she missed her shot." He made a face. "If I hadn't done that, the last vial of the Super Soldier Serum in existence might not have been smashed."

"She forgive you?"

"Oh yeah. She didn't hold grudges. Kind of short-tempered, but blown up and then gone, you know?"

"So... you're going to forgive me?" Tony said, and gave him a hopeful smile, the first tentative expression Steve had seen on him. Steve set his resolve. There would be no giving in to the sad puppy eyes.

"Are you going to do it again?"

"What, you want me to not rescue you if I think you're in danger?"

"I don't want you endangering other people for me."

The door to the roof slammed open, and they both jumped. Thor stepped out, hair and armour shining in the sunlight.

"My friends," he stepped towards them. "Can I speak with you in confidence?"

Steve had seen one picture of Loki, a composite assembled under Thor's direction. Thor had made a face at it, and Sif had snorted.

"He doesn't do pictures well," she'd said. "But once you see him, you'll recognise him again."

Collar-length dark hair, green eyes, slim. The figure that slipped into the booth and sat down opposite them was all those things, and he had an arrogance to his carriage very reminiscent of Thor's. He was wearing a dark green hoodie, and jeans, and sneakers. Steve continued eating his pie, which was actually pretty good; Tony couldn't leave the silence for long.

"You're Thor's little brother?" he said, and Loki's eyes narrowed. "Oh, foot right in it, first go, this can only get better from here."

"I was expecting Thor," he glanced around the diner, as if Thor might be undercover as a waitress. "Is my brother too busy to spare time for me?"

"Actually, yes," Steve cut in before Tony could wreck things. Loki looked aggrieved. "There's a major diplomatic incident taking place; and you requested a secret meeting. Thor simply cannot get away without explaining his absence or raising suspicions."

"And 'my murderous god brother hit me up on Twitter to ask for a meeting' is a weird reason by anyone's standards," Tony added.
"It's not like Twitter was my first choice," Loki frowned, and looked down at his hands, slim pale fingers twisting together. "Why didn't you bring him to the ghost town? I was going to talk to him then."

"Did you set that up so - you know what, the answer is just going to make me angry." Tony folded his arms across his chest and glared.

"Thor was in Asgard," Steve said "The diplomatic incident."

"What kind of diplomatic incident?"

"I'm afraid that's classified."

Silence reigned for a little while. Steve could see Loki's foot tapping impatiently on the floor; there were no logos, the mark on the side was a graceful coiled pattern in the same green as his hooded sweatshirt. Now Steve looked, the sweatshirt didn't quite have the same knitted weave as the sweats Clint and Natasha wore in the gym; it had a muted shine more like silk. Loki's clothes, he suspected, hadn't been manufactured. They either weren't real at all, or Loki had made them with magic.

Loki looked up from his hands, and met Steve's eyes. Steve had expected his gaze to be piercing, but his eyes were a soft muted green. Black lashes cast down again, and Loki tugged at his frayed cuffs, biting at his lower lip.

If Loki's cuffs were frayed, Steve reminded himself, it was because he wanted them that way, and if his gaze was soft and his manner harmless, that was probably because he wanted to appear that way. Loki had tried to murder his own brother.

"Does it have anything to do with the fact I stole the Tesseract?" Loki said quietly, and Tony jumped up from the narrow vinyl bench.

"I knew it! I knew it was you! That's mine, you son of a - "

"Sit down, Tony." Steve yanked firmly on his sleeve. "What do you want, Loki? Ransom?"

"I expected Thor to send his trusted allies." Loki folded his arms and almost pouted. Steve was starting to feel like a babysitter.

"You told him it was a secret," Steve said patiently. "Would you rather he'd told his friends who have oaths to Odin, or the ones who get their paychecks from SHIELD? He felt between us we were the best chance he had of getting an unbiased report back."

"Because I am really goddamn upset with SHIELD," Tony contributed.

"And I just want the Tesseract safe. So what is it you want?" After a second's hesitation, he reached out and gripped Loki's wrist, and Loki's gaze flew to his, eyes wide and a little startled. The Asgardians seemed a people who touched, a lot and often; surely Loki had to feel isolated, down here and alone but for Schmidt.

Schmidt was the priority; if Loki could get them Schmidt...

"I want to go home," Loki said, and looked down at Steve's hand. His skin was cool under Steve's fingers, and he could feel a slow, steady pulse; maybe twenty beats a minute. "I want Thor to approach our father, and tell him I will bring the Tesseract home to him in exchange for his forgiveness."
Steve heard Tony suck his breath between his teeth, and kicked sideways, catching him gently on the ankle.

"You know, I'm not an expert on Asgard, but I think you might do better just giving him the Tesseract and saying you're sorry." Loki rolled his eyes. "I mean, you can't buy forgiveness."

"Maybe and maybe not." Loki gently turned his wrist, shedding Steve's grip, and began to shuffle the condiment bottles around the table, spinning and shuffling them like a street conjurer. "I don't have the Tesseract. I didn't steal it alone, after all."

"Hammer was working with you," Tony said. "How? How did he know?"

"I have," Loki shrugged one shoulder. "Certain powers. I can communicate... see... over distances. I reached out to Hammer. I was looking..." he paused, tapped one finger on the ketchup bottle. "I was looking for the Tesseract. It's complicated. Anyway, I found Justin Hammer. He was supposed to break out and bring us the Tesseract."

"Your first mistake was relying on Hammer," Tony told him. "Seriously, that guy's completely inept."

"Yes," Loki agreed. "But you have to deal with what you can get."

"Is that what you tell yourself working with Schmidt?" Tony leaned forward. "Seriously, Nazis? Isn't that a bit low?"

"Nazis?" Loki tipped his head. "Is that what he is?" One hand snaked up to tap his cheek. "I thought only humans lived on Midgard."

"No, he's human, the redness is a war injury," Steve said.

"What's a Nazis, then, and why is it so terrible?"

"It doesn't really matter," Steve waved Tony to silence. "Schmidt is a mass-murderer who tried to wipe out most of the human race, anyway." Loki made a face.

"Well, who among us..." he murmured, and he showed his teeth. Steve felt a little spark of adrenaline at that smile, the awareness of imminent danger; Loki was not safe.

"See, that kind of tolerant attitude towards genocide is why you're crawling around down here asking for forgiveness." Tony pointed a fork accusingly, and Loki glared, the dangerous little smile turning into something more human and petty.

"I don't have to justify my actions to you people," he said. "I want to come home, and I offer the Tesseract as payment."

"How are you going to get it?" Steve asked, and Loki shrugged.

"I'll give up his location, and you'll come in and do your heroic thing. Without my support, Schmidt will no doubt fall to you, and then you'll have him and the Tesseract. I have to go; he'll be suspicious." Loki rose, and Steve looked up at him. His slightly too-baggy clothes didn't do a good job of hiding the fact he was as tall as Steve, and almost as broad. He looked around again, at the clutter and bustle of the lunchtime rush. "You'll talk to my brother?"

"All right," Tony said.
"Um, your mother said to give you her love," Steve added and Loki went still. His head turned, a little, enough so Steve must be in the very corner of his eye.

"And my father?"

"I haven't met your father."

"Two days," Loki said abruptly. "Bring your reply in two days." And he strode off towards the door.

"You are not seriously planning to forgive him?" Jane slammed the cupboard door so hard everything inside it rattled. "He tried to kill you! He did kill you! Your heart stopped!"

"I did get better though, Jane." Thor reached out for her, and flinched back when she glared. "I am not dead now, and he is my brother."

"He clearly doesn't feel that way."

"He talked about you guys as family," Steve said. "I don't know. He seemed - " he glanced at Tony, who shrugged.

"He sounded sincere enough, but from what you say, that's his schtick."

"He tried to commit genocide, he got Asgardians killed, he killed you."

"I – so did I, Jane," Thor said slowly, and Jane gave him a bewildered look. "Did we not have the same goals, Loki and I? To prove ourselves worthy for the throne by slaying and subjugating the Jotuns."

"You weren't killing your own people," but there was doubt in her voice.

"Many of our people would have died in a war with the Jotuns," Thor admitted. "And I did not even consider them; only the victory and glory we would have. Loki's methods were just – more efficient."

"But he tried to kill you. His brother. Who loved and trusted him."

"Yes," Thor's voice dropped to a whisper. "Yes, but that is mine to forgive, and my brother has been beside me all my life, and that – what he did then – it was not like him. We were raised together, Jane, and believe me when I say that there were dozens of times my life depended on him. I would like to have that brother back."

"But what if he does it again?" There were tears gathering in her eyes now.

"I do not think he will," Thor managed to gather her into his arms. "And I know my mother and father miss him very much. And surely, it is better that he is our ally?"

"I'd rather have him up on Asgard under his daddy's eye than running loose on Midgard with trouble on his mind," Tony added.

"You almost died," Jane mumbled into Thor's neck. "I can't bear to watch that again, Thor, it's too much." She lifted her head and gave him a look of such passion Steve's breath caught. He remembered, very sharply, another woman with a voice that shook. Steve, no -
"I think that's our exit," Tony took hold of Steve's elbow and tugged him towards the door. Thor and Jane didn't notice them leave.

Steve put a hand up to shade his eyes, and Tony patted his back.

"All right there?"

"Yeah," his voice came out steady, and he lowered his hand to smile at Tony, who looked back suspiciously.

"I should go bug Fury," Tony patted him again. "You want to hang out later?"

"Sure," Steve's smile stretched, became more genuine, and Tony grinned. "I've got to - some things to do, anyway."

"Sure, catch up with me at my place later - I'll send the car if you call." He backed away, nodding, until Steve nodded too, and then he turned and hurried down the hall towards Fury's office.

Steve trailed slowly in that direction, vaguely hoping to see Natasha or maybe even Clint; someone he could drag off for lunch, rather than being alone with his thoughts. He found someone better, shuffling files together and humming slightly off-key.

"Are you busy?" Steve said, and Sharon looked down at the piles of folders in her hand. "I mean, it's lunchtime, do you want to get out for a bit?"

"Sounds great." She dropped the files into a locker, and locked the door. "Let's walk, I've been cooped up here since six AM."

They got coffee at a little kiosk – or Sharon got coffee, and Steve got a mocha frappucino with caramel, because he loved the ridiculous things they did to coffee these days – and they found a low wall to perch on near the river and looked out over the water, making desultory small talk about boats. Neither of them knew anything about boats; but the wind was cool and the sun warm, and Steve felt better, even the calling of seagulls making him smile.

The wind picked up a little, carrying Sharon's words away; he ducked his head to hear her, and stray blonde hair tickled his cheek. He didn't hear her when she repeated herself, attention caught by the soft shadows around her eyes, the smooth pale curve of her cheekbone.

"Steve?" she said softly. Steve bent his head, and she tilted hers; her lips were warm and soft, and her hair silky under his hand when he touched it. She smelled of gun oil and lotion, and he was reminded so strongly of Peggy he felt tears start to his eyes. She only kissed him back for a second before turning her head, and he felt her sigh against his cheek.

"I'm sorry, it's just not - " her voice trailed off, and he nodded.

"Me too." He ducked his head. "I loved Peggy so much, I - " he put a hand to his mouth, and she nodded. Her eyes were glistening.

"I miss her," she said. "We - some of my earliest memories are sitting in her lap, watching the newsreels - and you'd be in them, and sometimes she'd cry - I didn't know why until I was older." She rubbed at her eyes with one hand. "This so silly, she's been gone two years now - "
"I - " and Steve couldn't hold it back, first the tears spilled over and then he let out a muffled sob, and then another, and Sharon made a horrified noise and Steve tried to say *I'm sorry* but all that came out was more sobs.

"Don't - don't - " Sharon patted frantically at his shoulder. "Don't cry, oh God." She grabbed his coffee before he could drop it and put both cups down on the floor before digging out a handful of tissues and pressing them into his hands. "Here. Here, it's all right, it's all right."

"Sorry," he choked out, and blew his nose. "Give me a minute." He seemed helpless in the grip of the sobs, making him convulse and shake; it was like an asthma attack, a steel cage compressing his lungs and driving out the breath.

It was several minutes before the tears dried up, and he could take a deep, shuddering breath.

"Oh, wow, sorry." His voice still wobbled; he mopped at his face with the scrunched damp clot of tissues. "I was not expecting to do that."

"Are you all right?" She put a hand cautiously on his shoulder. There were tear tracks on her face, like she'd taken the opportunity to get a few tears out for Peggy.

"Yeah, I just. Sorry. That's never happened before, it's just an emotional day I guess."

She put her arms carefully round his shoulders, and he put his arm round her waist.

"It's okay. I was just afraid I'd broken you," she gave a little laugh. "I guess that's why they didn't want me near you."

"No, no. It's - it's good. I feel better. I'm just sorry I brought it back for you." Steve tightened his grip, and she rested her head against his shoulder.

"I'm not," she murmured. "I always wondered what she was like when she was young. It's good to know someone who knew her then. Someone else who's lost her."

"You're so," Steve groped for words. "You're so like her, but unlike – I don't want to make you uncomfortable – "

"It's fine, Steve. I look a little like her, I know."

"Not just that. You're like her in the heart, she was so strong and fierce, I was almost scared of her at first."

"You were scared of Aunt Peggy?"

"A little, at first; not after she smiled at me."

"Come on," she pulled out of his grip. "Let's get you cleaned up. Blonds always look such a mess when they cry."

They found a department store, and went in to use the bathrooms; Steve felt much better after washing his face and eyes in cool water. He gave Sharon an apologetic smile, and she gave him a pat on the shoulder that seemed to mean something like *I'm glad you're better let us never speak of this.*
Which was fine with Steve.

"Back to base?" she was already turning in that direction. "I get a little leeway for taking the super-soldier off base, but I can't goof off forever."

"Yeah, I think - I have to go out to Tony Stark's place – I need to find a driver." He really had to persuade Fury to let him take a driving test; he couldn't let Tony send a fancy limo all that way.

"I'll take you," Sharon smiled at him. "You'll need an agent to escort you any way, I'll check in with Maria and get a car."

"Thanks. I really appreciate - everything." Her smile widened, and she bumped her shoulder against his. He nudged her back, and yeah, that was good; it was easy, like it had been with Bucky.

Sharon would have rescued him from being beat up in alleys, and she would have given him the same exasperated look and asked him why he didn't run away. He nudged her again, grinning, and she cast him a narrowed glare.

"You laughing at me, Rogers?" There was a smile playing at the corners of her mouth, though.

"I'm glad I met you," he told her, and she pinked a little.

"Don't get sentimental on me. Again."

Tony came out to meet them. Jeans and a tanktop again, feet bare on the white stone, and he waved his fingers at Sharon, who smiled politely.

"Have a nice lunch with the lovely Agent Carter?" Tony said. Steve turned to look at him, and he glared. "What? What? I just asked."

"Yes, we had a nice walk and then coffee. It was - " he hesitated, but he didn't feel like explaining the whole crying fit thing. "Very pleasant."

"Sure. Sure. What do you talk about? Guns? Computer hacking? The best way to squirm into skin-tight leather?" Tony ran a hand through his hair. "No, I was stopping this, wasn't I? Being an adult and so on. She's a hottie, you have good taste."

"She's the niece of my fiancee," Steve said, and Tony stopped, mouth hanging open.

"Agent Carter. Of course she is. Am I being stupid?" He shook his head, and Steve nodded. "Okay. Okay, I'm - sorry? I'm stupid."

"You're jealous," Steve corrected him, and Tony actually blushed, right up to his hairline. "You are! You're jealous."

"I'm not jealous. I have no need to be jealous." Tony turned away, and his ears were pink. Tony Stark could apparently blush, and that was endearing enough that Steve put a hand on his shoulder, and pulled him round.

"You don't have to be jealous," Steve said, foolishly and recklessly. Tony glared at him, and then hooked a hand round the back of his neck and kissed him, and Steve hadn't been building it up in his memory. It was delicious, sparks and fire, Tony fisting a hand in his hair and taking command of his mouth. He was warm, and he pressed up tight against Steve's body, and it felt so good to be touched,
Steve couldn't help wrapping his arms around Tony's waist and holding him close. Steve didn't open his eyes when Tony pulled away. "I don't – " He took a breath. Say no, say no, say no - "Casual, right?"

"Yeah," Tony put little kisses along the line of his jaw, breath coming fast. "Best night of your life, Steve, I promise." His voice was low and scratchy, and the thought of what he'd sound like in bed, with Steve's hands on him – it was a terrible idea. God, Tony smelled good, sweat and metal and some kind of fancy cologne.

As long as Tony liked him still, afterwards, it wouldn't be so bad. Steve wanted to be touched, held; and surely it was better to do it with someone who was casual about it, who it wouldn't mean anything to? Even if Steve burst into tears again, Tony would hardly care.

It had been all right with Natasha, afterwards, she'd snickered and smiled at him. Surely -

Tony slid a hand up under his shirt, short nails dragging slowly up the length of his spine, and Steve let out an honest-to-God whimper.

He'd missed his chance before; this wasn't love, but there was still no reason he should deny himself some small comfort.

"That's right," Tony's other hand hooked around the back of his neck, fingers rubbing the short hair there. He tugged, gently, and Steve stumbled forward, let himself be led. "Come on, Steve. That's right."

"I'll be all right?" Steve said helplessly. "Afterwards. You won't be - "

"I'll be a good boy. I promise. I'll respect you in the morning."

Tony kissed him all the way up the stairs, stumbling in circles with his hand trailing along the wall because he wasn't sure he wouldn't fall off the spiral if he didn't have a handhold.

They broke from kissing just long enough to scramble off shirts and then Tony pushed him onto his back on the bed and straddled him.

"Look at you," Tony used his nails again, trails of tingling fire over Steve's nipples and down his ribs, and Steve arched into the touch. "You like that, yeah – I'm gonna suck your dick."

"You - " Steve's mouth opened and shut soundlessly for a moment as his belt and jeans were opened. "Oh God, really? You - ah."

That was – that was filthy, but it felt like, like nothing on earth, and he propped himself up on his elbows to watch. Tony was looking at him, though, and Steve couldn't meet his eyes, had to shut his eyes and turn his head away.

"That – that feels - " his voice cracked and failed. He could hear the wet sloppy sounds in time with the sensations, the air cool on his heated skin, and Tony's mouth, God, his tongue slipping and swirling and the way he sucked -

His eyes shot open when something cool nudged deeper between his thighs, pressing steadily inwards.

"I've never done this," he blurted, not wanting Tony to stop but just –

"It's okay," mumbled around his dick. "I'll stop if you don't like it."
And that was not the issue, he liked it very much, he just – the slick touch pushed deeper, and Steve's
breath caught, ragged. The feeling of fullness, of being spread and open, made him want to buck and
writhe, press down and get more, to thrust into Tony's hot mouth, to -

"I, I'm – going to - " it took all his efforts to stay still, not grab or thrust or do anything that could hurt
Tony. Tony didn't pull away, and Steve's cheeks burned as Tony swallowed his come. "Oh God.
Sorry?" The frantic heat seeped out from his muscles, leaving him limp and contented and a little
embarrassed. Tony's fingers were still in him, a solid presence that now seemed odd rather than
erotic.

"That's cool. What, they don't swallow in the Forties?" Tony licked his lips and grinned wide.

"No, I – I mean, I've never done this before."

"Never had a blowjob?" Tony's eyebrow arched, and his fingers pushed a little deeper, turned, and
Steve squirmed, unsure if he liked it. "Or never - "

"Never had sex," he managed, and Tony's hand stilled.

"You – what about your girl - "

"I kissed her once," Steve tipped his head back so Tony wouldn't see his blush. "I maybe got to
second base once with a girl." Natasha probably counted as second base. There had definitely been
nuzzling.

"I suppose a decent man would stop at this point?" Tony said doubtfully, and Steve shook his head.
He was aching for Tony to move in him again, which answered the question of whether he liked it,
he supposed.

"No, he really wouldn't," he said firmly. "I just, um, this is weird for me, so - "

"Sure," Tony did something with his fingers that made Steve's hips jerk. "Don't worry, Steve, I got
this."

"Right."

And then Tony pulled his fingers out, which was very much not what Steve wanted. He jerked
upright with a noise of indignation, and Tony grinned at him.

"Calm down, soldier. I want to get your pants off."

"Uh, yeah," Steve leaned down to unlace his boots, and okay, naked was good. Tony naked was
good, the feeling of skin against his. He dragged Tony off the floor and into his arms, pressing them
together, filling his hands with the the curves of muscle and flesh. He could hear his breath rasping;
he was hard again already, and he could rub himself against Tony's hip, into the smooth hollow of
muscle and bone.

"Slow down," Tony murmured, and nipped at his neck, which didn't do anything to calm the heat
racing under Steve's skin. "Get up on the bed for me, yeah, just - " Steve couldn't bear to let go, just
grappled them up together, plenty of room to roll them over until they were both mostly on the bed,
Tony wrapped up in his arms and legs.

Fingers back inside him, startling coolness in the midst of all the heat, and Steve moaned and clung
tighter. Tony's mouth was on his neck, biting and kissing, and it was too much, Steve was dizzy with
it.
"Tony?" he said, and Tony *mm-hmed* against his throat, breathing hot into the hollow of his collarbone. "Tony, talk to me."

"Want me to talk dirty?" Tony sounded amused, and Steve almost whimpered at the thought of what Tony could say to him in that dark coaxing voice.

"No, just - God, Tony, I can't - "

"Shh. It's all right, I've got you. You're doing great." Tony ran his fingers into Steve's hair, pulled their mouths together in a deep kiss. Filled both ends, tongue and fingers, and Steve let out a high desperate sound and came again.

"Sorry," he blurted, and turned his head aside, gasping for breath. "I just, I can't."

"You're fine. It's good. You're gorgeous, keep doing what you're doing, I love it." The insistent familiar chatter drew a chuckle from Steve's throat, and he turned back for another kiss, Tony still muttering soft reassurance against his lips.

He was wet inside, could feel the easy glide of Tony's fingers inside. He clenched, experimentally, and Tony groaned.

"That's going to feel so good," Tony nipped his lower lip. "You going to squeeze my dick like that, babe? You'll be so tight around me. Fuck. You're ready, aren't you?"

No, yes, maybe. Steve shut his eyes and nodded, and Tony shifted, pushing himself free of Steve's tight grip, settling himself securely between Steve's spread thighs.

"You can't catch anything, right? Not that I have anything, but - you're immune to disease."

"What?" Steve opened his eyes. Tony was still, looking at him, apparently expecting some kind of response. Diseases? Oh. "It's fine, go ahead."

Tony grinned at him, hot and dirty, and then looked down, at - at them. Steve had to shut his eyes as Tony pushed up against him, forcing him open, painless but weird. Good, he thought it was good, and Tony's hand closed firmly around his dick, and that translated the sensation into pure pleasure.

"Yeaahh," he groaned, and arched his back, which got him a choked noise and fingers digging into his thigh.

"Don't do that," Tony's eyes were squeezed shut.

"Okay," Steve lied, and gave an experimental wriggle. Tony gasped, and dug his teeth into his lower lip, which encouraged Steve to do it again.

"You - " Tony's hips bucked against him, the sudden thrust inside driving the breath out of him. "You just - " he grabbed Steve's hips, pressing him down into the bed. "Hold still."

Okay, this was fun. Steve clenched down inside, and Tony groaned and lurched his weight forward, pushing right up inside, hands sliding up Steve's body to his shoulders.

"Come on," Steve grabbed Tony by the back of his neck. "Come on, I'm ready."

"You got used to this fast," Tony muttered, and gave Steve a look of irritated amusement. Then he rolled his hips, and Steve moaned helplessly at the wave of feeling, as his body closed and opened, sensation a river surging inside him, filling him and washing away thought. He spread his legs wide,
digging his heels in to lift his hips, offer himself, and Tony took him, took him harder and deeper and faster. Nothing but the building feeling, his whole body alive with it, every sensation vivid from the creased sheets sliding under his shoulders to the puff of Tony's breath against his brow.

Steve lifted his hands to Tony's hips, rested them there to feel the movement, muscles flexing as he drove in. Tony dipped lower to kiss him, light and brief.

"You going to come again?" he said softly.

"Maybe?" Steve blinked up at him. He was smiling, crooked and pleased, like Steve was the one thing in the world he wanted to see right now, and it sparked an ache somewhere in Steve; it was good to be wanted.

"I just," Tony caught his breath, and grinned wider, "Should I wait for you?"

"What?"

"I want to come, Steve. You going to come with me, or..."

"Oh," Steve slipped one hand down between them, and closed it round his cock. Pleasure pooled in his belly with a new intensity, and he groaned. "Yeah, yeah. Not long."

"Yeah, go on. Want to feel you come around me." The rhythm was speeding, Steve let his hand match Tony's rhythm in him, and he couldn't stop moaning, lazy throaty sounds that would have made him blush if his skin weren't already burning. "God, come on, Steve. I'm so close, you look so good like this..."

Like a fist in his gut, twisting and gripping, and Tony was making desperate noise but Steve didn't have attention to spare for anything but the heat rolling up his spine, throwing him back onto the sheets, arching and twisting, trying to grind himself deeper onto Tony's cock, into his own grip, anything, just more, and then it was over and he was blinking dizzily up at the ceiling while Tony rutted roughly against him and then came to a dead stop, muscles trembling.

"Oh," Steve managed, and Tony made a short abrupt sound that was probably a laugh. Then he pulled out, and flopped down to the side, pinning Steve's thigh to the mattress.

Steve threw his arms over his head and stretched. A contented well-being thrummed in his body, like nothing he'd ever felt before, like the whole world was a good place and Steve was lucky to be in it.

He felt cautiously between his legs, and checked to see none of the slickness was red. Not that he'd felt any pain, but better safe than completely mortified at his next medical. Then he looked at Tony, who was apparently playing dead, and a little cloud of doubt appeared in the golden sky.

"Should I go?" Tony lifted an arm, and dropped it over his waist.

"Don't even think about it."

"Okay." His grin was probably foolish, but Tony wasn't looking. He wiped his hand clean on the sheet, and then petted Tony's hair. Tony gave a little murmur of pleasure, and pushed against his hand like a cat. Steve wanted to gather him up and squeeze him til he yelped; instead, he said "Hey, can we get food?"

"I don't think I like this super endurance thing." Tony rolled off his thigh without opening his eyes. "Why don't you go call out for food. I'll just..." his voice trailed off, and then his eyes slitted open. He gave Steve a soft, intimate smile that made Steve's heart skip with something like lust. "You're
great. That was great. I'm just going to die here for a bit. Go do food." He shut his eyes again, and Steve pressed a kiss to his cheek before rolling to his feet and going in search of a menu.

Tony opened his eyes all the way for pizza, and sitting on the bed with the box between them, passing a bottle of Coke back and forth, was maybe the best time Steve had had since he opened his eyes to twenty-first century. Tony kept smiling at him, open and sweet, and he flirted entirely without barbs or challenges, just a steady inviting warmth that made Steve want to crawl into his lap.

He did just that when they were done; pushed the empty box onto the floor and straddled Tony's thighs, cupping his face in his hands and kissing him.

"You sore?" Tony murmured, fingers sliding down his spine and dipping into him. "Want to do you again. Or you can do me, would you like that?"

"Yes," the thought of Tony's body opening for him, wrapping around him, was - but he'd have to open Tony up, take it slow and careful, and Steve was all ready for it, and they could get started right away. "Either." He tilted his hips, rubbing himself back against Tony's fingers, and Tony hummed and pushed deeper.

"I want - " shifting and Tony slouched lower, resting back on one elbow and curving his body under Steve's so his cock pushed up against the wet stretched rim of Steve's body. "Want you to ride me."

Being on top, being able to take what he wanted, was maybe even better; only maybe, because he couldn't lose himself in the the way he had when Tony was doing it all to him. But the way Tony threw back his head and moaned, damp eyelashes trembling, said maybe he was doing that to Tony, which was definitely a good feeling.

Afterwards he fitted himself against Tony's body, head resting into the crook of his shoulder, arms around his waist, and Tony sighed and kissed his hair.

"Should shower," he said in a raspy voice, and Steve made an agreeable noise and draped his leg across Tony's thigh. The warm stickiness of his body was oddly pleasant, and the smell of musk and sweat kept a low throb of arousal pulsing through him. More than that, he just didn't want to move one millimetre away from Tony. "Jarvis. Lights."

Steve woke up some time before dawn, and the stickiness had become stuckness; untangling from Tony woke him up, and then a third time, which was the best of all, Steve's body so relaxed and ready for it. The intensity of it was like nothing he'd ever felt, and he had to bite his tongue to keep back all kinds of passionate declarations that were really probably just physical reactions. Amazing orgasms were not really the same as love, even if they felt a lot like it.

Steve kissed Tony's throat, shoulder, cheek until his breathing evened out, until he let out a soft snore. Then he got out of the bed, gathered up his clothes, and slipped out.

"Can I assist you, sir?" Jarvis' voice spoke while he was sitting on the couch tying his shoes, and Steve felt his cheeks flame.

"Uh, hi, Uh. Were you – do you watch - "

"No, sir."

"Oh. Okay." Steve looked up, and around; where did you look to talk to a disembodied being? "Um, can you let me out?"

"Of course, sir. Would you like me to arrange a car for you?"
"Um – no, no, it's all right - "

"I can assure you the car company possesses the utmost discretion." Now that was embarrassing. How many people had Jarvis gently ushered out?

"No, I'll just – I'll be fine." He stood up, and as promised, the front door swung open. There was a faint ache, a mild discomfort between his legs; his lips tingled too, and his neck - stubble burn, he realised, and his body flushed with heat again. He was almost tempted to go back upstairs, cuddle in and hope for another go. But it was getting early, and Steve didn't want to be there in the morning. Right now, everything was perfect, and getting politely shown the door by someone who wanted him gone would take the edge off that. He could wait a good long while before seeing boredom in Tony's eyes, after the fond way Tony had smiled at him.

No, this was better. If Steve wasn't there, it couldn't be awkward, and they could go back to being team-mates, and maybe friends. He stepped out into the yard, and the door swung to behind him. The morning air was cool and fresh; it was starting to get light. He broke into a jog as he passed through the open gates, and then lengthened his stride, muscles warming instantly, body thrumming with energy.

Tony woke up before dawn, as usual, face mashed into his pillow and feet sticking out from under the sheets. Sleep he thought, and then Steve and that made him grin like a fool as he reached out. The bed was empty, sheets cool under his searching hand.

"JARVIS?" He lifted his head and listened; no sound of the shower, no kitchen noises.

"Sir?"

"Where's Steve?"

"Captain Rogers left the building about twenty minutes ago, sir." The blandest tone JARVIS had. Tony sat up, slowly, trying to think. He felt fuzzy despite the lack of hangover.

"Where'd he go?"

"Well, sir, I didn't like to pry, but he seemed to be jogging down the road towards the city."

"It's twenty miles!" Tony rolled out of bed and yanked open a drawer to begin dressing. Had he done something wrong? Steve had been perfect, they'd been perfect, Tony liked to think of himself as something of an expert on sex and that had been fantastic sex.

"A mere stroll for Captain America, sir."

"Did I program you for hero-worship?"

"I'm based on your brain-waves, sir."

"Shut up." Tony hesitated for a long moment. Clearly, Steve had other priorities. He might have had an appointment. He might not have wanted to disturb Tony's sleep. He might be having a
heterosexual freakout. Tony should give him space, give him time, see how Steve was next time they worked together. It was the sensible thing to do.

Ten minutes later, he was piling on the speed down the long straight road. Steve had gotten about eight miles; Tony pulled up with a screech of brakes, skidding the car across his path. Steve came to an easy halt, and rested his hands on the passenger door, blue eyes wide and innocent.

"I forget something?"

"Is this payback?" Tony snapped. "No, wait - is this an important learning experience? A life lesson? Tony, this is what it's like to wake up alone, see how it feels? Because - "

"No," Steve interrupted, and Tony scowled. He looked perfectly relaxed, and only a little sweat beaded his hairline. Tony wanted to lick him. "I thought we discussed this. Before. You don't do commitment, remember?"

"And you don't do casual sex." Steve dipped his head, flushing a little.

"I thought maybe it was something we could do without wrecking our friendship, now. Was I wrong?"

Tony looked away. His hands were white-knuckled on the wheel.

"Maybe," he said in a small voice.

Steve sighed, and straightened up. He turned, and for a second Tony thought he was going to run off the road where Tony couldn't follow; instead, he vaulted neatly into the passenger seat.

"Let's go get breakfast," he said, and Tony started the car.

They went back home for breakfast; it wasn't likely that Steve would strip off and start yelling about how Tony could fuck him, but Tony wouldn't entirely put it past him, and Tony wasn't feeling up to a public exhibition this morning. He made them smoothies, and Steve didn't even blink at the vile green, just slurped at it.

"So what's wrong now?" Steve hooked his feet round the legs of his stool and rocked it back on to two legs. Tony watched, fascinated; he was steady as a rock.

"Nothing's wrong. We can't have a nice breakfast together?" Tony took a gulp of his smoothie. Delicious. Steve should be grateful.

"You chased me down the road, Tony."

"Well... yeah." He ducked his head. It wasn't like he minded waking up alone; plenty of partners had managed to sneak out before he was awake, especially after hard drinking nights. He just hadn't expected Steve to. Not after the fuss he'd made about casual sex. Tony had assumed Steve would want to cuddle in the morning, and chat over breakfast, and generally be buddies. Not just run out. He felt oddly cheated. "You shouldn't have assumed I would throw you out."

"That your PA would throw me out, and who says I did? Maybe I just wanted to leave."
Tony retreated into sullen silence. Maybe it was a Forties thing. Maybe Steve didn't think men needed to do staying overnight and so on with other men.

"Sometimes you're as bad as your father," Steve added, and Tony's eyes bulged.

"Please tell me you didn't - "

"No. I couldn't see anything but Peggy, back then. He went into terrible sulks, though, whenever he was crossed."

"He used to do that with my mother," Tony admitted. "He wasn't really very good at... showing affection." He could still remember the shock it had been, for the film reel of his father to speak with such open love for his son. Too little, too late.

"He was a good man," Steve said serenely. "You're a lot like him."

"That's creepy." Tony kicked at the leg of his stool. Steve was still balanced neatly on his tilted stool, perfectly calm and collected. Direct questioning seemed the best route; Tony was really not good at the subtle shit. "So why'd you leave?"

"I thought the morning would be awkward." Steve wrinkled his nose. "Leaving didn't fix that, though."

"I thought you were going to stay, we'd have morning sex, maybe make plans for future sex."

Steve gave a soft, surprised laugh. Tony arched his eyebrows.

"You mean like dates?" Steve rocked his stool forward, and set his glass down. Tony picked it up and dumped it in the sink.

"Let's not go crazy," he muttered. Dating Steve would mean commitment, that was clear enough, and Tony wasn't so good at the long-term thing, which was why Pepper wasn't here right now, judging his breakfast smoothies and giving him her fuzzy morning smile.

Steve rested his chin in his palm and regarded him tolerantly. Tony ran some water to indicate he was very busy doing dishes like a responsible homeowning adult.

"So now you want to be - what's the word? Fuckbuddies?" and Tony managed not to look too obviously horrified at the words someone was teaching Captain America. Probably Natasha. Perhaps Natasha and Steve were fuckbuddies.

No, because Steve had been a virgin. He'd said. Not that Tony had any kind of smugness issue about deflowering Captain America. And if he had that would have deflated pretty fast under the discovery Steve would rather take a twenty-mile pre-dawn run than cuddle with him.

"I think you'd probably call it friends with benefits," he said finally, and Steve nodded.

"Right. So we would just have occasional sex."

"Maybe even frequent sex." Tony felt, strongly, that it would take a long time to get bored of having Steve in his bed.
"And I could still see other people?"

"Why would you want to do that?" Steve raised his eyebrows. Tony fidgeted. All right, maybe he hadn't thought it through in the kind of miniscule detail Steve seemed to prefer, but the principle was sound. Him and Steve, hanging out, having regular sex. Like Tony and Rhodey. But with sex. "What do you want?"

"I want to not screw up our - "

"Working relationship, professional  blah blah. Come on, what do you want?"

"I don't actually have a grand plan, Tony. I can do friends with benefits, but that doesn't include you hovering around glaring whenever I meet someone."

"So what, you'll fuck me until someone better comes along?"

"Isn't that the point of friends with benefits?" Tony bit his tongue, and glared. Someone needed to check Steve's reading material; he was all to well-informed all of a sudden. Steve sighed. "Look. Six months ago I was in 1945. I was planning to go home and marry Peggy and settle down and start having kids and maybe go to art school. Now, things have changed. I do get that; I don't expect everyone to change their lives for my benefit. And there are a lot of things I like about the future. The now. But people still pair off and settle down, and I want to be one of those people. I want to settle down with someone I love, with a view to forever. And I get that's probably not what you want, and that's fine. You want something else, maybe we can do that, but for me, it's going to be temporary while I look for my future."

"Right," Tony folded his arms. Of course, Steve had a white picket fence in his future. "Well. Sorry to disappoint."

"Not a problem, Tony." Steve stood.

"Take the car, I can get Happy to pick it up."

"It's fine, I like to run most days." He smiled, and stepped round the counter to put his hand on Tony's shoulder. "I hope - "

"Oh, shut up," Tony snapped, suddenly losing a hold on all his good intentions. "You tell me I'm not good enough to settle down with but you'll fuck me, and then you want to be friends?"

Steve raised his eyebrows, and then hooked his foot round the leg of Tony's stool and yanked. Tony flailed, and was saved from hitting the floor by Steve's hands on his biceps, lifting him and dumping him to sit on the counter so they were nose to nose.

"Please, just for once, listen to what I'm saying. I'll say it very simply. I like you, Tony. I like hanging out with you; when you're not being an ass, I like working with you. I like going to bed with you. I like that a lot. But you've said that you're a casual kind of guy. We said it yesterday, before bed. And I'm not casual. I want someone to love. Don't make that face." Steve caught his chin in one hand and forced it up; Tony stared into his blue eyes from inches away. "You want me to love you, while you yank my chain? No. I'm not playing. You want us to be casual, fine, I can do that. You want to try for something serious, I can do that. I could fall for you, if I felt you'd give it a chance." He dipped in for a kiss, and Tony leaned into it; but he pulled back before it could get deep.
Tony rubbed his cheek against Steve's hand, and Steve sighed. "Just... think about it, all right? Think about what I've said. JARVIS can replay it for you. Listen a few times. It's not complicated, and you're a genius."

He backed away, and Tony pouted; Steve shook his head. Then he turned, and broke into a jog; JARVIS helpfully opened the door for him, and Tony watched him run until the door swung closed.

"He gave his word?" Loki said; he was sitting on a doorstep in a rather manky back alley, and from this angle, in those clothes, he looked very young and vulnerable. Tony had to remind himself this was a centuries-old extradimensional being, who had probably picked out his outfit with special consideration as to the best way to tug heartstrings. If Steve was right, even his roughly knotted shoelaces were elaborate illusions, creating the effect of... something.

Loki picked at the cuffs of his sweatshirt, frowning, as Tony dug in his pocket.

"Yeah," and Tony dropped a ring into his hand, a heavy silver thing with a flat black stone carved with a bird. "He gave me this to prove we'd spoken, Mr Suspicious."

"Yes," Loki said, rubbing his thumb over the face, eyes lit with pleasure. Apparently whatever it said in the language of jewellery was to his liking. There was a little smile denting the corners of his mouth when he pushed it onto his right ring finger. "All right." Tony glanced towards the mouth of the alley, where Steve was loitering, a woollen hat pulled down over his ears.

"You know," Tony took a step closer to Loki. "You can't just do stuff for people to get forgiven."

"What?" Loki gave him a blank look.

"Just, I've been there. I've screwed up – not genocide or anything – and you can't just do something showy and outrageous and expect it to make everything okay." Tony stopped, feeling foolish. Loki wasn't a kid, and Tony was only an adult by process of elimination. He really wasn't cut out for words of wisdom, but really, when you saw a vastly powerful extradimensional being setting himself up for a fall, you owed it to the multiverse to make an effort.

"I won't crawl," Loki said, face setting into haughty lines, and Tony made a face.

"Sometimes crawling is necessary. I mean, if you've screwed up really bad."

"I'm not having some kind of bonding experience with you, Stark," Loki snapped, and hunched his shoulders. "If I can return the Tesseract – then I can return with my pride intact."

"Well, great." It wasn't like Tony knew what the hell he was talking about. He was still trying to work this one out; maybe Loki had a point. It wasn't as if it didn't work sometimes, and who knew how Gods arranged their affairs. Thor had seemed to think it was a reasonable offer. "How'd you get away, anyway? Isn't Schmidt paranoid? Nazis usually are."

"Never you mind."

"Sure. Now, with our side of the bargain set up, are you actually going to share any useful information?" Put your money where your mouth is. Jane was still convinced this was all a trap; that Loki would lure Thor to his death, and whoever else was unfortunate enough to go with him. Tony...
wasn't sure. Loki seemed sincere enough, but by all accounts he'd fooled his family into believing that.

"Yes. He's planning to assault a government facility. In three days. To retrieve some kind of technical information."

"Okay, great. Which one? What information?"

"I don't know what he's trying to find out. Something Hammer told him."

"You don't know?"

"For some reason, he doesn't seem to trust me." Loki's eyes widened in mock innocence. "It seems my reputation precedes me."

"But you know which one, right? Because otherwise - "

"I know. It's a weapons facility, in a place called Death Valley."

"Really?" Tony eyebrows rose. "Okay, I can believe that. Department of Defence, not strong on irony."

"Is that enough information?"

"Do you have any more?"

"None that I can think of."

"Then it'll have to be."

Loki... ceased to be there, in a quiet, understated way, like cigarette smoke dispersing into the air. Tony waved a hand through the space where he'd been. Nothing.

"That's creepy," he said aloud, just in case Loki could hear him, and trudged off up the alleyway.

"Which one?" Fury said, and Tony shoved his notes over the table, leaning right over Steve, giving him a waft of cologne that made Steve's body flush with heat. Fury's eyes narrowed. "I see."

"How'd he know about it?" Tony said. "This Hammer again? You had him in on all the secret plans? Has he told you what Schmidt's up to?"

"Hammer was not my prisoner and didn't work for me," Fury snapped.

"You let him work on the Bifrost, though."

"Not discussing this." Fury held up his hands. Steve could sympathise; Tony was like a terrier sometimes. He shot a sideways look at Tony's disgruntled pout, which made him feel squishy rather than annoyed. Apparently sex made people's bad habits endearing, who knew? He'd have to keep that a secret. Tony would only use it as an excuse to act out, probably.

If he cared. Maybe he'd already consigned sex with Steve to the dustbin of memory.
Steve had to stop dwelling on this. He turned his eyes firmly back to Fury.

"Do you really plan on forgiving him?" Fury was asking, and Thor fixed him with his terrifyingly sincere gaze.

"I do," Thor said. "I would not have him for an enemy; and I too would like to see this artifact returned to my father's vault."


"Tony, my friend, you are welcome to come to Asgard and study it in safety."

"I am?" Tony brightened. "Well, all right then."

"I'm suddenly seeing all the appeal drain out of this plan," Fury said in tones of tired horror.

"But you would like Schmidt, would you not?" Thor said.

"I would," Fury said, his eye narrowing.

"So everyone gets something they want. It's settled then," Steve clapped his hands. "Now, I have some ideas -"

"You're not going," Fury interrupted, and Steve's mouth dropped open. "I want you here, at the base. Natasha can spearhead this one; she'll be fine."

"But -"

"Enough already," Fury snapped, and rubbed at his temples. "Can you people please learn to obey orders? You're not going to this one."

"Fury -"

"Meeting adjourned. Thor, Tony, I'll talk to you later." And he was up an out the door.

"Tough deal, buddy," Tony nudged him, and Thor patted his shoulder on his way to the door. "You piss off Fury somehow?"

"No."

"No." He sighed. "If I have, he hasn't said anything. Maybe he thinks I'm too close."

"Yeah." Tony gnawed on the end of his pencil. Steve looked at Tony's mouth, and then back at his eyes, which were fortunately staring off into the distance and hadn't registered Steve's gawking.

"You want to grab lunch?" he suggested as casually as he could, and tried not to look crestfallen when Tony shook his head.

"Got a date. Well. They don't know about it yet, but I plan to make a date."

"Oh. Okay. Well." He smiled, and Tony focused on him long enough to give him a genuine smile. That was nice, anyway. "You have fun."

Tony was able to slip past Natasha while she was dealing with a delivery; she clearly saw him, but was unwilling to sacrifice her dignity chasing him down.
"Was I - " Tony perched on the edge of Pepper's desk, and she gave him a cool look. "You're busy, right?"

"I'm busy."

"But I need to talk to you."

"Ms Potts does have an appointment calendar," Natasha said sweetly, eyes narrowed, and laid an envelope down on Pepper's desk. The two women exchanged what were apparently sincere smiles. "Why don't you come with me and I'll find you a space?"

"But - " Tony paused, and looked at Pepper, who was scowling down at her memo pad. "Yes, yes I will."

He sat down in the chair Natasha pointed him to, and watched as she made a show of scrolling, tapping her pen against her lower lip.

"So why are you still here?" He raised his eyebrows and tried to look harmless; Natasha gave him a cool, professional glance that still managed to wither.

"Because," she said curtly. "I can find you ten minutes on Thursday."

"Oh, come on. Doesn't she have lunch free?"

"She doesn't take business appointments at lunch."

"I'm not - I'm not a business appointment!"

"Are you here in your capacity as her ex-boyfriend?" Natasha said in syrupy tones, and Tony leaned back in his chair.

"Um - would I be in personal danger, if I were?"

"It's not impossible. I am supposed to be protecting the CEO of Stark Enterprises."

"I just want to talk to her about, you know," he eyed her cool expression. "Uh, where we went wrong, and - "

"Ms Potts is not your fucking therapist," Natasha said, expression not wavering. "And it is not in her job description to help you get in to Captain America's pants."

"No, no." Tony shook his head. "No, I - I just think, I was wondering - okay, you were her PA through all - that. And okay, it was my fault, yes."

"It was all, unquestionably, your fault."

"But why was it my fault?"

A tiny line appeared between Natasha's perfect brows, and they stared at each other.

"I mean, I know I wrecked it. I always do. But how did I wreck it?"
Natasha laid down her pen, and swivelled her chair so they faced each other. Tony had the feeling he had her full attention.

"You constantly stood her up."

"But she knows I - "

"Shut up. Stood her up. Flirted with other women in front of her. Left her explaining to other people why you weren't there - which undermined her as CEO. Ditched her at parties, sometimes to go to other parties, sometimes to go home and work. Went past her and talked to the Board when you wanted something. Told the press stuff you hadn't told her about first. Forgot her birthday. Bought her a birthday present she hated."

"She hated it?"

"She hates pearls."

"I didn't know she hated pearls."

"I know she hates pearls. And it didn't even fit, she had to get it resized so she could wear it to the birthday dinner you were an hour late for. And then you flirted with the waitress."

"Yeah, but - she knew that. I was always like that. It can't have surprised her."

"Stark," she sounded almost pitying. "You're supposed to treat your girlfriend differently from your PA. You just treated her like your PA you were fucking. And she wasn't even your PA any more."

"But I treat everyone..." he trailed off.

"Yes. Yes, you do."

"She dated me anyway!"

"Apparently you're charming enough people overlook these little character flaws. Or maybe she had Stockholm Syndrome."

"Apparently my charm doesn't work on you."

"I read your file before I met you."

"So what, I should start turning up places on time? That's it?"

"More like start treating people like they actually might, possibly, be as important to you as you are to yourself."

"I do! She is!"

"Well, there is absolutely no way for anyone other than you to know that." She raised her eyebrows. "Now, I'm rather busy. Do you want me to make this appointment?"

"Uh... no. Not right now."
The facility had been tipped off, it was already on high alert, and the Avengers had left an hour ago, to arrive at midnight. Tony looped lazy circuits round the top of SHIELD HQ, just to annoy Fury; he could do LA to Death Valley in minutes, and arriving on time to the dot would amuse him. He checked the time, and did one last loop; and then he heard a familiar voice.

"Iron Man!" Tony spun to to see Steve running out onto the roof, and lifted a hand in a cheery wave.

"Bye, Steve - " and then Steve launched himself off the roof and Tony boggled for a second before flinging back his arms so that when Steve hit him, he blasted the repulsors and didn't go head over heels.

"I thought I was too late," Steve clambered breathlessly over him. "Is this okay? You can fly like this?" He hooked a leg up around Tony's waist, a movement vividly reminiscent of the night they'd spent together, and it took Tony a long moment to regain his composure.

"Fury said you weren't supposed – oh, what the hell do I care. Climb round onto my back, I'm not carrying you around like this, we'll be a thousand caption competitions." He suffered Steve's scrambling for a moment, and then locked an arm around his waist. "Here, this is fine. Hold on."

Steering with one repulsor and a heavy weight was a little awkward, but could have been much worse. He had Steve tucked close, grinning under his helmet, and he also had a nice little piece of ammo for the next time Steve ragged on him about disobeying orders.

Admittedly, Fury's order had been total bullshit, but so were most of the orders Tony ignored.

"Fury's going to be furious," he said conversationally, and Steve shrugged.

"He'll live."

He arrived late, of course, because he couldn't go full speed with Steve aboard. Twenty after midnight, and he landed beside the truck convoy and Natasha leapt out of cover with a furious glare. Then she saw Steve, and groaned.

"Steve - "

"He's here now," Tony set Steve down on his feet. "You're still in charge, right?"

"Of course," Steve said. "I'll be good, I promise. Come on, Natasha, I can be useful."

"Of course you can." She shook her head. "Well, we can't leave you here, get in the truck." She pointed one black-gloved finger at Tony. "You'll regret this."

"That is so damn unfair," Tony said as he climbed into the truck, and took up position in the space they'd left for him right behind the cab. Steve patted his knee consolingly, and Tony gave into temptation and squeezed his hand. "You got me into trouble."

"Sorry," and Steve squeezed back, just for a second, before reclaiming his hand and resting it on the shield. "I mean, not that you really care," and his teeth gleamed in the low light. They were travelling dark, and only the arc reactor lit the interior of the truck. Thor was absent, again, because they'd decided that if Loki did have an undergradame, it probably involved targeting him. He'd gone sad-eyed and pathetic, but he'd had to agree they were right.
Rhodey had been borrowed back by the military again, so really it was just as well Steve had defied orders; Carter, Natasha, Clint and Iron Man wasn't exactly a full team. Tony couldn't be everywhere. Sure, in theory Loki was going to roll over on Schmidt, but...

The truck lurched to a stop, and he could pick up the brief discussion. They were being shipped in under pretence of - laundry, he thought, or maybe a food delivery. Something routine and harmless, so if Schmidt were watching he'd see nothing unusual.

Movement again, and when the doors opened again they were in an underground parking lot. There were more SHIELD agents, and a number of military guards, all wielding heavy weaponry.

"Hawkeye, get up to the north guard tower," Natasha turned to Steve. "I want you in the main testing facility, Captain, it's adjacent to many of the storage rooms and Schmidt's most likely target."

"Understood."

"Stark, you will take up position in the lobby at ground level, by the elevator bank - all the elevators are locked down in the basement, so you can use the shafts to transit."

"Sure, why not."

"Carter, you and I will be mobile. Keep moving, keep looking. All the civilian staff of this facility are in the basement levels; we haven't evacuated them for fear of tipping off Schmidt. Keep the fight out of that level, you understand? Stay above ground level. All right, let's get moving. It's going to be a long night."

"Steve?"

"Sh." Steve looked about him. He'd taken up position in the doorway of the main testing chamber, from where he could see most of the doors in this section. The big vault door was securely latched open, and he'd wedged it with a chair as a precaution; he didn't want to get shut in. He could also see the back of the elevator bank; Tony would be on the other side. And right now, instead of watching the doors, he was bugging Steve.

"Steeeeeve."

"We're on duty, To - Iron Man."

"No one can hear us. I'm using a tight beam transmission directly to you. Unless anyone's standing directly between us, they won't be able to hear."

Steve glanced down the empty corridor. Unless there was someone lurking in the elevator shaft, they were safe. And it was 4am and Steve was bored and hey, if he didn't keep Tony focused he might bother someone else, right?

"I hope you're paying attention to the job."

"Of course I am. Right now, I'm sitting in the floor with my back to a giant flowerpot, which is the only cover in the lobby. I'm taking regular sensor readings. I can hear Carter's fairy footsteps three floors up, and I think I can hear the dulcet tones of Hawkeye swearing in his tower." A lengthy sigh. "God, I'm bored."

"Hurry up and wait," Steve couldn't help the smile, and Tony chuckled, hearing the humour in his
"I thought this would be exciting."

"Afraid not. Want to quit?"

"Are you kidding? You guys need me."

"Sure we do, Tony." Humouring tone that got him a snort, and Steve let his voice soften. "I'm glad you're with us." Too soft; he could feel his cheeks flush. Missions were not flirtation time, and he really shouldn't flirt with Tony, not when things were going so well. But Tony just laughed again, warm and friendly.

"If Schmidt doesn't attack until tonight, we'll be worn out."

"You might be. I can go three days without sleep with no loss of function."

"Show-off. I'll have you know I have long experience fighting in no state to fight."

"Don't horrify me, Tony. I believe you. We'll be able to get some rest during the day." Steve stood, and walked down the length of the corridor.

"Where you going?"

"Just patrolling." A glance into each room he passed, and he paused at the elevator bank, stared at the wall if he could see through to walls and armour to see Tony's amused face. Then he turned on his heel and walked back, back into the testing chamber with its big vaulted roof and bare concrete floor.

He turned at the sound of running footsteps, and caught a glimpse of a slim figure in black crossing the corridor, red hair swinging. Natasha was tireless.

"You'd think she was the battery powered one." Tony's voice came again.

"Are you actually powered by - "

"No I'm not," a laugh in his voice. "I have a real flesh beating heart, too. I have shrapnel lodged in blood vessels. The arc reactor powers an electromagnet that holds them in place, rather than letting them be swept into my heart."

"You - " Steve's mouth dropped open. "Are you telling me if that thing breaks, you'll die?"

"Unlike all the other people who'll be fine if they get massive chest trauma." Tony snorted. "Relax."

"But what if it goes on the blink?"

"Steve, I designed this to keep me alive. It does not 'go on the blink'." Steve could hear him making finger-quotes. "Anyway, it's not instant death. Scar tissue's built up around them; in the event of a breakage, it'll take a while for them to work free, which gives me time to get to my back-up."

"Where's your backup?"

"Highly incredibly classified." Steve blushed. Of course Tony didn't want - "I'll tell you sometime when we're private." The blush deepened; Steve lifted his shield and pressed his cheeks to it, one then the other, the coolness driving back the heat. "Steve?"
"Yeah," he said, and couldn't think of anything to say that didn't sound ridiculous and childish. *I'd tell you my secrets, if I had any.* "Uh, thanks."

"No problem?" Questioning, a little puzzled, like he hadn't casually offered Steve - well, the key to his heart. Steve grinned down at the elevator bank.

"Maybe we should've run a book on when Schmidt attacks," Steve said almost at random, and Tony took it and ran, began trying to work out the mathematical odds of a Nazi attacking a military base while Steve paced and smiled and listened.

Steve would've picked just before dawn, and he would have been right. At 0526, a small plane crashed into the building, with a grand total of forty-five seconds warning from Tony.

Steve watched with fascination as the wall of the elevator bank buckled before his eyes under the impact; Tony had had plenty of time to get out of the way, but now, of course, he didn't have access to the elevators. Blocking them off was unlikely to be a coincidence, which meant Schmidt would attack either the top level, or the basement.

"Plane's empty," Tony said tersely over the main comm. "Matches the description of one stolen three weeks ago in Missouri."

Schmidt, of course, had been in the twenty-first century a while. He'd been making his plans with care, been scoping this target out. Sent Loki in, perhaps, to search out the weak spots.

Steve rolled his head on his shoulders. He didn't really get muscle stiffness any more, but it was better to move than be still, all the same. Something would happen, any minute. He could hear the roar of a fire extinguisher; Tony was putting out the fire. That was good.

So where was Schmidt?

If he was Schmidt, where would he be, after crashing a plane into an elevator shaft?

"What kind of plane?" he said.

"It's a - " the designation was meaningless to Steve. He really needed to learn more about modern... everything, really.

"Could someone hide in the underside and drop down the elevator shaft?"

A tense pause.

"If someone had built in a reinforced compartment yes, and yes, that looks to be the case," he said, and Natasha's voice came in.

"Stark, get to the emergency stairs. They're the only other access point to the basement. Cap, stay where you are, be ready to move when we get a definite read on him."

"The civilians are in the basement," he said tightly. "I can - "

"We're on it. *Stay where you are,* Cap."

He waited, tensely, trying not to think what Schmidt could be doing down there, loose among civilians. They must have military guards. Where was Loki?

Would Schmidt climb back up the elevator shaft, through the flames and wreckage? Natasha would have thought of that. Steve paced back and forth, checking each room because that was his job right
now.

The floor trembled, very slightly, under his feet.

"Natasha?" He hesitated. "Sharon?"

"Comms probably won't work in the underground levels," Hawkeye said.

"I think I felt an explosion." Steve bit his lip. "Iron Man?"

Nothing.

"Hawkeye?"

"Christ. The guys are telling me they can't raise anyone down there on the base comms, either. You'd better go. Go to minus three."

"There are multiple - why that one?"

"You better get going," was all Hawkeye said, and Steve ran towards the emergency stairs.

Minus three was smoky, and the sprinklers were going off; the layout was unclear, and there were no signs. There were, however, darker patches on the wall, as if signs had recently been taken down.

Glass crunched under Steve's feet as he circled the floor; he heard heavy footsteps, and readied his shield, only to relax when Iron Man appeared.

"Bad boy," he said. "Natasha will be pissed."

"Hawkeye said I should go."

"Schmidt set a bunch of explosives off; all the levels I've seen are a mess. I didn't know it went this deep. Natasha sent me to guard minus-three-seventeen."

"What's in -"

"Don't know." Tony crunched past him. "I'm going to assume it's under minus-two-seventeen, as someone seems to have taken down the door numbers." He stopped outside a door. "This one."

Steve moved up beside him, and stared at the blank door. *Stay where you are, Cap.* He closed his hand carefully around the handle.

"Natasha told me not to open the door," Tony said, and Steve shrugged.

"You're not." He opened the door a crack, and then, seeing what looked like a hospital room, pushed it open the rest of the way.

A very old man, propped up in his bed with many pillows, machines crowded round the bed like anxious relatives. Steady beeps, and the man looked at him with wide, fearful eyes; familiar eyes, and Steve could picture them staring out of a face far less wrinkled and ancient.

"Zola," Steve's tongue felt thick and unresponsive in his mouth. "Armin Zola. What - what are -"

"Who's this guy?" Tony peered over his shoulder. "Hey. I know you, right? You're Dr -" he tipped his head a little. "Olafsen, yeah."
"He's a Nazi," Steve said. What was he doing here? Was this a secret prison?

"Mr Stark," Zola gave him an empty look. "Please take your friend away. I am an old, sick man and I have had a very traumatic day."

"Schmidt came here for you?" Tony put up the faceplate and squinted at him. "You're actually a Nazi."

"That was many years ago," Zola said. "I have paid for my crimes. I have worked most diligently and dedicatedly for America - " his breathing was speeding up, and the machine by his bed let out a warning beep.

"You know what," Tony interrupted the slurred words. "We're just going to go." He dragged Steve back, and pulled the door shut, and Steve staggered backwards. "Okay, that was unexpected but explains a lot. You okay?"

Steve shook his head. His knees felt strangely liquid; he braced himself against the wall. Tony moved closer, glancing up and down the passage.

"Why - " Steve grabbed Tony's arm, feeling the metal creak under his grip. "Why was he here, why was the Government working with him? How do you know him? Did Howard work with - were they friends?"

"I wouldn't say friends," Tony put a hand on his shoulder. "I met him a couple of times."

"I - " Steve's eyes prickled. "We got Bucky killed, capturing him, and he's - he's a hundred, or - "

"Whoa, hey, stop that," Tony shook him gently. "We're on a mission thing. Job."

"Right," Mission, Schmidt - time for Zola later. He wasn't going anywhere, that much was clear. He took a deep breath, and then another. "All right. You stay here, then." And he turned and made for the stairs again, because if Natasha was on minus two, that was where she was expecting to meet Schmidt.

Tony judged it entirely unfair and inappropriate that he got to be the one who guarded Olafsen - Zola? - from Schmidt, instead of getting to chase him about on the upper levels. It did explain why they hadn't just moved whatever Schmidt was after, though. Sick, ancient men couldn't be hustled about like parcels. It was very tempting to open the door and ask him a few more questions; but he hadn't looked healthy at all and Tony didn't want to finish him off.

Even if he had been a Nazi. Even if he had made Steve looked pale and panicky and hurt.

Tony waited for twenty excruciating minutes before giving in, wandering down the passage to an office, and dialing Clint's cellphone on the office phone.

"Where the fuck are you, Stark? Get up here!

"We need better comms," Tony told him, before tossing down the phone and walking towards the stairs. He could run up those, at least; emergency stairs tended to be good and solid.

As soon as he reached ground level, a babble of voices overwhelmed him, and it was a moment
before he could pick out the important point; the roof, Schmidt was aiming for the roof.

Where he'd be trapped, presumably. Awesome. Tony exited via the nearest window in a spray of glass, and looped around the building before aiming for the highest point.

There was a helicopter pad up there; was Schmidt expecting an escape vehicle? Perhaps that was Loki's task. Tony glanced about, but there was no sign of anything aloft.

Another clamour of voices, and this time he could hear them directly, not over the comms; Schmidt bolted out onto the roof, and three seconds later Steve tore after him. Schmidt was stuck; Tony locked all his targeting software on, and prepared to shoot, but Schmidt wasn't slowing, he hurled something high into the air and ran towards the edge of the roof.

Something really goddamn weird blossomed Tony's HUD. Something that brought up a number of warning windows, and set off alarms, and when he looked at the little lump of something descending, it was turning into - something else, something else very strange and yet familiar; he was looking down into stars.

Schmidt ran straight off the edge of the roof, and dived towards the hole in reality. Steve bounded straight after him, aiming for the pit of stars, and Tony swooped in and grabbed him, because fuck no.

"What the hell, Tony," Steve barked, and Tony's stomach dropped. The pit sealed up before their eyes,

"Sorry," he muttered, and dropped Steve in the guard tower next to Clint, who gave him a disapproving look. "But you can't just jump into a thing like that."

"He's gotten away," Steve narrowed his eyes. "I could have - "

"You could have been trapped between worlds until the next time the Bifrost breaks, which could be millenia," and Tony jetted back to the helicopter pad, where Carter and Natasha were waiting. Carter looked like she'd been through a cement mixer, and Natasha didn't look much better; also, the zipper on her jumpsuit had broken, revealing a pale triangle of skin. Nice.

"Did you see Cap on minus three?" Natasha asked, and Tony shrugged.

"No," he lied cheerfully. "I thought you told him to stay up?"

"Yes, well." Tony thought she looked relieved. "I didn't see Loki anywhere."

"I guess that escape plan was his."

"That's an experimental project," Natasha said. "Developed by your father, actually."

"How'd he get it, then? Hammer? And where'd it go?"

"It's hard to say. If we could predict where they went, they wouldn't be experimental." She turned towards the stairs. "Meet us on the ground floor."

"Want a lift?" he said to Sharon, who cast a guilty glance after Natasha and then swung up onto his back. He dropped her beside Steve, who was standing with Clint in the forecourt.

"At least Schmidt didn't get away with anything," Clint said. "Unless he grabbed some more of those teleportation things."
"Those didn't come from here. He probably got them from Hammer, who didn't tell us about them. That means another few rounds of interrogation for Mr Hammer." Natasha stretched out her arms, and her back cracked audibly. "Ow. We need to get back, report. I'll call in a helicopter."

"Anyone want a lift?" Tony offered, and Natasha sighed.

"Take Cap," she ordered. "It was crowded enough on the way here."

"Right," Tony muttered, and held out his arm. Steve stepped onto his jetboot as casually as if it were a stepping stone.

They were about halfway back before the silence was too much for Tony.

"Sorry," he said, and Steve gave him a surprised look. "For grabbing you -"

"No, it's okay." Steve patted a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry I yelled."

"Yeah?" Tony hesitated. "I really did think -"

"It's fine," Steve smiled at him, wan but sincere. "You were right; it was a stupid risk. I just, I -" his face crumpled up. "I can't believe this, Tony. Everyone good I knew is dead, but the most evil men I knew are still alive. And working for the Government?"

"Plenty of Nazi scientists got out of trouble by offering their services," Tony glanced at Steve's scowl. "I guess he's one of them. He was... very notable." As Dr Olafsen, he'd been a notable but reclusive scientist; Tony had only met him a few times. For all Howard had worked closely with the man, he'd never seemed enthusiastic about him. Unsurprising, knowing what he must have known.

"He was Schmidt's right-hand man."

"Yeah. Well. I hate to say this to you of all people, but they weren't – still aren't – running the military on idealistic terms."

"Do you..." he trailed off. "Do you think Peggy knew?"

"She was Director eventually, right? She must have known." He rubbed his hand gently over Steve's back, and Steve sighed, and rested his head against Tony's shoulder.

"She was always very practical." He shook his head. "Maybe it was the right thing to do. The important thing is that Schmidt didn't get Zola, right?"

"Right. Hey, when we get back - I gotta get out of the armour," Steve nodded. "And then there'll be debriefing, but. Maybe you and I could pick up some lunch?"


By the time they were done with rounds of debriefing, and scolding from Maria Hill, and damage reports and medical examination and the usual boring wait while they X-Rayed him to make sure he hadn't gotten shot and forgotten about it and healed up over the bullet (honestly he'd done that one time in 1945, you'd think they'd be over it by now) it was time for dinner.

"I'm kind of tired," he told Tony, and Tony nodded earnestly and put a firm hand on his back and
steered him towards the car.

"But I bet a burger sounds good, right?" Tony's hand circled at the small of his back, like he'd done when they were flying. It was nice; made Steve want to press into his hands and ask for more touches. "I know where they do real nice burgers, and proper hand-cut fries. And milkshakes. Come on, I've seen your file; you need a lot of food."

"When did you see my file?"

"Pretty much as soon as I knew you were back. In my defence, their computer security has improved a lot since I started working for them. So mission accomplished as a consultant, right?"

"Of course," Steve let himself be pushed into the limo. Really, if he didn't go out he'd just end up hunting down Fury to yell at him, or just going back to his room and thinking about it -

"Enough frowny face, Steve, there are a dozen supermodels who'd love to be in your shoes right now." And Tony talked for the next three hours solid.

It was almost awe-inspiring. He talked and talked, and whenever Steve's attention started to drift Tony's foot would impact his ankle and he'd be off down another ridiculous intriguing tangent and Steve found it surprisingly easy to be dragged along and forget his worries.

Tony insisted on getting out of his limo and walking Steve back to his small room in the bowels of SHIELD HQ. Steve put up the most token of protests.

"I had a good time," Steve said at the door, and gave Tony his best smile. Tony was leaning against the doorframe, finally silent, eyes fixed on Steve. "We should hang out more."

"Well, talking of that," Tony reached out and caught his hand. Steve held his breath. "We could hang out some more now. Ask me in."

"Sure," Steve turned the handle, and led Tony inside. "You want coffee? I have a coffeemaker." He pulled the door shut behind them, and flicked the lock.

Tony leaned his back against the door, and made a face at Steve's room. The place was the size of a postage stamp; he had to find something better for Steve. No wonder he was mopey sometimes, living like this.

"You don't even have a kitchen? This is worse than Thor's place. Put down the coffee, Steve." Tony ran a hand through his hair, and tried a smile. "Do you - look, do you still want to do the casual thing? Friends with benefits, just like you said. You were right."

There was a pause, Steve's smile fading slowly into thoughtfulness, like sex with Tony was a tricky proposition that had to be thought through. Tony held his breath, held perfectly still, not wanting to disrupt it.

"I could do the casual thing," Steve gave him a half-smile, and moved close enough for Tony to grab; which of course Tony did, spinning him and pressing him up against the door.

"Hey," he grinned up at Steve, trying to convey just how good he felt about having sex with Steve again.

"Hey yourself."
"Have I told you how hot you are? Because really, you are stupidly hot. It's completely unfair." He slid his hands under Steve's t-shirt, and Steve made a contented little noise, sliding his hands into Tony's hair.

"Are we going to go to bed?"

"The bed is far. Can't I do you right here?"

"The bed is three steps."

"Three steps is too far if I have to let go." Steve laughed, and then grabbed Tony's ass with one hand and his arm with the other. "Oh, are you going to – oh no, this is undignified." He swallowed laughter as Steve took the necessary three paces and then rolled them down onto the bed. "So undignified, Steve."

"No one saw," Steve murmured. "I won't tell anyone." His lips were soft and a little cool with after-dinner mints; Tony dabbed his tongue out invitingly, and Steve opened for him, groaning in his throat. The kiss got deep and messy very fast, and then Steve broke away to scrabble at the buttons on Tony's shirt.

"In a hurry?" Tony yanked his tie free and got his cufflinks, because hey, hurry was fine with him. Steve was biting on his lower lip, rich colour flushing along his cheekbones. "We have plenty of time. Unless you have an appointment."

"No, I – just want it," and the colour deepened. "I really liked last time."

He hadn't done it since, then; not that it had been likely, in only a few days, but Captain America was a hot ticket and all. Tony tucked away his gloating for later.

"You want me to suck your cock again?"

"Yeah, please. Uh – can I do you, too?"

"Suck me?" Tony asked, and Steve nodded. "Well, I guess I can make time in my schedule." He kicked off his shoes, and let Steve peel his pants and boxers free. "Come on, take your – uh," he broke off when Steve dipped his head cautiously towards Tony's dick. "Carry on, in your own time, whatever," he added hastily.

He put a gentle, encouraging hand on Steve's neck, trying to convey I support your decision to suck or not to suck my cock. Steve licked him, carefully, root to tip, then wrinkled his nose a little. Then he licked again.

"Let me know if I can help you out with anything," Tony said, unable to keep quiet, and Steve gave a half-laugh.

"Sorry, I - "

"No apologies! Take your time. Get to know your way around. Study it at length."

"Okay," Steve wrapped a hand around the base, and tilted it back, examining it. "Um, are you circumcised?"

"I am indeed," Tony said. "Don't worry; they handle pretty much the same."

"Okay," Steve repeated, and dabbed at the tip with his tongue. Then another soft lick, over the slit,
and Tony's breath caught. He slid his hand up Steve's neck to cup his head.

"Suck me, Steve," he murmured. Patience was overrated, really. "Come on. Put your mouth on me." Steve's colour deepened, and he closed his mouth carefully over the end, soft wet heat and the pillow of his tongue, and Tony rocked his hips very slightly, letting the head of his dick slide in and out of Steve's pink lips. "That's beautiful, that's right," he rubbed his thumb through Steve's short hair, prickling against his fingers. "Can you take me deeper?"

Steve could, and Tony was soon nudging up against the back of his throat, watching his eyes widen slightly. That would do for now, they were going to do this again, which meant plenty of time to teach Steve to swallow him whole.

"Move your hand in time," he directed, and Steve set up a slow rhythm that made Tony's toes curl. "Yeah, that's perfect. Yeah. You have a fantastic mouth, you know? I wanted to fuck it from – well, not day one, but pretty early on, I thought, that man has the most fuckable mouth I have ever seen." He tightened his grip, encouraged Steve a little faster, and that was so good, Steve was breathing hard through his nose and his cheeks were burning red.

"Okay," Tony tried to grab his hair, but his hands slipped through the short strands. "Stop, stop."

"That – " Steve glanced up at him. "It wasn't good?"

"Very good, wonderful, come here and kiss me," Tony said on one breath, and Steve gave him a goofy smile. "I just want to fuck you." He pulled at Steve's belt, and yeah, Steve was hard, he hadn't hated sucking dick, at least.

Steve was so good, so eager for it, skin hot under Tony's hands, mouth still clumsy and hands gripping too tight but his body opening for it so easily and sweetly. Tony whispered to him, all the sweet flattery he could think of, how he wanted to do this forever, stay in Steve, with Steve, and Steve whimpered under him and said yes, yes please, Tony -

He fell straight into sleep afterwards, cheek pillowed on Tony's shoulder, and Tony stroked his hair and composed childish little fantasies of punching out anyone who put that sad look in Steve's eyes.

Tony woke up wrapped in a heavy blanket of super soldier, which was pleasant enough but somewhat sticky and oppressive. He squirmed, and Steve grunted and loosened his grip.

"Where you going?" he mumbled.

"Nowhere," Tony flapped the sheet to let some air circulate. "Just trying not to get crushed, you know." Steve rolled over onto his back, and Tony curled up under his arm. As expected, the hollow of Steve's shoulder was a comfy place to put his head.

"We've got an early meeting," Steve said after a moment, and Tony sighed.

"We do? Wait, I know this one. We're meeting some guys about a thing, right?"

"Something like that." Steve nuzzled Tony's hair. "C'mon. We should get up."

"No time for morning sex?" he dragged his nails over Steve's nipple, and Steve moaned softly. "Bet I can get you off in under ten minutes."
"Really?"

Eight minutes, but getting Tony off took another five. Tony stumbled out of the bed, trying to feel motivated; Steve was still flat out, a blissful dopey smile on his face.

A few sheets of paper on the dresser caught Tony's eye. He picked them up, because if Steve had left private stuff out it was his own fault, and laughed.

"Oh wow, is this you?
Skinny, tiny Steve; sitting next to a stunningly attractive dark-haired woman in a military uniform.

"Me and Peggy. Agent Carter had them. Souvenirs of her aunt."

"Pretty."
The woman was looking at Steve with exasperated amusement while he grinned at the camera; he was tiny, and Tony felt a twinge of -- of something. Like he wanted to put his arms around Steve, and protect him. Which was ridiculous, because Steve was now an enormous slab of muscle. He looked up, at Steve, sitting up the bed in the nude, and gave in to the urge.

"Mmm," Steve rubbed his cheek against Tony's shoulder, eyes falling shut. "Want to go back to bed?"

"Hey, sometimes I just want to cuddle." Steve opened an eye. "No, I'm kidding. Let's -- wait, meeting."

"Oh yeah," Steve pushed him gently away. "Oh damn, we're going to be late."

The meeting was definitely on the unproductive side. After about twenty minutes it descended into Steve interrogating Fury about Armin Zola and other Nazi war criminals; no one noticed when Tony got up and snuck out.

"Hey boss," Happy looked, well, happy. "Where we going?"

"Just home," Tony settled himself into the back seat. "Oh wait, maybe we should pick up breakfast."
The SHIELD cafeteria was a Government-run cafeteria, which was all that needed to be said about it.

He was preoccupied enough with keeping honey-sticky croissant crumbs off his tie he barely looked up when they rolled to a stop halfway home; he only paid attention when Happy tapped on the horn.

"What the hell?" Tony peered out the front. "Are those mustangs?"

"They don't look wild," Happy hit a longer blast, and the horses danced and reared, but remained scattered over the road. They were huge, glossy beasts, with neatly clipped manes and tails and huge feathered hooves.

"They look like police horses," Tony decided. "Where do police horses live when they're not policing?"

"It explains why they're not too upset by the horn." Happy turned to look at Tony, who raised his eyebrows expectantly.

"Well, champ, better get out and shoo them." Happy's face dropped, mournfully, and he got out of the car. Tony watched for a moment as he chased the horses up and down, waving the briefcase
chained to his wrist, and then he returned to his breakfast.

He didn't look up when the car door clicked closed again.

"You get them all?" He looked up when there was no answer, and stared at the back of someone's head. Someone with hair. "Who the hell - " Tony made a lunge for the door, but it opened in front of him and Loki stepped in, expression blank. The driver gunned the car as Loki pulled the door shut, and there was a horrible thump. Tony looked out the window to see Happy lying in a heap. There were no horses.

"Sit down, Stark," Loki said coolly, and Tony rounded on him.

"Asshole! If he's dead - " he choked back I'll see you never get back to Asgard because it was just possible that Loki could still be persuaded to help. He switched his gaze to the driver instead, and met dark eyes in the rear mirror.

"Good morning, Mr Stark. I believe you've heard of me."

"Oh yeah, right, I think I know who you are. What was it – oh yeah, the Red Skull." Loki winced, very slightly.

"Have your little joke, Mr Stark."

"You do know Stark Industries doesn't pay ransoms, right?"

"I don't want a ransom, Stark. I want you. Well, to be entirely accurate, I want Dr Zola; but I believe you'll make an adequate substitute."

"You want me to build weapons?"

"Yes, Mr Stark, I do."

"Well," Tony leaned his head back against the leather seat. "We'll see." Loki waggled his eyebrows, and Tony stared at him. Loki rolled his eyes, and made an odd sign with his hand; the horns? Was Loki cursing him? Another eye-roll, a tilt of the dark head towards his spread fingers, and Tony suddenly realised he meant telephone.

Schmidt hadn't taken his cellphone. He propped one ankle on the opposite knee, and slipped out his phone.

I've been kidnapped by the Red Skull, he tapped in. Heading north in my car. Rescue me? Plz send ambulance to Happy, car hit him..

He sent it to his SHIELD contact group; Natasha could tell Pepper. Or they could rescue him before Pepper had to know, that would be best.

And of course, his phone let out a chime as he got an automatic reply back from Fury's email address.

"What was that?" Schmidt said sharply. "Loki?"

"He has a communications device," Loki held out his hand.

"A cellphone," the Skull said, in a tone edged with impatience.

"Give it to me." Loki snapped his fingers. Tony dropped it in his hand, and watched him glance over
"It doesn't seem to be active." He wound down the window, and threw it out.

They ditched the limo at a truck stop, stepping into an old beater. Schmidt didn't talk; Loki didn't talk, but he blindfolded Tony.

"So where are we going?" Tony said after five minutes of darkness. "Do you have a secret base yet? Where did you get a secret base? How are you doing anything?"

"I have... resources," Schmidt said. "The Reich still exists, even in your precious America."

"Oh. Neo-nazis? Are we going to some crappy survivalist bunker?" Tony gnawed on his thumbnail. "I'm just saying, I don't think they'll have the equipment I need."

"We'll see."

They drove over smooth roads and then more weathered ones, the suspension jolting under them. They changed cars again, into something higher off the ground and louder; sounded expensive. Probably stolen. They ditched that, and Tony's arm was taken in a firm grip and he was led across rough ground at a speed that made his footing nervous.

He stumbled on an edge, only the tightening fingers above his elbow keeping him from falling, and Loki's voice spoke close to his ear.

"Steps."

"Great, thanks," Tony swallowed the acid words that wanted to come, and took slow, careful steps down on to regular stairs.

Soft clicking; the louder clunk of a door unlocking. He moved forward into stale air, the feel of metal flexing under his feet, and the door locked behind him.

"Where are we?" Tony said. Loki's hand left his arm, and then the blindfold was plucked off.

Tony blinked and squinted in the harsh fluorescent light. He stood at the top of a broad staircase built of metal grates, looking down into some kind of bunker, filled with odd outcroppings of machinery and worktables.

He took a slow step down, then another, eyes scanning over things, trying to form some kind of idea of where he was, what was happening. His gaze settled on a familiar shape printed on a dark bulk, and his breath caught.

"Are you kidding me?" Tony said in dismay, descending the remaining stairs and pulling the dustcover aside to reveal the Stark Industries logo. "How much stuff did my father never tell me about? And how did you know about this? There is no way Hammer told you this, he did not know this."

He turned, and looked up; Loki stood beside the door, now wearing a green robe over leather instead of the hoodie and jeans. His eyes were fixed on Schmidt, who gripped the hand rail so hard it warped a little, staring down at Tony with dark, still eyes. The skin of his face moved smooth and realistic as he spoke.

"I have my resources," Schmidt said again. "It seems your father did not have faith in Captain America; when he learned of my plan, he had this place built. Just in case. He expanded it during the
war with Russia."

"It wasn't an actual war," Tony corrected. "Never mind."

"He kept it equipped until his death." Schmidt slowly descended the stairs; Tony's skin prickled.

"Twenty-five years ago. It won't have what I need."

Schmidt pointed to a pool of brighter light, a few yards on; Tony moved, unwilling, towards it.

A lit lamp on a wide desk fitted with decades-old computer apparatus. And on top, several modern laptops, an open binder with notes in a familiar hand. Tony shook his head.

"Hammertech? And these are laptops, no good for - "

"Armin Zola built me what I needed in the Nineteen-Forties. You will do exactly what I want." His fingers bit into Tony's arm, suddenly and shockingly painful; Tony looked around to find his dark eyes very close. "Do you understand me, Stark? I can make life so very painful for you. Without your battlesuit, you are nothing."

"Yeah," Tony said, on a dry breath, and remembered breathing water in a cave in Afghanistan. "Yeah, I understand."

Steve was having a wonderful morning, right up until they got to the meeting. Tony had been... perfect. Just how he'd wanted it to be, all smiles and affection and warmth, and the promise of more in the future. Steve could just have pulled the covers up over their heads and stayed put forever, but duty, as ever, conspired against him.

He'd nursed the vague hope Tony would stick around and they could have lunch together, exchanging more smiles, maybe making a date for more sex. Tonight, even. But apparently it hadn't been good enough to make Tony sit through an angry meeting about things he wasn't interested in. He'd probably gone home, and Steve wouldn't see him until the next meeting. Steve had even forgotten to get his telephone number.

All in all, he wasn't feeling very friendly, and what had been a relatively civilised discussion was rapidly descending into snarling, and the relaxed languor that had been so enjoyable had become a full-body rigidity that made his temples and jaw ache.

"How could you keep - "

"He's a hundred years old, Rogers, you want to throw him in a jail?" Fury threw up his hands. "I am not pro-Nazi, but the guy's been co-operating with authority the whole time you've been frozen. The only thing he won't do is build weapons."

Fury was right, of course, but that just made Steve angrier.

"It shouldn't have happened at all!"

"Well I can't deal with shouldn't that happened before I was born!" Fury slumped back into his seat. "It's not something we ever wanted you to know about. Believe me, I try to spare you these things - "

"It's no favour to keep me in the dark."
"You getting something out of this knowledge, Cap?"

"Stark's been kidnapped," Agent Hill interrupted, and Steve and Fury both swivelled round to glare at her. She raised her eyebrows. "If that's not a priority, he was in his limo, so they've presumably got the Iron Man suit, which is a priority. I have to arrange an ambulance and search team, excuse me."

"What?" Steve lunged to grab her arm, and she made a sharp annoyed noise at him.

"Check your phone." She twisted out of his grip, and went for the door.

Steve scrambled out his phone, as did Fury. He'd hoped for a joke, some kind of prank on Hill, but surely Tony wouldn't joke, not to him, not about that -

Tony in the hands of Schmidt? He saw Bucky, strapped to the table, limp and bloodied. Saw Tony in his place, eyes blank and empty, the arc reactor dead in his chest - or would it keep burning, when Tony was dead?

"Oh God," he breathed. "Fury!"

"All right, Maria's on it," Fury snapped his phone shut. "We'll track his phone, and get a helicopter up. Track the armour, too. Schmidt was a pilot, wasn't he?"

"His limo has a tracker in it too," Natasha said. "I'll get people on it. Steve, how long did it take you to learn to fly a plane?"

"About an hour," Steve couldn't look away from the little glowing screen, the silver grey bubble with the black text inside. He pictured the armour, the faceplate swinging back to reveal the crimson snarl of Schmidt, clashing with the rich, clear red Tony favoured. Hot-rod red, he'd called it, and Steve squeezed his eyes tight shut. "I don't - the armour will be more complicated. Will it even fit?"

"The briefcase armour is more adaptable," Natasha said. "Maybe."

"What can I do?"

"Go suit up," Fury had his phone open, thumbs moving fast over the keypad. "Be ready."

"Does Ms Potts know? Someone should tell her." He fumbled with the phone - he couldn't see her on the CC list.

"I should go to her," Natasha scrambled up. "If this leaks out - how many people did he send this to, Jesus."

"Cap. Go get into costume, wait for the call." Fury pointed to the door, and Steve went, obediently.

Steve got into his new uniform, and tried not to think about Tony's hands on him. He lasted five nervous minutes, pacing around the room, checking his telephone every thirty seconds, and then he went in search of Sharon.

She was on the phone, and typing frantically at her computer; he squinted over her shoulder, ignoring the roll of her eyes. Some kind of mapping system, picking out routes to the north of L.A.

"I thought there was a tracker?" he asked, and Sharon picked up a pen long enough to scrawl ARMOUR NOT TAKEN before returning to her typing. On the one hand, at least Schmidt didn't have the armour; but now Tony was utterly unprotected. He hadn't realised how much he'd been
clinging to the idea that Tony would swoop back in, dressed in metal and smugness. "What about the limo?"

"It seems Mr Stark doesn't like being tracked." Hill came out of Fury's office. She frowned at him, absently, and held up a tiny metal gadget. "We found the tracker from his car attached to Director Fury's desk."

"I'm going to kill him," Steve said, suddenly breathless with rage at Tony's cavalier idiocy, and Hill nodded.

"That seems to be the agreed on course." She flipped open her folder. "We also found his phone on the roadside three miles north of where we found Happy Hogan."

"Is he alive?"

"Yes. The car didn't have a chance to get up much speed before hitting him, fortunately; some cracked ribs and a mild concussion. He reported something about horses blocking the road, which then vanished. Normally I'd blame the head injury, but if Loki's involved..." she gave a frustrated shrug. "It's very hard to know what to believe when you're dealing with someone who has powers of illusion."

"So what now?"

"So now we're tracking the car. It's distinctive enough. We've got a picture of Loki... assuming he's not disguised himself."

"Or the car," Steve said, mind recoiling from the near-infinite possibilities open to Loki. How broad were his powers? Could he ensure that no-one saw the car at all? Surely that would be too risky, though. He could disguise it as something else, perhaps...

"Yes. Stark's a celebrity, with any luck someone will recognise him. We'll track him down. And it's not like he's helpless; he's dealt with this kind of thing before."

The thought of Tony in the hands of terrorists was no comfort at all.

As the afternoon wore on, retrieving him began to seem less and less likely. Steve dragged a chair up to Sharon's desk, and watched her work; the car was discovered after less than an hour, empty and abandoned at a rest stop with no unidentified fingerprints.

"We've got a dozen agents combing the place," Sharon murmured to him. "And we've sent for Hogun. If anyone can find the car they took - "

"He can't track a deer in a stampede," Steve said, and Sharon shook her head.

"Maybe someone saw them."

"Maybe."

At ten PM, Fury ordered the team to stand down and get some rest. Steve got as far as his door, and then just stood outside it, head resting against the veneer. His sheets would still be tumbled, smelling of sweat and musk, saturated with memories of last night.
He slipped our, and jogged out through the city – idiotic, he knew, there were kidnappings going on, he hadn’t even told anyone where he was going – and ran all the way to Tony's house, where he banged on the door.

"Good evening, Captain," Jarvis said.

"Can you let me in?"

"Ms Potts ordered me to let no one in." Steve slapped his hand on the door and wondered if she'd think he was crazy if he called. "Of course, if someone were to let themselves in through the Iron Man's exit route, which can be manually opened by entering the code, that would be different." Steve shut his eyes, and pictured Tony's hand moving over the workshop's keypad; yeah.

"Where is it?"

A discreet square of metal set into the concrete; it was engraved with a loose representation of the arc reactor, and the keypad was barely noticeable, small level keys in the grid pattern at the centre. Climbing down the sides was simple enough, and he dropped the twenty feet to the ground with ease.

"Can I assist you, Captain?"

"Not unless you can help me find Tony," he said tiredly.

"Is Mr Stark missing?" A note of concern.

"Ms Potts didn't tell you? He's been kidnapped. By a Nazi." Jarvis was silent. "Any ideas?"

"I'm afraid not, Captain."

"I'm just going to go get some sleep." He made for the stairs. The lights followed him, flicking off behind him, and Steve settled down, fully dressed, in Tony's bedroom. The sheets were fresh; no smell of Tony. He sighed, and shut his eyes.

He was woken up by a shriek, and bounded to his feet; then Ms Potts put her hand over her heart.

"You scared me." She gave him a reproachful look. "What are you doing here?"

"Just, um. Taking a nap." He was blushing, he knew it; Ms Potts was looking at him with suspicion now. "What are you doing here?"

"Looking for clues," Natasha's voice called from the hallway. "It's possible Schmidt will try to get access to the house, and through it, SHIELD."

"You can access SHIELD computers from here?"

"You're not supposed to be able to," Natasha said darkly.

"Ms Potts," Jarvis said. "Captain. I have a message from Mr Stark."

Twenty-one years ago, the Internet was just getting started. Howard Stark, being as enthusiastically up to date as ever, had linked the computers in his hide-out with the ones at Stark Industries. Of course, the computers at Stark Industries had been upgraded at least eight times since then, which meant that the connections were dubious at best; Tony had spent the last three hours interfering with
his own computers and hoping someone would notice.

Loki had been locked in the office with him, but hadn't so much as glanced at his screen; he could have been playing Tetris for all Loki noticed. Of course, Loki might have a Twitter, he couldn't be that knowledgeable about computers, so Tony was left to his own devices.

Of course, that meant that three hours later when Schmidt returned, Tony had absolutely nothing to show or tell him.

"I'm doing my best," Tony said, and his fingers flew over the keyboard. Then he waited. The computer pondered, and Tony tapped the little hourglass that appeared on the screen. "It's pending. Pondering. Thinking. These things are twenty years out of date. I mean it's sort of a miracle they're even functioning, still. And it's a hell of a long time since I used a computer like this. I'm still trying to get my bearings, I - "

Schmidt clicked the safety off his gun. Tony threw up his hands, words drying up. He really hated having guns pointed at him. He knew in explicit detail what would happen to his body if Schmidt pulled the trigger.

"I know delaying tactics when I see them, Stark." The barrel of the gun rested on his collarbone, a cold little point that made his heartbeat race. "If you cannot do this, or will not do this, you are no use to me. I will kill you, and return my efforts to retrieving Dr Zola."

"I," Tony swallowed. "Okay. Why don't I try for a little longer?"

"Why don't you?" And Schmidt walked away, the door clicking shut behind him. What was he doing out there? Going through Howard Stark's projects, looking for weapons, for new sources of power? Had Hammer given him anything useful?

"Okay, can I just ask, why don't we grab the Tesseract and get out of here?" Tony looked over at Loki, who deigned to look at him, eyebrows arched disdainfully.

"Grab away, Stark. The door would appear to be locked."

"Not to you." That just got him a one-shouldered shrug. Thank you, Mr Cooperative. "So," Tony tapped his fingers. "Study the Tesseract. That's even what Schmidt wants me to do. Okay. There's got to be a way to tap it."

An hour later, he'd circumvented the primitive password protection and had the whole system laid out to him, which was progress enough he felt safe relaxing back in his chair and looking up at Loki. He was sitting on a table, his back to the wall and his knees pulled up to his chest.

"Why did my father keep so many secrets?" Tony inquired in Loki's general direction. Loki made a soft, amused sound, eyes sliding sideways to meet Tony's. "You think that's funny?"

"Somewhat." He rubbed at the back of his neck, and sighed. Tony eyed him appraisingly. He looked tired, his pale skin ghastly in the bleak lighting.

"Can you get me out of here?" Worth a try, but Loki's lips compressed into a thin line.

"No."

"What say next time Schmidt comes in, we take him down and get out? Then we can call -" Loki was already shaking his head. "Why not?"
"Because," Loki looked up, stared at the ceiling. Tony sighed, and tapped a finger on the desk, and Loki's eyes dropped to him. "Because... my powers don't work well on him."

"They don't?" That was new. He'd assumed that if he could get Loki's help, that would be it, but if Loki couldn't rely on his magic... Even with two of them, Schmidt would be a challenge. He remembered the fight between Schmidt and Steve, brief but startlingly violent, the world around them suddenly fragile as their bodies tore through brick and wood. Loki's Asgardian body would probably take that kind of damage. Tony, without his armour, would not.

"I'm not sure why." Loki was addressing the ceiling again. "He sees my illusions... but he doesn't really believe them. He always knows which is the real me. It's not the - " he stopped, and ducked his head, hugging his knees tighter. "I don't understand it."

"I don't see how a super soldier would be immune to weird Asgardian tech."

"Your Captain didn't seem to be immune."

"What did you do to Steve?" Tony stiffened, and Loki glanced up, frown deepening.

"Nothing. But he didn't comment on my clothes."

"Yes he did," Tony corrected. "He told me after he thought they must be - "

"An illusion." Loki's mouth turned down. "He could tell, then?"

"He said you didn't get the fabric right."

"That's not what I'm talking about. Anyone can pick up a mistake in an illusion. Schmidt just sees through them - I fooled him once, but after that he knew."

"Great." Tony turned back to the computer, and typed a query. He supposed he should count himself lucky the damn thing didn't run on punch cards. The files seemed to be organised by project; the simplest method, of course, would be to open each file, check the contents, and try to spot a pattern.

He reached for the laptop, and opened up a new spreadsheet. How long would indexing the whole damn system take? He tried not to think of Schmidt's dark eyes, banked with rage.

"Where were you, anyway? We expected you to be there." He missed having JARVIS to talk to; could he train Loki to say yes, sir and affect a British accent?

"I was," Loki licked his lips, and his gaze wandered over Tony's shoulder. "Indisposed."

"Indisposed? Schmidt was knocking over a high-security military base, and you were lying down in a dark room with a damp cloth on your brow?" He opened another file and stared at the data instead, and something from a half-forgotten myth swam up. "You're not knocked up, are you?"

"What?"

"Are you pregnant with a little Nazi?" Why had Howard had so many projects? Fifty years of them right here. This was going to take forever. Had he ordered them by date? Importance? Codename?"

"What?" Loki's face scrunched up in an expression of undiluted shock. "Are you insane?"

"Okay, guess not." Tony shrugged, relieved to find the madness apparently had limits. Immortal super-Nazis from space, whatever, anything was a reasonable fear. He opened his mouth to ask about the eight legged horse thing, and then decided he didn't really have time for digressions."What,
"I was shot," Loki said, and then looked faintly chagrined. Tony glanced up from the screen long enough to arch an eyebrow. "Schmidt... doesn't trust me."

"I'm really confused now. Shot?" If Fury wasn't such a dick, Tony would know all about the project already, and know the codename, and be able to find it. Of course, in this circumstance Fury wouldn't really want him to be able to find it, so he supposed logic was on Fury's side.

"Before he left. He shot me. It incapacitated me for a time."

Tony sat back, and stared at Loki, who looked too skinny and pale and tired.

"Wait. Are you guarding me, or are you a prisoner too?"

"I'm not a prisoner, Stark. Get back to your work; Schmidt will be back soon enough, and if you don't have results for him - "

"You're not going to bleed out or anything, are you?"

"Of course not." Loki scowled. "I didn't... I'm not used to bullets, that's all."

"I don't think they're the kind of thing you get used to."

"Back to work. Or I'll tell Schmidt..." That trailed off into nothing, Loki apparently deciding that just hinting at a threat would be enough to motivate Tony.

He wasn't wrong.

"You must have some information," Natasha said, and Hammer folded his arms and rolled his eyes, defiant in the face of her glare, uncaring that Hawkeye was soft-footing behind him, gun in hand. "Come on. We know Schmidt is holed up in one of Howard Stark's old facilities. Tell us where it is, and you might get some clemency."

"And I'm telling you I don't know!" Hammer looked outraged. "I never helped them!"

"You took them Einstein-Rosen grenades." Natasha scowled. "You handed over cutting-edge military technology to - "

"Miss, I don't think you understand. I've explained this. I was under a spell. Loki was using his divine powers on me. I was brainwashed. The grenades weren't even working properly when I took them." He twisted his head round to look at Clint, who gave him a faintly lunatic grin. "Isn't there someone else I can talk to?"

Steve sighed, and let his head rest against the two-way mirror. Hammer was a long way from the dapper figure they'd first brought in; the orange jumpsuit was a psychological trick, apparently. Clint had wanted to shave his head, but Fury had ruled against it.

According to Hammer, he'd been put under a spell by Loki, terrorised by Schmidt, given only the barest minimum of assistance under extreme duress, and escaped to the arms of the Avengers at the first opportunity. *Bullshit* Natasha had said when they'd broken for lunch, but he was sticking to his story.

"I think he's telling the truth," Fury said softly. Steve rolled an incredulous eye towards him. "About Howard's facility, I mean. I can't think of any reason he'd know about it. Hell, it doesn't seem like
Tony knew."

"Someone else must have an idea," Steve turned away from the window, and moved to make himself another cup of coffee. "Even Howard couldn't have an entire underground bunker no one knew about, surely?"

"I didn't think he could have one I didn't know about," Fury's mouth twitched a little, the shadow of a smile. "He was always a man with more than one plan going on. But how could Schmidt know? As far as we can tell, his only allies are Loki and Hammer. I don't see how Loki could know about it."

"Neither do I," Steve shut his eyes. "Loki can spy, I think... but he can only learn what people are talking about, that way." And from what Tony had said in his short, garbled message, the bunker had been disused for two decades. Why would someone be talking about it now?

"The only possible source is Hammer. But I'd swear Hammer was telling the truth - he may hate Stark, but he must know if..."

If Tony dies. Steve swallowed, and tried to think of the onward spill of events without Tony. The Iron Man would be snapped up by the Government - perhaps they'd put Clint or Natasha in it. Stark Enterprises, he supposed would manufacture them rather than let another company take the profit. Hammer couldn't hope to be put in charge of that, not now. Surely.

And being helpful now would support Hammer's case he hadn't wanted to help Schmidt.

Who else, though? Where had Schmidt found allies, who knew Howard Stark's secrets.

His eyes cut sideways to Fury, still as a statue. Not that he thought Fury would conspire with Schmidt... but if anyone knew where Stark Sr's base was...

"Didn't Peggy and Howard help found SHIELD?" he asked. Fury nodded. "She - " he cut himself off, thoughts running ahead. Fury's eyebrow shot up. "I was going to say it could be in the records - " but Fury was already tapping at his earpiece.

"Hill, please arrange for Agent Carter to be brought in for questioning. Low-key, please."

Tony had located a general inventory file, which had short summaries of every project Howard had ever worked on. Looking for the project with the most truly screwed-up results had given him the codename *Cosmic Cube*, which was making turning up experimental results somewhat easier.

Tony had shown Schmidt a few of the experiment files; he'd been pleased enough Tony had decided to chance his luck, and insist that he needed to see the Tesseract itself. Schmidt had given him that flat reptilian stare and then nodded.

It was enthroned on a little pedestal in a glass case, in an alcove. It took Tony several seconds to realise that Howard had probably had a place prepared for it; if the world fell apart, Howard had obviously planned to take everything possible into his bolthole.

And if there was a place for the Tesseract all ready, in theory - Tony moved to the nearest computer terminal, and turned it on.

"What are you doing, Stark?" He froze, and lifted his hands.
"I'm just wondering if there are any sensors in that alcove."

He slowly lowered his hands back to the console, to no objections, and hit a few keys. Bingo. Huh. "And according to the readings I'm getting, that's just a lightbulb." He set the laptop he carried down on the desk. "Let me crosscheck with some of the results Howard got back in the day."

The sensors here were basic things; there were experiment chambers which would allow for more detailed readings. They'd have to move the Tesseract for that - by all accounts, moving the Tesseract was easy enough - you just didn't come into direct contact with the thing. Every file he'd yet located on the Tesseract opened with a firm warning about touching it, even with gloves on. Dr Olafsen had apparently been explicit on the subject.

How had he known? The same ancient legends that had located it in the first place, or had they just handed it to some disfavoured minion and watched them dissolve? How many Nazis were floating around the world tree?

"Wouldn't it obey you?" Schmidt's voice came to him, and Tony turned his chair a little, so he could watch them. Loki was close to the glass, face lit blue. Schmidt hovered at his shoulder. When he spoke, his skin - his 'skin' - bunched oddly at his jaw. Tony hoped he didn't decide to dispense with the disguise altogether. "You are Odin's son, are you not?"

"It has been long away from Asgard. Lost before my - birth." Loki frowned at it. "I don't know... how it works. Whether it would recognise me in some way."

"You know nothing of it?" Schmidt leaned closer. Loki's shoulders hunched. He was as tall, perhaps taller than Schmidt, but the way he stood and walked seemed calculated to present him as smaller. Harmless.

Tony had worn lifts in his shoes since he was sixteen; if Howard was five foot nine, Tony would be five foot ten. The Iron Man left him as tall and almost as wide as Thor. He'd never studied to be smaller, and the way Loki ducked his head and spread his hands creeped him out, a little.

"I found an index of my father's files." Tony interrupted, before Loki could shrink any more. Schmidt's head came round, and oh yes, distracting him from Loki meant all that lovely Nazi attention was focused on him. He forced a cocky grin onto his face. "We'll be able to find all the project files that way. He worked on the Tesseract on and off all his life."

Schmidt stalked up behind him, and stared down at the green lines on the screen. "Show me how to access this."

"I can't on this - " a hand landed on his shoulder and began to squeeze. "I just need a different terminal! Jesus, calm down. I'm co-operating. These computers are ancient pieces of crap, this one's loaded for sensor data, we'll need one of the ones designed for file access, okay? I'll show you how to use the computers."

He wished he could claim to be faking the terrified bleat in his voice, but the ache in his shoulder left a weakness through his limbs that had nothing to do with the pain. The thought of being tortured again set panic as a clog in his throat, heart pounding in his ears. And worse, he was cooperating, so if Schmidt took exception to him there was no more he could do, nothing he could say to make the pain stop, and Loki wouldn't save him. Maybe he'd help.

He picked out a terminal in the corner, where Schmidt would have a bad view of the rest of the room - not that he couldn't use any of them once he understood the principle, but Tony was going to hope the Nazi liking for order and routine wasn't just an urban myth. Schmidt sat down in the chair, and
Tony logged in, slowly, partly because his hands were shaking and partly so Schmidt could see what he was doing.

"You need to make it list the files, and then you can pick out the ones you want," he said. "This directory - group of files - is where I've found Howard's Tesseract notes so far." There were easier ways of doing it, but why bring up those? And no need to mention the other directories he was investigating; Howard had kept more than his own notes here. The thought steadied his nerves a little; he still had secrets. "I'm trying to decipher them - they're cross-referenced, and the computers are slow, and it's silly but the printer ink has all dried up so I can't - " he cut off the babble, and shook his head. "Anyway. You can see everything there. I'll just go and - " he took a step back, and then another three as Schmidt rose.

He folded his gloves hands around one of the big, blocky machines - some kind of spectograph, Tony was guessing this as, though it looked to weigh about half a ton. Schmidt braced his feet and pulled, and the machine moved, with a terrible grinding noise. He stepped slowly backwards, dragging it with him, face still though his shoulders were straining under his coat, and then he let go and walked back to his desk. Tony could see the Tesseract, now, Loki still staring at it.

"Don't leave my sight," Schmidt told him, and sat down. His fingers moved over the keyboard, slowly at first, and then he sorted the files by date and opened the earliest. Preliminary investigations on the nature of the Tesseract; and Schmidt would know all that already. With access to Howard's notes, and his own knowledge, he might not need Tony.

Tony scuttled back to the Tesseract. Loki had finally stepped away from the glass, and was staring blankly down at the computer screen.

"I guess you can't make head nor tail?"

"We don't..." Loki waved a hand at the screen. "All these little characters. It's not how we do things."

"Right, sure, you don't do - " Tony bit hard on his thumb, and thought about Asgard. He had seen anything like a computer or screen. Even in Frigga's own room, her personal workshop, where presumably she did her work, there had been nothing, no clue as to how she wove her technology.

Weaving, though, she had been weaving. Tony could see her hands clicking back and forth, building patterns from loose threads. Think of it as a loom, she'd said, and smiled. "You magnificent bitch," he said in tones of great respect, and Loki looked up, and frowned. He wasn't bothering to make himself look small; apparently Tony didn't rate that now. "Not you. Hey. Hey," Tony put his hands over his mouth, and shut his eyes. Loki wiggled his fingers to do magic. Frigga... wove? Doing her magic right there while he watched. Or she built machines, like the observatory. Thor threw his hammer at things, or spun it. The Tesseract apparently worked on wishes. The Bifrost... "You know all those little lines, the patterns, that happen when the Bifrost gates form."

"No," Loki said, and Tony grabbed his arm and shook it, ignoring the haughty look he got.

"When you appear, you're standing in the middle of a ring of patterns."

"Yes," Loki said. "What about them?"

"Those are mathematical equations?"

"Well," Loki's brow furrowed a little. "Well, I suppose so. Yes, mathematical equations is probably
the simplest way to describe them."

Elaborate patterns, carved on the Observatory, woven into fabric, engraved into Thor's hammer. Did Loki’s fingers describe intricate patterns? But the Tesseract was an unornamented cube of crystal.

Still, it was a start.

"Okay, so, show me what you'd draw." Tony forced Loki’s fingers to close around the pen, and held it against the floor. Loki scrunched up his nose. "Come on, just sketch it out for me - "

"What are you doing, Stark?" Schmidt snapped, and Jesus, that guy moved far too quietly. Tony sat back on his heels and tried to look studious and cooperative.

"Learning sorcery. Loki - hngk," Tony clawed suddenly at the glove around his throat. "No, I - ack."

"Do not play with me, Stark," he hissed.

"It's how they do science," Tony forced out, and the hand loosened. "It's not magic, you know that. The Asgardians have a different system of notation. More complex. I theorise that the Tesseract is built around a concept of multidimensional space - ow!"

He hit the floor hard, and looked up to see the barrel of the gun pointing at him.

"You are trying my patience, Stark."

"Okay, you know, the Tesseract is complicated stuff, and I - I am doing my best." The words choked up in his throat, and chased themselves around in his brain; he couldn't quite think what to say, to convince Schmidt -

"I think he's right about the Tesseract," Loki spoke up, and Schimdt turned his gaze away from Tony. "It seems the Midgardians have only recently discovered multidimensional space and negative energy."

Schmidt lifted the gun, enough so Tony couldn't actually see down the barrel, and that was enough to let the words free.

"Yeah. Quantum field theory, right? That was - you know about that. Negative energy would have been, uh,'48? They measured it. The Asgardians have to use it to stabilise their wormholes, right Loki?"

"Yes," Loki drew out the word doubtfully. "More or less. The technical aspects of Asgardian science are hard to communicate, even in the Allspeak. The Midgardian scientists have yet to develop the vocabulary sufficient to the mysteries."

"Zola spoke of negative energy," Schmidt stepped back. "All right. I will let you pursue this a little more."

"Good choice," Tony assured him. "I'm sure there's things to learn here. Useful things."

"I'm sorry," was the first thing Steve said, and Sharon rolled her eyes. He set his folding chair down outside her cell, conscientiously placing it behind the yellow line painted on the floor. So she couldn't lunge through the bars and snap his neck, presumably. She’d been enthroned in a very pleasant cell, with daylight bulb and a comfortable bunk and a pile of books and a widescreen TV with movies on
demand. If you didn't mind having a video camera in your bathroom, it was great.

Sharon had submitted to voluntary custody rather than arrest. Fury had assured Steve that it was standard procedure, and nothing bad would happen to her, and of course we're not going to torture her Steve, for God's sake.

"You're career death," she told him, only slightly waspishly. She was still wearing her black leather jumpsuit, which was sleeker in several places he hadn't previously realised were hidden pockets. "So did you tell Fury I was a double agent?"

"Something I said gave him the idea," he admitted. "I didn't mean to, I meant - "

"It's all right," she quirked a smile. "This is no real hardship."

Just a precaution, Fury had said. As soon as they proved her innocence -

"Just, they thought Peggy might have known something about Howard's hidden facility."

"She very probably did," Sharon settled back in her chair, propping one foot on the opposite knee. She looked perfectly relaxed; maybe this was standard procedure, and SHIELD agents were always being locked up here for safekeeping. "Aunt Peggy and he were quite close when they worked together. The bunker's probably in the SHIELD records somewhere; when they track that down, they can track who's accessed the records, and then they'll clear me." Her mouth tightened, barely visible. If they didn't find those records, well. There was no evidence against Sharon, just suspicion, but suspicion would be enough to kill her career. And Steve would have done it.

He shouldn't have said anything - but -

"I'm sorry, I had to." He couldn't let Tony die, couldn't let Schmidt gain control over the Tesseract's power. But to ruin Sharon's life seemed the cruelest cost; he could so easily picture Peggy's pride and joy in her beloved niece. But Peggy would have understood. She'd put her own career on the line before - but that was hers to give. Steve had just -

"Of course you did," Sharon broke into the increasingly tangled mess of his thoughts. "Steve, I get it. You're just doing your job. I do understand that."

Of course she did; and Steve felt guilty again for doubting her. Like she didn't know the importance of what they were dealing with.

Enough moping; he and Sharon could talk things out. No one upstairs had time to go through this mess with him. Start with the basics.

"Who else would Howard have confided in?"

"People who wouldn't talk," Sharon said promptly. "So... people he trusted. People he employed. People he'd expect to take down into the bunker with him, if the worst happened? People he took there to work with him. People who worked on the bunker."

"Too many," Steve muttered. "And how could Schmidt know?" He'd been here longer than Steve, but he'd been in hiding; and he hadn't had the concentrated attention that Steve had benefited from, everyone willing to show him how things worked whenever he'd showed mild curiosity.

He really wished he hadn't spent all that time moping. There was still so much he needed to know, and if Schmidt got away with this because Steve had been too self-absorbed -
Just like he was being now. Focus. Schmidt had access to newspapers, libraries. Perhaps he’d learned to use the Internet; there were places that gave classes. No doubt he’d acquired cash, if not credit. But what could he have discovered that SHIELD couldn't find, with all its resources?

"Did Schmidt know Stark during the war, or before it?"

"He could have done before, I suppose... I thought from Tony’s message the base was built during the war. And Howard was only my age; he was brilliant, but still young when the war broke out. He can’t have known Schmidt well." Not that Howard hadn’t worked with Nazis; Steve’s brain still shied away from that, that Howard had known Zola well enough to introduce him to his son. Had he cared? He'd never known Bucky well, so perhaps Zola's crimes had faded into the background for him. Perhaps in thirty years they'd be nothing much to Steve, and he shouldn't judge Howard like this.

This wasn't helping. Focus.

"I was just wondering why he went after Tony." Sharon said, and surely that was a silly question?

"Because Tony builds the best weapons.” Sharon hummed a little. She hunched forward, folding her arms on her knees. Her face was tight with thought.

"But he doesn't, does he? He's stopped."

"What do you mean?” He couldn't quite see where she was going with this - it wasn't as if he'd forgotten, and technology couldn't have moved on that fast, it wasn't as if Tony didn't keep an eye on the War Machine's weaponry.

"I mean that whenever I see Tony Stark in the papers, he's a superhero. He's a billionaire. Sometimes he's even an engineer and cellphone designer. They never describe him as a weapons designer any more - sometimes an ex-arms merchant, but - "

"So where did Schmidt get the idea from." Steve nodded, mind racing. If Schmidt was looking for a weapons designer he'd come up with someone like - well, like Hammer. Even if he found out that Tony used to be the best, he wouldn't pick on a retired weapons designer. "He wouldn't have got it from Hammer; Hammer hates Tony."

"Loki wouldn't know either."

"Perhaps he thought Tony knew about the Tesseract. Schmidt didn't know Howard worked on it later, so someone who did know that... damn, we're back to SHIELD secrets again. Anyone who'd know Howard Stark's base would know - " his voice dried in his throat, and then he forced himself on. " - that Howard Stark worked on the Tesseract, and Tony Stark designs the best weapons."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes."

"You've thought of something."

"Maybe." He breathed, slowly. He didn't want to go rushing off half-cocked, after all, fill the cells with suspects; if this guess were right, there would be no evidence in SHIELD's records and Sharon would never rise above making the coffee and driving people around. "I mean - Hammer worked on the Tesseract, right? So he probably knew Howard did. He could have mentioned that to Schmidt, and that was why Schmidt picked out Tony."
"Fine, don't tell me," she tossed her head, but didn't seem particularly upset.

"I have to go make a few inquiries."

"I'm shocked." She smiled, though. "Thanks for coming to see me, and good luck."

"Thank you, Sharon. It's been really helpful to talk to you." He stepped over the yellow line, and she stood and gave him her cheek to kiss between the bars. "I hope you'll be out soon."

He headed straight for Fury's office; Hill was writing, reading and talking on the phone while typing one handed on her computer keyboard. Steve was starting to suspect that Hill's job was some kind of trial by fire for agents.

"Is Fury in?" Steve said, and Hill pointed to a chair without looking up. "It's urgent."

"Isn't everything? Colonel Rhodes is in with him now, so - "

"Agent Hill," he tapped on her desk, and she looked up, frowning. "It really is urgent."

"Fine," she tucked the phone under her chin, and tapped the intercom. "Director, Captain Rogers to see you." She clicked the switch before Fury got out more than Maria, I'm busy - and tipped her head towards the door.

Steve entered to a tense silence; Rhodes' fists were balled at his sides. Fury glared at them both.

"I don't have time for this." He spoke curtly. "Yes, we're all very worried about Stark. I get that. But we are doing all we can, do you both understand me?"

"Sir," Rhodes said. Steve eyed him thoughtfully. Rhodes had been the one to find Tony in the desert, after his last kidnapping.

"So what I want you both to do is run along, stay calm, and when we have a location, you will be the first to know. Clear?"

"Sir," Steve backed towards the door, and after a moment Rhodes followed. They passed Hill in silence, and then Steve touched Rhodes' arm. "Can we talk?"

Tony chalked in the crude lines on the smooth office floor, and they both stared down at the knots..

"How'm I doing?"

"I've seen Asgardian children do better. But I've seen my brother do worse." Loki's mouth curved in a smile, which Tony regarded with suspicion. He was sure a smiling Loki was a bad sign.

"Thor's not a scientist, huh?"

"He uses technology, he doesn't build it." Loki bit his lip. "Neither do I, really. I just study the forces. I can manipulate them, but I haven't studied building."

"Who does the building, then?" Tony brushed away the chalk lines, and began again. "Heimdall?"
"My mother, and her ladies. She designed and built the Bifrost - Heimdall is its guardian and operator."

"Her ladies?"

"Yes, of course," Loki looked up from under his lashes. "All Asgardians make use of the technology, but building it is women's magic."

"How do you know it, then?"

"Because I wanted to." Loki's image flickered, and for the briefest moment Tony saw a woman, with tumbling black hair and a pouting mouth. Then he was looking at Loki's narrow face again.

"You know, I think I'd rather be locked in here with her. Can she come back?"

"Really I should make you dress as a woman to learn this." A dimple appeared in Loki's cheek. "Even my father, the legends say, had to live as a woman to learn women's magic."

"You wanna send Schmidt out for skirts?" Frigga would have made him wear skirts, he was quite sure. He was lucky to be learning this from Loki. "Anyway, down here women can wear what men do. Just pretend I'm a woman who likes to dress butch." Tony got to his feet and went to the computer. It was still processing his last search string. "How did people live with computers like this all the time? I want to go home. I wish we could shout for Heimdall - "

"I don't need rescuing."

"Well, me? I need rescuing. I wish the Observatory weren't broken. Then Heimdall could just find us and send a rescue mission."

"He can't see me..." Loki scratched his head. "Hm."

"What?"

"The Tesseract was lost because we couldn't use the Observatory to find it. And Heimdall can't see me, sometimes. Perhaps he can't see the Tesseract for the same reason he can't see me."

"I thought you used spells to hide?" Tony settled back on the floor, and began to draw again, in a nice girly pink highlighter. Respecting the Asgardian customs.

"No. The more I use magic, the more I slip from his vision. I don't do it on purpose." He frowned. "I've seen my mother surprise him, sometimes."

"But it doesn't make sense that Heimdall can't see magic."

"Not all magic, then." Loki looked disapprovingly at Tony's new effort, which was already wobbling out of shape. "I don't know how Heimdall sees the Nine Worlds, though. The Observatory, yes, but I don't know how it works."

"Thor said you were an expert."

"I'm an expert to him. And yes, I do have skill. But there's more to this than any one person can learn, even in an Asgardian lifetime. And I have not lived an Asgardian lifetime. I know many tricks, many spells, many illusions and invocations, but I don't know the deep magics yet."

"Yeah, I get you. Too much to know." Tony thought, vaguely, of what he could build from the Bifrost machine, what he could do with particle physics. Probably not marry an alien prince. "I
wonder what you say," Tony said after a moment. "When you speak the Allspeak. I wonder what you say that gets translated as spells and invocations. It's not just the Allspeak; you understand everything, too, everything that communicates, right?"

"Yes. That is the Allspeak. It's about learning to hear as well as to speak."

"But there's got to be nuances missed." Tony scowled down. "How's this looking?"

"Better. Keep the lines smoother; you should be able to complete the design in one flowing movement."

"Do the lines have to be smooth?"

"Yes."

Perhaps that was why they had machines like the Observatory; a fifteen foot wide circle of intricate patterning had to be tiring to make by hand.

"So why doesn't your magic work well on Schmidt?"

"I don't know. Oh. You think..." Loki was smart, Tony liked that about him. Maybe not Tony-smart, but he wasn't such a hardship to be locked up with. "He spent seventy years in the space between wormholes..."

"Negative energy."

"Right. So negative energy..." Loki ran a hand through his hair. "Some Asgardian technology is based on negative energy, which interacts oddly with the technology that isn't."

"So you and Schmidt are both resistant to some kinds of Asgardian technology, and he's resistant to yours. Like different programming languages."

"Possibly."

"How does the Tesseract affect you both?" There was a long silence, and Tony uncurled his leg and poked Loki in the shin with his toe. "Spill it."

"I can't use magic well this close to the Tesseract," Loki admitted grudgingly. "That's why it was hard for me to get away. It's not easy. It interferes."

"So how did you steal it? Why didn't your illusion go down?"

"Well, I didn't," Loki grinned at him, smug as you like. "That was really Hammer."

"It actually was Hammer? I'm astonished you trusted him."

"Schmidt was his assistant." The amusement died out of Loki's face. "He had a different face then."

"Yeah." Tony made an elaborate switchback curve, a graceful line like the arch of a swan's neck, and Loki gave him an approving nod. "You picked that up out in Oklahoma, right?"

"Where?"

"Where you talked to the kids, did tricks for them."

"Oh yes. It took us a while to understand... Schmidt didn't realise time had moved on. And I'm not
accustomed to Midgard, really."

"So you burned down the store to cover your tracks? Was that necessary?"

"It was after Schmidt was done," Loki wrinkled his nose, either at the memory or at the three-pointed knot Tony had made a terrible hash of. "I'm far from squeamish, but that man enjoys killing far too much."

"You don't?"

"Once." Loki picked up the pen, and drew a complicated shape. It flickered for a second, and became an etched black line in the concrete floor. "But then I wished I hadn't. So."

"Sure," Tony jumped up to check the computer. He tapped a finger lightly on the screen, reading the results the database had come up with. "There's some familiarity to these notes," he murmured, and then regretted it; he was too used to thinking out loud. Loki wasn't JARVIS.

"Is that good?" Loki shuffled through his highlighters, and began drawing with two pens at once, a long snaking braid.

"Not really." Tony's hand crept to his chest, to the reactor set into it. "I think it's actually bad news."

Study, draw, fight the computer, be terrorised by Schmidt, eat dry military ration packs, drink bottled water, sleep in a desk chair. There was no real way of counting the days, and given neither Schmidt nor Loki were close to human, it was hard to judge by their behaviour.

"See, the Bifrost has all kinds of safety operations built in, right?" Tony swallowed some more water, and tried to focus. His hands were shaking. He really wanted coffee.

"What do you mean?"

"Even when it all went wrong, and was throwing people all over the world, everyone seems to have gotten there safely. Even Schmidt got there safely, if late. And the writings - they weren't broken or smeared, they just got less and less complex. That's got to be safety mechanisms."

"So?" Tony took back what he'd thought about Loki being smart. He had no brain. He was a parrot.

"Your mother told me - she said looms were made to weave together, not tear apart, or something like that. So I don't think it's very easy to destroy reality by accident. The Bifrost prioritises keeping its cargo intact and alive. The Tesseract, by any reasonable construction standard, has to have its highest safety standard as making an intact and functional reality."

"That makes sense," Loki agreed. "So why did it cast Schmidt out?"

"Several reasons. I'd love to think it just hates Nazis and morally judged his reality, but what I'm coming up with is that Schmidt was giving it input it couldn't accept. The Tesseract was sanitising its data input, only instead of just stripping out the malicious code, it booted the operator out of reality. That's a hell of a security function, but I guess you really don't want amateurs playing with it."

Which meant that their best option might be to convince Schmidt of the phenomenal power accessible through the Tesseract, and have him pick it up again. Of course, that entailed quite a lot of risks. Not least being that they still didn't know what the Tesseract rated good input, and if Schmidt picked it up with a clear end in view, the Tesseract might just accept that.
And, of course, Schmidt had some immunity to Asgardian magic, and might just be able to resist being kicked out of the system. And if he wasn't kicked out of the system, and kept on feeding the Tesseract junk data, well, a loom might not be designed to tear things apart but Tony had no illusions about the kind of utterly fucked-up fabric it could create. Making a new reality without due care and attention to the laws of thermodynamics would probably be very, very unwise.

"So?" Loki said again, and Tony sighed.

"So this isn't very useful at all. Let's let that rest for a while, and you can teach me some more sorcery. I'll colour my nails in with pink highlighter; that should be sufficiently feminine, right?"

He saw Steve's broad hand with the nails painted neatly in pink; was Steve looking for him? He couldn't think of that now.

Schmidt came for his - daily? Tony had no idea - check-in. He looked almost pleased, today. Perhaps he'd been convinced of the value of Asgardian sorcery. He didn't even point the gun at Tony, just tapped the barrel on his fingers.

"Progress?"

"I've found an analysis of the makeup of the Tesseract," Tony said. It was probably the most harmless thing he could share, but it sounded good. Impressive. "It's largely composed of a very rare element called vibranium."

"And?"

"Well, it's tricky. Up until this year, the only known vibranium was a component of the alloy used in Captain America's shield."

The gun's tapping stopped. Tony swallowed.

"I find that very had to believe, Mr Stark."

"But you're in luck. This year, I successfully created vibranium using a particle accelerator. I am as close as you'll get to an expert on the subject." He kicked his swivel chair round, and gave Schmidt a bland smile. "There's an excellent chance I'll be able to tap into the power of the Tesseract."

"How did Captain America get a shield of vibranium?"

"From my father. It's not pure vibranium, or they wouldn't have been able to work it. We still can't work vibranium. My father did a number of studies on it, but they just lacked the equipment to act on his ideas. Until recently."

"I see." Schmidt smiled at him, an unnerving peel of lips from teeth. "How long will this take?"

"I don't know. The Tesseract isn't just a lump of vibranium. It's constructed. Worked. It's a hypercube - it probably exists in more than the usual dimensions."

"Well. I think you'd better work quickly. Don't you?"

"Of course," Tony said, and held his breath until Schmidt finally nodded, and turned on his heel.
"Zola." Steve rolled the dimmer switch until he could make out Armin Zola's wide, terrified eyes. Zola's hand flew to his chest, and for a second Steve thought he was going to have a heart attack. Then he hammered on his emergency button. "I, uh, cut the cord."

Steve had worried they might move him, but you didn't move a hundred-year old man who'd had a nasty shock without running serious risks. You didn't give them shocks in the middle of the night without doing that, either. Steve could only bring himself to care by reminding himself this was their one lead to Tony.


Steve drew up a chair beside the bed, and helped Zola fit his oxygen mask over his nose and mouth, forcing himself not to recoil at the feel of Zola's clammy skin. He waited until Zola's blanched skin regained a little colour.

"You see, when we ran into Schmidt, we all assumed he hadn't gotten to you yet. But that's silly, isn't it? He wasn't going to throw you over his shoulder and run. Maybe he thought he might, but he's not an idiot. He would have seen you're in no state for it."

Zola didn't speak; he clung more tightly to his mask, taking deep, whooping breaths. Steve gently took it away from him.

"I think too much of that is bad for you."

"You don't know what it was like," Zola's words tumbled over each other. "He had a different face, but his eyes - I knew when I saw his eyes. I thought at first death had come to me in his shape, to take me down to Hell."

"You told Schmidt about Tony Stark, didn't you?"

"I had no choice," Zola said. "You don't know - I never had a choice, he is - "

"I'm really the last person you should talk to about choice," Steve said. He rested his hands on his knees, because holding onto the armrests would probably result in a broken chair. "Forget that. What else did you tell him?"

"Nothing." Zola shut his eyes. There were tears running down his crumpled cheeks.

"You told him where Howard Stark's hidden bunker was. Why shouldn't Howard trust you with it, after all? You're never going anywhere. You worked there together on your Tesseract research, didn't you?"

"No."

"Tell me." Steve swallowed. "Or..."

"You will do nothing, Captain. You will do nothing to hurt me, and that is why I do not fear you but I fear Schmidt."

"Why are you so afraid?"

"I am afraid of dying, Captain. I have spent sixty-five years working to find something that would
redeem me, some great discovery that could be set beside my youth to balance the scales. There was nothing, ever. I have only ever touched genius when engineering the death of millions, and for that sin I am going to Hell. I fear it - worst of all."

"That's so stupid," Steve's muscles twitched with the urge to throw himself out of his chair, to scream and yell. It wouldn't help. "If you wanted so badly to do good, why did you help Schmidt?"

"Because I was afraid."

"But - if you're afraid of going to hell for doing evil, why do you keep doing evil things?"

"It is too late for me to hope for forgiveness. Only to put off my fate as long as possible."

"Argh!" Steve buried his face in his hands, and took a deep breath. "Okay. He has the Tesseract," and Zola nodded. "He'll try and destroy the world again, is that what you want?"

"He won't be able to do it." Zola stared up at the ceiling. "Stark will be starting from scratch; he won't be able to build anything from it."

"Did you know Schmidt is working with Loki?"

"Loki?"

"The Norse God of Mischief. He's real. He's with Schmidt and Stark. He knows things about the Tesseract."

Zola's face couldn't pale any more. He shook his head.

"You want to live. Tell me where he is. We'll tell him we searched through Howard's records, through SHIELD records. We'll tell him we searched the land purchases or the pipe-laying. Anything. Zola. Tell me where he is. You haven't built weapons since World War Two. Don't let Schmidt do this. You tell me this, maybe it'll pay off telling Schmidt, what do you say?"

"I will have your forgiveness?" Zola peered at him, and Steve recoiled in his chair at the thought. "They said your best friend died, because of me. If I do this, you will forgive me?"

It doesn't work like that he wanted to scream. He wanted to punch Zola, drag him out of his bed and throw him up against the wall by the throat, choke the information out of him.

But there was nothing in that broken old body that could make it okay for Steve to hurt him. He could barely breathe unassisted. It would be nothing but a crude and horrible revenge, in memory of someone who'd have been disgusted by it.

Bucky had been dead for over sixty years, and nothing Steve said now had the power to hurt him.

"Yes, I'll forgive you." His voice had a rasp to it, and Zola turned his head back and forth, looking at him from one eye and then the other. Of course, he didn't have his glasses on. "I'll forgive you, if you'll tell me exactly what you told Schmidt. We'll be even, then."

And then he'd be out in the night air to ride back to base with War Machine, to go and roust everyone out and go to rescue Tony. Close now. Not long.
"So what we're saying," Tony dropped his voice even lower, as if Schmidt was standing outside the door, "Is that to use the Tesseract, you need to understand it, in your head. Because it reads your mind."

"Well - "

"All right, it listens to you. Like the Allspeak; only you don't even have to speak for it to hear."

"Yes."

"So we can study for decades, and it doesn't matter, because Schmidt cannot use our understanding to manipulate the Tesseract."

"Yes."

"Right. Great." Tony sat back on his heels. "And if we don't produce some results soon, Schmidt is going to kill me."

"I didn't intend that," Loki stared at his hands.

"I don't intend it either, which means back to my father's notes."

"Will that help?"

"We know Zola managed to tap power from the Tesseract. My working theory is that human technology just doesn't have anything to say to the Tesseract. It's too stupid, the Tesseract can't get anything. The human brain - and I suppose the Asgardian brain - is complex enough to communicate, and if it doesn't communicate right - "


"Maybe the Tesseract needs the Allspeak," Tony said. "Maybe the Allspeak is like Lojban. It's a constructed language made to be as clear and unambiguous as possible. Just the kind of thing you want when reshaping reality."

"That would mean anyone who knew Allspeak could use it." Loki shook his head. "This is pure speculation, though."

"Speculation says that maybe you can use the Tesseract, if you understand it enough."

"But even if that's true, I don't, and I don't want to be thrown through the holes in reality to a random destination."
The door opened, and they both looked up.

"Stark," Schmidt said, and beckoned to him. "A word."

"I guess I can fit you into my schedule." Tony rolled to his feet and walked out, trying not to cringe as he passed within inches of Schmidt. His face was definitely looking slack and loose around the jaw.

Schmidt shut the door on Loki, but didn't lock him in. He grasped Tony's arms and dragged him forward, to the desk Schmidt usually worked at.

There was a strange-looking weapon lying across the desk; at first, it just looked like a gun, but it was definitely missing some bits. There was also a square hollow on the upper side.

"Are you planning to put the Tesseract in that?" Tony put his hands on his hips, and aimed for a scornful look. "That's not going to work, unless - "

"Unless I have some means of tapping and converting the power of the Tesseract," Schmidt agreed. He put his hand firmly on Tony's shoulder, and pushed him into the desk, pressing up uncomfortably close behind him. Tony tried to keep his breathing steady, tried to breath at all as the barrel of Schmidt's gun trailed down his throat. "Do you know where I might find such a mechanism, Mr Stark?" The gun bumped over his collarbone, and tapped lightly on the edge of the arc reactor. "Something that can drain power from vibranium?"

"I can see it," Rhodes said, and Steve peered over his shoulder, down at the scrubland. There was, perhaps, a very faint outline, shaped over something in the earth. If he hadn't known better, Steve would have taken it for old, buried ruins. "Okay. Through the roof?"

"We can't risk it," Steve said. "There has to be an above-ground entrance."

"Somewhere," Rhodes turned his head to look at Steve out of his glowing red eyes. "How long's it going to take to find?"

"Pick a corner," Natasha called from her perch on Thor's back. "They're not likely to be tucked in the corner, and if they are, they'll move when they hear the noise."

"Take my fair burden, War Machine," Thor was swirled closer by his own personal windstorm. "I will make us a door."

"Fine." He held out an arm, and Natasha swung on to it, putting her foot on his boot and draping her arm securely over Steve's shoulders. She patted his cheek, lightly. Thor began to swing his hammer, an overhand looping motion that shivered the air; Rhodes prudently gained height.

"Stark will be fine," Natasha leaned close to Steve's ear to murmur, and Rhodes made a noise like tin cans being ground up.

"Tony's always fine."

"Of course he is," Steve grabbed her hand and squeezed it, and gave her a smile he hoped was confident. Beneath them, Thor and his baby tornado plummeted towards the ground.
The impact was horribly loud; the earth rippled, and Natasha winced.

"I hope we can pass that off as a small quake." She shook her head. "This is going to be a mess."

"You in, Thor?" the War Machine's amplified voice boomed, and Thor waved a casual hand and they plunged down to join him.

War Machine took point, shouldering through the mess of bricks and steel plating, dropping down into a big, dimly lit hall.

"Got a drop here," he said, and Natasha swung down onto his shoulders, then his feet, and then bounced to the floor, where she scuttled into cover. Steve followed, less gracefully, and looked about.

"Can you detect lifesigns, War Machine?" Natasha's voice came from somewhere in the shadows.

"Just one." He pointed further in. "Not Tony."

"Go left, Captain," she said coolly. "War Machine and Thor can go centre."

Steve ran left, circling, trying not to think what that meant. If Schmidt was here alone, what did that mean? Where was Loki? Perhaps he'd already rescued Tony. Perhaps they'd just missed him.

There was a blue glow up ahead. He moved towards it, slipping around the vast cloaked shapes, hearing the sound of the War Machine's tread and the faint jingle of Thor's armour.

"Tony?" War Machine demanded, and then Rhodes' bare voice. "Tony, speak to me - " a sharp sparking pain, not him too and Steve darted round the final corner.

Tony sprawled out on the floor, and for a second Steve thought he was dead, there was a deep hole in his chest, but then he took a shuddery breath and Steve realised the arc reactor was missing.

"Schmidt took his heart," Loki said, and Steve dragged his gaze up to see that Tony's head rested in Loki's lap. Loki held his hand high, like a lamp, glowing blue.

"Tony," he flung himself down, and Tony pawed weakly at his hand. "Oh, God. Oh, Tony." His hand hovered over the cavity in Tony's chest, which was filled with a soft blue glow that matched Loki's hand.

"What are you doing, brother?" Thor advanced slowly, and pointed to the floor. Steve glanced away from Tony's wide eyes long enough to see he was kneeling in the centre of a circle of knotted swirling patterns.

"His heart," Loki said, whitelipped. "I don't... I don't know how it works. I think I'm making it work." He turned his glowing hand enough that Steve could see that the glow emanated from something solid he was holding. "But I can't do this for long. He needs it back."

"Can we use this one?" Rhodes tapped his chest. "We could pry it out - "

"Old one," Tony said on a bubbling breath. "Not fit."

"Sh," Steve squeezed his hand, probably too tight. "He has a spare. I don't know where - "

"Ssssafe," Tony managed. "Ss - "

"Ms Potts has it," Natasha emerged from the darkness. "In the safe in her office. Rhodes, Thor,
which of you is fastest?"

"I can travel through the mirrors," Loki said. "I can bring it to you in minutes. Tell me what to say to Ms Potts."

"But you'll have to stop," Thor stepped forward. "If you are the only thing keeping him alive - "

"He won't die right away." Steve pushed the sweat damp black hair away from his brow. "I - it'll be quicker. By the time you get there and back - "

"Do it," Tony muttered. Steve slipped an arm under his shoulders, and eased him out of Loki's lap.

"Here's the sequence," Natasha grabbed his wrist, and wrote something down. The piece of glowing blue tumbled to the ground, and Tony let out a long, pained gasp. "The safe is behind the Modigliani - a sort of grid painting. If she's there, show her that."

Loki nodded, vanished around a corner. After a moment, Natasha followed, and then came back with a shrug.

"I hope he's trustworthy."


"And I am her PA and SHIELD liaison and so she tells me secret things."

"My heart," Tony narrowed his eyes.

"Shh, Tony," Steve slipped gentle fingers into his hair. "It's all right. You can yell at people later." He curled himself round Tony, as if he could protect Tony from this.


"Don't talk," Steve ordered, and put a hand over his mouth when he tried again. "Please, Tony, don't - just wait for Loki to get back."

Steve counted, silently. He didn't know how long Tony would survive this; there was no point in counting. But if he didn't think of that, he'd think of the tiny deadly slivers nestled in Tony's chest, stirring in their places, the sweeping of blood calling them along. To the heart.

Rhodes crouched down beside them, and took up Tony's other hand. Tony curled his mouth into something too forced to be a smile.

"Just need Pepper," he breathed. "Favourites."

"Sh," Steve squeezed his hand, and Rhodes nodded.

"Spare me the drama, Tony. You do this every week. You think we're worried? We're not worried."

"St - " Tony cut his eyes back to Steve.

"Steve here doesn't know any better. You're just doing this for the new audience, aren't you? We
shouldn't encourage him like this," Rhodes looked up and caught Steve's eyes. "He's just going to keep doing this. Like a kid holding its breath when he doesn't get his way."

Loki reappeared with the same lack of ceremony with which he'd vanished, holding out a glowing blue circle.

"I have - " he recoiled at Natasha's burst of motion, as she snatched it from his hand and threw herself at Tony. Her hands went unerringly to the hollow in his chest, and it settled into place with a firm click.

"She teach you that to?" Tony said on a barely-there breath, eyes fluttering shut, and Natasha sniffed, uncoiling with her usual measured grace.

"For some reason, Pepper likes you." She turned away, and then dropped back into fighting stance as Thor lunged at Loki.

"We thought you were dead," Thor grabbed Loki's wrist. "Why didn't you come forward? We grieved for you. Our father has had heart for nothing, my mother has barely spoken."

"Your father," Loki snapped. "Or didn't he tell you? I'm not his son. I'm not your brother. I'm a Jotun."

"What difference does that make, Loki? You are still my brother. We love you and - "

"Shut up! I tried to kill you!"

"This is very dramatic," Tony said in something much more like his normal voice, and Steve looked down to see his eyes open, no glaze, only his bright direct stare. "Like a soap opera. As the nine worlds turn. Or maybe just an opera, right? They're going to start singing about their feelings."

"Oh my God, Tony," Steve hefted him up, ignoring his grunt of protest, so he could kiss him. He made a surprised noise, but submitted, his hand coming up to curl around Steve's neck. "I thought you were going to die, my God, I was so worried, never do that to me again."

"It's cool," he patted Steve hair, kissed Steve's cheek, kissed the hot patches that were probably, shamefully, tears. "I'm cool. No dying. See? Fine." He cut his eyes sideways, and Steve looked up to see Thor and Loki staring at them. Rhodes was staring thoughtfully at his gauntlets, and Natasha was still watching Loki.

"What?" he said belligerently, and Thor shrugged.

"Tony told me you didn't swing that way."

"Swing?" Steve looked down at Tony, who shook his head and scrambled up out of Steve's embrace, swaying only slightly as he gained his feet.

"Okay, guys, are we over the attempted fratricide?"

"Yes," said Thor.

"No," said Loki.

"It's not usually that way round. Can we postpone it until after we deal with Schmidt? Loki, you still want the Tesseract?"

"Yes," Loki said fervently, and Thor gave him a dubious look.
"Where is it?" Natasha glanced around. "I assume Schmidt has taken it?"

"He figured out my arc reactor draws power from vibranium. The Tesseract is... One of the things it is is a big lump of vibranium. Schmidt cobbled them together, and wedged them all into a big damn gun the ever helpful Hammer presented him with."

"That means it won't work, right?" Rhodes said.

"Bitter so bitter, Rhodey." Tony shrugged. "It might work. Although it would be completely hilarious if it didn't."

"What's his plan?" Natasha interrupted.

"Well, some genius apparently confided in him about the potential genocide possibilities of the Bifrost." He quirked an eyebrow at Loki, who glared back. "So my guess is - "

"Jane!" Thor cried out. "She is with the Bifrost machine today!"

"So we'd better get moving," Tony said smoothly. "Rescue the lady. Shit, I need my armour." He rubbed his eyes. "Rhodey, you can drop me off at my place, right?"

"Sure, hop on."

"Thor, can you take the other three?"

"I'll see you there," Loki said, and took a step back, becoming faintly translucent.

"Protect Jane," Thor grabbed Steve's wrist and began towing him back towards their entrance. "She is your sister."

Loki abruptly went solid. "My what?"

"Melodramatics later," Tony ordered, and the War Machine launched and they vanished off down the long hall in a blaze of blue.

"Faster," Tony croaked again, but Rhodey kept going at the same speed, like Tony was some kind of pussy about G-forces. Admittedly, it seemed a long time since Tony had managed even half a breath, but the faster they travelled, the sooner they'd stop.

The house swelled up before them at sudden speed, and for a moment he thought they were going to overshoot and fly out over the ocean, which for all it would be wonderful mocking material wouldn't really suit him. But Rhodey pulled up right over the hatch, which yawned open for them to drop into.

"Welcome home, Mr Stark," JARVIS almost crooned. "Can I arrange - "

"Armour, JARVIS, we have a Nazi with a superweapon on the loose." Tony stumbled into position, and the armour wrapped itself comfortably around him. "Oh, baby, I have missed you. You have no idea how much."

"You ready?" Rhodey jerked his head up towards the hatch, and Tony nodded.
"Let's go kick some Nazi butt!" He watched Rhodey vanish, and added, "Wow, I never thought I'd get the chance to say that for real."

He chased Rhodey out, and as they ate up the distance to the city he opened a comm to him.

"You know. It's possible I haven't always been the best of friends to you."

"That's great, Tony. You can build me a bigger gun to make up for it."

"That's sweet of you, but I know that forgiveness can't be bought." He put on a sanctimonious tone, and Rhodey snickered.

"I think that's up to me to decide, don't you?"

"That's a point. Maybe, just for you, I'll build a big gun." He grinned inside his helmet. At least Rhodey was simple to make up with.

SHIELD HQ looked like someone had taken a giant-sized baseball bat to it. The top was missing from the central cylinder, and an entire wing had vanished. Tony couldn't see Thor anywhere. There were mobs of people hanging around outside, probably lured in by the spectacle of vast destruction. They were being ineffectually scolded away by SHIELD agents.

"Tony," Rhodey's voice came over the comm. "I probably should have asked this earlier, but what the hell does that superweapon do?"

"It dematerialises people. And stuff. Now, I've actually got a theory - "

"That's enough, thanks." They circled lower.

"Cap?" Tony tried over his comm. "Widow? Hawkeye? Carter? Hill?" Had they all been dematerialised?

"Stark," and of course, if anyone would survive it would be Hill, the woman was as tenacious as a cockroach. She could probably survive without a head. "Where are you?"

"Flying around. Seen - "

"In the lab, you fool. Get down there."

"Fine, fine." He adjusted his path, and Rhodey followed him. "Any chance of a situation report?"

"Upwards of twenty casualties, vanished by Schmidt's weapon. It has a considerable blast effect. Captain America's shield seems to deflect it - "

"That's because it's vibranium."

"This isn't science class, Stark. As far as I can tell, he's in the Bifrost lab itself, and they're in a standoff; he's got hostages."

"Jane?"

"And Darcy."
Tony and Rhodey moved as quietly as possible down the stairs to the lab’s outside door. It still wasn’t very quiet, but they’d have to hope Schmidt was busy. Unfortunately, the frosted glass in the doors meant he couldn’t scope the place easily.

He shrugged, and swiped his access card. Schmidt was almost certainly not going to murder his hostages over a door opening. After all, then he’d have no hostages.

Tony stuck his head around the door. Darcy and Jane sat on the floor by the Bifrost machine; Darcy’s arms were wrapped around Jane, who had her fist shoved in her mouth, probably to stop herself from yelling at Schmidt. No wonder; he was elbow deep in the guts of the Bifrost machine, his torn latex skin lit bright blue. The gun, with the hybrid Tesseract adaptor wired to it, was propped against his shoulder, the butt wedged between his knees.

He could hear a building rumble from the other end of the lab, and then a noise that was very probably a lightning bolt. Well, that was good timing.

Schmidt seemed unfazed, continuing his work. Were the lab doors seriously immune to lightning? That might not be unreasonable, considering the whole point of the Bifrost project was to locate a man whose primary weapon it was. Presumably, Schmidt had bugged the electronic lock, and not realised there was another door.

More rumbling, more cracking, and this time it sounded like some damage had been done. Schmidt looked up, and then turned back to his work. He was very close to Darcy and Jane, so close it would be impossible to get to them without Schmidt seeing. He could try shooting Schmidt, but he had the Tesseract in his lap and his hands full of over-powered interdimensional machine.

"Tricky," Rhodey muttered, and Tony nodded. "Distraction?"

"Got any bright ideas?"

"Walk in and start talking?"

"How are you a Lietenant Colonel?"

"I fly planes."

Tony pushed the door wide open, and strode in with no attempt at stealth. Schmidt, apparently, had no intention of being distracted; he snatched up his gun and leveled it, and Tony dived left as Rhodey dashed right. The gun tracked after Rhodey, probably identifying all those guns as the bigger threat, and Tony couldn't shoot, he was too close to the machine -

And then Schmidt spasmed, arms flying out, and Darcy let out a crow of joy.

"Eat tazer, Nazi scum!"

"Oh my God, Darcy, I can't believe you," Jane scrambled to the heavy swivel chair at her desk, and wrestled it up and gamely took a swing at Schmidt, sending him lurching sideways, and most importantly sending the gun flying from his hand. Tony raced towards it, and gave it a good hard kick; it came apart, and Tony gleefully scrunched the arc reactor carcass underfoot before reaching for the Tesseract.

"I got it," Tony crowed, and folded his hand around the glowing cube.

Apparently, the Iron Man armour was not sufficient protection or distance from the Tesseract. It grew to fill his whole vision, the blue wiping out anything else, billowing into a blue-white then pure white
and then crumbling into a vast sky, and he couldn't feel anything, he couldn't feel his own body -
A sharp cracking sound, and the cube went tumbling away; pain rushed in.

"Ow," Tony tried to lift his hand. "Oh Jesus, I think my wrist is broken."

"Sorry," Steve caught the shield as it rebounded back to him. "I'm really sorry." Then he went flying sideways as Schmidt tackled him.

"No, no. Good choice. Right decision. Ow." Tony swept his eyes around, to see Thor swooping Jane up in his arms, Hawkeye peeking out from behind a desk, Natasha advancing cautiously on the Tesseract. Darcy had taken cover behind War Machine, with only the end of her tazer visible. "Hi guys, good timing. Can someone give Cap a hand with the immortal super-Nazi, maybe? Don't touch that, Nat, what are you doing?"

Natasha was wielding a pair of tongs she had apparently had concealed somewhere – where in a skintight leather jumpsuit she had hidden foot-long tongs, Tony wasn't going to ask. She plucked the Tesseract up, and her lips curved into a satisfied smile. Schmidt and Steve went barrelling past the other way, punches and kicks flying, and no one paid the slightest attention.

"That's mine," Tony said indignantly.

"It's Thor's," Steve called, and then he and Schmidt fell over into the Bifrost machine with a sound like rending metal and howling wolves. Natasha went still; Thor looked up from Jane.

"That didn't sound good," Tony said, and Schmidt came flying out of the damaged part of the machine, followed by Steve, and Jane tried to squirm out of Thor's grip, hands extended beseechingly towards her machine. The Iron Man armour made a number of doubtful noises, and several reports popped up, reporting a new, yet oddly familiar phenomenon. "Guys? Guys, I think you broke it."

"Jane, stay back." Thor held her back, and just as well; Tony could see stars, now, could see galaxies swirling behind - and oh God, in front of - the Bifrost machine. Thor took a step towards it, then another, and his face paled. "Jane, I - can you turn the machine off?"

"It's powered by the - ugh!" Tony jerked his eyes away from the depths of a nebula to see her dragged right off her feet by Schmidt, who was holding his gun under her chin, barrel digging in to the tender flesh there.

"I said someone should do something about him," Tony's targeting software picked out Schmidt, and Tony wondered whether the machine behind him was the exploding kind. "Why does no one ever listen to me?"

"Give me the Tesseract," Schmidt snarled. "Or I'll shoot her dead."

"Let her go and you might live," Thor said, hand coiling round his hammer, and oh lord, this was going to go very badly. Tony glanced at Natasha, who was beginning to step backwards towards the door, clearly unwilling to give up the Tesseract, and really, how could Tony blame her?

Because he was looking at Natasha, he saw Loki step out from nowhere behind her, and reach over her shoulder.

"Pardon me, Midgardian," and Loki grabbed the Tesseract with both hands.

"Loki!" Tony took a step towards him, then flung up an arm as light blazed out.
"It's all right, Stark," Loki said in a distant voice, holding it aloft, and while the world seemed oddly thin and pale around him, it wasn't shredding open. "I think I've grasped the basic principles now."

"Give that to me," Schmidt said tightly. "Or - "

"Do you think I care?" Loki smiled, just a little bit. Schmidt's eyes narrowed, and then his gun jerked back, the barrel pointing skywards. Schmidt's gaze turned to it, and the gun slowly turned. "Well, perhaps I do," Loki continued thoughtfully. "She's my sister, I hear, so I can't let her get killed."

Schmidt let go of Jane, and grabbed at his own wrist. Jane bolted into Thor's arms, and the gun twisted and bucked in Schmidt's hand, and then just exploded, taking most of Schmidt's head with it.

"I enjoyed that one," Loki murmured, and Tony turned his eyes away, and looked at the still expanding hole in the world.

"Hey, Loki. Can you fix that next?"

"I said the basics, Stark. I can't knit up a hole in reality. If my mother were here," he stopped, and gnawed at his lip. "Heimdall! Can you hear me? We need my mother!"

"It still wasn't working alone five hours ago," Jane advanced on the hole, peering into it. "Can you stop the machine? If you - " she swallowed. "If you break it, that should stop the rift."

"It looks a long way," Steve said doubtfully, hefting his shield. "I could try, I suppose."

"Your shield is vibranium, idiot. That's the last thing we want to throw in there." Tony looked around. "Where's Hawkeye?"

"Present?" He popped up on the gallery. "Was trying to get a bead on Schmidt," he explained.

"Can you shoot the Bifrost machine?"

"Sure."

An entire round pumped into the empty space didn't seem to help. The bullets didn't even seem to reach the machine. The gap was bigger now, spreading out wide and tall, and as they watch, a computer desk tumbled in and vanished in the velvet darkness. The Bifrost machine looked... Smaller. Further away. Something.

"I will go," Thor said. "With my hammer in hand, I can fly to it - "

"Thor, no," Jane grabbed his cloak. "You'll be trapped on the other side."

"I could probably fly to it," Tony forced himself to say, and Thor shook his head.

"You are powered by vibranium, are you not? No more you than Steve's shield." He looked back down at Jane. "My love - " he dropped his head to hers, and they kissed, lingerly.

"Damn you, Thor," Loki said quietly, and he took three fast steps forward and hurled the Tesseract into the hole full of stars.

"What the shit." Tony punched Loki in the shoulder with his undamaged hand. Thor looked up, confused, to see the trailing comet of the Tesseract reach the Bifrost machine.

It winked out, like a blown candle, and then the place between worlds quietly folded itself away until it was too small to see, and there was only an empty space.
Jane made a little squeaking noise and knotted her hands in Thor's hair, pulling him down for another kiss.

"I thought you couldn't do that?" Steve loped up beside them, and wrapped an arm around Tony's shoulders. There was what looked like a bootprint on his face, and blood was dripping from his nose.

"I couldn't close the rift," Loki said. "I could instruct the Tesseract to go to the machine and cause a large explosion." He sat down on the nearest chair, mouth turning down. "Control over space and time." He shook his head. "Why do I have an idiot for a brother?"

"Loki!" The idiot brother in question bounced forward, towing Jane, and pulled Loki to his feet for a forcible group hug. Jane threw her arms around Loki's skinny neck and yanked him down to plant a kiss on his cheek; to Tony's deep amusement, Loki blushed. "You have saved Midgard, and all our lives!"

"I did not," he squirmed desperately for leverage, but Thor seemed intent on snuggling Loki until he lost his breath. "You were going to save Midgard. I just saved you. Which makes us even."

"What?" Thor gave him a look of utter bewilderment.

"Even. There was the - unfortunate incident - " Loki looked away. "Anyway, we're even. And I saved Jane! Tell Mother I saved Jane, and that makes up for - for Laufey striking her."

"Loki, we are not keeping score."

"And I'll find the Tesseract."

"Of course you will. The Bifrost will be repaired, and you and Mother can - "

"I'll find the Tesseract," Loki repeated. "And then I'll come home."

"Loki, no, I - " Thor staggered slightly, and stared in dejected bewilderment at the empty place in his arms. "Why do I have such a strange stupid brother?" he wondered aloud, and Tony snickered.

"Can we find some first aid?" he said when Thor gave him a reproachful look. "I think my wrist is broken. The armour injected me with a painkiller, but it doesn't have the good stuff. Fury said something about free access to narcotics over his dead body, or something."

"Let me get the first aid kit." Steve bustled off, presumably to discover modern first aid kits tended to be equipped with Band-aids and maybe some scissors if you were lucky.

"Hey, Natasha," Tony tapped her shoulder with his undamaged hand. "Hey, can I make a dinner appointment with Pepper?"

"Dinner," and that sounded exactly like not a chance.

"I want to apologise," Tony gnawed on his lower lip. "You were right, and I should apologise."

"I'm not sure she wants an apology."

"But - I was awful. I should apologise." There was an ominous silence. Natasha's face was rigid. "Please?"

"I'll check her schedule."
Steve couldn't find anything useful in the first aid kit, which was a bit depressing. He'd have to suggest to Fury that they needed better arrangements. Unfortunately, Schmidt seemed to have dematerialised a big chunk of the SHIELD infirmary.

Tony had suggested that he knew where Fury hid an excellent bottle of whiskey, which would help a lot with the pain. Darcy had enthusiastically endorsed that, and Steve had made a command decision and marched Tony right out of there.

The parking lot looked like someone had scrunched it up in a giant hand; the car insurance alone would be horrific. It was also swarming with civilians, who pointed their telephones at Steve and Tony and made clicking noises. Steve steered Tony towards the gate, smiling politely at the crowd and ignoring his mild protests.

"Captain!" a vaguely familiar voice called, and Steve turned to see a pair of rather nice legs, barefooted with red toenails, dangling over the side of a stack of debris. He followed them up to a dusty business suit, and to the face of Christine Everhart. She was wearing a hard hat and looked perfectly comfortable on her perch. "Can you give me a quick summary of the events here?"

"Well, uh," Steve took a few steps towards her, wondering if he should offer to help her down. "Well, it seems like Johann Schmidt and Loki laid hands on an occult artifact – the same one Schmidt had in the War – and they did - " he gestured around.

"So the Norse God Loki teamed up with a time-travelling Nazi to achieve cosmic power and destroy the world?" Ms Everhart raised her eyebrows, and Steve gave her his best, most earnest face.

"No ma'am! Loki was working with the Avengers to retrieve the artifact. He didn't initially understand the whole - time-travelling Nazi thing."

"Probably an excusable lapse in judgement."

"Cap," Tony stumbled up. "Cap, I need a doctor, where are the doctors, you broke my wrist – hello Christine, please write down that Captain America broke my wrist."

"Well, you're certainly my hero," she said to Steve, who turned pink.

"That wasn't - " Tony hesitated. "That's fair. Okay. I deserve that. The zing, not the broken wrist. And I never said this before, but thank you for telling me about the illegal arms shipments and everything."

"It's my job," she said. "Don't thank me."

"Right. Cap, I need a doctor. You broke my wrist."

"Will you be okay here?" Steve asked, and she nodded.

"Yes, of course. I'm hoping for a senior agent to come tell me to get clear of the area, I could use a quote."

"I'll call into Fury, tell him you're getting in the way," Steve promised, and she smiled.
Steve followed Tony to the infirmary, and sat by him while he made sad eyes at a nurse until given an injection and a splint.

"I wasn't flirting with the nurse," he said suddenly, and Steve patted his shoulder.

"Okay, Tony."

"I just, I wanted some painkillers for my wrist. I wasn't hitting on her."

Steve peered at his eyes, which were blown.

"I think the painkillers are working," he decided. Tony poked him in the chest with his armoured hand.

"I wasn't hitting - "

"Okay, Tony. How are you going to get home?"

"Fly, of course." He listed sideways a little, and Steve had a vivid picture of him lurching through the sky.

"Uh - no. Not on painkillers."

"I can fly!" Tony widened his eyes indignantly.

"Sure. Why don't you call Happy to come and get you?"

"Will you come home with me?" Tony leaned towards him, making big sad eyes. "My wrist still hurts. I might need help with," he paused. Then he frowned.

"Opening jars?" Steve suggested after a minute, and he bobbed his head up and down.

"Yeah. Jars. Yeah. Come home with me?"

"Sure, Tony."

"Tell Fury I have jars that need opening so you're coming home with me."

"I'll call it in. Can you get up?" Steve stood, and hooked his hand under Tony's elbow.

Happy was already waiting outside. He took Tony's other elbow, and steered them towards the parking lot.

"Will the car take the weight?" Steve asked, and Happy nodded.

"It's reinforced. I've had to fetch him before."

"One time one of my jetboots got broken and I was all wonky and ran into a building and Happy came and got me," Tony said. "Steve's coming home to open jars," he added, and Happy nodded.

"Sure thing, boss."

Tony started shedding armour in the car; Fury called while he was fighting with the shin armour, and Tony put him on speakerphone and then ignored him.

"Stark?" there was a growl in Fury's voice. "Stark, you listening?"
"They gave him some medication," Steve put in helpfully. He got an arm round Tony's shoulders and pulled him closer, so he could press his lips to Tony's temple. He tasted mostly of sweat.

"Huh," Fury paused, "You think he'd like to come in and negotiate some contracts?"

"I'm taking him home," Steve said firmly.

"Jars," Tony contributed.

"To make sure nobody gets hurt."

"Great."

Tony kicked out of the last bit of armour just as they pulled up outside Tony's front door. Happy opened the door, and Tony stared out at the ground. Then he turned a pathetic look on Steve.

"Hang on," Steve hopped out, and then reached in to scoop him up. "Okay?"

"Okay," Tony patted Happy on the head as he was carried past. "Thanks, Hap."

"No problem, boss."


"Yeah?"

"I don't need jars opening. I would like a blowjob, though."

"False pretences to lure me here? I'm shocked." The door helpfully swung open. "Thanks, Jarvis."

"You're welcome, sir. Does Mr Stark require medical attention?"

"He's had some, thanks." Steve turned to the stairs.

"The jar thing was discretion, see? I did not shout to the world that we were having sex. I was discreet. And I did not taunt Christine because I am a responsible adult."

"Well done." Steve set him down on his bed. "I think you should get some sleep." Tony looked shocked.

"But – sex! You're here, I'm here, we're in a bedroom – " he patted the bed beside him.

"You're on so many drugs you can't walk?" He leaned in to kiss Tony anyway, and Tony sighed contentedly. Then he scowled when Steve pulled away.

"I don't need to walk. I'm already on the bed." He gave Steve a look that managed to combine plaintiveness with determination; Steve considered the argument that was likely to come.

"Okay, Tony. I'm going to get a glass of water, and have a shower," Steve patted Tony's shoulder. "Why don't you get out of your," he flapped a hand to indicate the black thing Tony wore under the armour. "And wait for me?"

"Sure," and sure enough, when Steve got out of the shower, Tony was curled up naked in the centre of the bed, fast asleep. Jarvis had already dimmed the lights.
Steve eased the covers out from under him, and carefully tucked them in together. He held his breath when Tony murmured and wriggled, but he just edged closer to Steve, putting his hands against Steve's chest. Steve slipped a hand into his hair and watched his mouth turn up at the corner, and felt a terrible ache of affection rise up in his chest, knocking at his ribs to be let out.

"Stupid," he breathed. So stupid. He should have stayed away from Tony, never let it get this far. Should have listened to Natasha. How was he going to cope when Tony inevitably moved on?

Still. Maybe it would be easier than he expected. He'd already lost one love, and surely that had been much worse; she'd cared deeply about him, whereas Tony... he looked at Tony's sleeping face. Tony liked him. They'd still be friends, if Steve didn't make dramas out of it. It wouldn't hurt too much.

No call to borrow trouble; the future was nothing to rely on, and no one should know that better than Steve. Right now, he was here with Tony curled safe into his arms, and that was more than enough to make the moment a happy one.

Steve shut his eyes, and listened to Tony breathe.

Tony woke up in a moderate amount of pain; he slipped quietly out of bed so as not to disturb Steve, and Jarvis helpfully directed him to the painkillers. He took one, which hopefully wouldn't reduce him to babbling about jars. It was lucky Steve was a nice, sweet person who wouldn't tease the drugged, really.

A shower, and some water, and he was feeling almost human again; he peered back through his bedroom door, where Steve had expanded like a cat to fill all the available space.

Steve was stunningly attractive, he was pretty smart, he was a hero, he was sweet, he was charming. He carried Tony around when he was drugged and put him safely to bed.

He was perfect. But Pepper had been perfect, too, he could distinctly remember thinking Pepper was perfect, remembered looking at her and just knowing that loving Pepper, being loved by her, would make him a better man.

He didn't crawl back into bed and demand the blowjob Steve had promised him; he went down to the workshop to check his messages, like a responsible team member.

By the look of his inbox, everyone but Maria Hill was still sleeping it off; she'd already sent out an invitation to tender for rebuilding the SHIELD front-end. Tony had some thoughts on that, but they could wait.

There was also a meeting request from Natasha. Tony eyed it for almost a minute before clicking, and then swore, and jumped to his feet.

"Jarvis, get me a car. It's urgent."

Tony had to bribe the driver, but they screeched up outside Pepper's apartment block just as Pepper and Natasha stepped out of the glass doors. He bounded out of the car and proffered his bunch of flowers; the car service had helpfully provided them, at a cost even Tony found exploitative.
Pepper smiled, and took the flowers, holding them up to her nose. Natasha glared over her shoulder, the bruised mess over cheekbone and jaw detracting in no way from her air of menace. It vanished under a bright social smile as Pepper turned to her with the flowers; she took them, and nodded, and then she and Pepper bumped cheekbones and Natasha turned back while Pepper advance towards the car. Tony opened the door himself, and Pepper gave him a doubtful look before climbing in.

"So how are you doing?" he said, and she frowned at him. "What?"

"What have you done to yourself now?"

"This? This was Steve. He hit me in the wrist with his shield. I'm going to have to beef up the armour, clearly, if Cap can spot a weak point." He smiled. "Don't worry, I saw a doctor and I've had a painkiller."

"Okay," she looked suspiciously down at the strapped-up wrist. He wriggled his fingers to indicate their fineness.

"So how are you? Everything going fine?"

"Yes, of course. Tony, you were kidnapped by - "

"I hope that didn't cause any trouble."

"Trouble?" Her voice rose incredulously. Tony winced.

"With the board, I mean. I don't know, did SHIELD go public?"

"No, no one knows. We told everyone you were out of contact on a job for SHIELD. Tony, are you - "

"We're here," Tony almost fell out of his side of the car, and raced around to get Pepper's door open. She gave him an unhappy look, which seemed unfair; it only deepened when he pulled her chair out for her. She kept shooting him worried little looks, and as soon as the waiter departed with their orders, she slapped her palms down on the table, cutting off the compliment Tony had been paying her shoes. A nice, tasteful compliment too.

"Are you dying again?" she demanded, and Tony stared at her.

"What? Why would I be dying? It's just my wrist."

"Well, you insist on getting me out for lunch, Natasha says I should come, you're acting so..." she waved a hand. "Flowers? My favourite flowers?"

"I looked it up," Tony said proudly. "I looked up the invoices for the flowers you ordered for Secretary's Day. I figured they must be your favourite." He beamed. Pepper continued to look worried. "And you like Italian, right? You used to pick Italian restaurants to go out to."

"I do. What's – you haven't bankrupted the company, have you?" she paled. "Tony, we can work through this, just tell me - "

"No! Nothing's wrong, Pepper."

"You want me to give up CEO again?" Her lower lip pushed out. Tony threw up his hands.

"No, I – okay. I had thought we would have a nice civilised dinner in which I showed off my ability to be a decent human being, but clearly that will drive you crazy, so I will cut to the chase."
"Please do." Pepper folded her hands and visibly braced herself. Tony opened his mouth, and then shut it again. He'd hoped to have the opportunity to bring this naturally into the conversation, somehow. He should have made notes; he hadn't done this well last time. At least Pepper wasn't actively mad at him this time?

Blunt, to the point, truthful. That was the way to go.

"So it seems possible that I was a total asshole to you," he said abruptly, and Pepper sighed.

"I think we've been through this."

"Not - not like - I just wanted to say, that you were very important to me - you still are - and that I realise I have done very little to ever make that clear to you. Apart from saving your life. I did always make time for that, which - which should count in my favour, I think. Although I suppose if it weren't for me, you wouldn't - " he raised a hand and shook his head, trying to gather his thoughts back to the main point. "It seems like I should have been better to you when it wasn't a matter of life or death."

"Well, yes," Pepper stared down at the silver, poking at the forks until they all lined up perfectly. "You should have."

"You - really do matter to me. And I hope that I can do better, because you've always been there for me, fixed things, when I needed you, and when I didn't really need you but it just made things easier. For years. And I don't think I realised how much I was asking that was unreasonable, but I am so grateful."

She looked cautious, still, but there was a pleased little smile crooking up the corners of her mouth. "Well – thank you, Tony."

"I realise that it will take time. But I am going to keep trying." He sat up straight, struck with an idea. "In fact, now I've told you, maybe you can help me out, I'm going to try and be a nice considerate person all through dinner, maybe you could just kick me or something if I start screwing it up - "

"Tony, I'm not going to kick you." The tightness of lips that meant she was trying not to smile, that was good. Tony grinned at her.

"Well, just – maybe give me a clue. I'm trying! I will try."

"Tony," back to the forks again, pushing them about. "You know it's over between us? That that's not going to change?"

"Yeah," his breath sighed out. A door closing; not that he hadn't known that already, not that he hadn't already got things going on, but – Pepper was, well, she was Pepper and he loved her. He looked at the slope of her neck, the soft translucent skin under her ear he'd never kissed enough. The little dent between her perfectly shaped eyebrows that was starting to be a fixture; he'd put that wrinkle there, probably. "Yeah, I realise – I had my chance, and I'm not trying to – I want us to be friends again. Or maybe for the first time."

"Right," she nodded, a little smile curving her lips. A smile he didn't remember seeing from her before, something quiet and gleeful. "I'm seeing someone else, you see."

"Oh. Anyone I know?" Tony should maybe find whoever it was and give them the If you hurt her I'll kill you talk, but honestly Natasha had probably already done it better, because – "Holy crap, Pepper, are you dating Natasha?" That explained so much, and meant his overpriced flowers were probably in the garbage disposal. Oh well.
"Uh – yes," she said, and blushed a pink that clashed with her hair.

He considered getting flowers for Steve, too, but decided that would just confuse him. He stepped empty-handed back into the house, and listened. Dead silence. Had Steve left?

"JARVIS, you gave Steve my message, right?"

"As soon as Captain Rogers awoke, sir. He showered, had lunch, watched three hours of cartoons, and informed me he was going to take a nap."

"He's still here, then."

"Yes, sir."

"Okay."

Steve didn't appear to have moved at all, but when Tony got close up, he could see that the blond hair was a little damp. He was showing no signs of having gone ten rounds with another super-soldier, all the bruises faded to perfect smooth skin, the split lip now soft and pink and intact.

Tony was fairly sure the knotted up feeling in his chest was love; he'd had cardiac arrests, so he knew it couldn't be that.

He'd been in love with Pepper, too, and look how well that had gone.

But you only got better at these things by trying, right?

"Hey," Tony moved to perch on the edge of the bed, and Steve grumbled and tried to roll over. He was tangled in the bedding to a ridiculous degree, and only succeeded in kicking, vaguely. "Hey, are you seeing anyone right now?"

"Not going to throw a jealous fit?" Steve mumbled, and rubbed at his eyes with one hand.

"No," Tony held his breath as Steve yawned.

"No, I'm not. Been a bit busy." Score. Of course, he would probably have considered it tacky to sleep around while Tony was kidnapped, but Steve was a popular guy, and there was a lot of competition for his bashful smiles and fantastic ass. Tony positioned himself carefully along the edge of the bed, and assumed his best persuasive, charming, you-know-you-love-me expression.

"So the offer of trying serious. Is it still open?"

Steve's eyes slitted open; he looked as suspicious as if Tony had asked him to pull his finger.

"You want to be serious?"

"I think I have reached a stage in my life where I can approximate the behaviour of a mature adult when engaging in romantic relationships," Tony said loftily. "I have made errors in the past. I freely admit that. However, I am a man capable of recognising my flaws." Steve grinned. Tony glared until it was clear Steve wasn't going to say anything. "With that in mind, I would like to make the attempt. With you. I probably won't - I won't get it right at first, but I think I've already identified my major errors, and maybe you could tell me when I get it wrong, and I'll – I'll do better. I'll try." He realised he was babbling, and closed his mouth.
Steve sat up, and untangled his feet from the sheets. He devoted an unreasonable amount of attention to smoothing them out; he was frowning, now.

If Steve said no, Tony would – well, he'd have to be an adult about it, or he'd forfeit all future chances at sex with Steve, but he was definitely going to go down the to workshop and shriek at Jarvis.

"You may have gotten the wrong impression," Steve said abruptly, still staring down at his feet, and Tony's gut developed a chilly ache. "I mean, you – seem to think I'm some kind of expert on successful relationships."

"You're better at friendships than I am," Tony eased forward, and laid his hand on the small of Steve's back. Promisingly, Steve didn't move away. "You always turn up on time."

"There's more to relationships than punctuality, Tony." Steve's mouth curved in an incredulous smile. Tony shook his head.

"See, what I have learned is that it is a very important part of relationships." Tony pressed a kiss to the curve of Steve's shoulder. "Also, remembering allergies."

"I don't have any allergies."

"And I know that!" Tony beamed at him.

"Okay?" Steve smiled back, clearly confused. Tony decided to skip explaining.


"You have to promise me that if it doesn't work out you'll be professional about it," Steve warned, and Tony nodded. "I just, we can't destroy the team."

"Completely professional." There was a pause. "You don't want to, do you?"

"No, I really do. I really really do. I want – " Steve turned and pounced, and Tony suppressed a girly yelp as he was pinned down under lovely sleepwarmed skin. "I want you so much." A gentle kiss; Tony tried to deepen it, but Steve pulled back. "It's just hard to - to think about this. You. I get kind of irrational about it."

"You have been irritatingly rational this whole time," Tony assured him. "Really! Depressingly so."

"I want you so much," Steve confided in an undertone.

"Steve," Tony stroked his hair, and he leaned into the touch, eyes going heavy. He hated cliche, but what could you do? Some things you just had to say outright. "I love you."

Steve's eyes widened, and then he smiled; he cupped Tony's face in those big, warm hands.

"Say that again," he breathed, and Tony stared up at him, caught by the glow in his eyes. "Please?"

"I love you," he said again, and Steve's eyes drifted shut, and he touched his forehead to Tony's, smile fading from glowing to dreamy, like Tony had said something far more profound, something intimate and precious instead of the same old nonsense.

But of course, it wasn't a cliche to him; maybe he'd never heard a lover whisper I love you. Certainly he'd never heard it from lips that didn't mean it, didn't know to hear it with sceptism and irony. When
Tony said *I love you*, Steve heard - just that.

"I love you," he said for a third time, just to see Steve give him that look again.

"I love you too," Steve said like it was easy and obvious, and smiled bright as the sun. "*I love you.*"

"Then we'll make it work," Tony smiled back with all the confidence he didn't feel. "You and me. We'll figure it out."

"Of course we will," Steve dipped in for another kiss.

Who knew, maybe Steve was right. Together, they'd achieve the impossible.

End Notes

Written for the Cap-Ironman Big Bang: artwork by made_of_tin can be found [here](#) and [here](#). If you've come this far, you don't have to worry about spoilers.

Supporting character death: Johann Schmidt dies.

Works inspired by this one:

[[Podfic] Tomorrow Belongs to Me](#) by kalakirya

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